Theory of War: "The First Two Generations of Nuclear Strategists," Lawrence Freedman

Most sections in this lesson are taken from articles published in Paret, Peter, ed. Makers of Modern Strategy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986. Authors and titles of specific articles are given in the headings. Page references within the outline, unless specifically indicated, all come from this work.

   a. "The study of nuclear strategy . . . the study of the non-use of these weapons." (735)
      i. Leaders in the field have been civilians
   b. Cold War, and especially the Berlin Blockade, led to nuclear weapons being incorporated into US war plans
      i. Truman was reluctant to use them (cf. Korea and Berlin crisis)
      ii. After Soviet test of an atomic bomb in 1949, plans for their use had to be revised, since we no longer possessed a monopoly
   c. NSC-68 (1949)
      i. Use the newly developed H-bomb to provide a temporary advantage until conventional rearmament could be completed
      ii. US nuclear advantage balances Soviet manpower
      iii. Prospect of nuclear use involves exterminating civilian populations
      iv. This prospect could lead to better conventional defense, as governments seek some defense other than all or nothing
   d. "The sole long-term role of nuclear weapons was to deter their use by the enemy." (738)
      i. If both sides have nuclear arsenals, then they tend to balance each other out
      ii. More conventional forces are then needed to provide security
   e. Conventional forces are costly
      i. Reduce costs by relaxing inhibitions on nuclear use and substitute nuclear for conventional fire power
      ii. Hence, John Foster Dulles' "massive retaliation"
         (1) "bigger bang for the buck"
         (2) Dulles aimed at extracting political leverage by threat of the bomb
         (3) Brushfire wars like Korea or Indochina could lead to nuclear attack
            (a) Hints that nuclear weapons might be used in Korea
made prior to the armistice agreement

f. Critiques of Dulles' strategy
   i. US foreign policy is restricted if its reliance on unlimited makes us as well vulnerable to unlimited consequences
   ii. Once implemented, the financial gains of massive retaliation would make it hard to abandon this policy
      (1) US troops are present in Berlin, Korea, and Germany as "trip-wires" not as a credible defense force
   iii. Massive retaliation causes the US to force our Allies to associate with the policy
      (1) West Germany insists that it not be a future battleground
         (a) Requires a forward defense, rather than the defense in depth that ordinarily should be employed against Soviet attack
         (b) Forward defense requires early use of nuclear weapons
      (2) NATO forces therefore have a strong built-in nuclear bias
         (a) In the event of Soviet attack, there is a high likelihood of preemptive use by Soviets of their own nuclear weapons.
   iv. Dulles' deterrence is credible only so long as there is an imbalance of terror
      (1) If the USSR achieves equality, or near nuclear equality, why should the US run nuclear risks for Europe?
      (2) Our political leverage was short-lived: only until the Soviets could establish their strategic threat
      (3) "I cannot conceive of any President engaging in all-out nuclear war unless we were in danger of all-out destruction ourselves." Christian Herter, Secretary of State, 1959 (745)

g. Kennedy/MacNamara
   i. Tactical nuclear weapons appear to offer a solution to the cost of defending NATO from a forward defense
      (1) Note the role of improving technology in changing suppositions
      (2) It was assumed that tactical nuclear weapons would be an area of Western advantage
      (3) It was also assumed that they would favor the defense
      (4) It was further assumed that they could be used without exceptional damage to the environment
   ii. Critique of the use of tactical nuclear weapons
      (1) Soviets could, and did, build their own
      (2) Nuclear weapons could be used offensively and preemptive
      (3) Nuclear weapons used in highly populous areas, even the
"neutron bomb", would still be very destructive, as well as politically unpopular in Germany (the projected battlefield)

Theorist Bernard Brodie: "a people saved by us through our free use of nuclear weapons over their territories would probably be the last that would ever ask us to help them." (747-8)

iii. Henry Kissinger, formerly a proponent of the use of tactical nuclear weapons, acknowledges in 1960 that the use of tactical nuclear weapons would be ill-advised and advocates a shift toward conventional forces.

h. Problem of the use of battlefield nuclear weapons
i. Once used, what can prevent the enemy from escalating their use?
ii. Given the nuclear bias of NATO, the idea of a preemptive strike by the Soviets is hard to avoid
   (1) NATO, could, of course, preempt the Soviet preemptive strike, but the Soviets could preempt our preemptive strike of their preemptive strike, but . . . .

i. Albert Wohlstetter, "The Delicate Balance of Terror," 1959

i. "first strike capability": attack directed at the enemy's means of retaliation
ii. "second strike capability": ability to absorb a first strike and still inflict devastating retaliation; key factor here is "survivability."
iii. In order to provide international stability, BOTH sides must possess invulnerable retaliatory power
   (1) otherwise, "interacting expectations" could lead to a nuclear Pearl Harbor

j. Robert MacNamara and MAD: "mutual assured destruction"

i. Shift to missiles very important
   (1) Populations could not be protected, but missiles can be: ICBMs and SLBMs
ii. Antiballistic missile systems (ABMs) could provide one side with first strike capability but
   (1) Must be absolutely watertight
   (2) Probably inadequate to improved offensive abilities by the time it came into effect
iii. MAD="the ability to deter a deliberate [I suppose accidental nuclear attacks are not covered!] nuclear attack upon the United States or its allies by maintaining at all times a clear and unmistakable ability to inflict an unacceptable degree of damage upon any aggressor, or combination or aggressors--even after absorbing a surprise first attack."
   (1) 20-25% of population loss and 50% of industrial capacity lost is "unacceptable"
   (2) By mid-1960s, the US clearly could inflict much higher losses than that
k. ABMs threatened this balance (MAD)
   i. MacNamara authorizes multiple independently targeted re-entry vehicles (MIRVs) in 1966 to counter the development of Soviet ABMs
   ii. MacNamara identifies "action-reaction" dynamic within institutions (theirs and ours) as an important factor in defense decisions
   iii. SALT I (1972) attempts to stop the madness and preserve MAD by strictly limiting ABM systems

l. Herman Kahn and the "escalation ladder" and "escalation dominance"
   i. One approach at escalation is to dominate at one level of escalation and force the other side to take the dangerous next step up the ladder: escalation dominance
   ii. The other approach is to regard escalation of any kind as very uncertain, and that things can easily get out of hand
   (1) Thomas Schelling analyzes the problem pessimistically: "In practice, the critical threshold was likely to be the nuclear threshold." (765)
   (2) War is violent, and the violence can develop its own momentum
   iii. Robert MacNamara originally supported flexible response and escalation dominance, but in the aftermath of Berlin and the Cuban Missile crisis, became wary of the idea that there are mutually recognizable thresholds above the nuclear one.
   iv. What disturbs Europeans: "The more Americans talked about the need to avoid 'going nuclear' the more the Europeans suspected that the guarantee was in the process of being removed . . . . To Europeans, all war and not just nuclear war had to be deterred, and deterrence required at least some prospect of a resort to nuclear weapons." (770)

m. Arms Control talks
   i. Distinguishes between "strategic," "intermediate," and "tactical" nuclear weapons, which lends itself to escalation dominance.
   ii. There was a return to the idea of escalation in the late 1970s (Ford, Carter, Reagan) but there have been problems of implementation

n. Summary
   i. "If there was any consensus, it was that the West's security problems would be eased substantially if only it were possible to have stronger conventional forces and so be less reliant on nuclear weapons." (778)