

# Hans Morgenthau and the Unconventionality of Nuclear Weapons: Then and Now

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If a nation cannot resort to nuclear weapons without  
risking its own destruction, how can it support  
its interests in a world of sovereign nations  
which is ruled by violence as the last resort?  
Hans Morgenthau<sup>1</sup>

International relations theory has long been divided between realists, who, roughly speaking, believe that a nation's foreign policy should not be governed by moral considerations, and liberals (or idealists), who believe that morality should play some role in foreign policy. As could be expected, these two groups reacted differently, in the period following 1945, to the advent of nuclear weapons. Liberals tended to focus on the moral problems raised by nuclear weapons, resulting from the fact that the use of them would inevitably kill large numbers of civilians. Realists tended to view nuclear weapons as just another weapon, and sought to develop strategies for incorporating the new devices into our thinking about the use of military force.

Hans Morgenthau became, in this period, the dean of American realists. In this essay I seek to trace his writings on the subject of nuclear weapons with the intention of revealing something more general about the effect of these weapons on international affairs. Morgenthau came to recognize that nuclear weapons presented a profound challenge to realism. He recognized an important truth about and the social and political impact of nuclear weapons, a truth different than, though parallel to, the moral problem

of nuclear weapons recognized by the liberals. After surveying Morgenthau's thinking about nuclear weapons, I will raise the question of the extent to which his insights survive the end of the cold war. Did his thinking about nuclear weapons and their impact on realism reveal a truth about the weapons themselves, one that continues, as do the weapons, into our own period, or was it a truth that applied only to the historical conjunction of the cold war and the nuclear weapons, inapplicable after the cold war? In regard to his understanding of nuclear weapons, does Morgenthau speak to us still? This is a crucial question not just for our understanding of Morgenthau's thought, but also for our determination of what nuclear weapons policies we ought to adopt in our own time.

To set the stage for an examination of Morgenthau's views about nuclear weapons and their impact on realism, I will begin with the idea that there is a revealing parallel between those views and the views of liberals, and ethicists more generally, on the moral problem of nuclear weapons. As Morgenthau recognized that nuclear weapons represent a profound challenge to realism, ethicists recognized that nuclear weapons represent a profound challenge to our moral understanding of international relations. To begin, I sketch the latter challenge.

The moral assessment of military matters is typically undertaken through just war theory. The moral problem of nuclear weapons, in one of its formulations, is the inconsistency they create within just war theory. This idea is encapsulated in a quotation from Michael Walzer: "Nuclear weapons explode the theory of just war. They are the first of mankind's technological innovations that are simply not encompassable within the familiar moral world."<sup>2</sup> Just war theory is divided into two levels: the level of moral justification for going to war (*jus ad bellum*); and the level of rules of morally justified

conduct in war (*jus in bello*). One way to formulate the moral problem of nuclear weapons is to show that they create a clash between these two levels of moral analysis. *Jus ad bellum* permits war in self-defense, while *jus in bello* prohibits conduct in war that involves an intention to kill civilians. There is no inherent inconsistency between the levels because normally there no problem fighting a justified war in a way that respects the *jus in bello* rules of conduct. But this is not the case with nuclear war (or nuclear deterrence). If one is facing a military opponent armed with nuclear weapons, self defense may have to involve using nuclear weapons oneself. But nuclear weapons, given their destructiveness, cannot be used without the user intending to kill civilians, which is prohibited under *jus in bello*. Thus, the moral theory may both permit and prohibit nuclear use, justifying the war but disallowing the fighting of it. Nuclear weapons create an inconsistency within the theory. This argument applies both to the use of nuclear weapons in war and to threat to use them outside of war, that is, to policies of nuclear deterrence. The reason is that nuclear deterrence involves the conditional intention to kill civilians.

Morgenthau's insight about nuclear weapons and realism can be rendered in a form parallel to this rendering of the moral problem. The realist realm is the realm of prudence, national self-interest, rather than morality. Realism is concerned with the prudential justification of a policy, not its moral justification. But within prudence, two levels of justification can be distinguished, parallel to the two levels of moral justification in just war theory. Adopting appropriate Latin tags, there is a distinction between *usus ad bellum*, the prudential justification for going to war and *usus in bello*, the prudential justification for the conduct of war. Speaking in general, *usus ad bellum* justifies war, as

a last resort, when important matters of national self-interest are at stake, while *usus in bello* justifies conduct in war that is expected to promote victory. Normally there is no conflict between these levels because there are effective ways to fight wars that are required by important matters of national self-interest.

Morgenthau's insight is that nuclear weapons create an inconsistency between these two levels. This is due to the immense destructive capability of these weapons, which, given the large numbers that exist, has the potential to destroy civilization. It is likely that "Western civilization would not survive" an all-out nuclear war. Civilization can take only so much punishment before it is destroyed. In the case of nuclear theorists who talk about surviving a large-scale nuclear war, there is a "fundamental error in their reasoning [lying] in the assumption that the moral fiber of a civilization has an unlimited capacity to recover from shock." Human society is not an ant colony. "There is a breaking point for a civilization, as there is a breaking point for an individual man."<sup>3</sup> A consequence of this civilization-destroying potential is that the advent of nuclear weapons "constitutes a veritable revolution, the only one in recorded history, in the structure of international relations."<sup>4</sup>

It is the effect of nuclear weapons on international relations that creates the inconsistency. There are two oppositional elements in the inconsistency. The first is the irrationality of using nuclear war to defend a nation's interests. "All-out nuclear war, likely to destroy all belligerents and thus to eliminate the very distinction between victor and vanquished, is a completely irrational undertaking. No possible end can justify it; it is an instrument of mass murder and genocide." The second element is the need for a nation to be able to defend its interests with force, if necessary, as the *ultima ratio*, a basic

requirement of the international order. The juxtaposition of these two elements creates a dilemma, which “consists in the contrast between the need of nations to support their interest by resort to violence and the irrationality of resort to nuclear arms.”<sup>5</sup> In the nuclear age, the need for a nation to be able to defend its interests with force at the *usus ad bellum* level is inconsistent with the lack of effective means to do this at the *usus in bello* level. There is a “disproportion between the means of violence and the ends of foreign policy.”<sup>6</sup> The inconsistency is between means and ends. “The feasibility of an all-out atomic war has completely destroyed the rational relation between force and foreign policy.”<sup>7</sup>

The nature of the inconsistency, the disproportion between means and ends, is made vividly clear by Morgenthau in his article “Death in the Nuclear Age.”<sup>8</sup> The pointlessness of nuclear war, its inability to achieve any of the ends typically achievable by war, is illustrated by the nature of death in nuclear war. Nuclear weapons have “made war an absurdity” by the kind of death it entails. Traditionally, death in war has meaning because war can serve to promote the nation’s interests, and so can be heroic. When individuals die in war, they are remembered by the nation that endures for the sacrifices they have made. “The continuity of history gives the individual at least a chance to survive himself in the collective memory of mankind.” But death in a nuclear war is neither individual nor purposeful. “Nuclear destruction destroys the meaning of death by depriving it of its individuality [and] the meaning of immortality by making both society and history impossible.”<sup>9</sup> One dies in an all-out nuclear war along with millions of others in a destructive fury that eliminates the society which would remember its fallen.

The inconsistency we have been discussing can be characterized as a dilemma because it can be cast as a situation in which we face two choices, both of which are untenable, wage nuclear war or surrender the national interest. But the dilemma, and so the inconsistency, would be avoided, if there were an acceptable third alternative. Nuclear strategists have sought this third alternative in the form of the adoption of a strategy that creates the possibility of limited nuclear war. If nuclear war could be sufficiently limited, if it were not all-out, then nations could survive the war, and nuclear war, like traditional conventional war, could again be a means of serving national interests. Morgenthau at one point flirted with this possible solution to the prudential problem of nuclear weapons. In an article from 1956, he seems to recommend a strategy of preparing to fight limited nuclear war. "The United States must prepare for, and fight if necessary, a limited atomic war."<sup>10</sup>

It is clear why this position would be attractive to Morgenthau and other theorists, as it provides a way out of the prudential problem or dilemma. But even in this article, he raises questions about the position. Noting that successfully applying a limited nuclear war strategy would require fine control and carefully calculation, he asks what would happen if one side or the other miscalculates or overreaches. "These are," he replies, "ominous questions to which there is no good response."<sup>11</sup> In later writings he backs even further away from this qualified defense of the prospects of limited nuclear war, reverting to the view that the dilemma is unavoidable. The reasons he gives for the view that limited nuclear war is not a viable alternative to escape the dilemma are in his discussions of nuclear strategy.<sup>12</sup>

In Morgenthau's view, the inadequacy of much of nuclear strategizing is based on the existence of a debilitating gap, in the case of nuclear weapons, between appearance and reality. There is a break between the traditional way of thinking about military matters to which we have clung and the objective conditions, created by the advent of these weapons, under which we live, a "contradiction between our modes of thought and action, belonging to an age that has passed, and the objective conditions of our existence."<sup>13</sup> Because our traditional modes of thought developed from our experience with conventional war, Morgenthau argues that the gap between them and our nuclear reality leads us mistakenly to seek to "conventionalize" nuclear weapons and war. For example, the terms "nuclear weapon" and "nuclear war" are strictly misnomers, a misapplication of traditional modes of thought to the new reality. The terms are misnomers because neither nuclear weapons nor nuclear war can be rational instruments of national policy. Of course, this claim assumes that limited nuclear war is not a reliable prospect, for it were, nuclear weapons and war could be rational instruments of policy.

What is Morgenthau's case against limited nuclear war? The belief that a nation should seek to fight a limited nuclear war lies behind the idea of counterforce strategy. Counterforce strategy, as both a form of deterrence and a way of fighting a war, requires a nation's having a large number of accurate nuclear weapons that can be used against military targets rather than population centers. If nuclear war is to be limited, the belligerents must avoid hitting each other's cities. The idea is that each side would exercise restraint in the war, using only a portion of its weapons and not attacking cities, for if one side attacked cities, the other would reciprocate and the war would quickly become unlimited. The feasibility of fighting a limited nuclear war depends on there

being a high likelihood that a nuclear war could remain limited in fact. It is at this point where the gap between our traditional modes of thought and the objective conditions becomes telling. Morgenthau's argument is that the objective conditions, running contrary to our traditional modes of thought, entail that the likelihood of a nuclear war's remaining limited are not high. We must consider what fighting a nuclear war would be like.

What are the factors indicating that a nuclear war is not likely to remain limited? There are a set of factors that show that escalation is built into the logic of nuclear war. First, a limited nuclear war would require that there be a clear distinction between civilian and military targets (between strategic and tactical targets), for each side must be able in the midst of the war to signal with its own strikes to the other side that it is attacking only military targets. But there is no clear distinction because military and civilian targets are often co-located; this makes the military act inherently ambiguous.<sup>14</sup> Second, because of mutual suspicions and the size of the stakes, and because of the limitations on the availability of real-time information on what is occurring, there would be a strong tendency to misinterpret the intentions of the other side, for example, to regard it as having escalated its attacks to cities when it had not intentionally done so. Third, because keeping a war limited is a mainly a matter of sending the right signals about its intentions to the other side in the midst of the conflict, it is crucial that leaders keep close control on the use of nuclear weapons by their military subordinates, but this would be hard to do, due both to communications problems and the tendency of local commanders to take the initiative and overuse nuclear force.



A fourth factor is that there is a decided advantage to the side that strikes first, or in the midst of war first escalates to a higher level of destruction, so the temptation of one side or the other to do so, either because of that perceived advantage or because of the fear that the other side is about to do so, would be great. Fifth, the other side must play along, that is, it must adhere to the same ideas about limiting the war (and have the military capacities to do so), but this is hardly a foregone conclusion. Sixth, there are always unforeseen events that occur in war that may undermine or destroy the ability of leaders to successfully orchestrate keeping to the proper limits. These factors together show that a nation cannot count of a nuclear war, once begun, remaining limited, so the idea that it could be limited is not enough to make nuclear war a rational instrument of policy. There is no third alternative. “Will nations, already engaged in a war for high stakes and publicly committed to certain objectives, have the moral courage, the intellectual assurance, and rational control to stop short of all-out nuclear war?” It is at least possible. “But that is not a good enough answer when the existence of great nations and the fate of civilizations is at stake”<sup>15</sup>

But the interesting consequence of Morgenthau’s understanding of the nature of the nuclear revolution is his recognition of the implications this has for realism. In an act of intellectual courage reminiscent of Plato’s introduction late in his life of the third-man argument, Morgenthau directly faces the serious problem that nuclear weapons pose for the theory to which he had devoted his intellectual career. Realism is based on an assumption of an international order of sovereign nations, and the maintenance of that order requires the possibility of a rational resort to force. Nuclear weapons nullify that

possibility, thereby undermining the assumption. We must move beyond the world of sovereign nations.

The way out of the dilemma is to transcend the two equally unacceptable alternatives of surrender or fighting a suicidal atomic war, and that means taking nuclear power out of the arsenal of individual nations altogether [by] some kind of supra-national agency which we may call a world government, because this is what it would be.<sup>16</sup>

“Theoretical analysis, I think, can show that the principle of political organization which has dominated the modern world from the French Revolution of 1789 to this day is no longer valid.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, in conflict with the most basic assumption of realism, Morgenthau advocates “the abolition of international relations itself through the merger of all national sovereignties into one world state which would have a monopoly of the most destructive implements.”<sup>18</sup> The solution to the dilemma is to advance beyond realism.

But is the world government alternative a feasible one? Is it any more plausible a solution to the dilemma than the idea of limited nuclear war? Morgenthau recognizes the difficulties. He believes that the possibility for a unitary state, a “central power that cannot be challenged by any sub-power within the community,” grows out of a common society, and that the latter requires “loyalties that transcend parochial loyalties” and “a common expectation of justice.”<sup>19</sup> While he seems not to have provided a detailed blueprint for how such requirements could be met, he does mention some possibilities. He suggests, for example, that the threat of nuclear annihilation will give increased legitimacy to the power of a global state, and he proposes that “the anarchic tendencies of th[e] nation-state system can be mitigated and developed toward world integration by

intelligent diplomacy” that creates “common interests.”<sup>20</sup> Such gestures toward showing the possibility of a world state, as helpful as they are, will not, however, satisfy many realists, actual or so-called.

Now I turn to the question whether Morgenthau’s insights about nuclear weapons and the need to rethink the basic assumptions of realism, developed by him in the context of the cold war, apply to our own era. Is the prudential problem of nuclear weapons, the dilemma between surrender and suicide, present whenever nuclear weapons are in the hands of sovereign nations, or is it a function of the peculiar historical context of the cold war, a bipolar regime of two highly antagonistic global superpowers? If the latter, then his argument becomes, like the cold war itself, an historical curiosity that we no longer need to attend to in our policy deliberations. If the latter, then the demise of the Soviet Union, rather than a strategy of limited nuclear war or the advent of a world state, would, in effect, become the third alternative that avoids the dilemma.

It certainly appears that the nuclear danger with which Morgenthau was concerned was a function of the cold war. The risk of an all-out nuclear war is seen now as remote. As a consequence, there has been more and more talk, which might warm the hearts of traditional realists, of using nuclear weapons like conventional weapons. This can be seen, for example, in the “bunker buster” nuclear warheads currently under development by the U.S. government, which would be used (likely in a first strike) to destroy fortified underground military facilities.

But there are three reasons to think, contrary to this view, that Morgenthau’s insights are relevant to our own objective conditions. First, a cold-war like configuration of world powers is sure to return sooner or later. The international order is in constant

flux. The antagonistic bi-polar military relationship of the cold war has for now been replaced by a single military superpower with no powerful military antagonists, but it is only a matter of time before a military challenger to the United States arises, or, in the longer term, two other military superpowers arise to challenge each other. When that happens, the problems Morgenthau outlined will return with full force. The dilemma with which he was concerned is not inherent in every configuration of sovereign states in the nuclear age, but it is one that is sure to arise periodically. Thus, the dilemma, once and again to be, still impels us toward his solution of a world state, if not with the same subjective urgency, at least with the same objective urgency.

The second reason is that one important aspect of the cold-war situation that Morgenthau found to be dangerous remains with us, even in more intense form. This is the problem of nuclear proliferation, which he comments on in a number of his essays. When he wrote of proliferation, there was the fear among experts that it would advance at a much faster pace than it did, but now, in our era, the pace has picked up. The problem with proliferation is an increase in international instability. “Once nuclear weapons have been dispersed to an indefinite number of nations, the very mechanics of mutual deterrence as they exist today, stabilizing within certain limits the international situation, would disappear.”<sup>21</sup> One scenario he suggests is that if a nuclear weapon were to explode in New York when our only nuclear antagonist was the Soviet Union, retaliation would have been sure and swift. But if this were to happen when there were multiple antagonistic nuclear-weapons states, the United States might not know who to retaliate against. The point, of course, is such a use of nuclear weapons is much more likely to happen once proliferation had advanced.<sup>22</sup> This is eerily prescient of our own problem of

“rogue” states with nuclear weapons and the potential availability of nuclear weapons to international terrorists. Nuclear weapons in the hands of sovereign states still have the potential to produce catastrophe.

Of course, the use of a single nuclear weapon by a rogue state or a terrorist group would not be anything like as catastrophic as an all-out, society destroying nuclear war possible during the cold war. But there is another consideration. Any use of nuclear weapons would likely break the nuclear taboo, the informal norm that has developed in international society since 1945 that nuclear weapons are not to be used. Without this taboo, there is a risk that the first use of nuclear weapons that destroyed the taboo would be followed by many other uses, and that nuclear weapons would become conventionalized, as Morgenthau feared. Thus, while the use of nuclear weapons now would not lead to an instant escalation to large-scale nuclear use, as could have occurred during the cold war, we could see a kind of slow-motion escalation from a first use that could in total produce a good portion of the harm that an all-out nuclear war during the cold war would have produced. The weapons still exist in great numbers, and they still have the potential to be used in great numbers. The existence of sovereign states still invites nuclear catastrophe.

The third reason to think that Morgenthau’s understanding remains relevant today is his suggestion that there is an impetus toward a world state independent of our concerns about the nuclear danger. When he discusses the world state, he often speaks of it not only as something we should seek to achieve, but as something that is happening independent of our direct intentions. “The sovereign nation-state is in the process of becoming obsolete.”<sup>23</sup> In addition, there are factors other than the nuclear danger that call

for, or are calling forth, a greater level of global governance. He states that sovereign state “has been made as obsolete by the recent technological revolutions of transportation, communications, and weaponry as the feudal principle of political organization was made obsolete by the first industrial revolution of the steam engine.”<sup>24</sup> This passage suggests both that progress toward global governance is happening independent of our direct efforts and that there are factors other than nuclear weapons bringing this about. Were he writing today, he would doubtless have added environment concerns to the list.

The conclusion is that Morgenthau’s insights on the nuclear dilemma and the need to advance beyond the sovereign state as the principle of international order are relevant still. He observes that our inarticulate longing for the unity of humankind has long impelled us, however weakly, toward a global community. But now the impetus is greater. “This longing, in times past mainly a spiritual or humanitarian impulse, in the nuclear age has been greatly strengthened by the desire, innate in all men, for self-preservation.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Morgenthau, “International Relations,” in Morgenthau, *The Restoration of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 174.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 282.

<sup>3</sup> Morgenthau, “Western Values and Total War,” panel discussion with Morgenthau and others, *Commentary* (October 1961), p. 281.

<sup>4</sup> Morgenthau, “International Relations,” p. 169.

<sup>5</sup> Morgenthau, “International Relations,” p. 174.

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- <sup>6</sup> Morgenthau, "Western Values," p. 280.
- <sup>7</sup> Morgenthau, "Atomic Force and Foreign Policy," in Morgenthau, *Restoration*, p. 156.
- <sup>8</sup> Morgenthau, "Death in the Nuclear Age," *Commentary* (September 1961), pp. 231-234.
- <sup>9</sup> Morgenthau, "Death in the Nuclear Age," pp. 231, 232, 233.
- <sup>10</sup> Morgenthau, "Has Atomic War Really Become Impossible?" in Morgenthau, *Restoration*, p. 140. Commenting on Morgenthau's defense of limited nuclear war at this time, Campbell Craig remarks that this defense "constituted the most inconsistent, even muddle-headed thinking of his intellectual career." See Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 98.
- <sup>11</sup> Morgenthau, "Has Atomic War Really Become Impossible?" p. 141.
- <sup>12</sup> The discussion below of Morgenthau's views on nuclear strategy is drawn from two essays: "The Four Paradoxes of Nuclear Strategy," *The American Political Science Review* 58, no. 1 (March 1964), pp. 23-35; and "The Fallacy of Thinking Conventionally about Nuclear Weapons," in David Carlton and Carlo Schaerf (eds.), *Arms Control and Technological Innovation* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), pp. 255-64.
- <sup>13</sup> Morgenthau, "Four Paradoxes," p. 23.
- <sup>14</sup> Morgenthau points out that in a nuclear war in Europe between NATO and the former Warsaw Pact, it would be militarily incumbent on Russia to attack Western European ports.
- <sup>15</sup> Morgenthau, "Four Paradoxes," p. 27.
- <sup>16</sup> Morgenthau, "Western Values," p. 285.
- <sup>17</sup> Morgenthau, "Functions of a Theory of International Relations," in Morgenthau, *The Decline of Democratic Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p.75
- <sup>18</sup> Morgenthau, "International Relations," p. 174.
- <sup>19</sup> Morgenthau, "The Ethics of War and Peace in the Nuclear Age," interview with Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr, *War/Peace Report* (February 1967), p. 7.
- <sup>20</sup> Morgenthau, "The Ethics of War and Peace," p. 7.
- <sup>21</sup> Morgenthau, "Western Values," p. 291.

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<sup>22</sup> Morgenthau, "A Reassessment of United States Foreign Policy," in Morgenthau, *The Impasse of American Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> Morgenthau, "Functions of a Theory of International Relations," p.75.

<sup>24</sup> Morgenthau, "Western Values," p. 298.

<sup>25</sup> Morgenthau, "International Relations," p. 175.