

Transcending the Academic Haze, or How I Learned to Learn about the Bomb

by

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In the fall of 1978, I was an undergraduate international relations major, a junior, facing “cognitive dissonance,” a fancy academic term I learned sometime in the first two years of college that obfuscates a simple concept: “A condition of conflict or anxiety resulting from inconsistency between one’s beliefs and one’s actions.”¹ In this case, it was less my actions than what I was being taught.

After two years of international relations courses, I had come to learn that: the United States had no strategic objectives worth pursuing or supporting; “power” was no longer relevant in international politics; the way to understand international politics was to examine small to tiny questions using statistical methods call “politometrics” that, in the words of former President Clinton’s CIA Director Jim Woolsey, exhibited “an instinct for the capillaries;”² and that the real threats to American security were American imperialism, the “imposition” of Western values on countries with other (and supposedly superior) cultures, and that thinking clearly, carefully[,] and dispassionately about strategic issues, and especially about how to avoid nuclear war, would surely bring on human disaster or even extinction.

To understand the extent of my “dissonance,” it might be helpful to recall what had been going on since the late 1960s. American had just emerged from the defeat of Vietnam, Soviet clint regimes were being set up in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. And while Thailand was threatened (looked like dominoes to me), I was assured by professors these were genuine people’s revolutions. Soviet and Cuban

inspired “wars of national liberation” were threatening and toppling regimes in Africa and Central America. The Soviet nuclear arms buildup, supposedly stalled through SALT I treaties, was continuing at breakneck speed. The “Prague Spring” was crushed brutally by Soviet armies and our NATO allies were feeling threatened increasingly by the massive buildup of Soviet and Warsaw Pact conventional and nuclear forces in Eastern Europe. Prominent American congressmen were calling for a substantial retreat of American power from Europe while Soviet Propagandists were instructing us that it was only a matter of time before all of Europe was “Finlandized.” And we were months away from the twin shocks of the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Such was the state of the IR field, the world, and my mind when I stumbled that fall semester morning into a lecture course entitled: “IR 484: Military Strategy and Arms Control.” What happened there was close to magic. Concepts with fancy buzzwords attached were turned into plain English and rendered understandable, and sometimes laughable! To my amazement, the lecture topics bore more than a passing resemblance to what was actually happening in the world and being reported in the newspapers. Indeed, the reading of newspapers and no-academic professional literature was encouraged along with a rigorous understanding of the scholarly canon on strategy, the nature of international relations, and current strategic problems. Books that were out of print and written decades (maybe thousands of years) ago were preferred over this year’s marginal Ph.D. dissertation turned “scholarly work.” We were encouraged, nay required, to see and understand the world as it is before theorizing what it might be. In sum, imagine the relief I felt in finding a classroom where the Professor and I seemed to be living on the same planet.

Walking into that classroom changed my life forever. I never looked back. A law school bound IR major marking time through his undergraduate studies dropped the idea of the law and began reading not just IR theory, but history, geography, science, and political philosophy to better understand the world around him. I learned that, far from causing mankind’s destruction, it was essential that we study and understand every aspect of the most powerful force on earth,

atomic weapons, if only to ensure that we would never be driven to their use. I learned that strategy and politics are the same. They are about real people in the real world, and that the consequences of strategic mistakes can be enormous, even fatal. And because every strategist must take responsibility for his advice and counsel, the best of the art were both scholar and practitioner. I was not the first student to experience this epiphany in Professor William R. Van Cleave's classroom, nor was I the last. For generations of students, Bill Van Cleave has embodied the qualities of the rigorous scholar and consummate, professional strategist. He set the gold standard for dozens of his students, colleagues, and fellow statesmen.

As his academic career has transitioned from full-time Professor and Department Chair to Professor, *emeritus*, of the Defense and Strategic Studies program (started at the University of Southern California and continued at Missouri State University), it is fitting that his students (and colleagues) honor him with a *festschrift*. It is my humble privilege to offer this [essay]. I hope that through this essay and the many following in this volume, you will see the profound impact this learned man has had on me, countless other students, and the fashioning and conduct of American national security policy.

From a Window of Vulnerability to Peace Through Strength

In a career spanning four decades, Dr. William R. Van Cleave has played a vital and consistent role in addressing the complex, difficult, and dangerous threats faced by the United States, particularly the threats posed by the Cold War with the Soviet Union, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to countries that are hostile to the United States and the basic values of this nation – an enduring faith in democracy and human freedom. Indeed, Dr. Van Cleave's contributions to U.S. national security cannot be exaggerated.

In an era in which the United States is generally recognized as the world's only superpower, it is easy to forget that thirty or forty years ago many Americans believed that the United States was a declining power and that communism would prevail. Some even believed that the country was not worth fighting for. Dr. Van Cleave

spent much of his career fighting such foolishness, providing timely warning to the American people about the serious threats the nation faced and offering sage advice about how to parry those threats.

Unlike many of his academic contemporaries who believed and, in some cases, still believe that the world is made up of “country As” and “country Bs” with no critical differences between them, Bill Van Cleave recognized that the problem facing the United States was not weapons of mass destruction *per se* but, rather, the proliferation of those weapons to hostile totalitarian and authoritarian regimes that trample on basic human rights and crush their people into poverty to support vast military establishments with the aim of waging offensive war for whatever type of ideological or religious fanaticism inspires their corrupt leadership. He never believed that such governments were the wave of the future. Such regimes had to be fought and, true to his U.S. Marine Corps heritage, Bill Van Cleave recognized that such regimes responded to military power, or the lack thereof, and that we needed to build the military establishment required to face those dangers and prevail.

In 2002, President George W. Bush promulgated a new national security strategy to deal with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to rogue states. Among the military options the President advocated were missile defense, counterforce capabilities, and the willingness, where necessary, to preempt devastating attacks upon the United States. The administration’s conclusion was that we faced a very uncertain world and that the core element of the new strategy required flexibility and adaptability to preserve our security. Similarly in 1974, Dr. Van Cleave called for a strategy of “Strategic Adaptability.” According to this strategy, he explained, our forces should be structured so that if deterrence failed, it would not necessarily fail completely and with the worst possible outcome. Dr. Van Cleave argued that no matter what we did we could not guarantee that deterrence would not fail. Therefore, a flexible strategy was necessary because it provided options and

hedge[d] against the inability to predict deterrence thresholds for a range of situations, promote[d] the

possibility of escalation control, and increase[d] the opportunities for war termination without major urban damage.³

An important component of the 2002 Bush administration's strategy was called the "New Triad." While it put the country in a badly needed new policy direction, its key elements had been advocated by Bill Van Cleave more than thirty years ago. Dr. Van Cleave maintained that we needed a strong military counterforce capability and missile defense because the combination of these factors maximized deterrence and provided the elements of a necessary response to the threat of hostile dictatorships armed with weapons of mass destruction. The 2001 Bush administration's Nuclear Posture Review recognized that we had to maintain a nuclear deterrence "second to none," a policy Bill Van Cleave recognized thirty years before and advocated constantly throughout his long career.

"The ABM Treaty is a relic of the past," President George Bush declared in June 2001. He continued: "The days of the Cold War have ended, and so much the Cold War mentality, as far as I'm concerned."⁴ Bill Van Cleave knew that the ABM Treaty was conceptually ill-conceived more than thirty years ago. He argued it was unwise to leave our country completely vulnerable to ballistic missile attack and to depend purely upon offensive deterrence, particularly the minimalist variant of deterrence preached by advocates of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). Having participated in the negotiation of the ABM Treaty, Dr. Van Cleave was one of the few experts with the courage and foresight to oppose its approval by the United States Senate. Even after the ABM Treaty was approved by the Senate, Dr. Van Cleave saw the need to move beyond it. Indeed, in a chapter of the Strategic Alternatives Team report written in 1979, Bill Van Cleave concluded that we needed to deploy the capability of "defending against damage from small attacks or accidental launches,"⁵ a policy which was precluded by the ABM Treaty, but which was subsequently embraced by a bipartisan majority in Congress.

More than thirty years after Dr. Van Cleave's brilliant testimony against the ABM Treaty and twenty-two years after he called for a

limited missile defense of the United States, Dr. Van Cleave was vindicated by President George Bush's courageous decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty and, in doing so, to secure the option to deploy a missile defense system capable of providing a highly effective defense of the United States, our friend, allies, and our forces abroad against limited missile threats. The President declared:

Today, I have given formal notice to Russia, in accordance with the treaty, that the United States of America is withdrawing from this almost 30 year old treaty. I have concluded the ABM Treaty hinders our government's ability to develop ways to protect our people from future terrorist or rogue state missile attacks.⁶

Moreover, a year later, President Bush announced the initial deployment of a missile defense system, a vital step long advocated by Bill Van Cleave. That defense is coming into existence as we speak.

For forty years, Bill Van Cleave worked tirelessly to maximize the United States' ability to counter WMD threats through the deployment of effective deterrence and counterforce capabilities. Writing in the 1979 Strategic Alternative Team report, he called for the creation and modernization of forces capable

to execute a wide range of options in response to potential actions by an enemy, including a capability for precise attacks on both soft and hard targets, while at the same time minimizing collateral damage.⁷

The need for such capabilities was recognized gradually, at least to some degree, by nearly all subsequent U.S. administrations. As a consequence, they moved away increasingly from the MAD concept of the ABM Treaty era toward the position that Bill Van Cleave championed. It was fully recognized during the Bush administration's Nuclear Posture Review, which concluded that we require appropriate nuclear and improved conventional strike capabilities to expand the options available to the President to protect the American people. The combination of improved strike capabilities and active and passive

defenses maximized the chances that we could deter WMD threats successfully and minimize the consequences if deterrence failed.

Some twenty-five years before the Bush administration's Nuclear Posture Review highlighted the importance of credible nuclear capabilities to assure our allies, deter attack, dissuade competition in nuclear arms and, if deterrence failed, defend and defeat potential adversaries, Bill Van Cleave advocated the development of credible nuclear capabilities to deter attack on our NATO allies posed by the massive soviet threat that existed in that era. The threat then was the possibility of "theater wide [attack] against NATO nuclear and conventional forces to exploit the nuclear attack and rapidly seize NATO territory."⁸ MAD was not enough to deal with this threat. The United States, Dr. Van Cleave submitted, needed credible nuclear and conventional capabilities in order to deter, defend, and defeat potential adversaries if deterrence failed.

Bil Van Cleave played a key role on the "Team B" analytical exercise which was chartered by former President and the then-Director of Central Intelligence George H.W. Bush to take an independent look at the accuracy of U.S. intelligence estimates concerning Soviet strategic nuclear power. The resulting reports did a great deal to improve the quality of U.S. intelligence estimates. The Team B recognized that, as former Senator Malcolm Wallop wrote:

While the Soviet were beginning the biggest military buildup in history, the NIE's judged that they would not try to build as many missiles as we had. As the Soviets approached our number, the NIE's said they were unlikely to exceed it substantially. When they exceeded it substantially, the NIE's said they would not try for decisive superiority.⁹

The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence concluded that the Team B report, especially the report concerning technical intelligence questions, "provided some useful recommendations concerning the estimative process."¹⁰ Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, in a statement published with the report, noted that the claim of the Team B scholars

that the “Soviets intended to surpass the United States in strategic arms and are in the process of doing so, has gone from heresy to respectability if not orthodoxy.”¹¹ Again, Bill Van Cleave played a central role in Team B’s analytical production and subsequent policy impact.

Bill Van Cleave’s influence manifested itself also through his participation on the bipartisan Committee on the Present Danger during the 1970s, when there was growing concern about America’s failure to respond to the challenge posed by the massive Soviet nuclear buildup. Its numerous analytical reports altered perceptions of the growing Soviet nuclear threat inside the “Beltway” and beyond. The Committee’s documentation argued that the SALT negotiating process was flawed, and actually weakened the nation while not addressing the main challenges of the Soviet strategic nuclear buildup. The Committee alerted America to the “window of vulnerability” of U.S. strategic force and the need to take action to close it. In his role as a co-chairman of the Strategic Alternatives Team, Dr. Van Cleave organized the vital intellectual spade work for the defense policy of the Reagan administration that changed the thrust of American defense policy decisively and contributed both to the election of President Reagan and to the future direction of the Reagan administration’s national security policy. As Ronald Reagan’s senior defense advisor during the 1980 campaign, Dr. Van Cleave developed the concept of “quick fixes” to U.S. strategic vulnerabilities that was, at least to some degree, pursued by the Reagan administration. The Reagan administration’s policy approach and defense buildup hastened the demise of the “evil empire” and brought freedom to hundreds of millions of people.

But perhaps Professor Van Cleave’s greatest intellectual contribution was his incisive and devastating critique of the U.S. approach to arms control with the Soviet Union. In his voluminous testimony to the Congress on the ABM Treaty and the SALT I Interim Agreement, his numerous books and articles, and his frequent public appearances (not to mention his fabulous classroom lectures), he documented and provided explanations for the complete inability of the U.S. bureaucracy to negotiate effectively with the Soviet Union. He

described in great detail how U.S. negotiators were unable to maintain any focus on the basic objectives of the negotiation and how the process itself had become a substitute for achieving the original U.S. objectives. Arms control, Dr. Van Cleave stated eloquently, was not a substitute for a credible national defense. Its only possible value was in fact its potential ability to contribute to U.S. strategic objectives. As Dr. Van Cleave stated in 1979: "There is too much emphasis on making needed weapons programs consistent with SALT rather than the other way around."¹²

Dr. Van Cleave never lost sight of the difference between democratic and totalitarian states, observing in 1984 that arms control enthusiasts forget that in Western states "arms are always controlled. They are controlled and limited by traditional values, by political and budgeting processes, and by the influences of the media and public opinion. None of these limiting forces exist in the Soviet Union to any appreciable extent."¹³

Bill Van Cleave's seminal analysis of the SALT I negotiation literally impacted all future U.S. arms control negotiations, even the Carter administration's efforts to negotiate SALT II, which never received Senate consent in part because of Professor Van Cleave's devastating critique. Through his work on the Committee on the Present Danger, the Strategic Alternatives Team, and President Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign, Bill Van Cleave shook up the arms control bureaucracy and played a major role in the development of the Reagan administration's approach to arms control which resulted in agreements with greater substance and direct connection to strategic objectives.

Bill Van Cleave's intellectual output, as scholar, lecturer, defense official, foreign policy advisor, and statesman has been enormous, and would be the envy of many an academic or professional strategist. Funny that it is in many respects the least of his two towering contributions.

A School for Strategy

Professor Van Cleave's most lasting legacy is the myriad of students he taught, trained, mentored, inspired, and helped place in key academic, professional, and governmental positions. As a Professor of International Relations and the Director of the Strategic Studies program at the University of Southern California and Missouri State University, Dr. Van Cleave trained generations of students, many of whom went on to distinguished service in the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. Government and in industry. His students held and continue to hold senior positions in the Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush administrations. Many career professionals in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Department of Homeland Security, and other agencies received degrees from Professor Van Cleave's program. Many an American scholar would be content to have had the intellectual impact through their writings and testimony that Professor Van Cleave has had. No current American educator has had more influence on U.S. national security issues through his students, both as distinguished academics themselves and through the policymaking process, than Bill Van Cleave.

Professor Van Cleave, through the funding provided by numerous foundations, corporations, and individuals whose trust he richly deserved, built a center for the teaching of strategic thought that has been producing quality students for decades. His multidisciplinary curriculum, grounded in real world problems, and his mentoring approach to students have challenged and rewarded graduate students coming from the Ivy League to the PAC 10. And they are a model for the teaching of graduate students in applied fields.

I had the privilege of teaching with Professor Van Cleave for nearly 10 years at Missouri State University. Early in my tenure there, I remember receiving a call one day from a well-known think tank in Washington, D.C., that had just hired two of Bill's students and was considering two more. A senior manager called, not to inquire about the students (they were going to get the job), but to ask what we were

doing out in Missouri that was different. She claimed that Bill's students, better than many others from the prestigious universities, required very little on-the-job training to become productive staff members. She herself was a graduate of Columbia University and said she thought Bill's DSS students were far better prepared for professional strategic life than she was – coming from the Ivy League. How could that be? The answer was simple. Bill Van Cleave taught students to see the world as it is and through the eyes of the policymaker. What they were able to produce for her company was a by-product of two years of having every assumption challenged and every option debated – against the backdrop of real-world constraints and always with American national interests in clear view.

Bill Van Cleave's students have had an impact on national security not because they are the brightest, although many are the brightest men and women I have known, but because they have mastered the strategists' craft of balancing ends and means and always remembering Churchill's dictum: No matter how great the general (or statesman), sooner or later he must take account of the enemy.

Conclusion

While the main enemies of the United States in the 1960s and 1970s were different from those of the current era, the threat of WMD attack remains and must be countered effectively by the United States. The Soviet Union today may be nothing but a bad historical memory, yet the challenges to our security posed by nations led by dictators, surviving communist dictatorships, radical Islamic state sponsors of terror, and transnational terrorist organizations, have much in common with the threats posed by the totalitarian dictatorships of the middle 20th century. Dr. William R. Van Cleave played a major role in mobilizing America to meet this threat and provided the intellectual guidance and wisdom to deal with it. His legacy and that of his intellectual progeny are continuing to help those who seek to guide America through the perilous times we face today. These challenges will be addressed more easily if we recall Dr. Van Cleave's maxim that our strategic policies must always rest on a careful and dispassionate understanding of the nature of the enemies America faces and the need

for America to maintain a military that is truly “second to none” in the face of these threats.

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About the Author

At the time this essay was originally published in 2007, **J.D. Crouch** was Assistant to President George W. Bush and U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor. Today, he is the CEO & President of the United Services Organization (USO). He previously served as Chief Executive Officer of QinetiQ North America. Before serving in President Bush's White House, Dr. Crouch was Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy and then U.S. Ambassador to Romania. From 1993 to 2001, and late 2003 to 2004, Dr. Crouch was Associate Professor of Defense and Strategic Studies at Missouri State University, and before that Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy and Military Legislative Assistant to Senator Malcolm Wallop (R-Wyoming). From 1984 to 1986, he served in the Reagan Administration in the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and was an advisor to the U.S. Delegation on Nuclear and Space Arms Talks with the former Soviet Union. The views expressed herein are entirely his own, and do not necessarily represent those of anyone else.

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Notes

- ¹ “Cognitive dissonance,” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004); and Answers.com, <http://www.answers.com/topic/cognitive-dissonance>.
- ² Quoted in Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Presidio, 1982), 42.
- ³ William Van Cleave & Roger W. Barnett, “Strategic Adaptability,” *Orbis*, vol. 18, no. 3, Fall 1974, 42.
- ⁴ Frank Bruni, “In Spain, Bush Sells Missile Plan, Calling ‘72 Arms Treaty A ‘Relic,’” *New York Times*, June 13, 2001, 1.
- ⁵ William R. Van Cleave, “The Requirement for and Purpose of Quick Fixes to American Strategic Nuclear Forces,” in William R. Van Cleave & W. Scott Thompson, eds., *Strategic Options for the Early Eighties: What Can Be Done?* (National Strategy Information Center, 1979), 16.
- ⁶ “Remarks by the President on National Missile Defense,” December 13, 2002, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/12/20011213-4.html.
- ⁷ Van Cleave, “The Requirement and Purpose of Quick Fixes to American Strategic Nuclear Forces,” 16.
- ⁸ Samuel T. Cohen & William R. Van Cleave, “Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Capabilities, and Strategy,” in *Toward a New Defense for NATO – The Case for Tactical Nuclear Weapons* (National Strategy Information Center, 1976), 22.
- ⁹ *The National Intelligence Estimates A-B Team Episode Concerning Soviet Strategic Capability and Objectives* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Van Cleave & Thompson, *Strategic Options for the Early Eighties*, 151.

¹³ William Van Cleave, "U.S. Strategic and Arms Control Policy," in Dennis L. Bark, ed., *To Promote Peace – U.S. Foreign Policy in the Mid-1980s* (Hoover Institution, 1984).

¹⁴ **Editor's Note:** *Some alterations to the formatting of this essay have been made in reprinting it here, but the text has not been altered.*