

THE NUCLEAR QUESTION: The United States and Nuclear Weapons 1946–1976, by Michael Mandelbaum. Cambridge University Press, 277 pp., \$14.95.

Not thinking about the unthinkable

BARTON J. BERNSTEIN

EVER SINCE HIROSHIMA and Nagasaki, anxious critics have forecast imminent nuclear doom. Dissenting from this apocalyptic tradition, Michael Mandelbaum, an associate professor of government at Harvard, has written a book to explain how America has come to live with the bomb, why fears of nuclear war are exaggerated, and how the superpowers have established a policy of restraint and caution. For Mandelbaum, diplomacy and strategy have controlled technology in order to keep the peace and avoid war.

"The history of the nuclear age has not been a tragedy," he concludes. "It has been the continuation, with some modifications, of the history of politics among nations. The world has managed to live with the bomb." Ours is "the best of all possible nuclear worlds. . . ." In short, deterrence works. The United States and the Soviet Union, he contends, have generally accepted that nuclear weapons are not militarily usable. Like fencers on a high wire, to use his image, they carefully limit their lunges lest they fall into the abyss. In effect, then, a system—rooted in experience and agreements—has emerged to limit the danger and constrain the rivalry.

Unfortunately, there is a huge gap between this argument, which has some merit, and the author's use of evidence and his formulation of questions. The book is, at best, a sketch, an uneven outline, of the problems. He has done

BARTON J. BERNSTEIN, a contributing editor of *INQUIRY*, teaches American history at Stanford. He has written extensively on the Cold War.

some substantial research on the Kennedy administration (two-thirds of the volume) and glued it loosely to a quick treatment of 1946–60 and 1963–76.

Any full analysis of this international nuclear "system," as Mandelbaum terms it, has to reach well beyond *published* military doctrines, on which he dwells, and a few events—most notably the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and the test ban treaty of 1963, which he stresses—to look closely at basic problems that he neglects: How did leaders *privately* conceive of nuclear weapons for deterrence, diplomacy, and war? If deterrence should fail or be abandoned, then what? Only through such analysis, which broadens the questions and reaches into unpublished sources, usually ignored by Mandelbaum, can an author seek to establish how American leaders have conceived of the bomb and how close they have come to using it. These questions are at the heart of examining what kind of international nuclear system developed and how it developed.

Among the specific questions that the author frequently neglects or poorly addresses, are these: Were the atomic bombs dropped on Japan to intimidate the Soviets? Did American leaders rely on the bomb after World War II as an implied threat against the Soviets? Was the administration sincere in offering international control of atomic energy in 1946 and during the next few years? What was the role of the bomb in post-war military planning for war and deterrence? How close did Truman and Eisenhower come to using atomic weapons in combat? Did Eisenhower believe that the bomb could actually be used? Why did Kennedy in 1961 endorse a huge buildup of the American

long-range missile arsenal when he knew the Soviets were so far behind?

ANY VOLUME ON HOW AMERICA learned to live with the bomb should start not with 1946 (where, for the most part, Mandelbaum begins) but with the decision to drop nuclear weapons on Japan: American leaders believed that the two bombs would help end the Pacific war and also render the Soviets tractable, perhaps even making them relax their power in Eastern Europe. In American calculations, atomic intimidation of the Soviets was an anticipated bonus. The atomic bombing of Japan did frighten the Soviets, and as a result they speeded

How close did Truman and Eisenhower come to using atomic weapons in combat?

work on their own atomic-bomb project and concluded that they had additional reasons to distrust the United States.

Mandelbaum also overlooks a related set of questions: Did the Truman administration use "atomic diplomacy" (implied nuclear threats) in the fall of 1945 to try to roll back Soviet influence from Eastern Europe? The administration did hope to intimidate the Soviets. Secretary of State James Byrnes, a fellow cabinet member lamented, "wished to have the implied threat of the bomb in his pocket" in dealing with the Soviets. One associate privately complained, "Byrnes has felt that we could use the bomb as a pistol to get what we wanted in international diplomacy." America did not make explicit atomic threats that fall, mostly because the administration was not prepared to move from pressure to war and because the American people would not have countenanced such threats.

In mid-1946, the United States presented its plan for international control of atomic energy (the Baruch Plan)—which the Soviets rejected. For Mandelbaum, the plan was an unintended failure because it tried to remodel the international system, threatened national sovereignty, and abandoned traditional diplomacy—his recommended method for establishing a system of atomic understanding. His critique of the Baruch Plan is too broad, for he wrenches the measure out of context (earlier atomic diplomacy) and minimizes the fact that the plan would have benefited the United States and endangered the Soviet Union. The plan protected the American nuclear monopoly for years, barred the Soviets from conducting atomic research, and threatened Soviet secrecy and hence Soviet security.

After the failure of the Baruch Plan in 1946, the Truman administration trotted out slightly revised versions of the measure at the annual sessions of the United Nations. But no one in the American government expected the Soviets to reverse themselves and accept this program. America was simply engaging in a ritualistic ceremony for propaganda gains, and the ritual was often successful. By 1949–50 America had become so dependent on the atomic bomb that, as George Kennan privately regretted, the nation could not give up this keystone of its military edifice and accept international control.

How close did Truman come to using the atomic bomb in the Korean war? On

November 30, 1950, shortly after the massive Chinese onslaught, he told reporters that it was a possible weapon in the war. In January 1952, General Omar Bradley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, confided to Prime Minister Winston Churchill, “It is not our intention to use [atomic] bombs, since up to the present time no suitable targets were presented. If the situation changed in any way, so that suitable targets were presented, a new situation would arise.” Churchill, whose nation was within easy reach of Soviet retaliation, must have found Bradley’s explanation unsettling, to say the least.

Yet, the Prime Minister knew that the administration was constrained by strong fears: If Truman used the bomb, Russia might also retaliate against America, and European nations would quickly defect from the Western alliance. Unfortunately, American public opinion may have constituted a weaker constraint. In late 1950, a majority favored using the bomb against China; a year later, a majority supported dropping it on “military” targets in Korea.

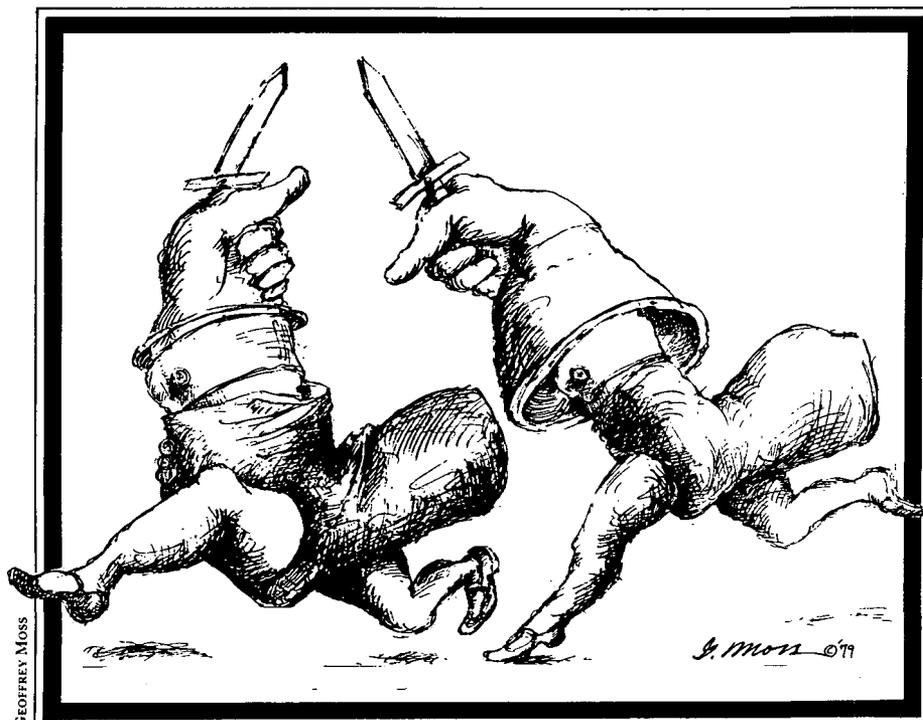
RELATED QUESTIONS about nuclear threats in the Korean war—also unconsidered by Mandelbaum—still linger. Would Ike have used the bomb, as some associates later contended, to end the war if China and North Korea had not acceded to American terms in mid-1953? Some recently declassified material (not used by Mandelbaum) bears on this question.

On February 12, 1953, according to the National Security Council minutes, Eisenhower “expressed the view that we should consider the use of atomic weapons [in Korea’s Kaesong area], which provided a good target for this type of weapon . . . the President added, we could not go on the way we were indefinitely.” Secretary of State John Foster Dulles seemed to agree, for, according to the minutes, he “discussed the moral problems and inhibitions on the use of the A-bomb, and Soviet success to date in setting atomic weapons apart from all other weapons as being in a special category. It was his opinion that we should try to break down this false distinction.”

It was the Eisenhower administration, as Mandelbaum acknowledges, that first clearly expressed the doctrine of nuclear deterrence: nuclear strength to prevent war and aggression. Dulles, elaborating upon this conception in January 1954, announced the doctrine of massive retaliation: Local defenses against Communist expansion would be supplemented by “the further deterrent of [America’s] massive retaliatory power.” The United States would deter the Soviets because of the “great [American] capacity to retaliate, instantly, by means and at places of our own choosing.”

This doctrine of massive retaliation raised many problems and provoked many criticisms. Would the United States actually start a nuclear war to stop aggression in the Third World—in, say, Indochina, Korea, or Lebanon? Critics contended that the doctrine was either incredible (America would not go to war) and thus ineffectual, or it was too dangerous because brushfire wars would speedily escalate into holocausts. In ways unexamined by Mandelbaum, Eisenhower and Dulles started backing away from this doctrine. By his last years in the White House, Eisenhower was suggesting a new doctrine—mutual assured destruction: Each side could destroy the other, so neither could begin a nuclear war.

John F. Kennedy, campaigning in 1960 on the supposed missile and deterrence gaps, criticized Eisenhower’s fiscal stinginess, his unwillingness to expand the army to fight limited wars, and his dependence on an allegedly inadequate nuclear deterrent. To widen the military options, to fight non-nuclear limited wars and possibly limited nuclear wars, Kennedy built up the army and created a more powerful nuclear arsenal—one that could also survive a Soviet first



GEORGEY MOSS

strike. Within his thousand days, Kennedy expanded the long-range missile arsenal by nearly 2000 percent—from about twenty-five weapons to five hundred. This decision, moving well beyond the more modest Eisenhower program, receives overly friendly treatment from Mandelbaum, who explains that Kennedy could not resist the demands of the Joint Chiefs for a huge arsenal.

The Cuban missile crisis is, for Mandelbaum, “the landmark in the evolution of nuclear diplomacy.” It marked the beginning of successful, formal diplomacy to establish the rules of the international system. He is correct in offering this familiar interpretation. What is new and dubious is his claim that the negotiations between Kennedy and Khrushchev, to end the crisis, were “between [near] equals.” Such an interpretation misses the fact that Kennedy made relatively minor concessions (a hedged statement not to invade Cuba and a hedged, private promise to withdraw missiles from Turkey) while Khrushchev promised publicly to withdraw the missiles from Cuba. Khrushchev was humiliated, and the Soviets expanded their missilery to prevent such defeats in the future.

Moreover, Mandelbaum seems too sanguine about the stability of the international system during the missile crisis. What would have happened if, for example, Dean Acheson, Truman’s former secretary of state who was then advising Kennedy, had been controlling American policy? During the early deliberations with top officials, Acheson proposed an air strike to destroy the Soviet missiles in Cuba. When asked how the Soviets would respond, he said, “I think they will knock out our missiles in Turkey.” What should the United States then do, he was asked. “Under our NATO treaty . . . , we would be required to respond by knocking out a missile base inside the Soviet Union.” What then? “Well,” said Acheson, “that’s when we hope cooler heads will prevail and they’ll stop and talk.” As one Kennedy aide complained, “that was rather chilling [advice].”

FORTUNATELY, KENNEDY did not follow that advice. But we will never know whether, as Attorney General Robert Kennedy later claimed, the President would have soon attacked Cuba and thus killed Soviet soldiers at the missile sites if the Soviets had not promised on Sunday, October 28, to withdraw their missiles. The night before, the attorney general warned the

Soviet ambassador that an attack was imminent. Did this American threat—backed by conventional superiority in the Caribbean and international nuclear superiority—compel Khrushchev to yield so speedily?

Perhaps there is a somewhat different explanation, for Castro had unexpectedly interfered and moved the superpowers closer to war. Unlike the Americans, the Soviets knew that the Cubans had seized the surface-to-air missile site (SAM) that had shot down an American U-2 on Saturday morning. That evening, Robert Kennedy warned the Soviet ambassador that another shoot-down of a U-2 would provoke an American attack on Cuba. Learning of this threat, Premier Khrushchev, probably fearing Castro’s actions, decided to concede and withdraw the “offensive” missiles in order to cool passions and avoid escalation. If Cuba had shot down another American plane, and Kennedy had attacked Cuba and killed many of the 15,000 to 20,000 Soviet soldiers there, how could Khrushchev have acquiesced? In ways that Mandelbaum does not understand, the superpowers came perilously close to war.

Having approached the nuclear abyss, the superpowers recognized the peril and moved toward defining some of the rules of the nuclear system. The test ban treaty of 1963 was the most notable result. It symbolized a new understanding and opened the way for SALT. Though the two powers have continued to escalate the arms race, they have so far avoided perilous confrontations.

In 1977, Jimmy Carter declared, “In the nuclear era, we can no longer think of war as merely a continuation of diplomacy by other means. Nuclear war cannot be measured by the standards of ‘victory’ or ‘defeat.’ This stark reality imposes on the United States an awesome and special responsibility.” Unfortunately, such chastening counsel still allows for the incredibly expensive arms race and the quest for new technological breakthroughs that may bestow a powerful advantage. These are not problems that greatly distress Mandelbaum, for he does not seem to foresee a technological breakthrough that would destroy the current system of deterrence. His ultimate conclusion seems designed to mute the dialogue on MX, cruise missiles, neutron bombs, or new guidance systems, for he believes that deterrence will continue to work. What could shake the confidence of Mandelbaum and his fellow optimists? □

HOW WE LIVED: A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America 1880–1930, by Irving Howe and Kenneth Libo. Richard Marek Publishers, 200 Madison Avenue, New York 10016; 360 pp., \$22.50.

In a land without a czar

WILLIAM NOVAK

IN ONE OF THE SEVERAL hundred excerpts from newspaper articles and personal memoirs that make up this volume, a former socialist recalls being taken to join a progressive club with the intriguing name of The Adler’s Young Men’s Independent Association, Number One. Why, he asks, does a group with so long a name feel the need to use the additional phrase “number one” when in fact it is the only organization with that name? This was done, he is told, because the members of the club took it for granted that a break-away faction of dissidents was inevitable, and they wanted to ensure that everybody knew which was the *real* Adler’s Club.

How different things are in the Jewish community today, when American Jewish organizations are so fearful of diversity and so careful to smooth over the various nuances of Jewish opinion in an effort to speak with a united voice. It’s good to be reminded that there was a time, not only in Europe but also here in America, when the Jewish community was not only more tolerant of the multiplicity of viewpoints in its ranks, but actually thrived on political and ideological pluralism. This occurred, to be sure, in a very different era—especially the years between 1880 and 1920, when millions of Jewish refugees from Europe and Russia arrived on these shores to build a new life. It was a time when Judaism had not yet been accepted as one of the three civil religions in America, and before some of its contemporary adherents chose to make of it a political ideology.

This book is a sequel to Irving Howe’s *World of Our Fathers*, which, when it was

WILLIAM NOVAK, who writes frequently on Jewish affairs, is the author of *High Culture: Marijuana in the Lives of Americans*, published by Alfred A. Knopf.