

**Nuclear Weapons  
and the  
Future of Humanity**

*The Fundamental Questions*

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**ROWMAN & ALLANHELD**  
**PUBLISHERS**

**ROWMAN & ALLANHELD**

Published in the United States of America in 1986  
by Rowman & Allanheld, Publishers  
(a division of Littlefield, Adams & Company)  
81 Adams Drive, Totowa, New Jersey 07512

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**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**  
Main entry under title:

Nuclear weapons and the future of humanity.

(Philosophy and society series)

Includes bibliographies and indexes.

1. Nuclear weapons—Moral and ethical aspects—  
Addresses, essays, lectures.
2. Nuclear warfare—  
Moral and ethical aspects—Addresses, essays, lectures.
3. Antinuclear movement—Addresses, essays, lectures.
4. World politics—1975-1985—Addresses, essays,  
lectures. I. Cohen, Avner, 1951- II. Lee,  
Steven. III. Series.

U264.N82 1986 172'.24 84-18362

ISBN 0-8476-7257-3

ISBN 0-8476-7258-1 (pbk.)

86 87 / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America



## 9 CREDIBILITY AND BLUFF

John Hare

This essay will look at the suggestion that nuclear deterrence works by bluff; it will examine the connections between bluff and credibility; and it will conclude with a discussion of the difference it makes to the moral assessment of deterrence whether it works by bluff or not.<sup>1</sup>

A bluff is a threat not accompanied by the conditional intention to carry out the threat if the threat fails.<sup>2</sup> It may be of two types: either accompanied by the intention not to carry out the threat, or not accompanied by a conditional intention one way or the other. I may threaten my son that if he spills the milk one more time, he will be sent to his room, and I may intend to send him to his room if he spills his milk; that is not a bluff. But I may also have resigned myself to tolerating spilt milk again without punishing him, or I may not yet have made up my mind whether to punish him. In both these last two cases I hope that merely issuing the threat will be sufficient to deter him.<sup>3</sup> In the nuclear case, we will consider the claim that deterrence works by bluff of the second type. The first type is unlikely here; probably those who issue the nuclear threats have at least left open the decision about nuclear use. The second type of bluff requires only that they have not yet decided whether they would indeed carry out their threats.

It is true that the nuclear powers try to indicate periodically that they do have the intention to carry out their nuclear threats. For example, Khrushchev declared during the Cuban Missile Crisis that the United States was pushing mankind "to the abyss of a world missile-nuclear war" and that if any effort to stop Soviet ships were to be made, "we would be forced for our part to take the measures which we deem necessary and adequate in order to protect our rights. For this we have all that is necessary." Kennedy declared, "It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union." But these sorts of declarations, and international political rhetoric in general, have to be seen as instruments of policy. One can sometimes learn from a government's statements what it wants its intended audience to hear, although this is not straightforward. But one cannot often learn what the intentions of the government in fact are.

It may be argued that a strategy of bluff is possible only theoretically; that in practice those with the final decision must, when they come into office, think through the options and decide when they would authorize nuclear use. It is cer-

tainly hard to believe they would be able to make these decisions from scratch at the last moment, given the short time available for decision once nuclear use by either side has started. But there are three responses to this argument. First, from the historical record. The private presidential papers of those presidents of the United States in the nuclear age whose papers are now public reveal that not one of them had firmly made up his mind under what conditions to authorize massive retaliation. Eisenhower, for example, although pressed to make this decision several times, steadfastly refused. Kennedy, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, was constantly aware of the danger that nuclear weapons might be used, but does not appear to have decided under what conditions he would use them. His actions were motivated in part by the desire to *avoid* the necessity of making such a decision. One reason he decided against an air strike on Cuba was that if the Soviet Union answered by attacking Turkey, he would then have to decide whether he would order the use of nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup> It is reported of Carter that when Brzezinski brought him examples of scenarios for nuclear use, he refused to settle the question of which scenarios would lead him to authorize the use of the weapons.

The second response is that conditional intentions are rare in politics much before an action actually has to be taken. Members of Congress, for example, if they know an issue well and have voted on it several times before, may know in advance which way to vote the next time around. But if the issue is a new one, and especially if it is new and momentous, the politician will often leave the decision until the last possible moment.<sup>5</sup> This is partly because of a desire to leave options open and preserve flexibility; partly it is due to a recognition that the nature of the choice depends on the immediate political environment, and this can change radically in a short period of time. What a politician *will* often want to know in advance is what the options are, and what the arguments and evidence are in favor of each option. This is why Carter had his national security advisor prepare the scenarios for nuclear use.

It is hard to know what a conditional intention for an institution like a government amounts to.<sup>6</sup> It is hard enough to know this for an individual. For example, the announcement that the United States would leave UNESCO in a year was accompanied by signals that this result could be forestalled if certain conditions were met. It is difficult to say if the United States' government had in fact formed the conditional intention to leave. A year was more than enough time for changes both at UNESCO and in the U.S. government. These changes were not predictable enough to allow much firmness in a decision one year ahead. The point is that the declaration of the intention is an instrument of policy, designed to secure certain kinds of political change, whether the conditional intention that is "declared" is in fact present or not.

The third response is that the strategic doctrine of both superpowers, insofar as this is public, rules out launch-on-warning or launch-under-attack. Indeed, one of the arguments made by the Soviets against the installation of Pershing II missiles in West Germany was that this would force them to move towards these strategic options. It has been argued that neither side would in fact ride out an attack before deciding whether or how to respond; but this is nonetheless the present doctrine. The reason for the doctrine is to allow a decision to be made on the basis of sufficient evidence, and not to leave it to the computers. This suggests, although it does

not imply, that the decision has not already been firmly made under what conditions to launch a retaliatory response.

It may also be argued that nuclear bluff could not be credible. Certainly a strategy of bluff would not be adopted if it made it impossible to issue a credible deterrent threat. How, then, is the credibility of a threat to be measured? We can take the credibility of a deterrent military threat as dependent upon two variables—the relative military capabilities of the parties and the relative size of the stakes at issue between them.<sup>7</sup> If one country is to find the threat by another country credible, it must believe first that the second country has available the force it is threatening to use and, second, that this force might be judged by the second country appropriate to the value it attaches to the object at stake. The crisis over Hungary and the Cuban Missile Crisis provide interesting examples. In the case of Hungary, the Soviet Union faced the possible collapse of its inner ring of defenses just as the United States did in Cuba. The Soviet Union was as far in advance of the United States in local conventional capacity in Hungary as the United States was in advance of the Soviet Union in Cuba. It is significant that the United States did not threaten to use nuclear weapons against Soviet cities in the Hungarian crisis, although the administration was under pressure to do so, but it felt free to do so in the Cuban crisis. This difference is explicable in terms of the above analysis of credibility. A threat by the United States over Cuba was credible, whereas a threat over Hungary would not have been.

A distinction can be made between different levels of stakes. We can call “marginal” those stakes that pose the possibility of gains and losses but do not involve a hierarchical shift in the international system,<sup>8</sup> “landslide” those stakes that do not pose the danger of a hierarchical shift, and “survival” those stakes that threaten the very survival of a nation as a nation. Hungary and Cuba represented stakes in the intermediate or “landslide” range. Their importance was such that a defeat for the Soviet Union in the first case or for the United States in the second could have seriously disrupted the balance of power.

We might plot a graph with levels of force on the vertical axis and the size of stakes at issue on the horizontal. On the vertical axis the range would be from conventional force at the bottom, through chemical weapons, tactical and strategic nuclear weapons, to the entire arsenal of the superpowers at the top. On the horizontal axis, the range would be from marginal stakes, through landslide stakes, to survival stakes. A threat by the United States to use a certain level of force will be maximally credible relative to a certain size of stake. We might then plot a threat credibility curve (strictly, a cumulative probability distribution curve) that would probably be an S-shape: it would show a gradual rise as force was threatened in response to Soviet activity in Angola or Yemen, then a steep rise through attacks on members of NATO, especially if United States’ troops were involved, and it would flatten out at the top over attacks on Minutemen or on U.S. cities. The threat to use the entire arsenal is not likely to be maximally credible even for the highest stakes, because of the possible stake in preserving “intra-war” deterrence.

This analysis of credibility sheds light on the difference between a strategy of bluff and a strategy of “simple deceit.”<sup>9</sup> The pretense that there is an irrevocable commitment to retaliate, as with a “doomsday machine,” or that one has lost all control over the final outcome, is a strategy of simple deceit.<sup>10</sup> It will not be easy to secure credibility for threats issued on this strategy. The purpose of pretending to make an irrevocable commitment, or pretending to give up final control, would be

to enhance in the eyes of one's opponent the value one attributes to some object. But it will not be worth trying to do this for stakes such as national survival that it might be rational to *decide* to defend with maximum force. For the value of national survival is not enhanced in this way. But if our account of credibility is correct, any expression of an irrevocable commitment to defend with a level of force an object one would *not* have chosen to defend with that level of force is not likely to be believed. The opponent will be more likely to see through the "simple deceit" and suppose that one has retained control of the final decision while pretending to abandon it.

One policy implication of this analysis of credibility is that it is necessary to have available all the levels of force appropriate to the stakes for which one wants to be able to issue deterrent threats. This is not the place to try to analyze what these stakes are, but an argument can be made for parity at each level of force.<sup>11</sup> This would involve a country having available to it, or to its allies, the force at each level to counter the force available to its enemies. This is necessary if the country is to have the flexibility to make deterrent threats credible in relation to the whole range of stakes at issue with its opponents. If a country or an alliance does not have available to it, for example, conventional forces of sufficient size and scope to counter the conventional forces of its opponents, it will be forced either to escalate or to surrender in the face of a full-scale conventional attack.

The debate centers most often around the forces in Europe. it is a controversial question whether at the moment of NATO conventional forces do have parity. The conclusion of the specialists seems to be that there is some inferiority, but the overall conventional balance still makes military aggression unattractive.<sup>12</sup> This means, in effect, that the choice has been made not to put exclusive reliance on the threat of nuclear use. This is a change in emphasis from the interpretation of "extended deterrence" that minimized conventional forces in Europe during a time of western strategic superiority, and relied on the threat of immediate escalation. Moreover, a consensus is emerging that it would be desirable to rely less on the nuclear threat than NATO currently does, even though there is no consensus yet on how much more expensive it would be to rely on a conventional response to conventional attack, or on whether this additional expense is affordable.

The connection of our analysis of credibility with bluff is that neither of the two variables by which credibility is measured requires an intention to carry out the threat in the threatened circumstances.<sup>13</sup> Credibility, that is to say, may be independent of this sort of intention. Each side in a dispute measures the credibility of the other's threats by assessing the availability of the threatened force and the importance of the stake at issue to the other side. Deterrence can work as long as the judgment can be made that the threatener might choose to carry out the threat, since the force is available to him and it is appropriate to the size of the stake.

As stated earlier, there are two types of bluff. If an intention has been formed not to carry out the threat (the first type), this intention will in some cases be hard to keep invisible. The argument might be made that this kind of secrecy is possible in closed totalitarian societies, but not in open democracies. But the important case to consider for nuclear deterrence is the second type. Our analysis of credibility suggests that the absence of a visible conditional intention to carry out the threat does not significantly affect credibility. This may be clarified by a nonnuclear example. President Reagan has refused to rule out the use of U.S. military force in Nicaragua (leaving aside the question of covert activity). At the same time he has denied that

there is currently any intention to use such force. The explicit refusal to rule out force is an instrument of policy, posing an implicit threat to the Sandinista government of invasion under unspecified circumstances. An astute observer of the political scene in the United States could determine that the mood in Congress and in the Pentagon is highly averse to such force being used, under present circumstances. But the Sandinistas claim, nonetheless, to fear invasion. The point is that the administration's intentions in this matter are invisible. But the force is available for an invasion of Nicaragua, and the Sandinistas have no doubt tried to calculate how large a stake Nicaragua represents to the administration. After Grenada, in particular, there is a credible threat to use force against Nicaragua under certain conditions (perhaps a Nicaraguan invasion of Honduras). The relevance of Grenada is that a certain level of force was deemed appropriate by the current administration to a certain size of stake in the region. Because the level of force would have to be greater in Nicaragua, the stake would have to be higher, but it is not inconceivable that it could become high enough. The Sandinistas need to assess not so much whether there is now a conditional intention to carry out an extremely vague threat, but whether (if the situation changes in certain ways) the mood in Washington might change, and a decision might be taken to authorize the use of force. What this example shows is that the conditional intention about what to do given, for example, a Nicaraguan invasion of Honduras is either not present, or is at least successfully hidden. Some members of the government or the Congress may be convinced that a counterinvasion of Nicaragua would be disastrous. On the other hand, contingency plans for such a course of action may well have been drawn up. But the government itself can hardly be said to have a conditional intention for this case, or at least to have one that is at all perspicuous. Threats here rely for their credibility not on this sort of conditional intention, but on the Sandinistas' assessment of the force available and the size of the stake to the current U.S. government.

The nuclear case is similar in that no one intends to use the weapons under current circumstances. The question is whether there is now a conditional intention to use them under any foreseeable circumstances. If a president and his advisors wanted to preserve deterrence and had decided not to use nuclear weapons under any circumstances, they would have to hide this from Congress and the American people as well as from the Soviet Union. But the case is different if there is no conditional intention one way or the other. Congress, the American people, and the Soviet Union will in any case be uncertain about the government's declarations of intention in this matter. Such declarations are known to be a necessary part of nuclear deterrence whether or not they are accompanied by the intentions they "declare." But this recognition does not destroy the effectiveness of deterrence. What makes the deterrent work is the residual uncertainty created by the mere existence of the weapons, coupled with the possibility that the stake might be high enough for a decision to be taken to use them.

How does this affect the moral assessment of deterrence? This analysis forestalls one form of attack.<sup>14</sup> Suppose it is assumed that no nuclear use can be morally justified (a large assumption, which will not be defended or attacked in this essay). Suppose it is also granted that whatever is wrong to do is also wrong to intend to do. Suppose, finally, it is agreed that a successful nuclear deterrence policy requires the intention to use the nuclear weapons under certain conditions (contrary to the argument of this essay). An argument can be made from these three premises that nuclear deterrence cannot be morally justified. But if we are correct, even if the

first two premises are granted, the third can be denied. The possession of nuclear weapons, the issuing of implicit and explicit threats, and the training of personnel to "man" the deterrent may all be parts of the implementation of a strategy of bluff; they do not need to involve any conditional intention to use weapons.

There are at least three objections to this response. The first has been referred to elsewhere as "the objection from the rank and file."<sup>15</sup> Suppose it is true that the government of the United States has not formed a conditional intention to bomb Soviet cities, for example, in retaliation for an attack on American cities. Nonetheless, thousands of men and women in the armed forces have to be prepared to carry out the orders that would result in an attack on Soviet cities if the United States were engaged in the implementation of a strategy of use and not of bluff.<sup>16</sup> Is it not true that those "manning" the deterrent must have formed a conditional intention to fire the missiles, if so ordered? If so, a strategy of bluff may release the top military commanders from immoral intentions (granting that the intention to retaliate is immoral), while at the same time requiring these immoral intentions of the rank and file. For if it is immoral to intend massive retaliation, it is surely immoral to intend to carry it out if so ordered.

I know of no completely satisfactory rejoinder to this objection (to this response to this attack on deterrence). A partial rejoinder is that most of those "manning" the deterrent will not be in a position to know whether in obeying orders, through all the stages of alert, they are implementing a strategy of threat or of actual use. It would be morally preferable if the maker of the threat could be known to be the one who would eventually have to carry it out. Developments in communications technology have made this increasingly possible by allowing the centralization of command and control mechanisms. If this were possible, a satisfactory rejoinder would be available. Each of the innumerable antecedent decisions necessary for the use of the weapon could be taken in good faith by a member of the armed forces who supported a policy of threat, but not of use. But if there must be individuals (like the crew of the *Enola Gay*) who both know they are taking the last and irreversible step and who are not originators of the policy, then they are indeed being asked, for the sake of effective deterrence, to form the intention to obey immoral orders (again granting that these orders are immoral).<sup>17</sup> This is one moral cost of nuclear deterrence, even if deterrence is explained in terms of a strategy of bluff.

There are other such costs. The second objection is that the threat of nuclear warfare is immoral in itself, whether or not it is accompanied by the conditional intention to use the weapons. Many reasons could be given in support of this view, but I will mention only four. The point is that nuclear deterrence could still be deeply objectionable even if it is analyzed as a strategy of bluff.<sup>18</sup> First, there is the constant possibility that the threat may be carried out by miscalculation, accident, or madness. Second, the longer we rely on the deterrent, the more we become used to the idea of the destruction we are threatening against others and in the end against ourselves; we become dangerously less ready to move decisively toward arms control and disarmament. Third, the whole world has to live under the shadow of the possible destruction of civilization as we know it. Fourth, the maintenance of a credible deterrent threat requires diverting essential resources from meeting basic human needs.<sup>19</sup>

The third objection is that even if the nuclear threat is not necessarily accompanied by a conditional intention to use the weapons, the threat to use them still makes their use more likely.<sup>20</sup> But if it is wrong to do something, it is also wrong to make it



more probable that one will do it. If it is wrong to intend to do something, then it is wrong to make it more likely that one will form the intention to do it. The development of the first atom bomb is instructive here. When Einstein and others first pressed for it, they feared that the Germans would develop the bomb first. But in the period from 1942 to 1945, it seems to have become accepted by almost everyone in a position of authority that the bomb would actually be used by the Allies if it were developed in time. Thus the work at Los Alamos went on at full speed even after the discovery that the Germans had not, in fact, been nearly as close as had been assumed. World War II saw the progression from Guernica to Warsaw and Rotterdam, Hamburg and Dresden, Tokyo, and then Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Moral sensibilities became progressively blunted as the war progressed and the technology developed.

There is no proof that new weapons will inevitably be used, only the fact that new weapons have usually been used sooner or later. In addition to the history of the first atom bomb (which is perhaps a bad example because the United States was engaged in a world war), there is the fear that the arms race is producing weapons that themselves make it much harder to keep deterrence stable (because they put a premium on preemptive use). There is also the fear that deterrence leads to the proliferation of nuclear weapons into less reliable hands. In any case, the assessment that nuclear states are in the end likely to use the weapons if they are available changes the moral calculation about deterrence. For if the assessment is that the system of mutual deterrence is likely to break down anyway, it is rational to risk more radical measures to dismantle the system before this happens. If the assessment is that deterrence has a good chance of remaining stable for the foreseeable future, this dismantling is less urgent.

It is not the purpose of this essay to discuss the empirical question of which of these two assessments is more likely to be right. But it is important to see that the moral assessment of deterrence depends (among other things) on how likely deterrence is to remain stable. This in turn depends on particular policies of particular governments. Deterrence therefore has to be evaluated morally in the light of its current political context. By the nature of politics, no exact possibilities can be attached here, but it can be argued that certain policies move deterrence toward stability and others move it toward breakdown. Emphasizing invulnerability, deemphasizing first-strike capability, and pushing for a comprehensive test ban treaty are policies likely to decrease the chances that anyone will use nuclear weapons. The connection with credibility is that they tend to increase the size of stake required for a credible nuclear threat in the eyes of one's opponents. On the other hand, emphasizing worst-case scenarios in procurement decisions, deploying systems with the rationale of prevailing in a nuclear war, and constantly expanding the areas of "vital national interest" are policies that tend to increase the chances of breakdown. They tend to decrease the size of stake required for a credible nuclear threat by one's own side. Lists like these tend to sound partisan, and the arguments for these conclusions have not been given. But such lists do illustrate one reason why our moral feelings about deterrence tend to be ambiguous. Unless we take the position that deterrence is immoral if there is any risk of breakdown at all (or that it is moral whatever the chances of breakdown), our moral assessment will vary with the continual and ambiguous shifts in government policy.

Because the policies just referred to need involve only capabilities and stakes, they can shift without requiring changes in conditional intention about nuclear use.

This suggests that conditional intentions may be relatively unimportant not only for credibility, but for the moral assessment of deterrence as well.

### NOTES

1. Some of the argument will be taken from J.E. Hare and Carey B. Joynt, *Ethics and International Affairs* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1982), esp. pp. 101–24.
2. A conditional intention is an intention to do something given certain conditions, e.g., the failure of a threat.
3. See note 13. Barrie Paskins and Michael Dockrill, *The Ethics of War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), pp. 236–44, claim that “bluff” cannot be used for the situation where no intention has yet been formed to carry out the threat or not to carry it out. This claim does not seem to be consistent with ordinary usage, in poker, for example, or with the dictionaries. But even if they are right about the word, the case of threatening without yet having formed a conditional intention whether or not to carry out the threat will be important for the analysis of deterrence.
4. Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days* (NY: W.W. Norton, 1969), p. 96.
5. It is dangerous to generalize in this way about politicians. Some are notorious for making up their minds in advance about what they are going to do and sticking to it, come what may.
6. We can say at least that a government can be responsible for its actions and hence can act intentionally. But the “intentions” here may not be independent of the actions. Thus, a government can issue a threat intentionally, but the intention here is the intention to issue the threat, not the intention to carry it out if the threat fails.
7. Carey B. Joynt, “The Anatomy of Crises,” *The Year Book of World Affairs*, vol. 28 (London, 1974), pp. 15–22; and Hare and Joynt, *Ethics and International Affairs*, pp. 118–20.
8. For the concept of a hierarchical ranking, see G. Schwarzenberger, *Power Politics* (London: Stevens, 1951), chaps. 6 and 7.
9. “Simple deceit” is J.S. Maxwell’s term. See Paskins and Dockrill, *The Ethics of War*, p. 211.
10. One of T.C. Schelling’s suggestions was to delegate decisions about nuclear use to junior officers so as to increase the uncertainty faced by one’s opponent. See his *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 261ff.
11. This essay attempts no precision about how the continuum of force should be split up into different levels.
12. *The Military Balance, 1982–1983* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1983).
13. If an intention is apparent, it may be relevant to credibility. This is probably the case with the child spilling the milk, which is why bluff is not encouraged in child-raising manuals. The child will know his parent well enough to know when the threat is a bluff, and even which type of bluff it is. But the argument of this chapter is that visible intentions are not necessary for credibility of military deterrent threats, even though governments have to “display” their intentions and “demonstrate” their resolve.

14. Gregory Kavka analyzes this form attack in "Some Paradoxes of Deterrence," *The Journal of Philosophy* 75, no. 6 (June 1978): 285-302. David Hoekema responds in "Intentions, Threats, and Nuclear Deterrence" in *The Applied Turn in Contemporary Philosophy, Bowling Green Studies in Applied Philosophy*, vol. 5(1983), ed. Michael Bradie et al. Because the Roman Catholic bishops did not consider the connection of deterrence and bluff in their pastoral letter, their conditional acceptance of deterrence is liable to this attack. See J.E. Hare, "Threats and Intentions" in *Evangelicals and the Bishops' Pastoral Letter* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publ., 1984).
15. Hare and Joynt, *Ethics and International Affairs*, pp. 110-12.
16. Michael Walzer says that deterrence requires "thousands of men trained in the techniques of mass destruction and drilled in instant obedience" in *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 272.
17. It may be argued that the American armed forces, like the West German, have manuals that include an explicit instruction that all commands be evaluated morally before they are carried out. But in practice this will not often be done, and the system of military training and discipline is designed to encourage that it not be done. It is probably unrealistic to expect any widespread independence of mind in the matter of obedience to orders in an effective military force.
18. Any thoughtful proponent of deterrence is likely to have replies to each one. For instance, the danger of the use of nuclear weapons is decreased if both parties possess them, given that the only use so far has been against a nonnuclear power; popular commitment to arms controls seems to go in cycles, being higher now than it was five years ago; the shadow of the destruction of civilization is real, but so is the shadow of the destruction of the freedoms that are the fruits of that civilization; and an effective conventional deterrent, e.g., for Western Europe, would be more expensive than the present nuclear deterrent. The point is that none of these arguments is affected by whether or not deterrence is correctly analyzed in terms of bluff.
19. There are many such lists: e.g., Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), pp. 124-26.
20. This is David Hoekema's point in "Intentions, Threats, and Nuclear Deterrence."