

REPLY TO RAY PERKINS ON RUSSELL'S CONDITIONAL THREAT OF WAR

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Ray Perkins brings up a number of important points in “Russell and Preventive War: a Reply to David Blitz”, his measured response to my article “Did Russell Advocate Preventive Atomic War Against the USSR?”¹ I would like to consider the following issues which Perkins brings up: (a) did Russell’s position amount to a “conditional advocacy of preventive war”? (b) was his estimation of the likelihood of Soviet compliance with Western demands a mitigating factor that “partially vindicates Russell from the charges of advocating an immoral policy”? and (c) was Russell’s later confusion about what he actually did say in the period under question—1945 to 1952—an attempt to maintain his “humanitarian credibility” relative to a position which was “morally problematic” to many otherwise sympathetic observers?

(a). *Preventive War or Conditional Threat*

The major issue is that of characterizing Russell’s thesis. I refer to it as “conditional threat of war” (CTW), and distinguish that from “advocacy of preventive war” (APW), while Perkins refers to it as “conditional advocacy of preventive war” (which he designates as PWc). Here are the statements behind the acronyms, formulated in terms of the Soviet Union (Russia) in the late 1940s:

- (i) CTW: “If Russia does not acquiesce in the Baruch Plan for the international control of atomic energy, then the West should conditionally threaten war.”
- (ii) APW: “Because Russia did not acquiesce in the Baruch Plan for the international control of atomic energy, the West should wage preventive war.” (*Ibid.*)

Ray Perkins prefers the following formulation, which he terms PWc:

- (i)’ PWc: “The US/West ought to wage war against the Soviets unless they agree, under

¹ *Russell*, n.s. 22 (2002): 5–45.

threat of war, to international controls (of atomic energy/armament).” (“Reply”, p. 162)

Perkins then specifies an important variant of this thesis, to include the likelihood of Soviet compliance, as follows:

(ii)′ PWC₁: “We ought to wage war against the Soviets unless they agree, under threat of war, to internationalize controls; and they will probably agree.”²

Perkins argues that what Russell defended is captured by PWC₁: “conditional advocacy of preventive war”, qualified by the probability of Soviet compliance. However, I maintain that Russell did not publicly advocate preventive war, either conditionally or unconditionally, and that consideration of Soviet compliance was secondary and non-decisive.

At the outset, I want to deal with a point of criticism concerning my formulation of CTW which Perkins has made. Perkins notes that if all the consequence involves is the conditional threat of war, rather than the actual waging of war, the consequence is mild indeed. The problem is that repeating the term “conditionally threaten” within the statement of the conditional threat is either redundant or too weak, and I have no objection to reformulating the conditional threat of war thesis as follows: CTW′: “If Russia does not acquiesce to the Baruch Plan for the international control of atomic energy, then the West should threaten to wage war.” The conditional aspect of the proposition is given by its implicational structure, and does not need to be reiterated in the proposition itself.

I suspect that Perkins would like to see a stronger consequence in the formulation, such as “immediately wage war” rather than the weaker “threaten to wage war”. But I think that the weaker formulation is preferable, both in terms of what Russell did say, and what current events have demonstrated. As critics of US policy towards Iraq indicated in the recent debate in the Security Council, the decision to go to war is so serious that a two-step process is required: the first to determine the violation of the condition, and the second to authorize the use of force. This latter is needed because it is possible that other conditions may have also changed when the “*casus belli*” has occurred, and the automatic application of the consequence may be ill advised. Indeed, this is precisely what happened once the Soviet Union had both rejected the Baruch Plan and fully developed its own nuclear force: Russell came to believe that the consequence should not be applied in these doubly changed circumstances and reformulated his strategy in the mid-1950s.

² Perkins, “Russell and Preventive War”, *Russell*, n.s. 14 (1994): 136.

Secondly, Perkins rightly notes that although I correctly translated “*A* unless *B*” as “*A* is inequivalent to *B*” (in the context of translating “unless” into an “if ... then ...” formulation), I incorrectly expanded “*A* is inequivalent to *B*”, as “If *A* then not-*B* and if *B* then not-*A*”. A quick check by truth-tables shows that the second conjunct should be “If not-*B* then *A*” as Perkins correctly states.

But the substantial point is whether Russell’s position should be termed “conditional threat of war” as I suggest, or “conditional advocacy of preventive war”, as Perkins would have it. Here I maintain my original point in favour of the former, and in opposition to the latter. Consider the following two cases:

- (i) If country *B* persists in sponsoring and aiding those who attack country *A*, then country *A* is justified in attacking country *B*.
- (ii) Because country *C* might in the future support those who would attack country *A*, then country *A* is justified in attacking country *C*.

In case (i) there is a clearly expressed condition, the “*casus belli*”, which should it persist, would lead to war. Country *B* has the option to desist from the specified action, in which case country *A* will not attack. In case (ii) country *A* has decided to attack now, rather than later, without specifying any conditions that country *C* can alter in the present in order to avoid the attack.

Now, I claim that case (i) is that of conditional threat of war (CTW), while case (ii) is that of advocacy of preventive war (APW). These differ in that CTW clearly involves self-defence while APW is a form of aggression. Let’s be more explicit about countries *A*, *B* and *C* as follows, with *A* = United States, *B* = Afghanistan and *C* = Iraq:

- (i)’ CTW: If the Taliban regime in Afghanistan does not stop collaborating with al-Qaeda, which has attacked the US, then the US is justified in attacking Afghanistan.
- (ii)'' APW: Because Iraq might in the future provide weapons of mass destruction to al-Qaeda, then the US is justified in attacking Iraq now.

These two cases differ as follows: In the former case the US specified a condition, the satisfaction of which would have (at least in theory) led to no attack: the Taliban had to hand over the al-Qaeda leaders and dismantle their bases. In the latter case, even President Bush admitted that there was nothing that the Iraqi regime could do to forestall war, since the preventive war strategy the US adopted after the Afghan war would be satisfied with nothing less than military victory and regime change.³

³ US Government, “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America”, at

Now I think that what Russell favoured in the period 1945–52 was rather more like the Afghan scenario than the Iraqi one; that is to say, conditional threat of war—including the possibility that war would result—rather than advocacy of preventive war—with the inevitable result of war.⁴ I admit that for many observers both the Afghan and the Iraq wars were indistinguishable as acts of US imperialism, and had the same root cause in antecedent US policies in the Middle East. I think that failing to distinguish the two cases is wrong, for the same reason that I think that Russell favoured CTW rather than APW. CTW responds to an existing or imminent danger with an alternative: either desist or be liable to attack. APW responds to a fear about a future situation which is neither immediate nor imminent, and provides no alternative: it leads directly to attack.⁵

(b). Probability of Soviet Compliance with Threats of War

Perkins argues that Russell's view concerning the likelihood of Soviet compliance with the threat of war is important, and he refers to the debate he had on this issue with Douglas Lackey, who denied the relevance of considerations of probability in judging the moral acceptability of a statement.⁶ Specifically, Lackey argued that Perkins, by taking into account the probability of Soviet compliance (PWC₁), has not thereby defended Russell against the charge that he acted immorally in formulating PWC. Perkins, in his reply to me, repeats his view that consideration of the probability of Soviet compliance is both relevant and "partially vindicates Russell from charges of advocating an immoral policy" (this issue, p. 163).

Let's return for a moment to Lackey's position, which I did not fully criticize in my paper. Lackey, in his reply to Perkins' original article, stated that the probability of an action occurring is "hardly relevant compared to the moral weight of the action that is in view" (p. 86). On this view, advocating any form of nuclear war—whether conditionally or unconditionally—is morally abhorrent, and Lackey compares Russell's position to that of a maniac who determines that

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html> [visited 2 June 2003]. See also *New York Times*, 5 March 2003, "President Bush's News Conference on Iraq", response to Robert (no last name provided), in which Bush indicated that even the destruction of all of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (supposing there remained any) would not forestall war, as the goal of US policy was regime change.

⁴ Many countries that approved of and participated with the US in the Afghan intervention—notably Canada—rejected the justification for the Iraq attack, for reasons similar to those sketched above: conditional threat of war can be justified under international law, but preventive war cannot.

⁵ I speculate that those who do not see a difference between the Afghan and the Iraq situation would tend to prefer Perkins' characterization of Russell's position to mine.

⁶ Lackey, "Reply to Perkins on 'Conditional Preventive War'", *Russell*, n.s. 16 (1996): 85–8. See also Perkins, "Response to Lackey on 'Conditional Preventive War'", n.s. 16: 169–70.

he will kill the next woman he meets dressed in a pink polka-dot skirt. Now, Lackey claims, the fact that the likelihood of meeting such a person is small does not diminish our moral outrage and condemnation of the maniac's planned action. It is the intent, not the likely outcome, which counts.

I understand Perkins' reluctance to accept such an argument, since not only is the analogy far-fetched and inappropriate (Russell can hardly be compared to a maniac who plans to arbitrarily kill innocent victims), but it is also simplistic. In terms that Perkins uses in his reply to me, it fails to distinguish between the "objective rightness and wrongness of an action and its subjective rightness or wrongness" (this issue, p. 163). I think that Perkins' dual factor analysis, formulated both in terms of propositional intent and likely outcome, is far better than Lackey's single factor model. However, I still think it overestimates the importance of the likelihood of compliance as a mitigating factor, since on numerous occasions during the period in question, Russell admitted that the probability of Soviet acquiescence was low.⁷

A more adequate analysis of Russell's position requires three factors: possibilities, preferences, and probabilities. I consider the article "The Outlook for Mankind" (1948) paradigmatic of Russell's thinking during this period. In it he enumerated six possibilities: four "pure" cases: American or Soviet domination of the world through peaceful conversion or military victory, and two "mixed" cases: division of the world into stable and peaceful blocs, or inconclusive war between the two powers leading to instability and more war. Russell then assigned preferences to four of these options, ranging from peaceful division of the world (his first preference) to inconclusive war (his last preference), excluding two cases he ruled out as highly improbable (American or Soviet domination through peaceful means). That left American victory in a war as his second preference and Soviet victory as his third, where it was clear that only the first two preferences were desirable (peaceful coexistence or US victory in war).

In his analysis of the world situation Russell considered three factors: (i) the possible cases were identified from a purely logical point of view; (ii) the likelihood of occurrence of each case was then considered; and (iii) preferences were assigned to those scenarios that were not excluded as highly unlikely in the previous step. I have argued that in so far as Russell preferred a no-war case above all others—the peaceful division of the world into American and Soviet spheres of influence—he did not contradict his pacifist principles. In so far as he ranked as second preference a war with the Soviet Union, he called upon what

⁷ See Russell, "The Outlook for Mankind", *Horizon*, 17 (April 1948): 238–46 (at 243): "I do not myself believe that it is possible to persuade them [the Russians], and therefore I expect a war." See also Russell, *How Near is War?* (London: Derricke Ridgway, 1952), p. 15, where he estimated, as late as 1952, the chance of war as six to four.

I have termed the “exception clause” to his non-absolute pacifism, allowing for wars in those unusual cases where civilization itself was at stake.⁸ Russell certainly considered World War II as such a case, given the barbarism of the Nazi onslaught. In the immediate post-war period he—incorrectly—feared that Russian Communism would replace the Nazis as an aggressive force that would once more threaten to destroy Western civilization. As it turned out, Russell’s estimate of the Soviet menace was exaggerated, and his analysis of probabilities not as trenchant as he—or we—would have liked.

Nonetheless, probabilities were of secondary importance in this matter. They served only to exclude two cases judged highly unlikely (US or Soviet peaceful conversion of the world). At the same time Russell held that his most preferred case (peaceful division of the world into American and Soviet spheres) was unlikely, though not highly improbable. So, I would prefer not to base my moral judgment of Russell’s views on the probabilities involved—which Perkins terms the “likelihood of compliance”—but rather on Russell’s stated preference—a position quite different from Lackey’s ascription of murderous intent. As a result, although I relegate Perkins’ role for probability to a secondary role, I do not preclude it and as a result disagree with Lackey. On the whole I am closer to Perkins than to Lackey on the substantial question: that Russell’s position was not an immoral one. I think that both Perkins and myself also agree that Russell was less politically astute than he would have liked to have been, and careless in some of his formulations, especially as concerns his later responses to questions as to what he said during the period in question.

(c) *Russell’s Denials and Retraction of Denials*

Perkins conjectures that Russell’s denials and retractions of denials about what he did or did not say about war with Russia in the later 1940s constituted an attempt to “obscure” these past declarations, which Russell saw, from the perspective of the mid-1950s, as “morally problematic”. On Perkins’ view, Russell wanted to protect his “humanitarian credibility” in the new anti-war campaign in which he was then involved. This was brought to a head in 1954 with Walter Marseille’s publication of Russell’s private letter to him of May 1948, in which Russell made extreme statements about the USSR of a sort which, in an earlier letter to Gamel Brenan, he had vowed never to “dream of advocating” (1 Sept. 1945, *SLBR*, 2: 410). Perkins is particularly concerned that Russell was unclear about this matter in his *Autobiography*, presumably because this was his last chance to clear the matter up and he didn’t adequately do it.

⁸ Blitz, “Russell, Einstein and the Philosophy of Non-Absolute Pacifism”, *Russell*, n.s. 20 (2002): 101–28.

However, although Russell's *Autobiography* is revealing and essential in order to understand his life and work, it is incomplete in other ways as well, as, for example, I have shown with respect to another important incident: Russell's "conversion" to pacifism.⁹

I propose a different hypothesis to account for Russell's problem in dealing with what he said in 1945–52. As I indicated in my article, up to 1953 Russell was basically correct in his admission of having favoured CTW and having rejected APW. Thereafter, he made a series of mistakes in recalling or restating what he had stated, including believing that he had formulated CTW only in the 1948 letter to Marseille, or admitting to having formulated APW publicly when an analysis of what he said reveals that he had in fact advanced CTW in print.

The development of the hydrogen bomb by both sides in the mid-1950s (the US in 1952 and the USSR three years later) changed Russell's analysis of the strategy to adopt in order to preserve peace. In that changed circumstance, Russell now believed that CTW, were the threat to be carried out, would lead to disastrous nuclear war and mutual annihilation. It would be as wrong as APW had been in its own time, though for different reasons. As there was now no practical difference between the two positions, Russell tended, in the face of continued questioning about the matter, to downplay the distinction. Over time he confused the two, and responded inaccurately as to which he had in fact defended, and when.

By the mid-1950s, Russell had entered a new phase of his thinking on war and peace, and he came to see the rivalry between the two superpowers, the US and the USSR—both now armed with hydrogen weapons—as the focus of his criticism. Later, in the last decade of his life, he tended to identify the US and its allies, including the British Government, as the main dangers to world peace. Continued calls for him to justify what he had said in the period 1945–52 appeared to him more as an annoyance than as an embarrassment, and his responses, unsatisfactory as they may have been, allowed him to go on to deal with the new and more pressing issues at hand.

In conclusion, I want to thank Ray Perkins for his valuable criticisms, both those with which I agree and those with which I disagree. Overall our agreement on what Russell did and did not say, and why he did what he did, is greater than our disagreement. I hope that continued discussion of this matter has helped to clarify the issue, and I am grateful for this opportunity to refine and restate my views.

⁹ Blitz, "Russell and the Boer War: from Imperialist to Anti-Imperialist", *Russell*, n.s. 19 (1999): 117–42. Russell claimed that his conversion to pacifism occurred while Mrs. Whitehead was suffering a possible heart attack; I argue that it occurred over a period of time in the course of a debate with the French logician Louis Couturat about the Boer War.
