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Viewpoint: The Dead Cockroach Maneuver

Preparedness never caused a war, and unpreparedness never prevented one. The Soviets may take our lack of commitment as an invitation.

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During the Great Depression, there was a California congresswoman named Florence Prag Kahn, a tough and principled lady. Had she not been so principled, she would have appointed me to West Point. Mrs. Kahn, disdaining the then popular congressional practice of handing out service academy appointments as political favors, held complete examinations. The winner got the appointment. Having won, I was briefly the Kahn nominee, until someone called attention to the fact that an eighteen-year-old could not independently establish legal residence in San Francisco. Mrs. Kahn, true to her principles, regretfully disqualified me.

The purpose in bringing up her name, however, is to recall something she once said: "Preparedness never caused a war, and unpreparedness never prevented one." How much more sense that simple statement makes than the incantations of the various frenzied peace movements. Mrs. Kahn was speaking in the depression-ridden thirties when political sentiment, then as now, was for social spending, not defense. Sure enough, December 7, 1941, found us unprepared at war.

Nothing is nastier to contemplate than the use of nuclear weapons. If there were some way to disinvent the things, a majority of the world's population would doubtless celebrate despite the fact that American nuclear weapons have served long and honorably as the guarantors of Western European security. Those weapons, back in the days of United States nuclear monopoly, made the Berlin Airlift possible. Once the monopoly was lost, American nuclear superiority went on to keep the Cold War just that and to make possible John Kennedy's calling of Khrushchev's hand in Cuba. All in all, these monstrous devices, while admittedly of no help to Hungary, Poland, or Afghanistan, have given the Western world a pretty good thirty-five years. Unhappily looking ahead does not make for a pleasant viewing as looking back.

When President Reagan showed satellite pictures of Soviet military activities, it was doubtless over the objections of at least some intelligence officials, intelligence specialists share a certain trait with supply people: They like to keep things on the shelf. Anyway, we can be certain the pictures the President showed were by no means the most revealing ones. What the President was saying, if only the freeze-now crowd would stop chanting for moment and listen, is that the United States is losing the edge it has had since World War II. Perhaps, as the President suggested, space defense may one day make ballistic missiles vulnerable, but that concept, if feasible, is still years from realization, and in any case will not be a way of disinventing nukes. It will just encourage nonballistic delivery systems.

We have reached our present perilous state through a long series of miscalculations, the worst one being the concept of Mutual Assured Destruction — MAD. If both sides had the capacity to wreak wholesale destruction on the other, went this bit of reasoning, then both would be deterred. Thus comforted, we essentially froze our strategic weaponry and went on to other matters. Meanwhile, the Soviets took to heart the lesson they learned in Cuba and began enlarging, and diversifying, their nuclear weapon systems. In the curious world of the MAD theoreticians, this Soviet buildup was not alarming, but, rather, a welcome development. The MAD doctrine, after all, depended on a mutual, presumably equal, capacity to destroy.

Somehow or other, the Soviets never got the word. Instead, they seem intent on developing a clear and unmistakable advantage, one that puts our land-based missiles at risk. Now, after all those comfortable years when nuclear war was unthinkable, given our retaliatory capability, the future begins to look grim. Even if there were a national consensus on the need to redress the strategic balance, there would still be uncertain years ahead, for if the USSR reaches a point where it can knock out a majority of our Minutemen, the President would have left the submarine-launched missiles whose accuracy restricts them to area targets, and the surviving B-52s: city-busting, or old and vulnerable bombers. Not much of a choice. Not even, in fact, a particularly credible choice for a President who has lost his accurate missiles, but whose cities are still untouched and who is, at the same time, faced with an opponent who can retaliate.

The overriding problem with nuclear war is that it does not bear thinking about. Since no one has ever fought such a war — Hiroshima and Nagasaki were too one-sided to count — there is not real basis for rational thinking about it. If we are to believe published Russian military literature, the Soviets are preparing to fight, and survive, a nuclear conflict, although perhaps this is only propaganda. After all public opinion being an illusory force in the USSR, the generals can say what they wish without regard to any outcry that might follow.

Whether or not the Soviets are serious about fighting and winning a nuclear war, one thing is certain: Unquestioned Soviet superiority in nuclear weaponry, together with the already conventional superiority they enjoy, would give the Russians an excellent, perhaps irresistible, opportunity to throw their weight around in non-Communist Europe. It is hard to see how countries that have taken shelter for thirty-five years under the United States nuclear umbrella could withstand Soviet pressures if that umbrella no longer existed.

The Scowcroft Commission has made this point in its report to President Reagan. This report, by its reasonableness and calm logic, should stand as one of the most significant documents on strategic weaponry yet produced. The members of General Scowcroft's commission, eminent, qualified on the subject, and of disparate political conviction, agree on the need for 100 MXs as evidence of this country's continued will, and ability, to respond if necessary. The MX would be supplanted in due course by single-warhead mobile missiles, thus severely complicating the Soviet task of attacking land-based ICBMs. Behind all this is an intention to stabilize the production of nuclear arms.

Like Congresswoman Kahn's simple logic of long ago, the commission members think preparedness, not the dead cockroach maneuver, is the way to prevent war. — End