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# Policy Forum 03-16A: Making the Case Against Calamity



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## Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 03-16A: Making the Case Against Calamity", NAPSNet Policy Forum, March 09, 2003, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/nautilus-institute-policy-forum-online-making-the-case-against-calamity/>

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# Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online: Making the Case Against Calamity

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PFO 03-16: March 9, 2003

## Making the Case Against Calamity

By Steven Weinberg

### CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Essay by Steven Weinberg](#)

[III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses](#)

### I. Introduction

In the essay below, Weinberg recounts his participation in the 1966 report that urged against the

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first-use of tactical nuclear weapons in the Vietnam war. Weinberg concludes that today the US should beware of moving beyond nuclear deterrence by developing low-yield weapons for attacking underground facilities. Steven Weinberg won the Nobel Prize for physics in 1979 and present teaches at the University of Texas at Austin.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

## **II. Essay by Steven Weinberg**

"Making the Case Against Calamity"

By Steven Weinberg

Professor of Physics, University of Texas at Austin

In 1966, as a member of the JASON group of defense consultants, I was one of the authors of a report titled "Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Southeast Asia." Although the report was classified, its title and authorship became public knowledge, a fact that caused me some grief.

From its title, it was natural - though wrong - to conclude that the report offered a plan for the use of nuclear weapons in the region. In fact, the group predicted terrible consequences if such weapons were employed, and advised against their use. But because the report's title had circulated in the Bay Area, someone scrawled the words "Steven Weinberg, war criminal" in front of the house in Berkeley where I lived when the report was written. I am pleased that the report has at last been declassified, so people can see what was in it.

The JASON group was divided in its reaction to the Vietnam War. Some members looked at it as a purely military problem, to which our expertise might make a useful contribution. Some thought of it as nasty business, which could best be ended by winning the war. Others simply wanted nothing to do with it. I was in the last group.

In 1966, we heard rumors that someone in the Pentagon or White House was pushing to use tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam or Laos. Some of us were appalled, believing this would take the war to a new and horrifying level of destructiveness. It also, I felt, would create a terrible precedent for the use of nuclear weapons for something other than deterrence. In the end, I doubted it would help much with the war, but it would open up the possibility of nuclear attacks on our own bases in Vietnam. These immediate reactions, though, were not based on any careful analysis. So we decided to do the analysis and write a report.

It was clear from the beginning that the report should not go into ethical issues; for us to raise them would cast doubt on the impartiality of our analysis. So the report concentrated instead on purely military issues. As can now be read in the report, we concluded that the Vietnam War did not offer plausible targets for nuclear weapons, and that our forces were far more vulnerable to the use of nuclear weapons than our adversaries were.

The analysis was honestly done, but I have to admit its conclusions were pretty much what we expected from the beginning, and if I had not expected to reach these conclusions, then, for the ethical reasons that we left out of the report, I would not have helped to write it. I never learned whether our report had any effect.

I never learned, even, whether there had ever been a serious idea of using nuclear weapons in

Southeast Asia. At least they were not used and have not been used since. Since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there has been a de facto taboo against using nuclear weapons for anything other than deterrence. But there have been some signs recently of a weakening of this taboo: in talk of developing low-yield weapons for attacking underground facilities, and even in suggestions of reviving interest in nuclear-armed anti-missile interceptors. Let's hope this will go no further than did the idea of using nuclear weapons in the war in Southeast Asia.

For the original 1966 Document:

<https://nautilus.org/vietnamFOIA/report/report.html>

### **III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses**

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: [napsnet-reply@nautilus.org](mailto:napsnet-reply@nautilus.org) . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development  
Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project ( [napsnet-reply@nautilus.org](mailto:napsnet-reply@nautilus.org) )

[Return to top](#)

[back to top](#)

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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

[nautilus@nautilus.org](mailto:nautilus@nautilus.org)