

## ***No More Countervalue***

***By Matt J. Martin***

SIOP '62 was the first war plan to contain a “no-cities” option for strategic nuclear attack. It was an idea whose time has come and whose time is still here. In an article by Jeff Erich printed in your paper on 17 Feb 97, the author suggested that in an age of arms control and reduced nuclear arsenals we would once again, after over thirty-five years of strategic evolution, target population centers in order for our smaller nuclear forces to maintain their deterrent effect. This is sheer nonsense. The targeting of cities—known as countervalue targeting—has no business in the US strategic doctrine. For the reasons outlined below, it would undermine the credibility of our deterrent posture and make the rush to nuclear attack all the more likely in future wars.

Clausewitz was a military genius far ahead of his time. His rules for fighting and winning wars are still, hundreds of years after he wrote them, of critical importance to modern warfare. Yet we seem to have forgotten his most basic lesson. If you want to win a war, there is one and only one thing you have to do—You have to remove your enemies capability to wage war. Bottom line: combat capability. Once your enemy no longer has the instruments, tools, and weapons with which to wage an effective fighting campaign, that enemy has no choice but to surrender. Failure to surrender can only mean total destruction. It doesn't matter what sort of war you're fighting. Even when it comes to the dreadful case of nuclear war, combat capability is still all that matters.

During WWII we had a dubious flirtation with a strategy we now know to be bankrupt and useless in modern warfare, and this bankrupt strategy formed the original basis for countervalue doctrine. This strategy was known as Strategic Bombardment—the practice of firebombing cities for the sole purpose of destroying populations. It was surmised that by bombing civilians we would demoralize our enemy and convince them that it's just not worth it to continue the fight. We should have read our Clausewitz.

Moral and ethical issues aside, this type of strategy is flawed for one very important reason—it leaves our enemy with a capacity to strike back. Strategic Bombardment—and countervalue—do nothing to degrade an adversary’s combat capability. History now shows that Strategic Bombardment had the opposite effect than the one intended. Rather than demoralize the enemy, it strengthened their resolve and encouraged them to fight to total destruction rather than surrender while there was still something left of their societies.

Our current conventional strategy is beginning to reflect our newfound wisdom concerning Strategic Bombardment. Operations Linebacker I and II were limited, for the most part, to military targets rather than population centers. In fact, despite the tremendous amounts of ordinance dropped on North Vietnam (more per month than was dropped on all of Europe during all of WWII), the kill ratio per B-52 sortie was only about 1.5.

During Desert Storm we took great aims to limit civilian casualties, and we focused solely on military targets. The result was victory in war.

I’m sure many of you are thinking that the result of dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—civilian targets—was to bring about the immediate surrender of the Japanese. This result is very misleading, however. The evidence now suggests that the reason the Japanese surrendered was not because they were shocked or demoralized by the tremendous civilian casualties, or the impending destruction of their society, but because they made a military calculation that the strategic advantage had irrevocably turned against them. They reasoned, quite correctly, that the atomic bomb, if used against military targets, meant that they could no longer hope to defeat the US militarily. It was a calculation of combat capability that encouraged the Japanese to surrender, not the demoralization of strategic bombardment.

There are two other very convincing arguments concerning why countervalue is a bankrupt philosophy. The first has to do with the credibility of retaliation. Say, for

instance, the Russians decide to launch a first-strike nuclear attack against our cities. The President, once he receives an assessment of this attack, realizes that 200 million US citizens are about to be killed and there's absolutely nothing he can do to prevent it. The only option he has before him is to launch his own countervalue attack, exact revenge on the Russian population, and kill hundreds of millions of their own citizens. This, I submit, is no strategy at all. A counterforce posture—the one we've maintain for over 35 years—at least gives him the option to strike at the enemies remaining strategic assets and limiting the damage.

The second argument has to due the credibility of extended deterrence. Countervalue strategy doesn't allow us the option of deterring anything except a direct nuclear attack against the soil of the United States. If, to use a Cold War example, the Russian were to invade Western Europe, we could never launch a nuclear attack to stop them, as that would mean nothing short of the total destruction of both societies. A countervalue strategy gives the option of flexible response—a tit for tat retaliation. It can be used to stop a war short of total destruction.

As for the effectiveness of counterforce with limited nuclear arsenals, noting about the strategy is significantly changed. If an enemy wishes to win a nuclear conflict, that enemy must eliminate our capacity to fight a nuclear conflict. With a counterforce posture, that will prove impossible. The enemy will be very uncertain as to the prospects of victory, and will therefore decide not to try. That is deterrence.

The question of how we should shape our strategic forces in the post-Cold War era are some of the most important questions currently facing our country today. Rather than put our faith in pipedreams and bankrupt strategies however, we should maintain our perspective and remember that combat capability—not half-baked theories—is what keeps the peace.

Matt J. Martin, 1997