

## Is There A Case For Strategic Disengagement?

*Never Again: Learning from America's Foreign Policy Failures.* By Earl C. Ravenal. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978).

*Reagan's 1982 Defense Budget: An Analysis and An Alternative.* By Earl C. Ravenal. (San Francisco: CATO Institute Policy Analysis Papers, 1982).

*NATO's Unremarked Demise.* By Earl C. Ravenal. (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1979).

**The** 1984 presidential campaign revealed sharp differences over to achieve specific foreign policy objectives, including heated controversy surrounding strategic nuclear and Central American policies. But at the same time, most prominent politicians of both parties agreed that the United States must continue to manage and contain Soviet power, and that this will require an active American role in the world. Even sharp critics of present policies share with current decisionmakers key assumptions about this role and the commitments that underlie it. Such agreement is not surprising; most historians and foreign policy analysts have perceived a basic continuity in American foreign policy objectives since the beginning of the Cold War. The skeptical orientation that provided many sweeping, critical analyses of U.S. policy in the late 1960s and early 1970s has diminished, and fewer voices now question America's global role or systematically examine the constraints faced by policymakers in pursuing it.

The writings of Earl Ravenal are a major exception to this consensus. Over the past dozen years he has produced a coherent and, in our view, cogent body of work that stands as the major contemporary critique of containment. He concludes that the United States should withdraw from existing commitments and stand aloof from the world's trouble spots. Although Ravenal's position is markedly different from mainstream analyses, he possesses recognized expertise as a systems analyst in the Johnson and Nixon Administrations'

Defense Departments, and his work demonstrates a detailed knowledge of American foreign policy issues. Ravenal's critique and the issues it raises deserve serious consideration.

Since 1947, American foreign policy-makers have assumed a need to "contain" expansionist tendencies of the Soviet Union and other states and groups that enjoyed Soviet support, including Mainland China during the 1950s and 1960s. In George Kennan's initial formulation, containment was restricted to a few areas, especially in Europe and Northeast Asia, close to the Soviet Union. Beginning with the Truman Doctrine, and particularly following the Korean War, containment was globalized. An extensive series of alliances identified American interests with stability and the frustration of Soviet gains. Policymakers assumed that the Soviet Union sought global domination and that the interest of the United States, and mankind in general, demanded an effort to prevent a Soviet victory. The United States has employed two methods to achieve this end.' In cases of "symmetric containment," the United States has responded to challenges "face-to-face," that is in the same area and in a like manner; examples include the Korean War and Kennedy's policy of Flexible Response. "Asymmetric containment" describes an American policy of responding to communist pressures with means and at places of our own choosing, for example by threatening "massive retaliation." The United States has implemented both types of containment by making commitments to deter and defend third countries against communist encroachment, by preparing for a variety of military conflicts, and by purchasing extensive and costly forces. Aside from the central strategic nuclear forces that deter Soviet attack, the vast proportion of American military expenditures pay for our external commitments. The extent of this effort can be measured in the 359 "sizeable" U.S. military installations maintained outside the continental United States.<sup>2</sup>

Ravenal's critique of this containment policy is nonideological. He does not explain American policy in terms of imperialism or militarism nor assert that there is something in the American foreign policy-making system that dictates interventionist policies. In short, he rejects what he labels the "fundamentalist critique" of American policy, a radical argument that explains intervention in terms of

1. See John Lewis Caddis, *Strategies of Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

2. *New York Times*, July 24, 1985, E5.

capitalism or the institutional needs of America's elite policy-making system (*Never Again*). Ravenal's "strategic critique" explains policy in terms of that set of cognitive beliefs characteristically held by American decisionmakers. He calls these "strategic presumptions," and asserts (*Never Again*, 96) that "a sharp change in presumptions about strategic requisites" would lead to more realistic, safer, and sustainable foreign policies.

Ravenal's own "strategic presumptions" differ sharply from those underlying American postwar containment policies, and they remain consistent throughout the body of this work. He insists on drawing the broadest possible conclusion from the Vietnam fiasco, and argues that containment itself made Vietnam (or something like it) inevitable. Therefore, he argues that the United States should not intervene militarily in any war that does not threaten the American homeland, and he favors decoupling ourselves from existing commitments to intervene. He concludes (Ravenal, 1980: 34) that:

. . . the United States should be looking for ways to delink-to minimize provocations; to let regional conflicts burn themselves out; to suppress commitments engendered by alliances; to decouple one stage of military escalation from another; in short, to compartmentalize the world's troubles.

American risks would be minimized by divestiture of commitments in situations we cannot control (for example, guerrilla wars in the Third World) and by providing insulation from outcomes we cannot afford to attempt to control (for example, deterrence in NATO Europe).

Strategic disengagement is, in simple terms, a policy of non-intervention. Ravenal's writings confuse the issue of whether this is equivalent to isolationism. He asserts (1973: 506) that "Amoral noninterventionism is isolationism. It connotes Fortress America, narrow prejudice, and active xenophobia." In contrast, Ravenal (1973) advocates what he calls "moral noninterventionism," which abjures only military commitments and positively values transnational contacts.

Ravenal also differentiates strategic disengagement from neo-isolationism, a common response to Vietnam taken by much of the moderate left. This set of beliefs encompassed some limited lessons from Vietnam, including a rejection of Cold War rigidity and an intention to weigh the costs and benefits of future involvements more carefully. In essence, neo-isolationism is a view of America's world

role that is skeptical of military commitments, while not renouncing them in principle. It implies a selective view of intervention, biased against likely failure; many critics of current Central American policies learned their lessons from Vietnam. Strategic disengagement differs from neo-isolationism because it is universally applied rather than situational. Ravenal believes that the problem with neo-isolationists is (1980: 32, 39) "that they are not isolationist enough .... The only alternative now to the official strategy of resuscitated military interventionism is an isolationist foreign policy."

America's pre-World War II isolationism rested on several deeply rooted beliefs. The world's complexity was rejected, and it was felt that we would only bring ruin to ourselves by becoming diplomatically and militarily involved overseas. As Robert Tucker and others have noted, this outlook was buttressed by a number of supporting attitudes: xenophobic parochialism; a penchant for unilateralism; and a belief that because the Western hemisphere was impregnable, the greatest threat to American security would result from involvement in foreign wars. Tucker defines isolationism as "the refusal to entertain certain relationships, notably alliances, and to undertake certain actions, notably interventions."<sup>3</sup>

By this definition, Ravenal is a modern day isolationist. While his writings are often cast differently from those of earlier isolationists, many of his arguments are strikingly similar to theirs. The differences reflect important political and technological changes of the post World War II period. Most notably, he focuses more on the constraints of American power—both internal and external—to achieve its stated purposes than his predecessors did. But he agrees that our greatest danger would follow from intervention, rather than from failing to intervene. Moreover, he adheres to a contemporary form of unilateralism: "Americans should observe a code of conduct that is constructive for ourselves, even if it is not reciprocated." (1980: 35)

The thrust of this critique has been heard before. Early in the Cold War Walter Lippmann and George Kennan both warned that a militarized containment policy would lead to a dangerous alliance competition with the Soviets and proliferation of American commitments. Perhaps it was difficult to foresee these developments at

3. Robert W. Tucker, *A New Isolationism: Threat or Promise?* (New York: Universe Books), 32.

that time; thus it took Vietnam to define the limits of our willingness to fight wars and honor our commitments. Strategic parity and its legacy of American vulnerability give new force to old arguments about the danger of alliances. Perhaps we had to experience the Cold War to appreciate arguments like those of Kennan, Lippmann, and Ravenal.

Ravenal has good reason to avoid the isolationist label, even though the substance of his arguments makes his policy prescriptions essentially the same. When America assumed a world role in the early 1940s, we turned our back on the old isolationism. An entire generation was traumatized by the Munich tragedy, and policymakers "overlearned" the lessons of that experience. When containment became the consensus strategy, "internationalism" became synonymous with "interventionism." Today, critics of American policy who wish to reach a mainstream audience avoid the isolationist appellation, so Ravenal labels his preferred policy as "strategic disengagement."

Strategic disengagement encompasses non-interventionism but goes beyond it. It emphasized adjustment to, rather than control of, the international system and a complete reversal of containment-style approaches. This would be accomplished by a measured, but ultimately total withdrawal from overseas commitments and positions. What makes this argument unique, as well as unusually compelling, are two additional elements. First, containment is *completely* rejected. America's future policies should be determined unilaterally and unconditionally, regardless of allies' wishes or the behavior of adversaries. Second, Ravenal explicitly acknowledges the costs of his prescriptions and is willing to pay them.

Ravenal's work, taken as a whole, advances five principal arguments supporting the case for strategic disengagement; all focus on domestic and international constraints or costs. Although the arguments reinforce each other, they are logically independent and differ in their centrality to his case. This makes it useful to examine each separately.

His most important argument is that American commitments are too dangerous to be justified. Because our conventional forces may not be adequate to deter attacks on areas such as Western Europe and the Persian Gulf region, we extend the deterrent protection of our nuclear arsenal to various allies. In theory, an attack on our

defined interests in these areas could lead to the use of our central intercontinental arsenal and all-out war. Extended deterrence, which attempts to compensate for disadvantages in balances of theater forces, thus rests on the threatened "first use" of nuclear weapons. Ravenal argues that neither Persian Gulf oil nor the defense of NATO Europe is worth the risk of nuclear war. He puts it this way (1980: 36): "Ironically, because the cases America cares about are also most demanding and possibly terminal, they are the ones the United States would in fact-and should in principle-shrink from defending."

The American commitment to Europe illustrates this argument most clearly, and Ravenal has written two papers outlining why he believes present NATO strategy is dangerous and obsolete. Of course, the classic rejoinder to the suggestion that the United States withdraw its commitment to Western Europe is that America cannot afford the "loss" of Western Europe. But for Ravenal (*NATO*, 35), this possible cost is offset by the

miniscule-but not fictitious-risk of the nuclear death of our own country, and probably also of civilization, if we continued to deter and deterrence were to fail. The only strategic sequence that could plausibly lead to such a dire result would be through the linkage provided by the Atlantic Alliance.

This is not an original idea, but Ravenal is on record-loudly and clearly-as opposing a policy which seeks to deter attacks on others by risking the possible nuclear annihilation of the United States.

Ravenal explicitly recognizes, as do many nuclear strategists, the connections between our commitments, putative strategic doctrines, and force structure. In this context, he asserts that extended deterrence is too dangerous because it necessitates a counterforce capability. Because the American commitment to Western Europe requires both a seemingly adequate local balance for initial conventional defense and "credible" extended deterrence, we must have the capability to strike first if necessary. Ravenal spells out the logical implications of this strategic relationship quite plainly (1982: 31, 34):

the American gravitation to counterforce is compelled by the preservation of U.S. alliances-particularly NATO, which has always depended on the threat of a U.S. first use of nuclear weapons . . . . Thus, America's willingness to protect its allies rises or falls with the prospective viability of counterforce . . . .

Ravenal's contribution lies in drawing our attention to this relationship, and the potential it carries for making the superpower nuclear balance unstable. It is especially relevant in the context of the protracted debate over the MX missile and long-term goals of reducing each side's incentive to strike first. Present plans call for deploying the MX—a first strike weapon—in vulnerable silos, an obviously destabilizing force posture. Ravenal notes that in "theory" this is supposed to deter the Soviets from preempting with their heavy missiles, but in fact the opposite is more likely. In a crisis the missiles' vulnerability could contribute to instability by *inviting a* Soviet pre-emptive attack. Since one assumes that Soviet as well as American defense planners know that the sites would be vulnerable, each side logically prepares to launch first, or on warning of attack. If Ravenal's reasoning is correct, not only our commitments but the forces we've deployed to honor them are exceedingly dangerous.

Ravenal's second argument is that containment policies are not sustainable in the long run due to the constraints of the American economic system. To begin, he claims that the economy cannot afford present and future projected defense costs. One reason is that these expenditures contribute disproportionately to unacceptably high budget deficits. He maintains (*Defense*) that the economy won't perform adequately without drastic reductions in military spending.

Although Ravenal has maintained for well over a decade that American commitments cost more than we can or will pay, fiscal considerations have recently become more central to his argument. For example, when speculating about large defense cuts in 1976, he said (1976: 76) that "savings should not be the dominant motive for initiating strategic changes; the motive should be to adjust to unsatisfactory choices and avoid disastrous situations." Now, he is buttressing his budgetary argument with what might be called a "total resources constraint" argument: defense spending extracts resources from the society that are needed for "the renewal of our industrial base and the maintenance of our standard of consumption" (*Defense*, 4). In this same work (*Defense*, 10) he states flatly that "we cannot afford our present global strategy."

Ravenal's more recent work on the defense budget was motivated by the Reagan Administration's proposals to increase military spending by over 50 percent in real terms from 1982 to 1988. Alternative military budget projections through the 1980s range from the 4 percent of GNP that Ravenal advocates through the 7 percent favored

by prominent Congressional Democrats, to the Administration's 8 percent. Although Ravenal's budgetary argument is plausible, we believe that it is open to criticism. Reductions in military spending of the size he advocates would greatly trim the deficits, and this is now one of his reasons for urging them. However, one could argue that America's economic and fiscal troubles were caused by years of mismanagement and recent tax cuts, not primarily by current military spending. To say, as Ravenal (*Defense*, 11) does, that "in an era of tax revolts, the resource base for military expenditures is constricted," is somewhat disingenuous, since that base was deliberately shrunk by government policy. In other words, revenue gaps are not givens; they can be manipulated to serve certain interests and policy preferences.

Defense spending is important in this context because it involves budgetary priorities and implies fiscal alternatives. Reductions in military outlays could have salutary effects on long-term interest rates and investor confidence. The choices involved in financing the deficits at projected levels are not easy: selling federal bonds to the Federal Reserve is inflationary, and offering them to the private credit markets could dry up capital needed for recovery and expansion. Even if it is a political given that much nondefense spending is politically "untouchable," fiscal alternatives might be considered before concluding that defense spending busts the budget. One could argue, as do many economists, that our budgetary problems can be solved only through some combination of higher taxes and lower military spending. Although budgetary constraints are and will remain important, we do not believe that Ravenal's assertions about the price of foreign policy can or need to rest on these so heavily.

The total resources argument is especially dubious. Perhaps the economy cannot provide recovery, reindustrialization, as well as afford our present foreign policy commitments. But Ravenal should supplement these assertions with further arguments and scholarly evidence, since competent economists differ widely. Herbert Stein, who headed the Council of Economic Advisors in the early 1970s, has estimated that nondefense output would increase by 3.3 percent annually if the Reagan military plan were implemented, as opposed to a 3.5 percent yearly increase under alternative plans. Even the lower growth figure would allow the resources available for nondefense purposes to double in 20 years.<sup>4</sup> It is at least debatable to

4. Herbert Stein, "Affording Defense and More," *New York Times*, April 8, 1983, 29.



assert that the economy could not afford these additional resources.

What of the resources needed to promote industrial modernization and development? If the shortfall in total resources is cyclical-i.e., if the economy, as it approaches full employment, could generate a pool of savings sufficient to finance a large military establishment and other needs-then Ravenal's argument can be seriously challenged. Even if large deficits persist, the tax structure could be modified-without increasing the total tax burden-to provide incentives for saving and productive investment rather than consumption. As the Reagan Administration points out, the economy "afforded" a significantly greater percentage of GNP for defense in the 1950s and 1960s than it does now or would under projected outlays. Arguments against certain levels of defense spending based on limited resources are not convincing because those making them focus only on manipulation of a single variable. The problem has been more comprehensive: America's inflation originated in excessive societal claims on available resources, compounded by short-sighted political and fiscal measures. When added to oil price increases and the stop-and-go policies of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the result was stagflation.

Ravenal is almost certainly correct in claiming that marginal cuts in defense spending will neither solve our economic difficulties nor clarify our foreign policy choices. As he puts it, the bulk of the military budget pays for forces that perform missions to support certain commitments; taken together, these constitute the heart of our foreign policy. The focus should be on those policies, rather than on trying to save money in various places; the latter will almost certainly lead to attempts to perform the same missions or support existing commitments with even less credibility. Defense spending does involve real economic costs, and these should be debated. However, it seems that Ravenal's resources argument is somewhat arbitrary and not essential to his major thesis.

Ravenal's third principal argument is empirically based and more convincing: Congress and the American people will in the long run be *unwilling* (as opposed to unable) to fund defense at anything like the levels containment requires. He made this point quite convincingly in a 1971 article which criticized the Nixon Doctrine. In that paper (1971: 211), he found that the budgetary constraints that helped produce the Doctrine did not "arise out of the absolute scarcity of resources, but out of the nation's unwillingness to make large

sacrifices for objectives that cannot be credibly invoked by its leadership." This constraint is probably long-term rather than cyclical; it involves what our society and political system *will* sustain, rather than what we *can* pay.

American leaders, on the other hand, have become habituated to an imperial world role; no important client, supply route, or strategic asset can be neglected. The result is overcommitment: "Traditionally, we've had a range of contingency needs that probably exceed the force capabilities we've been able to generate ...." And the mismatch between obligations and forces is "greater now than it was before because we are trying to do everything."<sup>5</sup> If the Executive Branch is overambitious, why doesn't Congress restore the balance by cutting forces? Congress is constrained from doing this in two ways. First, there is no evidence that any sizeable group of legislators disputes our world role. When Administration spokesmen insist that Congress specify which obligations are to be cut along with funds, there are few if any takers. Second, the pressure to keep control of expensive conventional forces creates a pattern of stretching available resources. Congress and the President both find it easier to acquire new interests than to pay for them.

America's weariness with the resource costs of our foreign policy exemplifies Ravenal's third argument. But blood as well as treasure is involved. Over the long run, America's leaders will not find adequate support for actions taken to implement a foreign policy based on containment. Transcending resource constraints, the public will not support limited wars against determined opponents. In other words, the system at home will not tolerate another Vietnam. Yet this is what interventionist policies will inevitably produce.

Ravenal's point is that our commitments will require us to fight conventional wars (if lesser measures, such as military aid and advisors, are ineffective), and that our political leaders cannot sustain such efforts. He argues that "we can't, as a society, produce and project military forces or efforts much different from what we have done" (*Never Again*, 106). But such efforts *will* often fail if we confront adversaries who understand our domestic system and its "breaking point," especially those who fight at lower "thresholds," such as sustained guerrilla warfare. In short, we will fight conventional wars (if we do not disengage) because we will be unwilling to escalate to strategic nuclear warfare, and constrained by the obvious

5. Quotations from Army Chief of Staff John A. Wickham, Jr., and former JCS Chairman David Jones, *New York Times*, August 10, 1983, 1.

costs, we will stop short of "winning" (see *Never Again*, 104). At this point the third argument converges with the first. Our commitments are dangerous because they rely, more or less explicitly, on the first use of nuclear weapons should deterrence fail. So we look for ways to stop along the scale of escalation, through the use of "firebreaks" and other subtle forms of decoupling. This leaves us to wage conventional war, which domestic pressures preclude us from fighting successfully. Thus, we should avoid intervention, for the outcome is unavoidably disadvantageous.

Today's hard-line critics also understand these constraints but try to transcend them. Norman Podhoretz finds President Reagan confronted by a climate of isolationism and pacifism that makes it difficult for him to propose the use of force in the face of a "clear and present danger." The danger is that El Salvador will join Nicaragua and Cuba as Soviet allies and further chip away at America's strategic position and historic dominance in Central America. Podhoretz perceives, as do many of the Administration's liberal critics, that the President cannot simultaneously (and credibly) claim that this outcome would threaten our vital interests and forswear the direct use of U.S. combat troops to prevent it. Doing so, he implies, confuses both our own public and our adversaries as to our interests and willingness to bear risks. Since Vietnam, it has been axiomatic that public opinion would not tolerate a comparable use of American forces for indefinite periods under unfavorable conditions. Podhoretz is cognizant of this constraint, but chooses to interpret it differently:

... a lesson to be learned from Vietnam ... is that fighting a war on the cheap is a sure formula for defeat ... if American military power should become necessary to prevent El Salvador from following Cuba and Nicaragua into the Soviet orbit, and if we should then fail to use it at all, or fail to use it effectively, we will have revealed ourselves as a spent and impotent force.<sup>6</sup>

Ravenal seems to understand the inherent dilemmas of intervention better than Podhoretz. Ravenal wonders "how much grace the American people will give its leaders to make good on their promises before emasculating another president" (1980: 32). The question is apposite to current Central American policy, particularly the

6. Norman Podhoretz, "Military Intervention in Central America?" *New York Times*, July 24, 1983, E21.

minuet being danced by the President and Congress over aid, military maneuvering, and support for rebels against the Sandinista government. The policy appears incoherent—support for a "negotiated settlement" along with threats and increased military pressure against Nicaragua—because the President would like to prevail on the cheap. Reagan wants his measures to frighten Nicaragua and appear restrained to the American public, which may be an impossible task. Ironically, he might have more success with foreign adversaries, at least in the short run, than in selling his policy domestically. But would the domestic support be forthcoming, especially if American involvement increased through a troop buildup or a blockade of Nicaragua? Although some commentators draw an analogy to the successful Cuban blockade of 1962, the Vietnam analogy appears more instructive in today's international environment.

Ravenal's fourth argument considers the constraints imposed by the international system. Here it is exemplified by focusing on the paradigm case of America's commitment to Europe; for Ravenal, this commitment is the most important aspect of America's external involvement, and its lessons are applicable to other cases. Our strategy for protecting Europe has involved differing mixes of two elements, extended deterrence and forward defense. Forward defense, whether it involves Western Europe, the Korean peninsula, or areas close to home, carries with it the possibility that the United States might have to fight other countries' wars. If Ravenal's arguments and those presented here are correct, it is unlikely that any long and costly conventional war would be tolerated by the American people, except perhaps to defend Western Europe. But this is the last thing our allies want: they have preferred the protection of our nuclear umbrella to the costs and risks of raising the threshold at which the side that is losing a conventional war might choose to initiate the use of nuclear weapons. This leaves extended deterrence as the glue that holds NATO together. We have presented Ravenal's argument that the value of extended deterrence is negated by its dangers and resource costs. Much of his recent work has focused on the "inherent incredibility" (*Defense*, 11) of our commitment to graduated escalation should deterrence fail.

It is not original to assert that an American commitment to use nuclear weapons in response to anything short of an attack on the

United States lacks credibility, especially in an era of Soviet parity (or superiority) in strategic weapons. What differentiates Ravenal's contribution is his conclusion that we must alter the essential nature of our foreign policy. Since we are unwilling to fund and adequately maintain conventional forces that are sufficient to guarantee every one of our commitments, the threatened use of nuclear weapons hovers in the background of every serious challenge and crisis. For these reasons a containment policy, and the commitments that underlie it, cannot be sustained within the confines of strategic realities. Extended deterrence cannot be made credible, so we must divest ourselves of the commitments.

Because these conclusions are based on a calculus of national self-interest rather than ideological principles, they stand as unique in the literature. To be credible, extended deterrence requires both (1982: 32) the "practical invulnerability of American society itself to attack," and the close "coupling" of the American nuclear arsenal with the local defense of Europe. But since America is clearly vulnerable to Soviet retaliation, no U.S. commitment to initiate nuclear war is credible. Ravenal explicitly concurs with Henry Kissinger's 1979 statement in Brussels that

perhaps even today, but surely in the 1980s-the United States will no longer be in a strategic position to reduce a Soviet counterblow against the United States to tolerable levels .... If my analysis is correct we must face the fact that it is absurd to base the strategy of the West on the credibility of the threat of mutual suicide . . . . European allies should not keep asking us to multiply strategic assurances that we cannot possibly mean, or if we do mean, we should not want to execute because if we execute, we risk the destruction of civilization.'

Based on this reasoning, Ravenal suggests that (*NATO*, 15) "decoupling from Europe is America's secret strategy."

These issues merit close discussion. Would America's policy elite, so closely tied to Europe through experience and sentiment, consciously weaken this key commitment? Perhaps not, but they have kept the obligation while trying to minimize the inherent dangers it poses for the United States. The key factor behind our willingness to pledge our homeland to the defense of Europe has been the super-

7. Henry A. Kissinger, "NATO: The Next Thirty Years," in Christoph Bertram, ed., *Strategic Deterrence in a Changing Environment* (Montclair, NJ: Allanhead, Osman & Co., 1981), 108-09.

power nuclear balance. American superiority meant, most importantly, our society's relative invulnerability to the effects of a Soviet counterblow if, as our strategy required, we used nuclear weapons first. Once this invulnerability was lost in the 1960s, American officials naturally sought to ensure that Europe could sustain itself in battle for some period of time without the automatic use of American nuclear weapons. "Flexible response" required our allies to furnish the bulk of an effective conventional defense, which was intended to contain a European war at the lowest possible level. While the Soviets probably have little doubt that we would retaliate if American territory were attacked, our response to attacks on even close allies is much more uncertain. In fact, we probably do not know how we would respond if our allies were losing a conventional war, and they no doubt realize this. As Ravenal notes, "unless we are willing to believe in perfect deterrence, we must at least contemplate the cases in which specific nuclear threats, and even nuclear attacks, would have to be made." (1976: 86)

NATO's present strategy is based on the deterrent threat of graduated nuclear escalation. If the conventional defense were to fail following a Warsaw Pact attack, the strategy calls for the U.S. to use nuclear weapons (first in the theater, then central systems) based on the common, integrated NATO contingency plans. Nuclear warheads could only be fired with the approval both of the United States and the host country. In fact, very little is known about the conditions that would prevail should nuclear weapons be used in battle. Careful, graduated escalation is only one possibility; two plausible scenarios can be sketched as alternatives. In the first, Western European leaders would be loathe to permit the first use of nuclear weapons on their territory until it was too late for them to be effective in battle; later, when the enemy was closer to population centers, local leaders would fear turning Europe into a nuclear battleground. In this scenario, "self-deterrence" would make Europe a *conventional* battleground. A second possibility is that tactical nuclear weapons would be used fairly early; the United States would hope to contain the conflict at this level, and European officials would acquiesce in order to begin the chain of escalation to U.S. central systems. Alternatively, battlefield weapons might be used to prevent them from being overrun by enemy forces. In this case, short-range nuclear forces might represent the top of the escalatory ladder: the superpowers might tacitly agree to keep the war out of each other's homelands. Ravenal discusses the latter possibility in his

earlier monograph on NATO (*NATO*, 13). In either case, or others that are equally plausible, there is no reason to believe that graduated escalation would be credible during a war, or that it would be implemented as current NATO doctrine envisages. As Desmond Ball argues, the first use of American central systems "is likely to follow a period of large-scale military action in which there has already been substantial use of tactical nuclear weapons, significant military and collateral casualties, and some degradation of command and control systems . . . . The historical record would seem to suggest that the pre-planned options in the S1OP are too idealized, that they are a-strategic in the sense that they would be of little relevance in real-life situations."<sup>8</sup> Europe cannot count on our promise because there is a substantial probability that we would not honor it under war-fighting conditions. Since Europe's territory could become America's buffer during a war, its situation is strategically different-in the most basic sense-from America's. The strategic realities do not permit a credible deterrent commitment.

Despite these possibilities, American leaders have consistently maintained (at least while in office) that our strategic forces are coupled to the defense of Europe. This results in a fundamentally incoherent strategy: we are driven to counterforce weapons and strategies to reinforce deterrence, while many of our actions and our obvious interests impel us to weaken the commitment. We have given various kinds of tacit warning of this, beginning with "flexible response," but the alternatives implied for both Europe and the United States in formally withdrawing the commitment are too difficult to contemplate.

One suggested solution to the tension between our safety and that of our allies is "no first use" of nuclear weapons. As advocated by Bundy et al., this would release the U.S. from its pledge to use nuclear weapons first against the Warsaw Pact if NATO were losing a conventional war. But under this proposal, America would still retaliate with nuclear weapons-inside the theater or directly against the Soviet Union-if the Soviets used them first.<sup>9</sup> Ravenal correctly responds (1983b: 11) that this idea contains two essentially contradictory goals: preservation of American commitments along

8. Desmond Ball, "U.S. Strategic Forces: How Would They Be Used?," *International Security* 7 (1982/83), 44.

9. McGeorge Bundy et al., "Nuclear Weapons and the Atlantic Alliance," *Foreign Affairs* 60 (Spring 1982), 753-68.

with reduced risk to the United States. He further argues that NATO depends on extended deterrence and that Bundy et al. are wrong in arguing that no first use is compatible with our commitment.

Ravenal advocates a unilateral American declaration of no first use, with an important qualification. For him it means that "we would not use nuclear weapons except in response to a nuclear attack on our homeland" (1983b: 16). This represents complete rather than partial American decoupling, consistent with his general prescriptions. While his logic is sound, the recommendation is probably not politically feasible in the foreseeable future. Perhaps the Bundy proposals are a reasonable first step, since under present conditions Europe would almost certainly be devastated in a war fought with either conventional or nuclear weapons. The United States wishes to retain the option of first use for its deterrent effect (as well as to maintain a key foundation of our present international position), but it is uncertain that our allies will expend the resources necessary to defend themselves if we withdraw the commitment. No first use *explicitly* raises the nuclear threshold and implicitly pressures our allies to prepare an adequate conventional defense.

Ravenal concedes that a Soviet attack is unlikely and that the possibility of some American nuclear response (whatever our declaratory policy) acts as a deterrent. Ever since U.S. (and later, by necessity, NATO's) doctrine became one of "flexible response" and thus made retaliation contingent, America's allies have suspected that our preference was to limit the effects of conflict to the European theater. The situation was not helped by President Reagan's careless remarks about the possibility of fighting a tactical nuclear war that would not touch the homelands of the superpowers. It seems that Reagan's ambivalence about pushing the button only gave voice to what most top officials have probably long ruminated about in private. Nonetheless, this explicit decoupling has seriously damaged NATO's cohesion and base of public support. This is crucial, since extended deterrence has two goals: to keep our allies and to deter the Soviets. But maintaining Europe as an ally—as opposed to a "third force"—is even harder than keeping the Soviets out. Ravenal believes that the credibility of our commitment is so irreparably damaged that we should admit the impossibility of restoring it. He sums up the dilemma starkly: "Moreover, it only has to be uncertain that an American president would push the button; the mere prospect of such a default undermines our alliances." (1976: 86)



Ravenal's final argument, which may be his most original, concerns the costs of disengagement. He does not minimize these costs, but he argues (*Never Again*, 137) quite convincingly that "we can live with or cope with a wide range of plausible outcomes." His position (*Defense*, 14) :

.. accepts some foreign 'losses' for fundamental reasons that have to do with preserving the integrity of our political and social system ... .  
Non-interventionists ... foresee the losses, but they weigh them and discount them.

These costs would include a Europe more independent of American influence and the need to develop new sources of domestically produced energy in case we were denied access to Persian Gulf sources. Ravenal acknowledges that domestic energy development is expensive, and that autarky distorts comparative advantages. But he balances these costs against the cost of dangerous policies which will lack domestic support at crucial times and which may prove impossible to implement due to international constraints.

Adjustment to some foreseeable consequences of disengagement could, of course, take alternative forms. Ravenal has emphasized that he advocates acquiring the "capacity" for economic independence in critical areas as a hedge, relying mainly on the self-interested actions of individuals and firms to guard against the possibility of supply disruptions. We find two difficulties in this position. First, acquiring the capacity for economic independence is autarkic, whether labeled so or not; it is inefficient and must therefore be counted as a cost.

Assuming that the United States chose to pay certain efficiency costs to reduce potential vulnerabilities, there is a second cost inherent in Ravenal's free market view that "Americans should take advantage of the flexibility and intelligence that markets and price mechanisms can provide and allow their private commercial organizations to deal abroad on whatever terms they can get." (1980: 35) One might seriously doubt whether private actors can or should make resource and supply decisions for critical commodities on which the economy and *any* defense effort would depend. These observations apply chiefly to oil, since this is the only commodity whose abrupt cutoff would cause serious economic dislocations. For other raw materials we are relatively well protected against emergencies by strategic stockpiles and diverse sources of supply. Our point is simply stated: private actors cannot be counted on to

make, nor should we expect them to make, strategic choices based on *national* interests. On the contrary, this is the classic definition of foreign policy as pursued by governments. Not only do different firms assess risks differently, but some may be differently damaged by disruptive events. Roger Stobaugh shows how the multinational oil companies were constrained to obey the instructions of Arab OPEC members during the 1973-74 oil crisis, some cutting production "even a little more"<sup>10</sup> than was required. Although the evidence indicates that the companies allocated supplies as "equitably" as possible given the constraints they faced, an Exxon executive explained his company's reaction in this way: "we complied with all of the producing countries' embargoes as they ordered because otherwise the consequences would have been much more severe . . . this is a job that . . . should have been done by Government and Government failed to do it."<sup>11</sup>

We conclude that only a well-defined governmental policy can manage problems of this kind. State intervention causes certain inefficiencies, but these must be balanced against the uncertainties of the invisible hand as well as the costs and risks of preparing to defend resource supplies by force. We don't hold a doctrinaire position on this issue; maintaining adequate strategic reserves involves different costs from those entailed in synthetic development. Our point is that the costs of all feasible alternatives should be compared.

Conspicuously absent from Ravenal's writings is any discussion of how American disengagement could affect the international economic system. American political and economic power played a critical role in the construction and maintenance of the "liberal" post World War II arrangements and rules, such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which facilitated the longest sustained period of world economic growth in history. Recent studies show how American power gave U.S. policymakers the flexibility to promote a system in which long-run political objectives, such as the promotion of key allies,<sup>12</sup> took precedence over specific American national economic goals.

10. Robert B. Stobaugh, "The Oil Companies in the Crisis," in Raymond Vernon, ed., *The Oil Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1976), 179.

11. Edward N. Krapels, *Oil Crisis Management: Strategic Stockpiling for International Security* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 25.

12. See, for example, Robert O. Keohane, "Hegemonic Leadership and U.S. Foreign Economic Policy in the 'Long Decade' of the 1950s," in William P. Avery and David P. Rapkin, eds., *America in a Changing World Political Economy* (New York: Longman, 1982).

Krasner and others have argued that the decline of American power has made U.S. economic objectives less cosmopolitan, and that this has contributed to the present lack of organization in the world economy.<sup>13</sup> Disengagement would further erode American influence, and thus usable power, making American direction of the international economic system even more difficult. Ravenal's anti-statist approach probably explains his failure to take this possibility seriously. His implied conclusion is convincing, because American economic influence will be based more on specific economic assets, such as the strength of our currency and technological dynamism, than on maintaining a high diplomatic and military profile. Moreover, our basic international economic interests and the specific interests of powerful domestic groups will incline us to basically liberal policies for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, the possibility that disengagement could further erode our economic influence cannot be completely discounted for several reasons. Disengagement would dramatically change perceptions of American power, and foreign actors would have much less incentive to comply with our preferences than they would those of a powerful global actor. More fundamentally, over time disengagement would help produce a more decentralized international system, one characterized more by regional and exceptional arrangements than by outcomes consistent with general rules. The liberal economic framework that served American interests in the postwar period would be further undermined. These consequences would represent significant costs that must be considered.

Although Ravenal has virtually nothing in common with today's hawks, he consistently credits their willingness to face (some of) the costs of maintaining containment policies. The hawks define threats in a certain way and delineate the national interest in terms of meeting challenges to them. The costs are indeed high, but the hawks are willing to pay them. This is not true of the "liberal" critics; they want to make marginal reductions in military spending and avoid "bad" wars. Liberals basically accept the assumptions and most of the requirements of containment, and explain the errors

13. Stephen D. Krasner, "American Policy and Global Economic Stability," in William P. Avery and David P. Rapkin, eds., *America in a Changing World Political Economy* (New York: Longman, 1982).

that have come in its wake as special cases while arguing for more prudent and selective intervention in the future.

The problem is that the liberals want to retain the traditional "good" defensive commitments such as NATO while disowning "a few Third World dictators or abandoning a few strategically worthless areas-objects that are not taking any American forces anyway'." (*Defense*, 8) In other words, they want to hold on to America's present world role while eliminating embarrassments and obvious losing cases. In picking and choosing where to be involved, "proponents of selectivity forget that wars must be taken as they come . . . If we cannot take wars as they come, then we must avoid them in wide moves of policy direction, long before they happen, and that means shedding commitments . . . ." (*Never Again*, 129)

Ravenal implies that liberals are intellectually dishonest for seeking the capacity to intervene selectively without accepting the likely consequences of military engagements. He perceives only two choices for the United States (1983a: 60-61): "Containment must be all-inclusive, for the Russians are not likely to organize their pressures and probes to suit American convenience . . . . The real choice is between containing the Soviet Union in any and all of its global manifestations and not containing it, period." This dichotomy may be too simplistic. Isn't it possible to *selectively expand* our security perimeter beyond our frontiers based on *a limited* set of key interests? Consider, for example, Robert Tucker's argument that Europe and the Persian Gulf are crucial to the United States but that Central America is not essential. Other analysts might reverse these priorities, but the obvious answer is yes; we could define and pursue a policy of limited involvement, but only if we were able and willing to bear the costs and risks outlined above.

Ravenal is aware of this possibility, and he builds a hedge into his argument by asserting that it would be consistent with our disengaged posture to retain "second-chance" forces that would be used only in a defensive manner if another state was "confronted by a momentous, inexorable military threat clearly directed against our homeland." (1983a: 61) One obvious threat of this kind would be a Marxist regime in Guatemala supplying insurgents against Mexico. There is little question that such a situation would threaten our most vital interests. The problem with absolutist positions such as Ravenal's is that if they admit of any exceptions-as he does above-choices would still have to be made about the seriousness of

threats and the intentions of adversaries. We might still have to intervene, although in far fewer circumstances than under present strategies. If one accepts the premises established by Ravenal's arguments, such interventions would still be very dangerous, especially considering the stakes that would then be involved. As long as the United States has a global adversary and *any* interests beyond its borders, intervention is a possible response to imminent dangers. Nevertheless, with some qualifications, his argument against selective commitments seems valid.

If the premises of these arguments are accepted certain policy implications will follow, although difficult questions will remain. How quickly would we divest ourselves of our commitments, and what, if anything, would we owe our allies as we divorced our fate from theirs? What outcomes or interests would we continue to define as vital, and how would we prepare to safeguard them? A disengaged America would have a very different foreign policy from the one we have taken for granted since the onset of the Cold War, and it would take time to adjust to new limits and the outcomes inherent in them. These are some of the most difficult questions our polity will ever face, and the ultimate answers will not come easily or quickly.

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