NO-FIRST-USE UNKNOWABLES

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In Scotland, juries have three options: "innocent," "guilty," or "not proven." In America, nuclear strategists apparently are limited to only two options: thumbs up or thumbs down.

Strategists generally acknowledge uncertainty but rarely let it interfere with their coming to strong conclusions about nuclear policies. And they have not considered agnosticism on particular issues—taking the position that something just cannot be known—as an acceptable option.

Yet the obvious epistemological shackles on policy analysis do have important consequences for policymaking, especially where nuclear strategy is involved. When the pros and cons of an important policy question stack up fairly evenly, the failure to acknowledge uncertainty leads analysts to overlook the possibility that the solution is not knowable.

One prime example is the controversy over conventional strength and nuclear deterrence in Western Europe. This debate first became public in the early 1960s, when the Kennedy administration called for a strengthened conventional defense in Western Europe. It erupted again suddenly in 1982 when former top American security officials McGeorge Bundy, George Kennan, Robert McNamara, and Gerard Smith, since dubbed the "Gang of Four," proposed in the Spring 1982 issue of Foreign Affairs that NATO decrease its reliance on nuclear weapons and declare a nuclear no-first-use policy. Four prominent West Germans, Karl Kaiser, Georg Leber, Alois Mertes, and Franz-Josef Schulze, responded in the next issue. But the arguments on both sides had changed little since McNamara, as President John Kennedy's secretary of defense,
lobbed for flexible response two decades earlier.

This stalemate stems from the uncertainties and dilemmas that are built into the subject and from a lack of useful evidence that precludes a rational choice among the leading options. A detailed look at the no-first-use debate suggests how completely many of today's strategists have become bogged down by arguing unsupportable positions. And it reveals how a new way of thinking about such issues can serve the public good by recognizing nuclear unknowables for the alluring distractions they are, and by highlighting more solvable, if less grandiose, problems.

NATO has always reserved the option of initiating nuclear war against a nonnuclear assault. Threatening nuclear escalation was originally intended to correct a perceived conventional inferiority with respect to the Warsaw Pact and to raise the risks of nuclear destruction for the Soviet Union. But starting in the late 1950s, as the Soviet arsenal of tactical and strategic nuclear weapons approached the size of NATO's, first use was seen as more likely to produce Armageddon than any military advantage.

Kennedy's attempts to reduce NATO's nuclear dependence were stiffly resisted by the European allies, who still saw the U.S. nuclear umbrella as an effective deterrent to conventional attack. What emerged was an ambiguous compromise that acknowledged the importance of conventional defense while retaining the option to go nuclear if conventional defense failed. Although politically expedient, the adoption of this "flexible response" doctrine did not lead to significant force or strategy changes, and the same concerns about first use's effectiveness have persisted through the present.

The no-first-use debate has focused primarily on three questions: Would no first use deter an attack by the Warsaw Pact better or worse than the current posture? Would no first use increase or decrease the likelihood of nuclear war? Would no first use strengthen or disrupt NATO unity?

"No first use" describes an array of related policies. Adopting a no-first-use policy could
be as simple as renouncing the threat to go nuclear. But most no-first-use advocates urge force as well as declaratory changes—primarily, a conventional build-up in Western Europe. This is the version analyzed here.

Many no-first-use advocates urge a reduction in the thousands of tactical nuclear weapons in Western Europe, particularly the forward-based atomic demolition munitions and artillery shells that could be used only in the early stages of a battle, if at all. These force changes would still leave thousands of nuclear weapons for deterring Soviet first use. Advocates claim that restructuring NATO's tactical nuclear forces could make accidental first use and Soviet pre-emption less likely. But the effect on the likelihood of intentional first use is unclear because most first-use contingencies can be executed by rear-based systems.

Many see merit in the force changes but not in declaring no first use. They prefer the compromise "no early first use." By allowing NATO to delay going nuclear, a no-early-use posture would give the antagonists more time to come to terms. Whatever their differences, no first use and no early use both attempt to raise the nuclear threshold and to strengthen whatever firebreak exists between conventional and nuclear war. Since declared policy can be easily ignored during crises, the differences between no early use and no first use seem minor. Thus the discussion of no first use will apply to no early use, as well as to the innumerable combinations of different declaratory postures, force deployments, and strategies that lie between a trip-wire first-use policy—employing a pushover conventional force simply to trigger nuclear escalation—and a no-first-use policy without any tactical nuclear weapons at all.

**Threatening Suicide**

Everyone agrees on the importance of avoiding a conventional war in Europe. Such a war can break out in two ways: through a deliberate decision, as with World War II, or inadvertently, as with World War I. The literature largely focuses on the former, asking whether NATO's current army with the threat to go nuclear is a better deterrent to Soviet
aggression than a stronger army with no first use.

No-first-use advocates typically claim that regardless of whether NATO threatens first use, actual first use would be irrational because NATO can get no military advantage by escalating, and because use of even the "cleanest" tactical nuclear weapons carries a high risk of escalation to all-out nuclear war. To show that nuclear war cannot be controlled, advocates point out the pressures on leaders to escalate: great stress and anger, lack of information, general chaos, fear of pre-emption, the military and political consequences of backing down, and the chance that showing even greater resolve would scare the enemy into backing down.

Uncontrollability, the argument continues, makes threatening limited first use equivalent to threatening massive first use, which is equivalent to threatening suicide. And everyone agrees that suicide is not a credible response to conventional aggression. Since going nuclear would only worsen NATO's situation, the Soviets do not believe NATO's threat to do so. Thus the current first-use policy does not effectively deter Soviet aggression.

While hammering on first use's incredibility, no-first-use proponents admit that even no-first-use declarations would not rule out actual NATO first use in wartime. The prospect of nuclear war, even if lower than under first-use postures, would still deter Moscow. The Gang of Four claims that this residual prospect of nuclear war, combined with the increase in conventional forces, would "reduce the risk of conventional aggression in Europe."

No-first-use critics respond that since what really deters the Soviets is the possibility of all-out nuclear war, it is best to emphasize that possibility to Moscow. No first use would decrease the likelihood of nuclear escalation and thus decrease the real deterrent to Soviet aggression. Even if the Soviets doubt the sincerity of the current first-use threat, the mere presence of vulnerable nuclear weapons guarantees some chance that NATO will use them—either deliberately, to avoid losing

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them, or inadvertently, through unauthorized use by field commanders.

In addition, many first-use advocates have their own limited war theory to show that nuclear war is somewhat controllable and thus can be rationally initiated. The adversaries would be under tremendous pressure to keep the nuclear exchanges under control; perhaps just a warning shot would bring the Soviets to the table. (To emphasize the obvious, which neither side seems to appreciate, there is not much hard data showing exactly how controllable a limited nuclear war in Europe would be. Would it get out of control 5 per cent of the time or 95 per cent?)

Still, first-use advocates must admit the danger of escalation to global nuclear war because it is precisely this danger that they claim is central to deterring Soviet aggression. It does not matter that the credibility of the first-use threat is declining slightly, because what really deters the Soviets is the small yet inescapable risk of a devastating nuclear war inherent in the first-use posture. Obviously, the no-first-use pledge is not inviolate, so the Soviet Union would not be truly "liberated" from nuclear risk by its adoption, as the West German authors insist. But the claim that no first use would diminish that risk must be taken seriously.

The disagreements, then, center on credibility—how much adopting a no-first-use policy will decrease the Soviet belief that NATO will go nuclear, and how much that decrease can be reversed by increasing conventional forces.

It is easy to forget that discussions of credibility and conventional deterrence concern the psychological and bureaucratic decision-making process of the Soviet leadership. Even if the probability that a limited nuclear war will escalate into a general nuclear war could be objectively calculated, analysts would still be far from knowing the credibility of first use. What matters to deterrence is not the objective probability that a nuclear war will remain limited, but what the two sides think. As McNamara argued in a subsequent Foreign Affairs article, it is the recognition by Western leaders that escalation to global war is likely that makes their first use of nuclear weapons
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so unlikely. Hence it is the Soviet perception of this Western recognition that could decrease the credibility of first use.

Credibility is very much in the eye of the beholder. But neither McNamara nor the West German authors support their claims about credibility with evidence on the beholder. Indeed, rigorous analysis of Soviet perceptions is so daunting that it is usually omitted from policy debates. Both arguments seem to rely instead on implicit, intuitive assumptions about Soviet thinking.

Opponents of no first use claim that it is primarily the nuclear threat that keeps the opponent from taking dangerous risks. The strongest evidence they cite is the four war-free decades that Europe has enjoyed. Adding several implicit assumptions about Soviet psychology, they attribute Moscow’s evident prudence to the first-use threat.

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Yet the “40 years of peace” argument is weak. Not only were there decades in the 19th century without major European wars, but also no detailed analysis of Soviet intentions is ever presented to justify the contention. Without such direct evidence, several other plausible explanations of Soviet caution must be considered: the Soviets’ exhaustion after World War II and the Stalin-era purges that together cost tens of millions of lives; the continuing threat of rebellion in Eastern Europe; the related unreliability of Warsaw Pact armies and the knowledge that Soviet supply lines would be going through unfriendly territory; the considerable strength of NATO conventional forces; or even a sincere desire for peace. Further, the 40 years of peace may be due partly to circumstances largely independent of NATO policy. Maybe NATO and the Warsaw Pact have simply been lucky. Crises are not always in-

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tentional, and conflicts do not always result from an aggressor's calculations. World War I is the classic case of a war that nobody wanted. Interestingly, those who insist on the key peace-keeping role of nuclear weapons never even mention these other explanations. Perhaps more important, even if the first-use threat has discouraged Soviet aggression in the past, it may not in the future—particularly as East and West remain in rough nuclear balance.

The lack of supporting evidence is not surprising, given the notorious paucity of evidence on Soviet decision making. Analysts have only intelligence reports of Soviet military expenditures and capabilities, Soviet military writings and statements—which may not contain the actual views of Soviet leaders—and some history of the relevant individuals and bureaucracies. To be useful, these data, which typically are uncertain, incomplete, and self-contradictory, would have to be integrated into a coherent picture of the Soviet decision-making process. Even if one could know what the Soviet leaders now believe they would do in a crisis, one would not necessarily know how they would really act. The leaders themselves cannot know for sure. Further, this unfocused picture would work for current Soviet leaders only, not necessarily for future ones. Obviously, the West does know certain things about Soviet thinking. But experts in Soviet foreign policy readily admit that they have made little headway in resolving the disagreements about Soviet decision making that drive Western policy disputes.¹

Political scientists can also analyze a range of historical cases of conventional deterrence, draw general conclusions about what deters, and then apply them to the Soviet Union. Yet it is often hard to tell whether deterrence worked at all—what if no attack was ever intended in the first place? And if deterrence did work, which factors were crucial? Although deterrence involving nuclear weapons might sometimes work like conventional de-

terence, mutual vulnerability has dramatically changed what deterrence requires.

But the shortage of crisis-deterrence situations during the nuclear age provides a very small sample for analysis, and only a handful of these incidents involve deterrence between major nuclear powers. In no instance have the nuclear powers squared off over a territory as important as Western Europe, or even a territory that the defender had pledged to defend with nuclear weapons.

Yet even a plethora of useful nuclear cases would tell little about how to prevent the opponent from contemplating attack to begin with, and thus how to prevent crises from even occurring. If a policy to improve deterrence during crises hampers deterrence of crises, it is not clear whether it will increase or decrease the likelihood of war. Indeed, analysts such as Colin Gray argue that policies aimed at improving crisis stability encourage the Soviet Union to start trouble.

Weak Links

Without rigorous theories about Soviet decision making, analysts must rely on a priori psychological assumptions. Many deterrence theorists and strategists attempt to clarify the psychology of decision making by treating decision makers as rational calculators of expected costs and benefits—even though the most rational people do not usually make decisions in this way. But the problem of assessing the Soviets’ particular calculus of credibility and cost still remains.

If no first use increased both credibility and harm threatened, or decreased both, the choice would be obvious. But, as in many situations, credibility gained and harm threatened are inversely related. Reducing the level of violence threatened increases the likelihood that the threat will be carried out because it lowers the risks that the conflict will escalate to all-out nuclear war. Yet the lower such risks


appear, the less dangerous conflict appears to the aggressor. Conversely, raising the threat's level of violence decreases the likelihood that it will be carried out, and thus its credibility. To argue for a certain policy, therefore, analysts must show that it will drive one variable up significantly more than it will drive the opposite variable down. Evaluating the net impact of a policy on the likelihood of conventional attack can require an extremely subtle analysis of credibility and cost.

Although it is not too difficult to tell which threats are very credible, somewhat credible, or positively incredible, subtler distinctions are more difficult to measure. Yet subtle distinctions must be measured to assess no first use. And if accurate calculations cannot be made now, with plenty of time and resources, how could officials make them in times of crisis?

Intractable tradeoffs between harm threatened and credibility permeate the no-first-use debate. Consider beliefs about controlling nuclear escalation. Suppose NATO leaders agree that nuclear war cannot remain limited. Soviet recognition of this agreement lowers the credibility of first use, since NATO believes that actually using nuclear weapons would be suicidal. But if the Soviets have similar doubts about controlling nuclear war, the threatened harm will nonetheless appear high to them. Therefore, the effects of these beliefs on first use as a deterrent are unclear, and probably unknowable.

The weakest link in the no-first-use argument is the requirement for added NATO conventional forces. There would be vigorous resistance to such a sweeping change, especially to the budgets and personnel that would be required. Moreover, the effort could well lead to an even costlier conventional arms race with the Soviet Union.

An increased NATO commitment to conventional defense, along with emerging weapons technologies and a re-evaluation of the NATO–Warsaw Pact conventional balance, would raise NATO's confidence in repelling conventional attack. But the record of even conventionally superior defenders is too erratic to justify the high confidence that no-first-
use advocates generally seem to require. For instance, by most measurements at the time, France's army was at least equal to Nazi Germany's in 1940. But while the French had prepared for the trench warfare of World War I, the Germans had built lighter tanks, capable of negotiating the Ardennes—a region of Luxembourg that was thought to be impenetrable. This unforeseen factor made the devastating blitzkrieg possible.

Underappreciated technical and tactical factors can always undermine the most impressive-sounding military analysis. No one can be sure that the relatively small increases in military spending that no-first-use advocates request can compensate for the loss in deterrence that results from the first-use threat.

But the Gang of Four has another, stronger argument: Nuclear war is more catastrophic than conventional war, so preventing the former is more important than preventing the latter. Thus even if it could be established, despite the epistemological difficulties, that the current posture deters conventional war better, no first use might be justified in order to lower the risk of all-out nuclear war.

In assessing the risk of nuclear war, however, the risk of conventional attack must be taken into consideration. The risk of nuclear war is the rough product of two factors: the risk of conventional attack and the risk of nuclear escalation (subsuming pre-emption under nuclear escalation). No first use decreases the likelihood that either side will go nuclear, but seems to increase the likelihood of conventional attack. The two factors are therefore inversely related. This tradeoff makes it difficult to figure out how no first use would affect the risk of nuclear war.

One of McNamara's arguments that no first use decreases the risk of nuclear war nicely illustrates the tradeoff. If the Soviets expected a nuclear response to a conventional attack, wrote McNamara in his solo Foreign Affairs article, they would have good reason to initiate the conflict with nuclear weapons:

To the extent that the nuclear threat has deterrent value, ... preparing themselves for the possibility of NATO nuclear attacks means that they must avoid massing their
offensive units. This would make it more difficult to mount a successful conventional attack, raising the incentives to initiate the war with a nuclear offensive.

But here McNamara partially undermines his own conventional-deterrence argument. The difficulty that the Soviets will face in mounting a conventional attack under the current NATO posture decreases the probability of their doing so. So if the Soviets do not have to worry about nuclear retaliation, by McNamara's own logic they can mass their troops for a more effective attack, and conventional war becomes more likely. Thus no first use might lower the probability of going nuclear as it raises the probability of attack.

Neither McNamara nor the West German authors support their claims about credibility with evidence.

Naturally, this tradeoff affects only deliberate Soviet attack. NATO policy and the risk of nuclear escalation have little impact on the unintentional factors, such as East German revolts. The significance of the tradeoff thus depends on the relative roles of Soviet aggression and accidental circumstances in bringing NATO and the Warsaw Pact to the brink of war. If accidental war is much likelier than Soviet adventurism, then NATO policy has only a slight impact on the risks of conventional war, while keeping the risks of nuclear escalation high. In that case, a first-use policy would clearly increase the likelihood of nuclear war.

But observers agree that there is a possibility of deliberate attack in Europe. A status quo proponent would argue that if the Soviets have very little interest now in starting trouble, that is because the risk of nuclear war has made conventional war unthinkable. Removing the threat of first use would make conventional war a viable option, and therefore would heighten Soviet willingness to provoke crises. Assuming that deliberate attack is a real possibility, as most strategists do, and given

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the aforementioned difficulty of providing a high-confidence conventional defense, it seems reasonable to assume that there is indeed a significant tradeoff.

If so, it becomes difficult to determine how no first use would affect the likelihood of nuclear war. Proponents must show that it would lower the risk of nuclear escalation more than it would raise the risk of Soviet conventional attack. Conversely, to prove that no first use would make nuclear war much more likely, one must show that this policy would increase the risk of attack without proportionally decreasing the odds of nuclear escalation. A few critics of no first use have explicitly argued this. Leaders, they contend, are not always rational during crises, and they might delegate release authority to their field commanders—like British Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery, who reportedly once said about NATO’s first-use threat, “I’ll strike first and seek permission afterwards.” But the losing side would probably rather renge on its vow than capitulate. Since a conventional war would be more likely, no first use would make nuclear war more, not less, probable.

But the critics of no first use, like its advocates, cannot have their cake and eat it, too. Claiming that no first use would not make NATO first use less likely contradicts their claim that no first use would make conventional war more likely by liberating “the Soviet Union from the decisive nuclear risk,” as the West German authors put it. Making both claims requires an assumption, difficult to justify, that imputes an unlikely myopia to Soviet leaders.

Concern over a third major goal of U.S. security policy, maintaining NATO solidarity, also seems to have sparked the renewed debate. The original Gang of Four article claimed that “the value of a no-first-use policy


... is first of all for the internal health of the Western Alliance itself." But these effects of no first use seem no less obscure than its effect on deterrence.

In the early 1980s, the antinuclear movement in Western Europe was on the rise. No first use would not rule out the deployments of Pershing II or cruise missiles that sparked much of the antinuclear protest in the first place. But some advocates of no first use have suggested that removal of several thousand short-range tactical nuclear weapons plus a superpower agreement to forswear first use would assuage the underlying nuclear discontent. Moreover, the explicit decoupling of U.S. strategic forces from conventional war in Europe would undermine the "coupling" rationale for new Euromissiles.

The West German authors agree that no first use could relieve these fears but argue that new, more destructive fears could arise. No first use "could result in anxieties about a more probable conventional war soon replacing anxieties about the much less probable nuclear war" and could increase "the feeling of vulnerability to political blackmail." But the Gang of Four and its West German interlocutors offer no evidence to support their hypotheses about public opinion.

It is easy to see why. Public opinion is difficult to measure and much harder to predict. More sophisticated analyses of European discontent could unearth better evidence and produce better predictions, but only within limits. No doubt the extremes of the political spectrum will react according to their creeds. But for now, most people do not care enough about this issue to have formed strong opinions. Consequently, the answers to polls often depend on the content of the questions. Questions about a single policy preference can elicit different responses—for example, if they mention financial burden or catching up to the Soviet Union. Some polls suggest that most West Europeans oppose NATO use of nuclear weapons against a conventional attack. Evidence is scarce on this point, but many of these people would no doubt respond differently were they told about the conventional asymmetry between NATO and the Warsaw
Pact, or about the costs involved in a conventional build-up. When resilient opinions can be discerned, it is difficult to tell how different conditions would change them. Predicting future public reactions to certain military policies requires much better theory than political science has provided so far.

For now, one hopes that analysts will learn from their previous failures. In 1982, most—including both sides of the first-use controversy—expected the peace movement to maintain pressure on West German leaders to resist the U.S. missile deployments. Not even specialists on contemporary German politics foresaw the movement's decline. West European public support for NATO's first-use doctrine remained low before and during the Euro-missile debate, but confidence in the existing conventional deterrent and reluctance to spend more for conventional defenses have thus far blocked a no-first-use push.

The Scottish Option

Agnosticism is not justified for all strategic debates. Most, or at least many, arguments in nuclear strategy are clear-cut enough to make rational conclusions possible despite a small degree of uncertainty. For example, in the late 1950s a rational consensus emerged that massive nuclear retaliation was not sufficiently credible to deter low-level aggression and that less drastic threats were needed for effective deterrence. Yet the controversy over no first use as it has been argued so far appears fundamentally unresolvable.

The conclusion of unresolvability may be unusual, but concepts like credibility, cost, resolve, and crisis stability are familiar to nuclear strategists. Each, however, contains psychological components that are difficult to measure precisely.

When tradeoffs occur, psychological and other uncertainties often do interfere with rational resolution. For example, cases that hinge on subtle degrees of credibility scarcely ever address the difficulties in measuring credibility. Nuclear strategy debates in general lose sight of the limits on the precision with which psychological policies can be applied. Analysts often acknowledge tradeoffs, but
sometimes they are so intent on avoiding one horn of a dilemma that they barely realize how deeply they are impaled on the other. In the no-first-use debate, the proponents of no first use focus on the likelihood of nuclear escalation, while the critics attend mainly to the likelihood of conventional attack.

The unavoidably polemical process of democratic decision making is one culprit. After all, a balanced case full of hesitations and caveats is not usually the most persuasive one. Playing down uncertainties may also stem from the tacit but pervasive conception of nuclear strategy as a more or less scientific enterprise. Notwithstanding occasional academic dissension, the major questions of nuclear strategy have been dressed in an aura of objectivity that encourages unwarranted expectations of their ultimate resolvability.

Of course, all analysts know that it is unrealistic to require a political or military prediction to be scientifically provable. Extreme skeptics would soon find themselves doubting everything. As a matter of course, foreign- and security policy analysts, like all political analysts and decision makers, try to cope with uncertainty by relying on their good judgment and on common sense enriched by years of study and experience.

Often analysts make predictions that they cannot justify with explicit reasons, or that fail to persuade other equally competent analysts. When pressed, they defend these intuitive predictions as judgment calls. There is nothing wrong with using common sense psychology or judgment calls. And a consensus among informed people is more often than not correct. But when experts honestly disagree, citing one's own judgment as conclusive—simply because it is one's own—is an act of hubris, not of rationality. In the no-first-use debate, there is no consensus and the necessary evidence is not available.

It is unreasonable to expect answers to all questions. One need not be an extreme skeptic to recognize that at some point the lack of evidence and sound analogy makes a judgment call more of a guess than a rational decision. In nuclear strategy, the resources of judgment are so scant, and tradeoffs so common, that
many unresolvable questions should be expected.

Whatever the reasons, playing down uncertainty has serious drawbacks. Logically, if decision makers cannot tell how to achieve their major goals, they should turn to lesser goals. But without the Scottish third option, the decision will be based on rhetoric or the appeal of the arguments—however inadequate—concerning the highest goals. One might as well flip a coin.

In fact, flipping a coin would actually be better. The result would work out as often as rhetorically based decisions, but a decision maker could be more open to rethinking the matter if new information came to light. Further, with the Scottish option vividly available, decision makers could at least wonder whether the issue were rationally resolvable. Freed from the pressure of deciding on the basis of goals that they could not know how to achieve, they could turn to goals that they knew how to meet.

In the no-first-use debate, the difficulty—if not impossibility—of rationally deciding what will best deter aggression, what will best deter nuclear war, or how to best unify the Atlantic alliance should ideally lead one to lesser goals. For this debate, one important lesser goal is economic savings. Quibbling over price tags in matters as momentous as nuclear war is usually inappropriate. Accordingly, the economic cost of the associated conventional build-up has been treated as a limit on the political viability of no first use rather than as an intrinsically important consideration. But in certain cases, as the political scientist Bernard Brodie pointed out:

Experience assures us that it is not at all a simple matter to determine objectively, let alone get international agreement upon, those arms limitation measures that will really advance the ends of greater stability and lesser destructiveness. That leaves us with the mere matter of saving money.6

Of course, saving money was one of the major reasons for threatening first use back in the early postwar years. Nuclear weapons

provided "more bang for the buck" then and still do today. Some advocates of no first use have adopted NATO commander General Bernard Rogers's target of a 4 per cent annual real increase in NATO spending for an improved conventional deterrent; many skeptics doubt that even this sum would make much difference. Moreover, in the present climate, asking NATO for 4 per cent year after year would be like trying to get blood from a stone.

Other concerns besides expense might be decisive for policymakers. Given the difficulty of determining the national interest, perhaps a decision maker should choose on the basis of public wishes. In many cases this is fairly straightforward. For instance, polls show quite clearly that the American public does not favor unilateral disarmament.

But as the discussion of West European public opinion implies, evaluating actual public desires for no first use is difficult. When first asked, a substantial majority (62 per cent to 26 per cent) of Americans opposed U.S. first use. But when reminded of the risks of a no-first-use pledge, majorities or pluralities opposed it in three separate polls. It is not clear what the public's position is, or if it has a position at all.

A general consideration in changing any major policy is the immediate cost. Since no first use appears so important, is so controversial among elites, and will strike many as appeasement or defeatism, a long, bitter battle probably faces any leader determined to push it. Avoiding bloody battles over issues where victory is of dubious value is good politics and good policy, as King Pyrrhus learned. A leader's motto should not be, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," but rather, "If you can't tell how to make it better, don't mess with it." With no first use, since no one can tell if "it" is broken, this consideration advises leaving well enough alone.

Another criterion that American leaders should consider is the possible unconstitution-

ality of first use. Federation of American Scientists director Jeremy Stone's argument that current policy is unconstitutional, made in the Fall 1984 issue of FOREIGN POLICY, deserves to carry considerable weight with decision makers concerned about protecting congressional involvement in war.

No first use might lower the probability of going nuclear as it raises the probability of attack.

The economic and pragmatic considerations tip the scale toward the status quo. This does not preclude making small improvements in the current policy. Because NATO has so many battlefield nuclear weapons, reducing the arsenal by several thousand would probably not greatly affect Soviet judgments of escalation. And this step would lower the likelihood of accidental explosions, unauthorized use, and theft by terrorists. NATO, in fact, has removed 2,740 nuclear weapons since 1979.

The politically possible modest improvements in NATO conventional forces would not decrease the first-use threat in the eyes of Soviet leaders. But raising the nuclear threshold slightly could decrease slightly the credibility of first use. Compromise for the sake of compromise is no solution. It is not at all obvious why taking the high or the low road, each with its respective risks, is any less prudent than taking the middle course, which carries some risks of each kind.

Since no one can know whether fiddling with the first-use doctrine will improve West European and American security, the West should pursue the more difficult but more useful avenue of arms control. Bilateral reductions in conventional and nuclear forces in Europe, combined with a shift toward unambiguously defensive postures—for example, erecting tank barriers and limiting deployments of tanks and logistic systems—would decrease the risk of conventional war and nuclear war, plus save money and personnel.

Admittedly, the NATO–Warsaw Pact talks on conventional arms have made little prog-
ress in 13 years of negotiations. Moreover, Soviet strategy has traditionally been offense-minded, resulting in dangerously attack-oriented forces. Insofar as this policy is really due, as many claim, to historical fears of invasion, it may be possible to persuade Moscow to move together with the West toward more defensive postures.

Soviet leaders today, eager to revive their domestic economy, may want arms control more ardently than ever before. Mikhail Gorbachev's January 1986 Atlantic-to-the-Urals disarmament initiative suggests a new flexibility in Moscow's European defense policy. Although the proposal itself is ambiguous and unfair in many respects, the West could easily and safely explore the possibilities of a breakthrough. This course would certainly be more worthwhile than resuming the no-first-use debate. If nothing else, more intensive talks would provide valuable raw data about Soviet leadership that would improve U.S. decision making.

Given the natural disincentives to continuously harp on uncertainty, what is to be done? Perhaps opinion-page editors should add an agnostic to their usual pro and con columnists. "Advocacy" of uncertainty could be further institutionalized by giving review articles a greater role in the professional literature. Not only are they a traditional medium for skeptics and arbiters, but also they often point out analytic dead ends and suggest which avenues of future research appear most fruitful. Revealingly, they are relatively rare in the foreign-policy and national security fields.

But, someone might object, agnosticism is not a practical way to make policy. Frederick the Great said that if he ever wanted to punish a province he would put a philosopher in charge of it. Indeed, leaders must make decisions, and filling governments with Hamlet-like worriers or knee-jerk agnostics would be lamentable. But not every issue has to be mired in unknowability. What is needed is a change in the common practice of spending immense time and effort on policies as likely to make things worse as better.

The standard practice of simply paying lip service to uncertainty is bad decision making,
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a literature lacking agnosticism as an acceptable position is a seriously misleading literature. Those who really believe that it is best to know, and next best to know what cannot be known, make far better advisers and leaders.

The Reagan administration will clearly not adopt no first use. After the next election, the new administration could devote an enormous effort to instituting a no-first-use policy. But since it is unclear whether no first use is an improvement, why not focus on more clear-cut battles to be won—battles where one can be reasonably confident of doing some good.

Arguments over seemingly unresolvable goals must continue—not least because agnostics can be wrong, too. Yet greater attentiveness to uncertainties and tradeoffs would not hinder this process. On the contrary, it would help focus the work of researchers and analysts on Soviet decision making rather than on crude impressions of Soviet thinking. The wisdom found in Scottish law would make the world just a little safer.