

GUEST WORD

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NATO'S NUKES—THE UNTOUCHABLE QUESTION

President Ford's surprise announcement that the Soviet Union does not dominate Eastern Europe could well reflect wishful thinking about Europe that is shared by Republicans and Democrats alike. If the Warsaw Pact forces were simply a fantasy in the minds of lunatic cold warriors, there would be no need to worry about NATO's defensive posture. Without making the error of confusing capabilities with intentions, no strategic analyst would accord NATO's conventional forces the strength to withstand invasion for more than a few days. To say this is not to predict an invasion (except perhaps of the Balkans when Tito dies) but, on the other hand, the enormous Soviet build-up in Eastern Europe — to say nothing of ready reserves in Western Russia — can hardly be a socialist remedy for unemployment.

A more likely explanation, one that has been well-canvassed in the literature, is that the U.S.S.R., by developing overwhelming power, intends to convince European states that American protection is a mirage, and erode the fragile unity of the European Economic Community and the Atlantic Alliance. The code word is "Finlandization."

However, leaving the Politburo musing over its options, let us turn to our side of the hill. Here it is absolutely clear that, despite obfuscatory noises, a tactical nuclear first-strike alone can provide NATO with at least a semblance of military symmetry. Largely because of our superior technology in miniaturization, we have developed an arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons that are small, "clean," and extraordinarily accurate. Broad hints have been dropped to the Soviets that they will be targeted only on military objectives, airfields, tank-parks, bridges, etc. In short, no city-busting.

This may be reassuring, but it is based on Moscow's full cooperation. In other words, if the Warsaw Pact forces smash into

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Western Europe and we reply with our clean, accurate, and small nuclear weapons on military targets only, Marshals Brezhnev and Ustinov will shrug their shoulders and say, "Well, NATO has the right to military symmetry," and let it go at that. As the Duke of Wellington observed when someone addressed him as Mr. Smith, "Anyone who believes that, can believe anything."

Much more likely would be a Soviet nuclear counter-attack with large, dirty, and by American standards inaccurate, Short Range and Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles. Inevitably this would be an exercise in city-busting. But, worse, it would raise the question of a further American response. Would we be faced with the option of launching a general strategic nuclear war, or capitulating? The answer in my judgment is we would be caught in precisely that appalling situation. I have never believed nuclear war could be limited, that there were neat "firebreaks" at which point everybody would sit down and meditate on alternate courses of action. More significantly, the Soviets have flatly rejected such escalatory thresholds.

In short, the moment NATO launched its first tactical nuke, the horrible and inexorable strike and counter-strike process would begin. Why then has there been so little discussion of NATO's posture in American political circles? Surely the possibility of mass radioactivation should be on the agenda in a presidential campaign. The answer, I'm convinced, is that a nuclear strategy is capital-intensive while the rational alternative, massive conventional forces, is labor-intensive. In political terms, this means American "boys" might be conscripted and shot, and it is common knowledge from Vietnam-on-the-tube that this is terrible. Unfortunately there is something esoteric, almost sanitary about being radioactivated and, of course, no one will see it on television.