

# Russell's contribution to the study of nuclear weapons policy

*by Douglas P. Lackey*

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NOW THAT THE movement against nuclear weapons has so splendidly revived in this country and in Europe, it is interesting and appropriate to take a look back at Russell's writings on nuclear war. In reviewing this material, I have learned from Russell in two ways: I have learned from what he said, and learned from what he did not say. There are, in Russell's writings on this topic, numerous passages relevant to contemporary strategic problems, and Russell made, I shall suggest, at least one enduring contribution to the study of nuclear strategy which has provoked much subsequent research. On the other hand, there are serious lacunae in Russell's treatment of the subject. The lesson to be learned from these lacunae is the lesson of recognizing the historical limitations of even the most enlightened mind, a lesson which should induce in readers a certain healthy scepticism regarding the transcendent rightness of their favourite remedies for the nuclear problem. I regard these lapses in Russell's treatment of nuclear war (with one exception) more as intellectual failures than as moral blemishes. They do not compare, for example, with Aristotle's defence of slavery, Hume's remarks on the imbecility of Negroes, Rousseau's condescensions about women, Hegel's rhapsodies about the purifying effects of war, or Heidegger's contemptible endorsements of the Nazi programme. In most cases what Russell recommends concerning nuclear weapons is not morally wrong. He points in the right direction. But he does not go far enough.

I shall not, in this paper, attempt to reconstruct in any detail the development of Russell's thoughts about nuclear war. A general outline will suffice. Russell's ideas about nuclear war, I believe, can be divided into four phases. The first phase is the discovery phase, exemplified by his speech on nuclear war before the House of Lords on 28 November

1945. The second phase, from roughly 1946 to 1948, is the anti-Soviet phase, centring on Russell's proposals for threatening a preemptive nuclear strike against the Soviet Union. The third phase, from 1949 to 1962, is the phase of even-handed denunciation of the Cold War—the period, I believe, in which Russell made an enduring contribution both to world peace and to the study of nuclear strategy. The fourth phase, the anti-American phase, is initiated by the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 and extends to Russell's death in 1970. I shall not discuss Russell's publications in this last stage, not because I disagree with them—in point of fact I am more sympathetic to the claims of these last books than the productions of the other stages—but because it is difficult to determine which essays Russell actually wrote and which were partially or wholly drafted by Ralph Schoenman and others. One important scholarly task to be undertaken by the Russell Archives is the determination of the provenance of Russell's writings in these last years.

#### I. THE DISCOVERY PHASE

In his House of Lords speech,<sup>1</sup> Russell made the following predictions, all subsequently verified: (1) that atomic weapons would soon become more destructive and cheaper to produce, (2) that a fusion bomb would be constructed in “the somewhat more distant future”, and (3) that the secret of atomic bombs could not be kept and that the Russians could be expected to build one “within a few years”. The success of these prophecies is remarkable considering (1) that it was generally believed (and it was true until 1950) that atomic bombs would be exceedingly expensive to produce, (2) that many technical experts, J. R. Oppenheimer for example, believed that solving the technical problems of the fusion bomb would require decades of research, and (3) that General Leslie Groves in the United States had made a widely accepted prediction that the Soviets would not have the atomic bomb before 1965, if ever.<sup>2</sup> Russell went on to argue that a war with nuclear weapons would destroy civilization, that the choice facing the community of nations was between mutual destruction and the abolition of war, and that the first step towards abolition was the internationalization of atomic energy.

Now in these prescriptions I think Russell was wholly in the right, and it is difficult to appreciate today how few outside the scientific community held these views. The military were convinced, by reports of bridges

standing at Hiroshima and by the inability of atomic bombs to sink destroyers in the Bikini tests in 1946, that atomic weapons represented no new phase in the development of warfare; and support for the internationalization of atomic weapons sprang more from residual feelings of affection towards former Allies than from a widely felt belief that such internationalization was necessary in order to save civilization. Nevertheless, I confess that I am disappointed with Russell's House of Lords speech, his first major pronouncement on policy since returning to England. There is not a hint of criticism of Allied conduct during the war; indeed, if there is a moral criticism of the bombing of Hiroshima anywhere in Russell's work, I have not found it. The appeal of the speech is wholly prudential, and as a moral document it falls short of Dwight MacDonald's American essays published in the magazine *Politics* or the criticisms of Allied conduct emanating from religious figures in England and in America.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps Russell felt that once a war was worth fighting, little could be said about how it was fought. But this implies that if a prudent use for nuclear weapons could be found, they should be so used. In fact, Russell had already hit upon what he felt was just such a “prudent use”.

#### II. PREEMPTIVE STRIKES

In October 1945 Russell published a startling and disturbing article, “Humanity's Last Chance”, in the British popular magazine *Cavalcade*. Worked up by reports of Russian rapine in East Germany and stories of Soviet deportations and expulsions in Poland and other places along the Eastern front,<sup>4</sup> Russell announced:

I should, for my part, prefer all the chaos of war conducted by means of atomic bombs to the universal domination of a government having the evil characteristics of the Nazis.<sup>5</sup>

Russell's remedy for the problem was the formation of a new confederation of nations, with membership forcibly imposed on the U.S.S.R:

[I]f the U.S.S.R. did not give way and join the confederation, after there had been time for mature consideration, the conditions for justifiable war, which I

<sup>1</sup> The House of Lords speech is reprinted in B. Russell, *Has Man a Future?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), pp. 19–25.

<sup>2</sup> See Gregg Herken, *The Winning Weapon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), Chap. 5. The same chapter details military scepticism about the effectiveness of atomic weapons.

<sup>3</sup> See Dwight MacDonald, *Politics Past* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), especially pp. 72–5, “Massacre from the Air”. For a religious critique see John C. Ford, S.J., “The Morality of Obliteration Bombing”, *Theological Studies*, 1944, reprinted in R. Wasserstrom, *War and Morality* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth 1970), pp. 15–42.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald W. Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 519.

<sup>5</sup> B. Russell, “Humanity's Last Chance,” *Cavalcade*, 7, no. 398 (20 Oct. 1945): 8–9.

enumerated a moment ago, would all be fulfilled. A *casus belli* would not be difficult to find.<sup>6</sup>

All this was six months *before* Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech in Fulton, Missouri, in March 1946, and ten months before the Soviets rejected the American "Baruch Plan" for the internationalization of atomic energy and the abolition of atomic weapons, the event cited by Russell in later years as the motivating cause of his call for preventive war.<sup>7</sup> What are we to make of these ferocious suggestions? Russell was no fool, and he later admitted about such nuclear threats that one must be prepared to act if one's bluff is called.<sup>8</sup> Being prepared to act in this case meant being prepared to inflict on the people of Moscow and Leningrad the same fate as was experienced by the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the very Russian people whose self-interested but immense sacrifices had just spared England and the United States the main part of defeating Hitler. What we have in the *Cavalcade* article is a fairly straightforward call for preventive nuclear war. True, the launching of the war is to be preceded by an ultimatum, but the ultimatum demands the abrogation of national sovereignty by the Soviet Union. Under such conditions, the distinction between a conditional call for preventive war and an unconditional call for preventive war virtually dissolves. And the argument behind the call for preventive war is that a one-sided nuclear war with Russia is preferable to worldwide domination by the Kremlin, a false dilemma if there ever was one. Is there anything in the documents that provides a deeper rationale for these terrifying pronouncements than simple anti-Communism of the Churchill variety?

In the *Cavalcade* article one finds little more. But as Russell repeated his (more or less qualified) call for preventive war again and again in the next three years, a deeper argument does emerge, an argument based on a stalwart utilitarianism, the moral philosophy preferred by Russell more often than any other. The argument is that if the Soviet Union develops atomic bombs, a two-sided atomic war between East and West is likely at some future date. In the standard utilitarian analysis, even granting some

discount of future evils, a "small" one-sided nuclear war *now* is less evil than an immensely larger two-sided nuclear war *later*. Therefore, if these are the only alternatives, we ought to have the one-sided nuclear war now. This is precisely what Russell concluded.

As always, utilitarian reasoning requires rational estimates of the feasibility and consequences of the available policies, and it is a disaster for the utilitarian analysis if one does not get one's facts straight. Unfortunately, Russell did not get the facts straight about the feasibility of nuclear war with Russia in the immediate post-war years. Russell's empirical assumption was that American possession of atomic bombs would give the United States a decisive advantage in a war with Russia. As he argued in an article in *New Commonwealth*, January 1948,

If the whole world outside of Russia were to insist upon international control of atomic energy to the point of going to war on this issue, it is highly probable that the Soviet government would give way on this issue. If it did not, then if the issue were forced in the next year or two, only one side would have atomic bombs, and the war might be so short as not to involve utter ruin.

Such reasoning presumes that the United States had an adequate stock of atomic weapons in 1948 and reliable means of delivering them. In fact, the United States had neither. The American stockpile of atomic bombs in those years was pitifully, or rather fortunately, small: two atomic bombs in 1945, nine in 1946, thirteen in 1947, and no more than fifty in 1948.<sup>9</sup> Fifty atomic bombs, even if all of them were delivered on target, would not have been sufficient to knock the Soviet Union out of a war: indeed, the Harmon report in 1949 argued that even 100 accurately placed atomic bombs could not cripple the Red Army's ability to move west.<sup>10</sup> But even if the American stockpile had been ten times larger in 1948, there was little hope of delivering the bombs on target. In SAC exercises conducted in 1947, nearly half of the SAC bomber force had failed to get airborne. In 1948, on a mock night raid on Dayton, Ohio, not a single SAC bomber completed its mission as planned.<sup>11</sup> A preventive atomic war with the Soviet Union in 1948 could only have produced a massacre of the innocents in Russia followed by a Red Army occupation of all of continental Western Europe, the very result that Russell had, in

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* In fact, Russell provides no "enumeration of the causes of justifiable war" anywhere in this article.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the Appendix to Russell's *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959).

<sup>8</sup> In an interview published in *The Listener* (19 March 1959) John Freeman asked Russell, "Suppose that [the Soviets] hadn't given way, would you have been prepared to face the consequences... and used these weapons on the Russians?" Russell replied, "I should. They were not, of course, nearly as bad as these modern weapons are. I thought then, and hoped that the Russians would give way, but you can't threaten unless you're prepared to have your bluff called."

<sup>9</sup> David Alan Rosenberg, "U.S. Nuclear Stockpile 1945–50", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May 1982. The State Department confirmed Rosenberg's figures in an undated memorandum handed out sometime in 1982.

<sup>10</sup> Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960", *International Security*, Spring 1983, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Herken, *The Winning Weapon*, p. 296n.

1945, described as “worse than the chaos of atomic war”. Indeed, I suspect that Soviet occupation of Western Europe might have followed, not only upon atomic attack, but upon the delivery of Russell’s suggested ultimatum.<sup>12</sup>

### III. “CHICKEN” AND THE COLD WAR

With the explosion of the first Soviet atomic bomb in August 1949, proposals for conditional nuclear strikes against Russia became moot. In 1952 the United States detonated the first fusion device; in 1953 the Soviets exploded the first fusion bomb, and in April 1954 the United States exploded the “Bravo” bomb, which had an explosive power equivalent to 15 million tons of TNT and which, through an unexpected windshift, contaminated over 1,500 square miles of the South Pacific. By late 1954, the apocalyptic descriptions of Russell’s House of Lords speech—

As I go about the street and see St. Paul’s, the British Museum, the Houses of Parliament and the other monuments of our civilization, in my mind’s eye I see a nightmare vision of those buildings as heaps of rubble with corpses all round them<sup>13</sup>

—seemed closer to reality than ever, and Russell went on the radio on Christmas eve in 1954 with the message that nothing could be more important than the prevention of thermonuclear war. It is not necessary to follow Russell’s steps in the immediately ensuing years—the international petitions, the Pugwash conferences, the formation of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and so forth—since all of the ideas Russell had about nuclear war in the late 1950s are brilliantly condensed in his 1959 book, *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare*. The general thesis

<sup>12</sup> True, Russell did not know that the United States had so few atomic bombs in the late 1940s: the small size of the American stockpile was perhaps the best-kept secret of the post-war era. But Russell should have recognized the possibility of his ignorance on this score. When Russell addressed school leaders and students at a New Commonwealth school conference in London in November 1948, repeating his call for conditional preventive war, an alert member of the audience questioned Russell on his grounds for believing that the proposed war with Russia would be short and victorious. The meeting stenographer noted “He [Russell] said, however, that some people who knew told him that by means of atomic bombs the Russian war effort would be very quickly vanquished” (“Atomic Energy and the Problems of Europe”, *Nineteenth Century and After*, 145 [Jan. 1949]: 43). One can imagine what Russell’s response to such a remark would have been if it had come from the mouth of Lloyd George in 1918 or Lyndon Johnson in 1968.

<sup>13</sup> *Has Man a Future?*, p. 21.

of that book—that no goal of policy can be achieved by means of nuclear war—seems to me to be too obvious to be worth debating, and the specific suggestions of that volume—the cessation of nuclear tests, the formation of an international committee of reconciliation with the responsibility of preventing war, the unilateral nuclear disarmament of Great Britain, the formation of a demilitarized zone in Central Europe—have all either been adopted in some form by the nuclear powers, or ought to be. What I want to concentrate on is what I consider to be the great innovation of this book, and its great omission. The innovation is to compare the nuclear standoff and the Cold War with the game of Highway Chicken. The omission is the failure to consider that the development of nuclear arsenals might arguably contribute to a decreased chance of nuclear war, through the development of a posture of pure deterrence practiced by both sides. The analogy appears on page 30:

Since the nuclear stalemate became apparent, the Governments of East and West have adopted the policy which Mr. Dulles calls “brinkmanship”. This is a policy adapted from a sport which, I am told, is practised by some youthful degenerates. This sport is called “Chicken!” It is played by choosing a long straight road with a white line down the middle and starting two very fast cars towards each other from opposite ends. Each car is expected to keep the wheels of one side on the white line. As they approach each other, mutual destruction becomes more and more imminent. If one of them swerves from the white line before the other, the other, as he passes, shouts “Chicken!” and the one who has swerved becomes an object of contempt.

Now I have searched through prominent works of nuclear strategy in the late 1950s, for example, Bernard Brodie’s *Strategy in the Missile Age* (1959), B. H. Liddell-Hart’s *Deterrent or Defense* (1960) and Oscar Morgenstern’s *The Question of National Defense* (1960), and I can find no earlier or independent presentation of this analogy.<sup>14</sup> Let me explain why the Chicken analogy is important. First of all, the analogy illustrates in a striking way the Achilles’ heel of the Dulles policy of “brinkmanship”, which had been given some measure of academic respectability by Thomas Schelling in his famous essays in the late 1950s on threats that leave something to chance.<sup>15</sup> The problem with strategies based on such threats is that they are individually rational but collectively irrational;

<sup>14</sup> Herman Kahn’s mammoth treatise, *On Thermonuclear War* (1960), cites Russell as the source of the Chicken story (2nd ed. [New York: Free Press, 1969]), pp. 291–2.

<sup>15</sup> Schelling’s essays were collected and published as *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960). See especially Chaps. 7 and 8.

individually practised they yield success, but collectively practised they yield disaster. Second, the Chicken analogy was a suggestive attempt to describe international relations with a model easily representable in the theory of games. The game of Chicken proved to be perfectly representable as a  $2 \times 2$  ordinal game with the following payoff matrix:

		B:	
		Hold Firm	Chicken Out
A:	Hold Firm	4, 4	1, 3
	Chicken Out	3, 1	2, 2

in which each box is an outcome of a choice by A and a choice by B; the left member of each pair of numbers represents A's priorities, and the right member represents B's priorities. Game theorists in their hundreds have worked on models like this from the sixties down to the present day, to some degree inspired by Russell's example. Third, it might be the case that of the 78 distinct  $2 \times 2$  ordinal games Russell hit upon the one which most felicitously represents the follies of the international scene: its only possible competitor, I should think, is the Prisoner's Dilemma.

Russell seems to have felt that if the game of Chicken correctly models international relations, then the imprudence of contemporary policy becomes clear:

As played by irresponsible boys, this game is considered decadent and immoral, though only the lives of the players are risked. But when the game is played by eminent statesmen, who risk not only their own lives but those of many hundreds of millions of human beings, it is thought on both sides that the statesmen on one side are displaying a high degree of wisdom and courage, and only the statesmen on the other side are reprehensible. This, of course, is absurd. Both are to blame for playing such an incredibly dangerous game. The game may be played without misfortune a few times, but sooner or later it will come to be felt that loss of face is more dreadful than nuclear annihilation. The moment will come when neither side can face the derisive cry of "Chicken!" from the other side. When that moment is come, the statesmen of both sides will plunge the world into destruction. (*Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare*, p. 30)

Unfortunately matters are not that simple. What Russell's argument shows is that it is irrational to play the game, but on the international scene it is often the case that one is forced to play a game whether one wants to or not. But even if we are forced into the game, Russell seems to feel that both sides, if they are rational, will recognize the mutual folly of

holding firm. Now if my opponent sees that I recognize the folly of holding firm, then my opponent will know that I am going to chicken out, and it will be to his rational advantage to hold firm. Throughout the book Russell appeals to the "mutual interest" of East and West, but a mutual interest is simply a sum of convergent self-interests, and the format of Chicken does not provide any easy way for self-interests to converge. That is the devilish feature of Chicken: it instructs rational people to exploit and betray the cooperative instincts of others. Small wonder, if Chicken correctly describes the preferences of nations, that Russell found it easier to preach reasonableness than to sell it.

The policy of brinkmanship reached its apotheosis in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, after which relatively calmer heads came to prevail. Many of the dangerous features of brinkmanship: the open nuclear threats, the possibilities of miscalculation, the advantages of a first strike, disappeared with the establishment of mutual second strike capacity in the late 1960s. The evolution of such a relatively stable system of deterrence was hardly a gleam in Russell's eye in 1959, even though the first nuclear submarines, those primary stabilizers of the strategic scene, were under construction that very year. That Russell provides no analysis of mutual deterrence is the greatest weakness of *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare*, and makes his book, despite its many insights, irrelevant to contemporary problems of nuclear war.

Nevertheless, we can consider what Russell might have said about mutual deterrence if he had lived to see its present manifestation. Since he believed that a permanent peace can only be produced by a genuine international authority, he would argue that the present system, though far more stable than the system of the 1950s, must nevertheless lead to a war which, most authorities agree, will destroy Western civilization. On that ground, I expect that he would find the present state of affairs intolerable. But since the prospects for an international authority established by force are non-existent, he might be forced to consider the neglected option of *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare*—unilateral nuclear disarmament, not just by Britain, but by all the nuclear powers in the West, either by direct dismantling of weapons or by unilateral implementation of something like the Baruch Plan of 1946. To be sure, the objection will immediately arise that such a step would leave the West at the mercy of Soviet Russia, open to nuclear conquest or at least to nuclear blackmail. In response to such objections, I suggest a reading of what I consider to be Russell's finest essay on war, which is not normally considered relevant to nuclear war because it was published in the August 1915 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, under the title "War and Non-Resistance". In this, the most Tolstoyan of Russell's essays, Russell asks,

Let us imagine that England were to disband its army and navy, after a generation of instruction in the principles of passive resistance as a better defence than war.<sup>16</sup>

The results, described by Russell in a sequence of brilliant paragraphs, would be that Germany would have no pretext for a war against England, and that, if war were undertaken without a pretext, the Germans might occupy England but could hardly succeed in exploiting it. Even if they seized the total rent of the nation, Russell observes:

The working classes, the shopkeepers, manufacturers, and merchants, the literary men, and the men of science, all the people who make England of any account in the world—have at most an infinitesimal and accidental share in the rental of England. The men who have a share use their rents in luxury, political corruption, taking the lives of birds, and depopulating and enslaving the rural districts.... It is this life of the idle rich which would be curtailed if the Germans exacted a tribute from England. (P. 47)

Russell continued to preach the methods of passive resistance down through the 1930s; they play a major part in his book *Which Way to Peace?*, published in 1936. Russell came to believe by 1940 that these methods would not work against the Nazis, an observation with which many pacifists might agree. But the proposal which we are considering is not the general and complete disarmament envisaged by Russell in his article of 1915, but unilateral nuclear disarmament, in which the role of “passive resistance” to nuclear weapons can involve the operation of non-nuclear armies and navies. It is worth considering whether the frustrations of the Germans described in Russell’s Tolstoyan parable in 1915 would be matched by the frustration of a power that sought to dominate—not merely destroy—a non-nuclear but actively resisting nation. The costs of conquest might prove so great that no rational nation might embark upon them. And if it is objected that this remedy presupposes the rationality of the opponent, an assumption for which Russell was often chided, it should be observed that the alternative system, the system of mutual nuclear deterrence, equally presupposes that both sides are rational.

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<sup>16</sup> *Justice in War Time* (1916), reprinted by Spokesman Books, Nottingham, England, n.d., p. 42.