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James Schlesinger's Lifelong Creed of Public Service and the Schlesinger Doctrine

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David McCullough's biography of America's second president, John Adams, tells us that public service was not a "platitude" for Adams; it was "a lifelong creed."¹ The same surely holds true for the late James Schlesinger. He served under Republican and Democratic Presidents, including serving as Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, Director of Central Intelligence, and the first Secretary of Energy. In 1973, at the age of 44 and the height of the Cold War, James Schlesinger was confirmed as the 12th U.S. Secretary of Defense. He received numerous prestigious awards for government service, including the National Security Medal, presented by President Jimmy Carter.

While serving as Defense Secretary, Dr. Schlesinger implemented important nuclear policy developments designed to strengthen the deterrence of war and the assurance of allies. He also was key to the U.S. crisis airlift of material to Israel during the October 1973 Yom Kippur War. Then-Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir said of this airlift, "For generations to come, all will be told of the miracle of the immense planes from the United States bringing in the material that meant life for our people."²

I first met Dr. Schlesinger in 2007. Referring to several critiques of U.S. Cold War nuclear deterrence policy I had written earlier, his initial greeting was, "So you are the fellow who thinks we got it [deterrence] all wrong." Such an introductory comment from the senior statesman for whom I had greatest respect was extremely unnerving. Not realizing at the time that this greeting was a bit of Dr. Schlesinger's sporting humor, I sheepishly replied that no, I



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did not think that his Cold War deterrence policy initiatives “got it all wrong.” In fact, shortly after that introduction I sent Dr. Schlesinger a copy of my first published article, which was a wholly laudatory commentary on his 1974 adjustments to U.S. nuclear policy, known as the “Schlesinger Doctrine” or the “Schlesinger Shift.”³ He responded with a kind handwritten note saying simply, “You are on the right track.”

The Schlesinger Doctrine advanced much of what was right about U.S. nuclear deterrence policy during the Cold War, and remains so today. Indeed, Secretary Schlesinger articulated the basic parameters of U.S. nuclear deterrence policy that contributed to the peaceful ending of the Cold War and have remained constant across Republican and Democratic administrations to the present. It is hard to conceive of a more significant defense policy legacy.

The Schlesinger Doctrine addressed the question of how U.S. nuclear deterrence policy--meant to help prevent large-scale attacks against the United States and allies--should be recast given the then-disturbing, new condition of Soviet strategic nuclear parity. This may seem an arcane question today, but at the height of the Cold War and Soviet power, it was a matter of grave importance. Earlier U.S. deterrence policy had been based on the assumption, pertinent to the 1950s and much of the 1960s, of significant U.S. strategic nuclear force advantages. These advantages had largely come to an end by the early 1970s with the Soviet deployment of numerous long-range ballistic missiles that could strike the United States.

Prior to the Schlesinger Doctrine, U.S. strategic nuclear deterrence planning involved *large-scale* nuclear retaliation threats against the Soviet Union. The “smallest” of these deterrence threats was at the “upper end of the spectrum” involving thousands of U.S. nuclear warheads--with likely massive Russian fatalities.⁴ Secretary Schlesinger found this type of nuclear planning—limited to large-scale U.S. nuclear threats—unacceptable given U.S. deterrence needs and the new context of Soviet strategic nuclear parity.

Why so? Because with Soviet strategic nuclear parity, such large-scale U.S. nuclear deterrent threats inherited from the 1960s would likely be *incredible* in many circumstances in which the United States *depended on deterrence working without failure*. There could be no expectation that incredible deterrence threats would work as hoped. And, given Soviet nuclear parity, large-scale U.S. nuclear deterrence threats could *logically* be credible only if they corresponded to the provocation, i.e., in response to a massive Soviet nuclear strike on the United States, not the more limited types of Soviet attack that seemed more plausible. Secretary Schlesinger explained that the Soviet strategic nuclear buildup of the 1960s had rendered the credibility of a massive U.S. nuclear deterrent threat against limited Soviet attacks “close to zero.”⁵

For example, how could a massive U.S. nuclear deterrent threat be considered credible as a response to a Soviet attack against a U.S. ally, or to a limited Soviet nuclear attack against the United States when the Soviet Union could launch a devastating nuclear counterstrike against the United States? As President Richard Nixon asked rhetorically in 1970, “Should a President,



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in the event of a nuclear attack, be left with the single option of ordering the mass destruction of enemy civilians in the face of the certainty that it would be followed by the mass slaughter of Americans?"⁶ President Nixon answered his own rhetorical question in 1971, "I must not be—and my successors must not be—limited to the indiscriminate mass destruction of enemy civilians as the sole possible response to challenges. This is especially so when that response involves the likelihood of triggering nuclear attacks on our own population."⁷

The U.S. policy of "extended nuclear deterrence" for allies included the potential for U.S. nuclear escalation against the Soviet Union to help deter a Soviet attack on NATO allies. The credibility of such a deterrence threat, however, came to be questioned by some allies when the Soviet Union achieved nuclear parity and the end result of large-scale U.S. nuclear employment against the Soviet Union would likely have been the immediate subsequent destruction of the United States.

The nuclear policy question confronting Secretary Schlesinger and the country was how to make U.S. nuclear deterrence credible for other than massive Soviet nuclear threats given the new reality of Soviet strategic nuclear parity. This was a fundamental deterrence challenge that had been long in the making, but not addressed in U.S. nuclear policy until the Schlesinger Doctrine advanced directions that remain at the heart of U.S. thinking today.

These nuclear policy directions were presented and explained in detail in the National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) 169 Working Group *Summary Report* (informally known as the "Foster Panel," named after Dr. John Foster, the Defense Department's Director of Research and Engineering).⁸ This NSSM 169 *Summary Report* was signed by Secretary of Defense Schlesinger and forwarded to the National Security Council on July 13, 1973.⁹ The *Summary Report* included a draft National Security Decision Memorandum (NSDM) which was endorsed by then-National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and submitted to President Nixon on January 7, 1974.¹⁰ It led directly to NSDM 242 signed by President Nixon on January 17, 1974.¹¹ The Department of Defense publicly presented the nuclear policy direction in the NSSM 169 *Summary Report* and codified in NSDM 242 as an incremental evolution of U.S. nuclear policy. If so, it was a significant increment: it included an enduring shift in U.S. deterrence policy which Secretary Schlesinger articulated and explained in an unprecedented series of public presentations and Congressional testimony. Rarely before or since has a serving Defense Secretary engaged so personally and directly in the public articulation of a significant development in U.S. nuclear deterrence policy.

The two major themes advanced by the Schlesinger Doctrine consciously addressed the critical question of how to deter limited Soviet attacks against the United States and allies in the new condition of Soviet strategic nuclear parity. First, it called for the U.S. development of a "wide range" of limited U.S. nuclear options aimed at "communication to the enemy a determination to resist aggression, coupled with a desire to exercise restraint."¹² While all previous U.S. planned nuclear options apparently involved "thousands of [nuclear] weapons," Secretary



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Schlesinger emphasized the need for nuclear options involving as few as a “handful” of weapons.¹³ This change in “thinking,” as he described NSDM 242, was for the United States to possess a range of nuclear response options that would enable it to deter limited Soviet provocations with limited responsive U.S. nuclear threats.¹⁴ Doing so would provide a *more credible* U.S. deterrent than would only large-scale nuclear options involving thousands of weapons because it would “provide the enemy opportunities to reconsider his actions” and would be less likely to trigger a large-scale Soviet nuclear reply.¹⁵

In addition, in the event of conflict, limited options were intended to support “the most critical [U.S.] employment objective,” which was, “early war termination, on terms acceptable to the United States and its allies, at the lowest level of conflict feasible.”¹⁶ With this emphasis on planning limited U.S. nuclear options, the Schlesinger Doctrine established the enduring U.S. policy answer to the question of how to structure a credible deterrent to a range of Soviet threats in the context of an opponent’s nuclear parity.

Second, the Schlesinger Doctrine revised the U.S. nuclear targeting objectives in the event of “general war” away from “wholesale destruction of Soviet military forces, people and industry,” to “targeting in large-scale retaliation those political, economic, and military targets critical to the enemy’s post-war power and recovery.”¹⁷ This approach to U.S. targeting in general contrasted sharply with the common notion that U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy was based on a massive U.S. nuclear threat to destroy Soviet industry and population—as U.S. defense officials had declared publicly since the mid-1960s.

This shift in U.S. nuclear policy was intended to serve “as a deterrent” and a “more direct coercive threat to the main power blocs in the USSR and PRC.”¹⁸ As the NSSM 169 *Summary Report* states: “The basic objective of the proposed nuclear policy is to provide for a more effective and stable deterrent to war, and to make the outcome less catastrophic should nuclear weapons, for some reason, come to be used.”¹⁹

Although not described as such at the time, this shift, at least in part, was an effort to “tailor” U.S. deterrence threats to the Soviet Union, and thus to provide the most effective U.S. deterrent possible.²⁰ Tailoring deterrence to the opponent has since become an expressed principle of U.S. deterrence policy, most recently highlighted in the Department of Defense’s 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review*.²¹

It may rightly be said that primary documents of the Schlesinger Doctrine—including the NSSM 169 *Summary Report*, the corresponding 1974 NSDM 242, and Secretary Schlesinger’s many public presentations thereof—advanced the basic, enduring features and explanation points for the U.S. approach to nuclear deterrence that successfully navigated the Cold War and after.

I would like to conclude with a brief anecdote that provides a bit of insight into Dr. Schlesinger’s intellectual vigor, tenacity, and graciousness long after his retirement from



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government service. In 2013, Dr. Schlesinger and I labored together on a report entitled, *Minimum Deterrence: Examining the Evidence*. He had graciously agreed to serve as the Chairman of the Senior Review Group for the study. We scheduled a meeting to review a draft of the report, which at the time was approximately 100 pages in length. I assumed that the meeting would take an hour or so and arrived with that level of effort in mind. I soon learned, however, that at the age of 84, Dr. Schlesinger had prepared insightful, detailed comments and suggestions on virtually every page and line of the draft study. After more than three hours of solid effort, I was exhausted, but he clearly was not.

I walked away from that meeting with an enormous appreciation for Dr. Schlesinger's generosity and a greater understanding of how one man could accomplish so much; his was "a lifelong creed" of public service. It is no exaggeration to conclude that he is due sincere gratitude from the entire Western world.

1. David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), p. 29.
2. Quoted in, Walter Boyne, "Nickel Grass," *Air Force Magazine* (December 1998), p. 59.
3. Keith B. Payne, "The Schlesinger Shift: Return to Rationality," in, Payne, C. Johnston Conover, and Bruce William Bennett, *Nuclear Strategy: Flexibility and Stability*, Student Paper No. 82 (Santa Monica, CA: California Seminar on Arms Control and Foreign Policy, March 1979), pp. 3-48.
4. See, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Testimony by James Schlesinger, *Briefing on Counterforce Attacks*, 93rd Congress, 2nd Session, September 11, 1974, p. 37 (made public January 10, 1975); and, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Testimony by James Schlesinger, *U.S./U.S.S.R. Strategic Policies*, 93rd Congress, 2nd Session, March 4, 1974, p. 9.
5. James Schlesinger, *Annual Defense Department Report, FY 1976 and FY 1977* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, February 5, 1975), p. II-3.
6. Quoted in, James Schlesinger, *Briefing on Counterforce Attacks*, pp. 5-6.
7. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard M. Nixon, 1971* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1972). P. 310.
8. Department of Defense, *National Security Study Memorandum 169 Summary Report*, June 8, 1973. Declassified on July 7, 1997.
9. James Schlesinger, Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Memorandum For The Assistant To The President For National Security Affairs*, July 13, 1973. Declassified July 7, 1997.
10. Henry Kissinger, *Memorandum For The President*, The White House, January 7, 1974. Declassified October 17, 1974.
11. Richard Nixon, *National Security Decision Memorandum 242*, The White House, January 17, 1974. Declassified on June 27, 2007.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 2.



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13. Secretary James Schlesinger's testimony in, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S./U.S.S.R. Strategic Policies, Hearings, 93rd Congress, 2nd Session* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1974), p. 9.
- 14 Secretary James Schlesinger, *News Conference at the Pentagon*, Washington, D.C. (January 17, 1974), pp. 3, 8, 9.
15. Nixon, *National Security Decision Memorandum 242*, p. 2.
16. Ibid.
17. Kissinger, *Memorandum For The President*, January 7, 1974, p. 2; and, Schlesinger, *NSSM 169 Summary Report*, p. 1.
18. Schlesinger, *NSSM 169 Summary Report*, p. 1.
19. Ibid., p. 31.
20. As observed by Dr. John Foster, former Defense Department Director of Research and Engineering and head of the "Foster Panel," in an interview with the author on February 12, 2019.
21. "Tailoring" deterrence is a theme of the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review*. See, Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, February 2018, pp. 25-33.

This Information Series is adapted from a chapter by the author in a forthcoming book celebrating the life and work of the late James R. Schlesinger. The views in this Information Series are those of the author and should not be construed as official U.S. Government policy, the official policy of the National Institute for Public Policy or any of its sponsors. For additional information about this publication or other publications by the National Institute Press, contact: Editor, National Institute Press, 9302 Lee Highway, Suite 750 | Fairfax, VA 22031 | (703) 293-9181 | www.nipp.org. For access to previous issues of the National Institute Press Information Series, please visit <http://www.nipp.org/national-institute-press/information-series/>.

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