

Democracy versus Deterrence: Nuclear Weapons and Political Integrity

This paper argues that the practice and performance of nuclear deterrence can never be fully representative or democratic due to the particular pressures placed on leaders by the nuclear condition. For nuclear deterrence to be effective – and for nuclear weapons to have any political value – a leader must always convince both their electorate as well as any possible foe, that they are willing to use nuclear weapons in extremis, irrespective of whether this is their true position. In any nuclear-armed state, where politicians privately believe that using nuclear weapons is always wrong, but publicly stress that possessing nuclear weapons to use as a deterrent is right, they are forced to act dishonestly. These tensions are particularly acute in the UK context given the reliance on just one form of nuclear weapons system for deterrence and the concurrent requirement to pre-delegate secret orders through a “letter of last resort”. The consequences for democratic nuclear-armed states are troubling; for public morality, the personal integrity of democratic leaders, and for true democratic accountability. The paper concludes that public criticism of political leaders, and citizen voting choices, ought to take account of the problem of transparency posed by policies of nuclear deterrence.

Key words: nuclear deterrence, political integrity, democracy, accountability, transparency, publicity of reasons.

I

According to Thomas Schelling, nuclear deterrence is as ‘the threat that leaves something to chance’ due to the inability of an attacker to ever know its adversary’s true intentions and red lines (Schelling 1990). But a similar dynamic also plays out in the domestic realm where the leader of any nuclear-armed state must express a particular position on nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence irrespective of whether this is what they truly believe, or would actually do. Thus, political leaders are sometimes required to express positions publicly on nuclear policy that they are privately opposed to, which in turn tends to exclude moderate policy positions from

consideration. The upshot of this is that nuclear weapons policy – and especially the threat of nuclear retaliation – pose a particular problem for democracies because they create a societal democratic deficit and place an unfair burden on political leaders. Essentially, in order for deterrence to be effective, some political leaders must not only lie to their fellows and to the electorate, but they must also be skilled at doing so.

While this democratic deterrence issue applies across the board to all nuclear-
weapons states, it appears to be particularly acute for the United Kingdom. The
problem is magnified by the fact that the UK relies on just one system for its nuclear
capability – submarines armed with nuclear missiles – and because each submarine
must have secret orders of what to do should the UK come under attack and the
Prime Minister killed. While these orders could theoretically say anything (or
nothing), the Prime Minister must always act and speak as if these weapons would
be used without hesitation should the need arise. While this pressure has applied to
all UK leaders since the development of the first British bomb in the 1950s, this
paper looks at the very assertive and unequivocal declaration by Prime Minister
Theresa May just days after assuming power that she was prepared to use nuclear
weapons.¹ As we explain, in reality, May's options in stating this position, whether
she believed it or not, were severely constrained by the nature of nuclear deterrence.

We begin by outlining and describing the nature and specifics of the British nuclear
policy, the particular problems of relying upon just one system for nuclear
deterrence, and the peculiar nature of the “letter of last resort”. Second, we highlight

1 HC Deb July 2016, vol. 613, col. 568.

the difficulties facing any UK Prime Minister when dealing with the nuclear issue in public, and, using Theresa May's recent statements, introduce three different strategic and ethical positions to explain the possible policy approaches on this question. Third, we consider the broader philosophical, moral and ethical issues arising from this problem, and whether nuclear deterrence can ever be compatible with true democratic control of policy, the burden policy-making places upon political leaders, and the way these issues should inform citizens' judgements.

II

UK nuclear weapons policy is – and has always been - the product of a complicated set of financial, political and strategic pressures. Financially, the UK could not afford a huge and diverse nuclear arsenal such as those developed by the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War; politically, the UK wanted to remain in the nuclear game but did not necessarily want to build a first-strike capability able to disarm an adversary; and strategically, the UK had to develop a policy that could still credibly threaten retaliation even if the country and its leadership were destroyed in a surprise sneak attack. As Garrett Graff put it in an article for Politico:

Britain faced a unique threat among the nuclear superpowers: Its comparatively tiny island — and its heavily concentrated population and government centers — could be easily obliterated by the power of later generations of atomic and hydrogen bombs (Graff 2017).

The result was that by the 1960s, the UK came to rely on nuclear-powered submarines carrying nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) to underpin its nuclear deterrent (for a discussion of this, see Baylis and Stoddart 2014).

British nuclear strategy has always been based on a belief in operating a “minimum nuclear deterrent”. That is, the smallest nuclear force possible to meet perceived deterrence requirements. Since the UK retired its air-delivered nuclear bombs in the 1990s, this has meant reliance on a single method of delivering nuclear weapons: the Trident Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM) carried by a nuclear-powered submarine.² The UK operates a posture of Continuous-At-Sea-Deterrence (CASD), whereby one of the fleet of four submarines is always on patrol³, somewhere under the surface of the North Atlantic ready to fire its nuclear-armed payload if instructed. Each of these submarines can (in theory) carry up to 192 nuclear-armed warheads (12 on each of the 16 missiles), but this has been limited to a maximum of 40 (UK Ministry of Defence 2017). Nevertheless, each of these 100kt class warheads are many times more powerful than the two bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki that killed approximately 200,000 Japanese citizens in 1945. The combination of ballistic missiles hidden inside stealthy submarines is believed to be the most secure and invulnerable method of ensuring a credible second strike capability – that is, the threat of nuclear retaliation should the United Kingdom be attacked and its leaders killed. It is this threat of nuclear ‘punishment’ that forms the

2 In July 2016, the UK voted to replace the ageing fleet of four Vanguard-class SSBNs with a new fleet of four nuclear-power submarines.

3 The other three submarines will be either undergoing maintenance and repairs or carrying out training exercises.

bedrock of UK deterrence strategy, although the UK does not have a nuclear No First Use (NFU) pledge, which means they could conceivably be used pre-emptively.

To ensure the credibility of this system, one of the first duties of each new UK Prime Minister is to write what is known as a ‘letter of last resort’ (Hennessy 2010, 310–59). Or as Peter Hennessy puts it “the solution to the problem of nuclear authorization from beyond the grave.”(Hennessy 2010, 311). These short, handwritten letters, which are placed in a sealed envelope in a secure safe on each of the four nuclear-armed submarines, contain the Prime Minister’s instructions should the UK come under nuclear attack, and if the PM is killed. These letters are designed to ensure that any adversary wishing to attack the UK must always assume that the UK can and will respond with nuclear weapons. It is believed that these letters contain four options for the submarine commander; (1) retaliate with nuclear weapons; (2) don’t retaliate; (3) use your own judgement, or; (4) place the submarine under control of an allied country (likely Australia or the United States). The letters are removed – unopened – and destroyed once the PM leaves office.⁴ Only one PM has revealed what they wrote in this letter – Jim Callaghan, who declared that he would have used them (Hennessy 2010, 311–13).⁵

While no one beyond their authors knows what is written in these letters (they could for example, be left blank!), for deterrence to work, and for the UK system to have any meaning, the PM must act at all times as though these weapons would be used.

4 The submarine on patrol at the time of a change of government will continue to operate based on the previous PM’s letter until it returns to port and can be replaced with the new one

5 Prime Ministers designate an ‘alternative decision-taker’ to act should they be unable. One of those, Denis Healey, revealed that he would have struggled to give the order to retaliate to a first strike from an enemy power (see Edyvane, 2015, p.312).

Thus, in a recent parliamentary debate on the renewal of Britain's Trident nuclear weapons system, when May was asked: 'Can we cut to the chase? Is she personally prepared to authorise a nuclear strike that can kill a hundred thousand innocent men, women and children?', her response was a firm and unequivocal 'Yes.' May went on to characterise Trident as the 'ultimate insurance policy'.⁶ In truth, May had very little choice about stating her public desired to use these weapons,⁷ whether that was what she believed in private or not. Moreover, the nature of deterrence policy makes it impossible for voters to know what her sincere beliefs actually are; the true content of the UK's deterrence policy is therefore left in the hands of one person and concealed under a veil of secrecy.

The debate around the morality of May's expressed position raises interesting problems for democrats, not to do with the ethics of using nuclear weapons or the specifics of nuclear policy, but rather with the structure imposed by the idea of deterrence upon the policy-making process. Specifically, the nature of nuclear deterrence rules out a full range of policy options from being publicly advocated by political leaders, and it prevents citizens from being able to accurately judge the conduct of their representatives or make informed voting choices. These issues can be brought to light by laying out, in broad terms, the different policy options available for an agent to endorse. These policy options encompass a mixture of ethical and strategic considerations, which we have simplified somewhat for our

6 HC Deb July 2016, vol. 613, col. 568.

7 Support for disarmament amongst Conservative voters has remained extremely low over the past three decades (Clements 2015), with the importance of the issue for voters making it hard to imagine a Conservative leader being able to retain her position and publicly articulate a policy of disarmament.

immediate purposes.⁸ Naturally, in the real world politicians may vacillate between views, suffer from uncertainty, indecision, or changes of heart. Nevertheless, the categories we describe sufficiently model political beliefs that a discussion of them can advance our moral understanding of an important policy debate.

The first position can be characterised as that of the *unilateralist*. The *unilateralist* believes that any use of nuclear weapons is wrong, and that possessing a nuclear deterrent is undesirable. Possessing a deterrent may be undesirable for strategic or instrumental reasons, for example, because it makes the world more unstable or because the ends achieved by possessing a nuclear deterrent can be realised by some other means. Or, it may be undesirable because possessing a deterrent is morally wrong; perhaps, again for example, because the presence of a nuclear weapons intentionally causes fear, and the intentional causing of fear is *prima facie* wrong. As a result, the *unilateralist* favours (both publicly and privately) a policy of disarmament. Interestingly, this is broadly the position adopted by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, if not perhaps by the rest of his party.

Rather than support *unilateralism*, a politician may instead adopt a contrastingly *hawkish* stance, believing that using strategic nuclear weapons is permissible or right in some circumstances, and that possessing a nuclear deterrent is both right because it discourages others from attacking, and because it leaves open the possibility of a first or retaliatory nuclear strike in extreme circumstances. The political *hawk* may believe that the possession of nuclear weapons maintains the international power of

⁸ We do not pretend that these three positions describe every available position, and nor do we attempt to describe every possible reason for holding them. In outlining them we intend only to broadly model key positions in public policy debates.

their state, and likely endorses the principle of *lex talionis* implicit in the idea of punitive nuclear strikes ‘from beyond the grave’.

Finally, between the *unilateralist* and the *hawk*, there is the politician who believes that the use of nuclear weapons is wrong because of the harms they cause, but who believes that the presence of others less moral requires the threat of use in order to provide a deterrent. This last category of political actor believes possession of nuclear weapons to be a necessary evil to preserve the safety of their fellow citizens, but regards the actual use of them as morally unconscionable. As Michael Walzer famously put it, this category describes the political leader who believes ‘We threaten to do evil in order not to do it and the doing of it would be so terrible that the threat seems in comparison to be morally defensible’ (Walzer 2006, 274). For want of a better term, we label this kind of political actor, the *moderate*. The *moderate* position, we show, presents serious problems both on a societal level for the democratic process and culture of a political community, and on a personal level for those who hold it. Our claim is that awareness of these political and personal problems, which are unavoidable features of the policy-making process for the *moderate* political leader, ought to inform ethical judgements about their position, and may require citizens to adopt voting strategies to mitigate the moral risks posed.

III

The reason nuclear deterrence poses a particular problem for democratic political communities is because of the nature of democratic political authority. In a democracy, the exercise of political power is made legitimate through the consent of the governed and the nature of democratic procedures. Democracy is valued in part

because of the way that it embodies and respects key values of equality, freedom, autonomy, and fairness. Democracy operates on the principle that each citizen has equal moral status, and this status is reflected in public rules and procedures.⁹ Citizens are granted equal rights and treated impartially. These rights include an equal right to participate in forming the laws that all citizens are equally subject to. Democratic procedures embody fairness and equality by giving equal weight and impartial consideration to the individual interests of citizens, and by discriminating solely on morally relevant grounds (c.f. Williams 2006). At the same time, respect for the freedom and moral autonomy of citizens is also intrinsic to the democratic process. By granting citizens a right to participate in forming and choosing the laws that govern their own conduct, democracy is said to respect the status of moral agents as self-governing agents. Citizens' moral autonomy is preserved through their freedom to act wrongly (within some constraints) and make bad political decisions. These reasons for valuing democracy are based on intrinsic features of the democratic process; these features make the democratic process valuable independently of the decisions that spring from it. Under some accounts, these features also make democratically-made decisions good regardless of their content (Christiano 2004, 266).

Democracy is valued not just for the intrinsic features of the democratic decision-making procedure, but also as a means to secure valuable ends. One of these putatively valuable ends is epistemic: the process of collective deliberating, expressing preferences, contesting policy platforms, and voting on issues reveals the

⁹ We take it that one way the right of participating can be cashed-out is in the form of equal rights to stand for office and vote for representatives.

common good or effectively tracks the preferences of citizens.¹⁰ Another benefit ascribed to democratic procedures is that they secure independently valuable states of affairs such as the protection of individual rights or interests or the well-being of citizens. We might think this is true because individual citizens are themselves best placed to know their interests and most motivated to push for them. Individuals know the strength and nature of their preferences better than someone acting on their behalf can. Thus, it is better for individuals that they pursue their own preferences through democratic procedures than that for a ruler to paternalistically impose policies based upon their own ideas. If the citizen trusts too much in a third party to advance their interests then the risk of bias, corruption, and error creeps in. Finally, the range of competing ideas and interest-groups, and the need to secure the support of the polis, prevent easy monopolisation of power and thus keeps tyranny at bay.

To preserve democratic values and ends, political decisions need to be made in the open, and on the basis of publicly given reasons. Attempts to exercise coercive power without providing public reasons imply that the judgement of decision-makers has a special status that stands without need of defence and so violates the principle of equality. Openness also preserves the freedom of citizens by ensuring that decision-makers can be held accountable to the political community. In this way legitimacy is conferred and disagreements between citizens can be resolved in ways that respect the free and equal citizens of citizens (c.f. Christiano 2004, 277). Because citizens are able to see that procedures governing the exercise of coercive power are fair, they

10 See, for example, Condorcet's jury theorem.

are more likely to accept the authority of the law even if they ultimately disagree with the content of a decision. In this way stability is ensured. A secret decision also rules out the chance for the epistemic benefits of public deliberation and collective decision-making to occur, and increases the likelihood that politicians will act for self-interested reasons. The uncertainty constitutive of deterrence policy thus undermines both the intrinsic values and instrumental benefits of democracy.

The *moderate* nuclear policy position we have outlined clearly falls foul of the democratic requirement for transparency in decision-making. The principle of nuclear deterrence rests on the built-in assumption of a willingness to use nuclear weapons either pre-emptively or in retaliation. But, a successful nuclear deterrence policy does not necessarily require a genuine *willingness* to use nuclear weapons, it only requires the *appearance* of willingness to use them. As former UK Secretary of Defence, Dennis Healey put it "...you had to make them think you would use ... [nuclear weapons] even if you wouldn't in practice (quoted in Edyvane 2015, 312). At the same time, a willingness to use nuclear weapons and a pretence at willingness in order to maintain deterrence policy are both positions that a voter may realistically endorse. But a voter has no way of knowing which position, that of the *hawk* or the *moderate*, that their representative truly endorses, even though the two positions are philosophically incompatible. Nor can the *moderate* principle ever appear in a manifesto or be adopted via democratic procedure. Enormous programs of public spending, and policies that could potentially lead to massive loss of innocent life may be dependent upon insincere advocacy by political leaders. This problem of uncertainty over the content of nuclear policy is an inherent feature of it. As a result, nuclear policy cannot help but violate the requirement that political authority in a

democratic political community be exercised in the open and only after public justification. Because it is an intrinsic feature, there is no way to resolve the problem in a way that is both democratic and makes all of the possible policy-positions publicly available.

One response to the argument above would be to contend that political leaders are required by the nature of their role to engage in deception. Indeed, ‘dirty hands theorists’ have highlighted that it is a feature of politics in the real world that politicians will be forced, unless they are exceptionally lucky, to dirty their hands in order to keep their people safe from hostile forces. The requirement to engage in *Realpolitik*: to lie, deceive, and keep secrets, is simply part of the role of any political leader, necessary to protect and preserve the political community (de Wijze 2003, 39). and potentially to be regarded as a desirable competence (Machiavelli 2011, chap. XVIII). One might therefore argue that *Realpolitik* reasonably permits a politician to deceive the enemies of a political community, and to keep some information secret from their fellow citizens. We might conclude that citizens, when they delegate power, authorise their representatives to engage in deception on their behalf and in order to protect their interests.

This characterisation of politics as a domain with features that by nature will require deception is what motivates realist political philosophy. If lies and deceit are simply an unavoidable element of political activity then we had better seek politicians prepared to deceive if we want good leaders. Thus, we become moved to consider not if lying is desirable but when it is desirable. The answer to this question is given by the conditions that make deceit necessary. Sometimes, politicians are required to

deceive the public in order to protect and preserve the institutions of democracy and the conditions necessary for those institutions to exist and function (Edyvane, 2015, 312). For this justification for deception to hold, it follows that any deception must not at the same time undermine the core democratic norms and institutions it is supposed to serve (cf. Galston, 1991, 185). The requirement to engage in putatively morally dubious acts, coupled with the constraints set by democratic values, leads realists to conclude that the ideal political leader ought to be the sort of person who is prepared to lie but reluctant to do so (Galston, 1991; Hampshire, 1978; Williams, 1978).

A further feature of political life is that decision-making cannot be straightforwardly subjected to continual scrutiny and challenge by the wider citizenry. Taking these features of politics together, realists ask us to direct our focus away from features of a circumstance that permit or exclude lying. Instead, they press us to consider the character of the political leader. Rather than citizens evaluating each and every policy decision as it needs to be made, citizens choose representatives to act on their behalf, trusting their judgement on public matters. With this in mind, better to consider whether the political leader has the right sort of attributes to exercise good judgement on behalf of her people than to attempt to specify in great detail a set of *a priori* rules governing permissible acts of secrecy and deception.

As far as things go, this argument has a lot going for it. Voters, after all, do not select individual policies from amongst a portfolio. Instead, electors choose politicians to represent their interests. On that basis, perhaps voters ought to select candidates who display the sorts of characteristics that a good representative ought to possess

rather than according to the policies they claim to endorse. Thus, the realist might claim that we ought to focus on whether any potential leader has the right sort of character rather than on their stated views on a specific policy, such as nuclear deterrence. Unfortunately this does not suffice to solve the problem posed by nuclear deterrence policy. Missing from the realist picture painted above is an explanation for how voters might come to a reliable judgement about the character of a politician asking for their support.

In a modern representative democracy voters are some distance removed from the politicians that represent them. In ordinary life, an agent comes to learn about the characters of other agents through the day to day features of interpersonal relationships. Over time, through repeated interactions, we come to know the sort of person our friends and colleagues are. The closer we are to a person, the better placed we are to make a reliable judgement about their character. Outside of those sorts of relationships we rely upon proxy measures to guide our interactions: professional standards and certifications, the testimony of those we trust, reputational measures and so forth. In politics, citizens can draw inferences about the sort of character a politician has from their professed public values, the policies they endorse, the issues they campaign on, and their past behaviour. Judgements about the character and capability of a leader rely in part upon knowing what sorts of policies they endorse. This means that if a policy option requires that a politician conceal their personal conviction then voters are denied some of the information they need to make a reliable judgement. This problem is serious because, whilst realists might be correct to identify that a politician needs to be the sort of person who is capable of lying but aware of the moral cost in doing so, that isn't all that is

desirable in politician. Voters also rightly care about other areas of a politician's character and the values they endorse, as well as the consequences that might arise from any policy they might seek to enact. In other words, whilst a voter might legitimately expect their politician to be the sort of person who is capable of making decisions to safeguard democratic institutions, their decisions also need to be informed by inferences about the sorts of actions a politician might take and what values inform their choices. Nuclear deterrence policy, by its very nature, prevents citizens from making fully informed assessments; it is only after a politician leaves office for good that reliable judgement can be made.

In order that the preservation of a democracy does not seriously undermine democracy itself, the actions required by the competing demands of *Realpolitik* must themselves be somehow made transparent and accountable even if it is only retrospectively (c.f. de Wijze 2003, 40). Ordinarily, democratic communities may, for example, demand that a requirement for secrecy in a policy be approved by citizens in advance. That is to say, if a public policy requires secrecy, citizens ought to be offered reasons for this secrecy so that they can decide for themselves if the justification is good enough. In their discussion of this principle, Gutmann and Thompson use the example of unmarked police cars, where the policy is public but the details of which particular cars are unmarked is kept secret. This enables citizens to discuss whether secrecy is justified and be able to limit its scope: 'it is the details of the policy, not the policy itself, that is secret' (Gutmann and Thompson 1998, 103; see also Bok, 1999, chap. XII; Thompson, 1999). Unfortunately, this sort of approach simply cannot work for nuclear deterrence policy. Were there to be any form of public deliberation and public consensus informing nuclear policy (beyond

debating the particular type of capability),¹¹ then its purpose would be immediately defeated: public acceptance of the premise of the *moderate* position by implication renders it ineffective. One way to build in some degree of transparency and accountability would be to require any secret orders to be made public some time after a leader leaves office. Whilst this would not address demands for electoral accountability, it would nevertheless allow moral judgements to be made about the actions of an agent. Unfortunately, the possibility of any former political leader re-standing for office would restrict this approach to post-mortem judgements only, or there would need to be some constitutional limit on standing for office in place, rendering it a very weak form of accountability indeed.¹²

Another possible means of ensuring some degree of accountability and transparency is through the operation of select oversight committees to scrutinise and approve decisions in lieu of public deliberation (de Wijze 2003, 40). However, as de Wijze points out, the larger and more representative a committee, the less likely it is that secrecy can be maintained (Ibid). But absolute secrecy is vital to maintaining the uncertainty required by nuclear policy – loss of secrecy does not erode the power of nuclear deterrence, it destroys it; hence the use of sealed secret letters of last resort. The *moderate* position requires maintaining a deception in front of one's friends, allies, fellow citizens, and closest compatriots as well as the enemies of one's state. In order to maintain the strongest possible degree of uncertainty, an agent must maintain this deception from the moment they harbour leadership ambitions. The

11 Such as for example during the Trident Alternatives Review in 2013. For a broader overview of this see, (Stoddart 2016).

12 See Edyvane, 2015, 313-5 for a discussion along similar lines.

moment a leader, or agent who harbours leadership ambitions commits to a (secret) policy of nuclear deterrence without use, they also commit themselves to engaging in a long-term public deception. This deception must be convincing, sustained, and, to minimise the risk of the deception failing, it must be borne by one person alone. Thus, the deception required by the *moderate* position transcends traditional forms of political deception through a scope that ranges across domestic and international, and public and private domains, and by the fact that the responsibility for maintaining the deception rests on the shoulders of a single agent.

Of course, in the unmarked police car example the policy is amenable to being made compatible with the demands of transparency because voters are aware of the content of the policy and how it will be instantiated. This is not so in the case of deterrence because the *moderate* and *hawkish* policies are distinct. A politician endorsing a broad policy of deterrence effectively leaves their constituents uncertain of which precise deterrence policy they would enact. Each policy will have dramatically different consequences and be subject to radically different moral evaluations should push ever come to shove. Thus, voters are unable to make reliable judgements about the possible consequences of their actions and of the value commitments of their representatives.

IV

While uncertainty over the content of nuclear policy erodes the integrity of the democratic process, endorsement of the *moderate* position by a political leader can also undermine their personal integrity, particularly if they possess characteristics most desirable in a leader from a democratic point of view. In a well-functioning

representative democracy, the ideal democratic leader will endorse, act upon, and be motivated to realise certain values, principles and valuable states of affairs to the best of their ability. Specifically, they will regard their fellow citizens as free and equal respect-worthy individuals who are owed reasons for any coercive use of state power over them, and will be concerned to ensure their safety and security. They will be committed to the principle of democratic accountability for all the reasons given in the preceding section. We take it that these features could be present in political leaders with a wide range of broader ideological commitments and comprehensive conceptions of the good. We take it also that a leader with these features could potentially belong in any of the three policy camps we have characterised. However, for the *moderate* leader, the policy they endorse presents particular problems connected with personal and social identity. The reason for this is that the *moderate* policy necessarily includes a performative element from the leader who professes willingness to use nuclear weapons. This performative element requires that a political leader pretend to endorse values they do not, and to act out the role of a *hawk*. In doing so, a leader incurs psychological and social burdens.

Each of us has a sense of who we are and, in all likelihood, where we belong. Our sense of self is based to some degree on continuity of memory, but it is also constituted by a set of values and attachments. How we see ourselves and our identity, is partly our conception of the kind of person we are. We define ourselves in terms of the character we believe ourselves to have: do we see ourselves as a kind, or an honest, or a courageous person? Are we loyal, hard-working, or weak-willed. These aspects of our character are both moral and psychological traits and characteristics. The set of values we endorse and the moral character we possess are

important to making us who we are as a person. If we change our central value commitments, or change from being a kind person to a cruel person, then we are inclined to say that we have become someone different (Heiphetz, Strohminger, and Young 2016).

These same traits and characteristics, openly displayed and acted upon, also define who we are in the eyes of others (Heiphetz, Strohminger, and Young 2016; Strohminger and Nichols 2014). The concept of identity describes both the first person sense of self, and the way one is seen by others. It is the intersections of how we see ourselves, how we see others, and how others perceive us that provides scope for attachment. These intersections allow us to place ourselves within groups and categories and so provide us with a sense of loyalty and belonging.

A sense of belonging need not relate to a particular place or time, or to a specific and tangible group. Belonging can also refer in a more abstract sense to the sorts of people one sees oneself as identifying with because of a shared set of values, practices, histories, or circumstances. When self-identity is in harmony with social-identity, then the conditions are in place for a sense of belonging to exist. When self-identity is at odds with social-identity, then relationships become difficult to cultivate, we may be excluded from a group we desire to be part of, and loneliness and alienation may result.

The *moderate* nuclear position requires not only lying to one's enemies in order to preserve the sense of uncertainty, but it also requires lying to one's friends, allies, and fellow citizens. In order to ensure the success of the policy they endorse, the agent must pretend to endorse a different policy. What is more, they must carry out this

deception in a sustained manner, potentially over many years, and must do so convincingly. If the political leader does not convincingly act-out the role of a *hawk*, if they are not an effective liar, then the policy of nuclear deterrence will fail (or at least be undermined). In performing the role of the *hawk*, a moderate political leader will attract the approbation of genuine *hawks*, and will be distanced from *unilateralists* and those who share their more moderate views. At the same time, their endorsement of a position they in-fact reject will grant legitimacy to that policy, and give comfort to those whose views they oppose.

In other words, the moderate political leader will be forced to live an inauthentic moral life, alienated from their true beliefs and given a social identity which differs from their self-identity. At the same time, the act of publicly endorsing nuclear deterrence while secretly not believing in nuclear use, forces them into a scenario evocative of dirty-hands cases, where an actor is forced into a moral bind by incompatible values. The structural requirements of maintaining the uncertainty demanded by nuclear deterrence requires that a politician sacrifice democratic requirements for openness, public consent, and accountability for security, and that they do so by engaging in deception and secrecy. Quite aside from the potential to undermine public accountability, the incompatibility of maintaining a credible stance on nuclear deterrence and acting openly will carry an unpleasant phenomenological content. The political leader will be unable to practice the virtues of honesty and integrity without betraying the interests of citizens, and regardless of whether they act rightly from an impartial or all-things-considered perspective, it is hard to imagine how a leader who is committed to democratic values will escape this predicament untainted and untroubled by the act of mass deception.

Now, we might think that a good political leader ought to have the mental fortitude to overcome these emotional trials. William Galston argues that the ideal political leader will have the virtue of toughness, described as the mean between squeamishness and callousness, wishfulness and cynicism, and maintaining moral purity and being coldly calculating. To act rightly, and to perform well in their role, the politician must be tough enough to act in circumstances where all the choices appear to carry some element of wrongness, without at the same time being eager to do so (Galston, 1991, p. 176). Reasserting the realist argument that these sort of choices are an inescapable fact of political life, Galston argues that they create a tension between a politician's moral self-regard and the responsibilities to others that arise out of their role. Being tough ameliorates this tension, but does not eradicate it. Cultivating the virtue of toughness requires maintaining interpersonal distance in the political sphere, avoiding intimacy and friendship. Instead, the politician ought to seek these things outside of politics (Ibid, 181–2).

One problem with this is that it appears to require of the politician that they seek friendship outside of the sphere where they express their most deeply held convictions and where they live the bulk of their lives. It demands that politicians not form friendships with those who are most like them and with whom they spend most time. Quite aside from the fact that the risks associated with deterrence policy require deceiving both political and non-political friends, the requirement for a general rule against forming political friendships is both unrealistic and undesirable.¹³

13 The difficulty in separating personal and professional morality and in locating the boundaries between these spheres, together with the alienating effect of doing so are briefly discussed by Williams in 'Professional morality and its dispositions' (2010, 197).

One does not avoid the unpleasant and thus undesirable consequences of having to sometimes deceive friends by avoiding having friends altogether.

In any case, if it is true that nuclear deterrence policy requires trading off some democratic values for others, then the virtue of toughness will not help us as much as it might in other cases. This is because, whilst politicians must be tough in order to gain and retain power in order to act on behalf of their constituents and their party, Galston also argues that they have an overriding duty not to act in ways that ‘betray core democratic norms, [or] undermine basic institutions’ (Ibid 185). The drive to obtain power is directed at the good, as a result, it must not be sought or used in ways that undermine the values the politician seeks to advance. Nor is the purpose of the virtue to resist the discomfort of having one’s moral identity threatened, for he also argues that the politician ought not act in ways that erode their long-term personal integrity. In the deterrence case, the agent’s sense of their moral self will be strained by their public endorsement of a policy they internally reject.

In ordinary life, one will often find agents unreflectively holding contradictory value attachments or dispositions without suffering any strain on their sense of moral identity and integrity. However, as Hampshire argues, when values come into conflict the agent’s attention becomes drawn to them and tensions become foregrounded in the agent’s psyche.¹⁴ It is the unpleasant mental states associated with internal conflict, uncertainty, and division that are an inherent feature of moral

14 Stuart Hampshire, “Public and Private Morality,” in *Public and Private Morality*, ed. Stuart Hampshire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 25–27.

dilemmas, and they help describe the burden resting upon the agent in dirty-hands cases. This point is particularly salient in the case of an ideal democratic leader holding *moderate* deterrence views for two reasons. The first is because it is the nature of political thought and action that it exerts a stronger demand for reason-giving, thus making it more likely that the agent will consider her position and discover tensions between values.¹⁵ The second reason is that the values we have associated with the ideal democratic leader are forced into tension in this case: in order to preserve the conditions necessary for democratic transparency and accountability, the agent must engage in secrecy and deception. If an agent found it easy to balance, trade-off, and prioritise their competing values then we would have cause to worry that they were perhaps the sort of leader who not fully aware of the moral costs of deceiving others. The ‘dirt’ in dirty hands cases is not merely considered an abstract moral remainder leaving a stain on an agent’s character, it is also cause for the agent to feel regret or remorse at having to have chosen the lesser of two evils, but an evil nevertheless.¹⁶ As in dirty hands cases, so, we argue, this psychological remainder is likely to be present in the political leader endorsing the *moderate* deterrence position. If this is the phenomenological content of deciding how to proceed, maintaining a lasting deception, and then living with having done so that constitutes creates the burden borne by the ideal *moderate* democratic leader.

15 c.f. *ibid.*, 28.

16 c.f. Stephen de Wijze, “Tragic-Remorse - the Anguish of Dirty Hands,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 7, no. 5 (2005): 453–71.

V

Nuclear *weapons* are physical capabilities that can be seen, counted, and their destructive power estimated. Nuclear *deterrence* on the other hand is intrinsically intangible and performative – it can be judged only by what a certain actor says or does. This disconnect forms a fascinating, yet often overlooked, aspect of nuclear politics – the fact that it is possible that the leader of a nuclear armed state secretly abhor the use of nuclear weapons but publicly support the notion of nuclear deterrence. Indeed, for nuclear weapons to have any deterrent value, the leader of a nuclear-armed state must convince both those at home and particularly abroad that they would ultimately “push the nuclear button” *in extremis*. These dynamics apply to the leaders of all nuclear-armed states, but appear particularly acute for the UK, given its reliance upon a single submarine to fulfil deterrence requirements and the concomitant need for a letter of last resort.

As we have shown, a feature of a plausible policy position, which many leaders and citizens may wish to endorse, cannot be chosen and deliberated upon, and this problem does not seem democratically resolvable. What principles ought to inform deliberation and govern the actions of citizens in such circumstances?

In cases where leaders profess, as Theresa May did, to be *hawks*, citizens¹⁷ ought to be aware that they are operating under conditions of political uncertainty. This uncertainty effects how citizens should give their support and their votes to candidates, and it effects how they should act when making moral judgements and

¹⁷ By citizens we mean to include those acting in private capacities as well as those in public roles, such as fellow representatives, journalists, community leaders and so forth.

levelling public criticism. Because individuals are implicated in the decisions taken by those they give support to, they ought to consider the potential harmful consequences in doing so. If a voter presumes that their representative is a *moderate* when in fact they are a *hawk* then they risk being partly responsible for enormous loss of innocent life. It may be that the chances of this risk being born out are extremely low, but, at the same time, the bad consequences are so potentially great that a citizen ought to operate in a risk averse way. When casting their vote or otherwise supporting a candidate, they should assume the worst of a politician and offer support accordingly. Citizens should not vote for an indeterminate position unless they are prepared to endorse the worst case scenario. They should assume that the stated position of a political leader who endorses the virtues of nuclear deterrence is whichever of 'willing to use' or 'unwilling to use' the citizen least favours. However, when it comes to offering public criticism, citizens should acknowledge that leaders can hold the view that nuclear deterrence is necessary but the use of nuclear weapons is wrong. Therefore, in criticising a leader who professes to be a *hawk* as if they were a *hawk*, a citizen risks damning them for a view they do not hold. Therefore, criticism of a leader who claims willingness to use nuclear weapons on the basis of judgements about the wrongness of this use may be unfair. Because of this, and taking account of the potential alienating effects a leader may face as a result, citizens should restrain themselves from overly forceful criticism on the basis of a leader's stated policy position. They should assume, for the purpose of moral evaluation, that the leader truly endorses a 'best case scenario'.

Although it may be possible to make judgements about the likelihood that a politician sincerely believes in *hawkish* policy based on their public persona and

support for other policies (for example, their views on nationalism, punishment, justice and so forth), it nevertheless remains impossible to be sure. Even the most *hawkish* leader, one who pursues policies of collective punishment in other regards, may balk at authorising killing of innocents on the potential scale offered by strategic nuclear weapons, and it may also be that a *moderate* leader is simply exceptionally skilled at performing the role of a *hawk*. Thus, although it may be tempting to offer public criticism on the basis of what we can infer from a leader's broader professed ideological commitments and behaviour, the uncertainty present ought to nevertheless move us temper that criticism. How much we temper it may reasonably depend upon other facts, but the potential burden born by a *moderate* leader gives us cause to engage in some degree of restraint.

One worry about broad public acceptance of these principles might be that they encourage an erosion of trust in politics. Democratic political systems have procedures in place to maintain transparency and accountability, but they nevertheless require a degree of trust that politicians are sincere and will keep their promises. This is what Patti Lenard refers to as the vertical trust between voters and representatives (Lenard 2015, 353). If politicians cannot be trusted, then opportunities for collective and cooperative decision-making through political means become limited. In order for society to function decently there has to be a general expectation that others will honour the social contract. However, not only have we argued that procedures to ensure transparency and accountability are impossible in nuclear weapons policy-making, particularly in the British case, but that citizens may be required to act on the assumption that their representatives are deceiving them. A potential consequence of this is that it could lead to a more general acceptance of

political deception and a greater degree of cynicism and suspicion. Whilst all of this may be true, there seems no more satisfactory way to resolve the problems we have identified. Democrats may simply have to accept that politicians engaged in public reasoning can, especially in the case of nuclear weapons policy, be forced to offer insincere reasons whilst at the same time having their true beliefs excluded by necessity from public deliberation.

Whether Mrs May – and many before her - truly believes what she said about UK nuclear policy will therefore necessarily remain the source of contention, and hopefully we will never get the chance to find out. But it would seem a prudent consideration for future UK nuclear debates, reviews and perhaps even party policy for the next general election to consider political and philosophical nature of nuclear policy as well as hard facts of systems, weapons and doctrine. It may well be that a closer consideration of these dynamics will reignite the debate about the wisdom and efficacy of particularly nuclear systems and posture, or of retaining a nuclear deterrent at all.

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