

CHICAGO — The contention that we need a large stockpile of weapons so that they will never be used does not conform to the lessons of history, which show that wherever there has been a growing stockpile of weapons they have in fact been used.

According to a study by The Canadian Army Journal (1960), there were 1,587 arms races from the year 600 B.C. to A.D. 1960, and all but 10 ended in war. The study indicates that the policy of "deterrence" deters only for limited periods. When either side finally determines it has a good chance of winning, it goes to war — always with the claim that war is necessary to "preserve the peace."

In the nuclear age, the policy of deterrence has been operative for a longer period than the deterrence that stayed the hand of the Allies and Axis for a period before World War II. But that does not mean that deterrence has prevented war. It is not the stockpiles of weapons that have dissuaded each of the superpowers from attacking the other, but the inability of either side to develop a "win" scenario.

Before World War II, Germany and France feverishly "deterred" each other. The Nazis rebuilt their armed forces around a strategy of movement, dependent on Stuka bombers and Panzer tank divisions. The French, relying on the old strategy of holding on to positions, tried to deter the Germans with their seemingly impregnable Maginot Line. By 1939, the Germans decided they could defeat the French (and the Allies). In retrospect, it is clear that deterrence did not stave off war; it delayed it until one side decided it had a good chance to win.

The nuclear arms race is unique in

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Deterrence Hardly Deters

By Sidney Lens

that both sides know with mathematical certainty that they can win a war, in the sense of destroying the other, but also know they must lose it (with equal mathematical certainty) because they have no means of defending themselves from simultaneous destruction. In that sense, deterrence may be said to have "worked." Neither side has seen its way clear to a "win" scenario, especially since the 16,000-mile-an-hour missile arrived on the scene in the 1960's. Even so, there are three flaws to the argument that deterrence assures enduring peace.

The first is that it brings us to the precipice far too often. There have been at least 17 occasions when America came close to nuclear war or considered using nuclear weapons. Five were the result of accidents, such as the misreading of radar signals; nine were contemplated limited nuclear attacks such as President Richard M. Nixon's plan (he himself called it the "madman theory") to use nuclear weapons against North Vietnam by November 1969 unless Hanoi came to terms; and three were direct confrontations with the Soviet Union — in 1946, when Harry S. Truman advised Andrei A. Gromyko he would use nuclear bombs on the Soviet Union unless it withdrew its forces from Azerbaijan; in 1962, during the Cuban missile crisis; and in

1973, during the Arab-Israeli war.

A second weakness in the deterrence policy is that it cannot operate unless each side manufactures greater and greater distrust of the other. We must "scare the hell" out of the American people, Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg advised President Truman early in the cold war. To prod Congress into voting larger and larger military budgets, the other side must be pictured in ever more lurid terms, making accommodation ever more difficult. Ultimately, we will become prisoners of our own fixations. Had an American or a West German plane been shot down with 269 passengers a few months ago instead of a South Korean airliner, who knows whether the American temper could have been contained short of nuclear war?

Finally, there is the problem of nuclear wars initiated by other countries. So long as the two main antagonists are in bitter contention, weaker nations will take liberties they would not otherwise dare. In 1976, President Gerald R. Ford predicted that 40 nations would have the capability to produce nuclear weapons by 1985. While that was obviously an overstatement, the possibility of many more nations joining the nuclear club is not only real, but, as Fred C. Iklé, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, has noted, poses "a danger that may make us look back on the present as a safe and easy time by comparison."

Viewed in this light, deterrence has not kept us from war; it has prepared us for war. All that is needed is for either side to conclude it can win a nuclear war — a "limited" one — or for passions to run out of control. In the end, we are no safer with 9,500 strategic warheads than if we had none. Thus, the abolition of nuclear weapons today would be no more unrealistic than the abolition of slavery in the last century.