IN PRAISE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS
by Louis A. Delvoie

One of the most widely held views of the second half of the 20th century was that the abolition or elimination of nuclear weapons was an absolute good or an eminently desirable objective. The memories or images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were part of the collective consciousness of succeeding generations. The literature about the destructive power of nuclear and thermonuclear bombs was often graphic and inspired sentiments of horror and revulsion. Nuclear weapons came to be seen as inherently evil. No sane or moral person could possibly hold a contrary view. The small minority that did was inevitably branded with the epithet ‘Dr. Strangelove’, after the mad scientist so brilliantly portrayed by Peter Sellers, who envisaged with glee the prospect of some mix of Armageddon and Gotterdammerung.

The power of the received idea or collective wisdom, and the fervour with which it was propounded, were usually sufficient to cow dissenters. They fell back on arguments about the practical difficulties of achieving total nuclear disarmament, about the problems of verification, about the technological obstacles to ‘putting the nuclear genie back in the bottle’ from whence it had been allowed to emerge. Except in the arcane world and journals of what the late Prime Minister Trudeau disparagingly described as “the nuclear accountants,” there was little genuine debate about the merits of nuclear weapons. Few politicians, journalists or academics were prepared to admit publicly that to this question, as to most questions, there might be two sides. And yet there is another side.

In arms control circles of the Cold War era, there was an oft-repeated throw away line which ran: “Abolish nuclear weapons and make the world safe for conventional war.” This boutade encapsulated in shorthand form three important truths worth pondering.

The first of these truths was that major conventional wars had become progressively more destructive and more murderous between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries. What is often referred to as the first modern war in terms of military technology, the American Civil War (1860-65), produced a death toll of about 600,000. The First World War (1914-18) resulted in the deaths of some 15 million. The Second World War (1939-45) saw some 80 million die, including 20 million Russians and 20 million Chinese, all too often forgotten in the Western world. The idea of millions of people being killed in war is not solely the spectre of the nuclear age; it was the reality of the pre-nuclear age.

The second truth is that the world was spared another war engaging the major powers throughout the second half of the 20th century. This was not because of a shortage of conflicts or events, which in an era of purely conventional weapons (regardless of their lethality) might well have precipitated a third world war. Indeed, any one of the following would probably have been viewed as a cassus belli:

- The Berlin blockade of 1948;
- The Suez Crisis of 1956;
- The Arab-Israeli War of 1973;
- The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962;
- The American bombing of North Vietnam;
- The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968;
- The Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956;

That no new world war resulted from any of these events is largely due to the existence of nuclear weapons, and to the deterrent effect which their possession and deployment had on the actions of the major powers throughout the Cold War. Although the theories of nuclear deterrence are numerous and complex, the lesson learned by the governments of the major powers was expressed with eloquent simplicity by the historian Paul Kennedy: “It is now clear that the dropping of the atomic bombs in 1945 marked a watershed in the military history of the world, and one which throws into doubt the viability of mankind should a Great Power war with atomic weaponry ever be fought.”

The third point is that hundreds of thousands of people were killed in civil and inter-state wars in the second half of the twentieth century. The carnage of the Algerian War of Independence, of the Vietnam War, of the Iran-Iraq War and of the civil wars in the Sudan, Afghanistan, Rwanda and Sri Lanka was and is horrendous. That carnage was, however, largely inflicted with weapons ranging from machetes and machine guns to howitzers and helicopter gunships; none of it was the result of the use of nuclear weapons. On the contrary, the deterrent value of nuclear weapons served to avoid the far worse carnage which would have attended a third world war among the major powers.

There are those who, while prepared to recognize the merits of nuclear deterrence in the geo-strategic framework of the Cold War, consider that the concept is now obsolete in a post-Cold War world. This is a view which pays insufficient attention to the history of international relations and to the realities of world politics. The end of a fairly stable structure of politico-ideological competition and conflict between East and West does not mean the end of divergent interests and power struggles among the world’s principal politico-military actors. Countries such as the United States, Russia and China will not cease to pursue their own agendas, and will risk collisions in the process. When this occurs, nuclear deterrence will continue to serve as a moderating influence in their mutual relations, and will have a usefully restraining effect on any overly hegemonistic ambitions.

But nuclear deterrence is not limited in its usefulness to relations among the major powers. It can also prove remarkably salutary in more limited conflicts. The Gulf War of 1991 is a case in point. As that war unfolded there was an ever increasing worry among regional countries and peoples, and among the partners in the US-led coalition, that Iraq might resort to the use of chemical weapons. In the end, that worry proved unfounded. Why? Iraq certainly had chemical weapons; that was proved beyond reasonable doubt by intelligence and inspection reports. It also had the means to deliver them; that was proved by the number of SCUD missiles which
it launched (with conventional explosives) at Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Iraqi leadership was facing a desperate military situation and had displayed no moral scruples about using chemical weapons, having already done so in its war against Iran and in its campaign of repression against the Kurds in Northern Iraq. Why not this time? Barr ing any hard evidence to the contrary, the most logical explanation is that the Iraqi leadership could not be certain that the United States would not retaliate with nuclear weapons. What President Saddam Hussein and his colleagues did know for sure was that the United States had the capability to do so, that the United States had never subscribed to a ‘no first use’ of nuclear weapons policy, and that a retaliatory nuclear attack would devastate Iraq. In short, the American nuclear deterrent in all likelihood prevented the human and environmental catastrophe which would have resulted if Iraq had used chemical weapons.

All of this is not to say that there does not exist a strong case for the control of nuclear weapons. Arms control agreements aimed at enhancing strategic stability through the reduction of stockpiles and the elimination of inherently destabilizing systems should be vigorously pursued. So too should efforts to limit the proliferation of nuclear weapons, especially in areas of the world where they may contribute to instability, or where political or technological conditions are unlikely to ensure adequate safeguards against their actual use. The total abolition or elimination of nuclear weapons is, however, another matter. Even if it proved to be a practically achievable goal, is it one we should necessarily pursue? The track record of nuclear deterrence in averting large-scale wars and their attendant human calamities is impressive. Should we risk once again ‘making the world safe for conventional war’?

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NOTE
‘Hard power’ is coercive force — the ability to smash things, kill people and win in a fight. The mission of the US Army — “to fight and win the nation’s wars decisively” — is the epitome of ‘hard power’. But most conflicts don’t come to a fight. The history of civilization can be described as the expansion of order and rule of law. Soldiers play a part in this. A great deal of power resides in the network of formal and informal rules and relationships that govern interactions between people, groups and states. ‘Soft power’ involves building and using these networks of formal regimes, rules and relationships to preserve and enhance security and other objectives. Should professional soldiers strive to understand both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ means of achieving national security objectives, or should they concentrate their professional efforts on readiness to exert ‘hard power’ whenever it is necessary?

In a chapter of Contemporary Issues in Officership, I argued that professional officers must understand violence in new ways. Peace, conflict and war are interrelated, and if we focus only on winning wars with the latest technology (‘hard power’), we will be unprepared for much of what our profession demands of us. War evolves, and the military profession must evolve with it. General Romeo Dallaire, a graduate of the Imperial Defence College in the UK, remains convinced that education for war was inadequate preparation for the challenges he faced in Rwanda. Canada has a special place in the evolution of military education precisely because we rely so much on ‘soft power’ and special relationships for our security and pursuit of our interests. Furthermore, we have a direct stake in spreading the doctrine of ‘soft power’ and common security. The more states adhere to norms of non-violent conflict resolution and international law, the better. Educating professional managers about violence is a good start. One could argue cynically that even if we planned to rely on ‘hard power’ for our own security, teaching others to rely on ‘soft power’ might be a good policy. But that argument misconstrues the nature of ‘soft power’, which keeps the French and Germans, Americans and Canadians safe from violence at each other’s hands despite the wars of the past.

As an opening salvo in what should be a continuing debate, I offer below the commentary of a professional officer who believes strongly in a military focus on war-fighting. Those who disagree are not necessarily pacifists: we can all agree on the need for strong forces to achieve security, while disagreeing about the best way to shape the profession in order to achieve it. Similar debates go on in other professions. Medicine includes public health advocates and disease fighters. The law includes champions of individual freedoms and crusaders for social justice. These are simplistic distinctions, and I hope that readers will rise to the challenge of debating the nature of the military profession in all its subtlety. The Canadian Forces Leadership Institute and the School of Policy Studies at Queen’s University will host an international conference of the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society in Kingston in October 2002. Titled Challenge and Change for the Military Institution, the Military Profession and Military Leadership in the 21st Century, this conference will continue the debate and make the proceedings available for further study. I would like to thank Lieutenant Colonel Schnelle for his comments, and look forward to reading other contributions to the debate.

NOTES

1. This argument is made by historian William H. MacNeill, The Pursuit of Power (University of Chicago Press, 1982).
3. See the link to the conference web site from the RMC web page, or directly at http://www.rmc.ca/academic/conference/iuscanada/

SOLDIERS, NOT “POST-MODERN PROFESSIONALS”

by Lieutenant Colonel Douglas Schnelle

I found Major Last’s chapter “Educating Officers: Post-modern Professionals to Control and Prevent Violence” to be both thoughtful and provocative. I am a great admirer of both the British and Canadian armies, and have attempted to maintain a sense of the contemporary professional literature of both military organizations. I found much in the article to reflect upon and would like to make several observations to contribute to the debate. Central to my comment is that the business of soldiers is war, and that every effort should be made to prepare them for this. Anything less is a dereliction of our responsibilities as trainers and leaders in the profession of arms.

Major Last argues that ideas in the West have changed concerning war and its justification. However, I suspect that this change is fleeting and limited to Western Europe. No doubt, in part, it is a result of economic prosperity and the perceived lack of a foreign threat in Europe for the last decade. In some respects, this is true in the United States as well. However, the war in the Falklands, the British military commitment to Northern Ireland, the commitment of ground combat forces in the Gulf War, the deployment of British Royal Marines to Afghanistan and the retention of military conscription in many Western countries all suggest to me that war has not been rejected by states. The movement in the West toward smaller professional military forces is as much a matter of declining birth rates, lack of threat identification and advancing technology as it is a matter of changing attitudes to war.

The World Wars were not an aberration unique to Europe, but part of a longstanding pattern of interstate war-
fare which has persisted since 1945. The Iran-Iraq War, the wars between India and Pakistan, the wars between Israel and Arab states, the conflicts of both the Korean Peninsula and Indo-China, as well as scores of other interstate and intrastate conflicts have made war commonplace since the end of the Second World War. War is ubiquitous. Among cultural elites, a chatting class exists that rejects war as an acceptable method of statecraft. However, I suspect that that view is limited largely to Western intellectuals. I support strategic thinking that incorporates war-prevention. My daughter’s great-grandfather fought in the First World War, her grandfather fought in the Second World War, and her granduncle was killed in the Marine Corps at the Chosen Reservoir in the Korean War. Several male relations by blood and/or marriage fought in the Vietnam War, and her father is a professional soldier. What rational person would not desire peace? However, the success of war-prevention is always doubtful, even when it is appropriate.

Major Last states that wars have evolved, and that the role of the professional soldier should change with it. My view of the history of the British, American and to a lesser extent the Canadian military is that all three armies have a long tradition of fighting frontier or empire wars as well as participating in world wars against Western industrial powers. A reading of Winston Churchill’s River War suggests that the world surrounding the battlefield at Omdurman is very close to the post-modern world surrounding the ‘battlespace’ at Kabul. The Canadian military experience in Western Canada with the Cree Indians, the Riel Rebellion, the Boer War, and the political complexities of the Korean War suggest to me that war, conflict and ‘peace’ — as it should be understood by Canadian soldiers — is a historically constant phenomenon. The British soldier Caldwell and his work “Small Wars,” and the United States Marine Corps “Small Wars Manual” written in the interwar years, 1919-1941, has a great deal of information and an historical perspective that is as useful today as it was when the ink was fresh. Do we sometimes make the present seem more complex than it is, and suggest that the past was a simple time? I fear we distort the complexity of the present by reducing the complexity of the historical past.

The discussion of “common conceptions of security” affecting the ‘post-modern’ world really suggests to me a common illusion which has affected the West since the Treaty of Westphalia. At the end of the 19th century, pacifist Norman Angell confidently predicted that war between Western industrial states was nearly impossible because of democracy and economic interdependence. He was proved wrong by the events of 1914. How do we make ourselves more secure by rejecting the idea that warfare is possible? The American Army refused to believe that there would be another Indian war throughout almost 200 years of warfare. It did not prepare for a long conflict, nor did it establish doctrine, organize forces, train soldiers or develop leaders who were able to meet the specific threat of the Plains and Mountain Indians of the American West. The reason that the Army did not prepare for sustained operations was that it was not able to reflect and articulate the reality of their historical times and, therefore, was not really prepared to fight effectively at the onset of hostilities. A significant price was paid for this failure to prepare for war, as the defeat of the Seventh Cavalry at the battle of the Little Bighorn demonstrated.

John Keegan’s observation that “Western Warriors” must draw on more than Western war-fighting traditions to be successful on the battlefields of the future is suspect. The author and university professor Victor Davis Hanson’s most recent work, Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of the West, demonstrates that whereever primitive forms of warfare confront the West, they fail to achieve military victory by force of arms. The movie Blackhawk Down and the more recent We Were Soldiers are suggestive of the power of Western arms. Naturally, political will is another matter. Without the demonstration of national will, no victory is possible.

Major Last cites the warnings of Michael Howard about abuse of military history as “mythmaking,” but historical understanding can aid cohesion among the troops. Napoleon’s dictum that “Morale is to material as three is to one” is still valid. Surely history is useful in understanding positive values like courage, honour and duty? Is there no value in that? In addition, only the study of military history can reveal the eternal lessons of combat. What were the good decisions in battle, and what decisions cost lives and defeated armies? The ‘post-modern’ mind is all too ready to abandon the wisdom of the past in pursuit of a more ‘relevant’ present.

I find it difficult to accept Last’s view that “officers should not be educated for the technological romance of an idealized cyber-battlefield.” I command a US Army Training Centre and the complexity of training for modern war is significant. Individual soldier skills are difficult to maintain, and we train to the potential technological threat that could face us. This becomes both a practical and moral responsibility. American blood is at stake. Should not armies train to the standard of their equipment and capabilities? To prepare modern armies for combat requires an enormous commitment of time and intellectual energy. The first priority of the professional officer is to ensure that his soldiers are ready for war. That priority centres on technology, fieldcraft and tactics. Officers must be exposed to a certain degree of education that is involved in providing the intellectual framework required to understand weapons, technology, fieldcraft, tactics, human dynamics, unit cohesion, the psychology of stress, etc. This is clearly part of our professional imperative. Naturally, as officers mature and gain senior rank and the leadership of institutions, exposure to national security studies becomes critical. Ultimately, what kind of education would help the professional officer to perform the duties of a manager of violence? I think it is our professional responsibility to focus education on preparation for war.

The views expressed are those of the author only, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the US Army or the Government of the United States of America.