DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND
OFFUTT AIR FORCE BASE, NEBRASKA 68113

21 MAR 1984

Honorable Caspar W. Weinberger
Secretary of Defense
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Mr. Secretary

One of our toughest, yet most important dialogues recently has been on the continuing search for greater stability in the strategic balance. This search involves two central, but seemingly contradictory elements: a real and growing Soviet strategic threat, and the pressing need to raise the nuclear threshold. What we are seeking is a prudent balance between strength and stability.

I believe we are making real progress. Recent initiatives to deploy more flexible forces, negotiate significant arms reductions, and investigate emerging technologies all demonstrate our genuine desire for a safer world. These efforts will help reduce our reliance on nuclear weapons without compromising deterrence. In keeping with our long-term goals, my staff has been giving a great deal of thought recently to a fourth potential initiative--increased US reliance on strategic nonnuclear weapons, rather than complete reliance on nuclear weapons.

The attached White Paper outlines some initial thoughts on the role of strategic nonnuclear weapons in our future deterrent force structure. Although there are some uncertainties associated with a US move in this direction (e.g., Soviet reactions, public opinion, and the impact on deterrence), I believe this is a concept that warrants serious consideration.

Please contact me if you have any questions on the attached material. I look forward to a continuing dialogue on our most pressing deterrent issues.

Respectfully

[redacted]

B. L. DAVIS
General, USAF
Commander in Chief

1 Atch
White Paper (S)

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STEPPING BACK FROM THE NUCLEAR THRESHOLD

OVERVIEW--THE SEARCH FOR IMPROVED DETERRENCE

Since the beginning of the nuclear age, the US has been in constant pursuit of initiatives to control strategic weapons and reduce the risk of nuclear war. These goals are somewhat elusive. For many years we have been forced to continue programs to modernize our strategic forces in response to a growing Soviet threat. Nevertheless, we have not abandoned our goals and we continually examine every opportunity to reduce tensions and introduce greater stability in the strategic nuclear balance. Over the past few years in particular, we have been seeking new and innovative measures to step back from the nuclear threshold. Recent efforts can be grouped into three categories:

- A continuing movement away from massive nuclear retaliation--the evolution of US nuclear policy.

- Pursuit of deep and verifiable force reductions--arms control.

- The search for innovative but workable new concepts--emerging technologies.

Each of these initiatives offers promise. Each will help bring about a balance between the very real nature of the Soviet threat, and the pressing need to create true long-term stability. Collectively, they represent a prudent approach to reducing our reliance on nuclear weapons.

There is a fourth initiative that could provide near-term potential through a synthesis of the previous three--we can increase US reliance on strategic nonnuclear, rather than nuclear weapons. There are affordable opportunities available by applying emerging technologies for strategic nonnuclear weapons to support our overall strategic deterrent policy. Properly integrated into our military strategy, this initiative can be achieved without compromising our deterrent capabilities.

STRATEGIC NONNUCLEAR WEAPONS AND EVOLVING US NUCLEAR POLICY

Over the past two decades, we have sustained a gradual but steady movement away from the concept of assured destruction as the major component of our deterrent strategy. The reality that any conflict could escalate to the level of massive retaliation is a moderating factor that would surely give any potential adversary pause, but this capability in itself is not an adequate deterrent.

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In keeping with this doctrinal evolution, we are developing a strategic force structure to deter convincingly at all levels of potential conflict so we are not forced to fight at any level. The modernization programs we are pursuing will provide a much more flexible nuclear retaliatory capability. A progressive strategic deterrent policy that incorporates innovative concepts with emerging technologies could allow us to make a valuable contribution to deterrence with strategic nonnuclear weapons. There is an unfortunate tendency to equate "strategic" exclusively with "nuclear," and to forget that a conflict does not necessarily need to involve nuclear weapons in order to be strategic.

If emerging technologies can provide us the opportunity to hold a wide range of targets at risk with strategic nonnuclear weapons, we may be able to raise the nuclear threshold, increase the range of our retaliatory options, and add another very stabilizing rung to the escalatory ladder. Simply put, new technologies can provide us the opportunity to employ strategic nonnuclear weapons as a significant deterrent option.

As effective strategic nonnuclear systems become a reality, we must still retain a nuclear deterrent at the level necessary to protect our national interests. Although we can--and should--strive for deep nuclear weapon reductions, it is unlikely our potential adversaries will ever permit us to eliminate them completely from our retaliatory force structure. However, the broader issue is the type of force structure we should pursue to raise the nuclear threshold as far as technological, political, and military realities will allow.

For example, we could use nonnuclear weapons to hold strategic categories of targets at risk and sustain deterrence below the nuclear level of conflict. The fact that we would retain the option of a nuclear response should deter the Soviets from using nuclear weapons just as it does today. If we do develop and possess a credible and clear nonnuclear retaliatory capability, the Soviets would likely be driven to adopt a similar force structure. This could represent real progress in US policy evolution--a truly effective strategic deterrent capability that would rely on fewer nuclear weapons.

STRATEGIC NONNUCLEAR WEAPONS AND ARMS CONTROL

The stated goal of dramatic force reductions through meaningful arms control agreements is an eminently sensible diplomatic approach to promoting long-term stability. The negotiations are likely to be lengthy and frustrating, but we have every reason to work vigorously to achieve this goal. Although weapons reductions in themselves will certainly represent a step toward stability, they may also pose some unique challenges:

- Fairly minor shifts in relative offensive capabilities would likely have a dramatic impact on the strategic balance at much lower levels of forces.

- Unanticipated technological breakthroughs (e.g., Soviet strategic defense) could be destabilizing if we are caught off guard.

We will be forced to think with imagination in the face of these uncertainties. We will probably also have to seek unilateral initiatives to insure long-term stability; unfortunately, we simply cannot rely on Soviet willingness to conform to our notions of what constitutes a safe world.

Relative merits aside, the various "antinuclear" and "freeze" movements represent an obvious public statement against nuclear war. JS b(1)

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Impact of a declared US shift in the nonnuclear direction could be important. It should be a compelling statement about true US desires for stability if we take the initiative by unilaterally moving away from sole dependence on nuclear weapons to maintain strategic deterrence. The potential political ramifications are one facet of this issue that would require a very detailed examination. It is obviously important for the US to seize this initiative before the Soviets do if we hope to benefit from the political "high ground."

STRATEGIC NONNUCLEAR WEAPONS AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGY

Despite the fact that viable defensive systems are probably several decades away, the study of such concepts represents healthy new thinking. It forces us to reexamine our traditional approach to deterrence. Perhaps we should extend the boundaries of our imagination one degree more and not limit our new horizons solely to the defensive arena. Emerging technologies can provide affordable strategic offensive nonnuclear options within this decade.

It can be argued that our reliance on nuclear weapons to maintain deterrence has been more a function of technological and economic constraints than deliberate choice. In order to place the required Soviet targets at risk, we have been forced to use nuclear destructive potential to compensate for limitations in the accuracy and firepower of nonnuclear munitions. Although our current conventional weapons and delivery systems do not possess the capabilities required to meet the full range of our deterrent requirements, there are several technological options (e.g., conventional ACM and conventional ALCM) that have near-term potential. A move to strategic nonnuclear weapons would require advanced submunitions with lethal accuracies. These weapons

could be delivered effectively from outside, or on the fringe of, the lethal envelope of ground defenses to greatly increase flexibility and accuracy while significantly reducing the risk of delivery aircraft attrition. Technology can provide us an excellent weapon to accomplish this task--the long-range standoff weapon. New advances in propulsion, guidance systems and smart submunitions make this possible. Improvements in computer computational speed and capacity, improved inertial navigation systems, development of new ring laser gyros, and the deployment of the global positioning satellite system (GPS), all contribute to the ability to deliver a long-range standoff weapon with very high accuracy. Building strategic nonnuclear standoff weapons and integrating them with our existing bombers would be relatively inexpensive, and the technologies are well understood.

Besides advances in weapons technology, we have made great progress in sensor and radar development. The ability to acquire and track targets at long ranges is now an accepted capability. JS b(1) [redacted] By combining new technological advances in weapons and sensors with the inherent attributes of long-range aircraft, we can produce a highly effective system.

Long-range bombers hold the most potential for the strategic nonnuclear role because of their inherent flexibility. This flexibility exists today, and can be enhanced tomorrow with the introduction of follow-on systems. As we look to the possibility of strategic nonnuclear deterrent forces, the manned bomber represents an ideal platform because of its long-range, all-weather, day/night ability to deliver diverse payloads. These inherent attributes should be nurtured to provide the flexibility we will need before, during and after force reductions, and to help us move confidently toward strategic nonnuclear options while maintaining the degree of nuclear deterrence required.

CONCLUSION

When examined carefully, a movement toward strategic nonnuclear deterrent systems is not a radical concept. It is more a natural progression in our continuing search to maintain convincing deterrence across the spectrum of potential conflict.

The inclusion of strategic nonnuclear systems will not significantly alter our fundamental planning for maintaining deterrence. We will still identify an appropriate target base, plan the best allocation of weapons against those targets (even though some of our retaliatory assets may be nonnuclear), and develop a Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) to provide future National Command Authorities the most flexible range of options possible. The current responsibilities of the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff (JSTPS) are likely to grow as the range of weapons they use to set those responsibilities evolves

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Deployment of flexible strategic retaliatory forces, efforts to negotiate arms reductions, and the search for viable new concepts will all help create true long-term stability. A US initiative toward strategic nonnuclear weapons embodies positive aspects of our other efforts to reduce our reliance on nuclear weapons. Our immediate task is to identify the near-term steps required to reach this capability safely by capitalizing on the most promising new technologies involved in our longer-term goals. Increased reliance on strategic nonnuclear weapons for more convincing deterrence promises to be a good first step in this direction.

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Chart: Spectrum of
Potential Conflict (S)

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