JASON’s Tactical Lessons

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I. Introduction

Michael A. Levi, Director of the Strategic Security Project at the Federation of American Scientists, asserts that today we again find the Bush Administration speaking loosely of tactical uses for nuclear weapons, in Iraq or in future contingencies. The enormous power of nuclear weapons often tempts military planners to inevitably view bigger as better. But the central lesson of the 1966 JASON study, echoed throughout fifty years of thinking about nuclear weapons, is that the wider the context in which nuclear weapons are viewed, the narrower their appeal.

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II. Essay by Michael Levi

"JASON's Tactical Lessons"
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Faced with a military stalemate in Vietnam, American policymakers forty years ago considered employing tactical nuclear weapons. We do not know how seriously the option was ever considered, but it was shelved after four JASON physicists argued in the 1967 report Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Southeast Asia that tactical nuclear weapons have at best marginal military value. Today we again find an Administration speaking loosely of tactical uses for nuclear weapons, in Iraq or in future contingencies. To be certain, this talk might not be too serious; but regardless, its consequences cannot be good.

The enormous power of nuclear weapons often tempts military planners, who inevitably view bigger as better. But the central lesson of the JASON study, echoed throughout fifty years of thinking about

nuclear weapons, is that the wider the context in which nuclear weapons are viewed, the narrower their appeal. Considering individual targets, the JASONs find some specialized applications for nuclear weapons; factoring in the lack of intelligence on relevant targets - you can't hit something you can't find - they are less sanguine; assessing the utility of destroying these targets to winning a longer war, the analysts are even more skeptical; and considering the potential for nuclear retaliation in the theater, they reject the nuclear option outright.

Any assessment of today's nuclear weapons - and of those whose development is now proposed - proceeds similarly, though with nuclear weapons starting at even less of a technical advantage. In 1966, the JASONs were able to find many tactical applications - defeating massed troops, flattening bases, destroying bridges, tunnels, airfields, and missile sites, blocking roads, and establishing radioactive hot-zones - that, viewed narrowly, had at least some potential utility. Today, the only roles touted for tactical nuclear weapons are destroying hardened underground bunkers, neutralizing chemical and biological agents, and possibly attacking enemy electronics. Nuclear weapons, of course, have not become any less effective; but conventional alternatives, drawing on sophisticated targeting, precision guidance, and exotic payloads, have rendered most nuclear roles obsolete.

Intelligence shortfalls forced the JASONs to lower their assessment of the usefulness of some nuclear options. They note, for example, that "the outstanding difficulty in the use of TNW [Tactical Nuclear Weapons] lies in locating troop targets accurately...."; and that "With groundburst TNW, it would be possible to destroy even deep tunnel systems, but this would require that the positions of the tunnels be known to within a few hundred feet." Today's proposals for tactical nuclear weapons face the same problems. Some claim a possible need for nuclear weapons to neutralize stockpiles of chemical and biological agents in Iraq; yet if inspectors on the ground cannot locate even an ounce of Iraq's banned materiel, how can American weapons effectively eliminate Iraq's WMD? Our pursuit of hardened deeply buried targets suffers similarly - we cannot see effectively underground, and we cannot attack what we cannot find.

The JASONs are scrupulous in providing military context for their calculations. For example, they concede the impressive ability of tactical nuclear weapons to close off supply lines for a month, but argue that is not particularly useful in the context of a multi-year war. They note with displeasure that previous studies neglect this context and thus grossly overestimate the value of tactical nuclear weapons. They conclude that whether the war is winnable or not, its outcome will not turn on the use of nuclear weapons. Similarly, today's proposals for tactical nuclear weapons often ignore military context. For example, we hear frequently of the need to destroy Iraq's WMD production facilities. But in a war expected to be won in only weeks, how necessary or useful would that be to the military objective?

Worried about Vietnamese nuclear retaliation - with weapons from their allies Russia or China - the JASONs also make recommendations for hardening U.S. bases in the theater. Here the analogy to today is looser, but equally powerful: If we are to embark on military missions, nuclear or not, that might provoke the enemy to retaliate with WMD, we ought be prepared to defend ourselves. Yet while CIA Director Tenet has testified that attacking Iraq will make Saddam more likely to share WMD with terrorists who might use it to attack America, we have neglected to adequately invest in homeland security. Richard K. Betts argued persuasively in a recent issue of Foreign Affairs that American investments in homeland security are not commensurate with the threats we face if we are to attack WMD armed adversaries. The Gilmore Commission recently reported that America's first responders have inadequate training. National security may begin abroad, but it must draw its last line at home.

There are important lessons to be learned today from Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Southeast Asia.

Certainly, comparisons with the Vietnam War are often the path to intellectual quagmire, and indeed, many opponents of war with Iraq find false parallels with various military and moral dimensions of Vietnam. But in this study, page after page, there is advice we would do well to heed.

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