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# DETERRENCE

From Cold War to Long War

*Lessons from Six Decades  
of RAND Research*

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**Austin Long**

Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



NATIONAL DEFENSE RESEARCH INSTITUTE and  
PROJECT AIR FORCE

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## Summary

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Deterrence is the art of producing in the mind of the enemy the fear to attack.

—Peter George, *Dr. Strangelove*<sup>1</sup>

Deterrence was never a well-loved concept in the United States, but, following the end of the Cold War, it lost what little luster it held for most Americans. A strategy of nuclear deterrence in particular was an ugly policy, involving the threat of massive damage to entire societies. It was also an uncertain proposition, as affecting the enemy's mind rather than its body is only partly susceptible to advance planning and calculation. Such movies as *Fail-Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove* document the combination of revulsion and dark humor that nuclear deterrence evokes. Conventional deterrence by punishment is little better regarded.

A decade after the end of the Cold War, many viewed the attacks of September 11, 2001, as confirming the end of deterrence. Despite overwhelming nuclear and conventional superiority, the United States suffered a major attack on its own soil for the first time since World War II. In response to this atrocity, the 2002 United States national-security strategy (White House Office, 2002, p. 15) proclaimed the

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<sup>1</sup> George (1988, p. 98). *Dr. Strangelove* remains a central element of popular culture for deterrence theorists in general and the RAND Corporation specifically. The title character references “the BLAND Corporation” (also on p. 98), and the character as portrayed in the movie by Peter Sellers includes elements of the personality and style of RAND analyst Herman Kahn. Kahn, Thomas Schelling, and others also consulted with the movie's director, Stanley Kubrick.

irrelevance of deterrence to many important challenges from both state and nonstate actors.

Yet reports of the demise of deterrence were greatly exaggerated. The 2006 version of the national-security strategy returned *deterrence* to the lexicon of U.S. national defense. More importantly, it provides the framework from which this revival of deterrence springs. This framework is that “of a long struggle, similar to what our country faced in the early years of the Cold War.”<sup>2</sup> Deterrence, the unpalatable but indispensable strategy of the old cold war, will be an equally indispensable part of the strategy of the new long war.

Since its inception six decades ago, the RAND Corporation has been one of the key institutional “homes” for the study of deterrence. Most if not all of the early deterrence theorists spent at least some time at RAND, where they conducted extensive research and applied theory to critical policy decisions. This book is an attempt to examine much of this research for lessons relevant to the current and future strategic environment. It is therefore part intellectual history and part policy recommendation, intended to encourage debate and discussion on how deterrence can best be incorporated into U.S. strategy.

This book serves the additional purpose of increasing the distribution of important RAND research. While much of RAND’s work on deterrence is well known and forms the backbone of the modern conception of deterrence, other important works have remained limited in distribution. Hopefully, making this past research more widely available will contribute to the quality of future debates on deterrence.

This book consists of seven main sections. The first presents a brief history of RAND’s role in the development of deterrence theory and policy. The second provides an assessment of the relevance of Cold War–era deterrence research to the challenges of the long war. The next section discusses the theoretical basis of deterrence and its components as well as some generic policy considerations that are derived from the theory. The fourth section describes why deterrence was the strategy the United States adopted for the Cold War and the benefits that accrued from this choice. The fifth section describes in more detail

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<sup>2</sup> Bush (2006, p. 1). For comments on deterrence, see pp. 22–23.

various technical and doctrinal approaches to making deterrence effective that RAND studied. The next section describes RAND efforts to study the psychological and organizational elements of deterrence. The final section presents three contexts and scenarios related to the long war in which RAND deterrence research might be relevant.

In addition, an annotated bibliography of less well-known RAND deterrence research is presented. Some of the documents cited herein were part of RAND's draft (D) series of publications, which were intended to promote discussion among researchers. Those publications were not reviewed and were never intended for external dissemination, yet provide interesting insights into the debate within RAND on these issues at the time. Not all D-series publications are available to the public.