

## Uncommon Cause

*General Lee Butler  
USAF (Ret'd)*

*Interviewed by  
Robert Kazel*

*General Butler first appeared in The Spokesman (no.63) in 1997, in the company of General Andrew J Goodpaster, engaged in 'Eliminating Nuclear Weapons'. The former chief of US Nuclear Forces holds fast to this aim, as he explains to Robert Kazel. A longer version of their exchange is available online at the website of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, to which we make grateful acknowledgements. General Butler's Uncommon Cause: A Life at Odds with Convention, will be published this year.*



*General Lee Butler, pictured here in 1983, was commander of the 320<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Wing, Mather Air Force Base, California. The base was home to long-range B-52 strategic bombers on alert for Strategic Air Command.*

**KAZEL:** *In the 1990s, you often said nuclear abolition was a good long-term goal, but we could greatly reduce risks and maybe avert catastrophe by de-alerting our land-based weapons – our ICBMs [Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles]. What do you think about 450 of our Minuteman missiles being on high alert nearly 20 years later?*

**BUTLER:** I just scratch my head in astonishment, quite frankly. That is such a feature of the Cold War era, when we were vulnerable to attack at any moment, so we had to be prepared to launch our forces on a moment's notice. Somehow, we've managed to persuade ourselves that we need to continue in that posture. I find that unseemly.

I don't know how many hundreds of billions of dollars of investments we have in Russia, and how many hundreds of thousands of our citizens are there at a given time. But somehow, just the thought of having an instantaneous circumstance in which we would even consider annihilating our own people, not to mention their assets, in Russia, boggles the mind.

From the standpoint of what I consider rationality, it doesn't pass muster with me. Even when you have someone who can be irresponsible in his rhetoric, like a [Russian President Vladimir] Putin, I find it extremely difficult to imagine a scenario, in this day and age, when you'd have a nuclear weapons component [to a US-Russian conflict]. A posture of immediate alert, I just think, is a complete anachronism at this point.

**KAZEL:** *As commander of US nuclear forces, you helped persuade the George H. W. Bush Administration to take our nuclear bombers off high alert. Did you or other military leaders also consider taking ICBMs off alert?*

**BUTLER:** The farthest we proceeded was to retire the Minuteman IIs early, and then move in the direction of single-warhead Minuteman IIIs. The community was just not ready for the prospect of taking two of the vaunted Triad weapon systems off alert at the same time. It was a pretty big bite to swallow just to get those bombers off alert. Part of the price of that was everything else was considered sacrosanct.

**KAZEL:** *Is there even a role for land-based missiles now? It seems they just increase danger by turning large portions of our territory into enemy targets.*

**BUTLER:** I would have removed land-based missiles from our arsenal a long time ago. I'd be happy to put that mission on the submarines. I came to develop an extremely high regard for submarines – their flexibility, their invulnerability, etc. And contrary to myth, we can communicate with them very quickly. So, with a significant fraction of bombers having a nuclear weapons capability that can be restored to alert very quickly, and with even a small complement of Trident submarines – with all those missiles and all those warheads on patrol – it's hard to imagine we couldn't get by. Now, the Air Force would take exception to that.

**KAZEL:** *How do present alert levels add to the pressure to respond quickly? What did those simulations tell you?*

**BUTLER:** The biggest constraint is how tight the timelines are: about 10

minutes for the conversation between [the commander of nuclear forces] and the President to characterise the attack and then get a decision. It's a function of physics. If you take a nominal ICBM launch from the former Soviet Union to a nominal target, say, in the centre of the United States, you're talking about 30 minutes. But that missile launch has to be detected and then its trajectory has to be assessed through two independent warning means, satellite and ground radar. Well, that takes time. It takes about 15 minutes or so, and then the commander of NORAD has to be brought on line. All the while, more and more missiles are being launched and are coming onto the radar screen. At some point, the commander of NORAD has to say, 'OK, I understand now what's happening, we're under nuclear attack'.

I would call the President. I had to lay out his options. The Nuclear War Plan has four major attack options with increasing numbers of weapons. Essentially all of our [recommendations were] MAO-4, Major Attack Option 4, which means we send everything we've got and it would cover all 10,000 weapons [in the U.S. arsenal at that time].

The war plan was my responsibility and had about 12,000 targets. Some weapons could destroy more than one target at the same time. That war plan was premised on all those weapons being available. If we allowed the Russian attack to take out any number of them, then the war plan may not have been viable. So, there reached a point where I would say, 'Mr. President, I need your decision now'. It became unequivocally obvious to me the immense responsibility of my role. The [person playing the role of the] President said at that point, 'General Butler, what is your recommendation?' And effectively, on my answer – which he would always endorse – hung the fate of civilization. If I said MAO-4 [full-scale counterattack], he would always agree. If it's you sitting in that chair, knowing that once you said the fatal words, 'I agree with your recommendation: MAO-4,' you've sealed the fate of hundreds of millions of people outright. Thanks to what science has now taught us, as Carl Sagan said many years ago (see *Spokesman* 46, 57), the combined effects of a wholesale attack involving 20,000 [American and Russian] thermonuclear warheads essentially would have been the end of civilization as we know it.

**KAZEL:** *When you commanded Strategic Air Command, you ordered a major revision of the list of nuclear targets. You saw that US missiles would hit political or military targets, but they'd be so numerous and so powerful that countless civilians in nearby cities and industrial areas would also be wiped out.*

**BUTLER:** The notion of the ‘1, 2, 3, 4’ major attack options is that we would begin with leadership targets, MAO-1, then military targets, then military-industrial targets, and then, finally, urban areas. That was always parsing matters pretty finely, because if you think about where the leadership targets were, they were in Moscow, for the most part. We had 400 warheads targeted on Moscow, in my day. Think about that: four hundred thermonuclear weapons, each on the order of 350 kilotons? The urban population certainly was not going to be spared simply because it was an attack on military leadership.

**KAZEL:** *Your book looks critically at US military leaders who kept using deterrence theory to justify large nuclear arsenals long after the Cold War ended. Do you think the new generation of leaders really still has faith in deterrence?*

**BUTLER:** In the latest issue of the Air Force’s *Air and Space Power Journal*, there was an article on the five ‘myths’ of arguments against deterrence, one of which was that submarines can do the job. I don’t want to use the word ‘desperate’, but I think it is a very concerted effort on the part of the Air Force to shore up deterrence. It all rings so hollow. It’s like the priest in the temple, and his voice is echoing amongst the columns. But you peel it all back and say, ‘Give me a situation when you would actually use one’.

**KAZEL:** *Why isn’t deterrence reliable?*

**BUTLER:** The first victim in a nuclear crisis is deterrence, because at that point all bets are off. One of the fatal flaws of deterrence, then and now, is deterrence applies in a circumstance in which you have a mortal enemy. If they’re a mortal enemy, you probably don’t have a very close relationship with them, which means you probably don’t understand how they think to a very high degree of precision – how they will respond under very threatening circumstances. That doesn’t sit very well with me. Even people who live with each other every day are sometimes hugely surprised.

I can’t think of a situation where you’re more likely to be wrong. And in the case of the Soviet Union, we were wrong. They didn’t buy into ‘flexible’ response. When I was a young, so-called ‘action officer’ in the Pentagon and Air Force Headquarters, an Air Force brigadier [general] named Jasper Welch – who would shortly become my boss – had spent a very long period of his life developing a whole notion of ‘flexible’ options to be incorporated into the Nuclear War Plan so that the President wasn’t left with an all-or-

nothing [decision]. Now on the face of it, that seems like a very reasonable idea, instead of the President having to say, ‘That’s all I can do, just launch everything?’ What if it’s not an all-out attack [on the US]? That was perfectly rational and legitimate: limited and selected attack options.

**KAZEL:** *As I understand this, our government started to think it might selectively strike Soviet political and military targets in a war, but that launching a massive attack at the beginning might be avoided?*

**BUTLER:** This is one of the frailties of deterrence: the Soviets never bought into that sort of philosophy. For them, one warhead on the motherland, and that was it. If they should lose their leadership in an initial attack, they made provisions for the forces to be launched [by various lesser officials or military officers]. So, that gave the lie to the whole notion of flexible options.

If I could strike one word from the lexicon of the nuclear weapons enterprise, it would be ‘deterrence’. Because it’s easy. It’s lazy. It’s using rhetoric for a replacement of really rigorous thinking about what is exactly implied by your actions. I would force people to actually describe what it is they think they’re doing [by holding onto nuclear weapons] in very detailed terms, and then defend it on that basis.

**KAZEL:** *You’ve also said that deterrence fails in practice because it ignites arms races – spiraling costs, new and revamped technologies, and instability as various nations seek not just security but superiority. Can deterrence theory give birth to conditions that are likelier to lead to war?*

**BUTLER:** We had 40 years of history of that. Of the several things that deterrence did not do, it did not serve as any sort of guide for force levels. To the contrary, in service to deterrence, force levels constantly increased almost exponentially. At its height we had 36,000 weapons in our active inventory. Imagine that. Thirty-six thousand. We had warheads on artillery shells that could be launched from jeeps. We had dozens of warhead types and delivery systems. We had landmines and sea mines. We deluded ourselves with regard to our capacity to manage crises. Deterrence was an open-ended invitation to just build more, and more complicated, systems. We always found a reason to go to the next level of arms, or the next hot technological biscuit to come popping out of the oven. That just scared the bejesus out of the Soviets. They weren’t equipped to stay in that race, and ultimately Ronald Reagan saw that and he spent them into oblivion. The

weapons became ever more numerous and more destructive. There's no end to it, and the rationale was always that deterrence required it.

That we would pursue these weapons with such unfettered enthusiasm – competing amongst the [military] services for resources, going to roll out these shiny new things, cutting ribbons – spoke to me a great deal about the human condition. For some people, technology has absolutely mesmerising qualities. If we can do it, we must. That's the kind of thinking that got us where we are today. To add to that, the military-industrial complex was being fed a virtually endless trough of money. There is no end to the number of people who will find any way to justify building something new, brighter and better. I've seen that happen time and time and time again ...

Fifteen hundred nuclear warheads [deployed by both the US and Russia today] is still a mind-boggling amount of destructive potential. Mind-boggling. I can't think of anything that underscores that better than how concerned we are about one falling into the wrong hands. We still readily accept 1,500 as a reasonable number. That's the kind of 'logic' that we get locked into, in the nuclear era.

**KAZEL:** *Aside from questions of strategy, you argue in your memoirs the same position you pounded home 20 years ago: that nuclear weapons violate basic ethics and are an affront to sacred human values. How did you start to believe that?*

**BUTLER:** I guess I'm what some would call a spiritual person, from my study of the origin and evolution of the universe and life as we know it. I find it so awe-inspiring. That's where I draw my sense of morality and humanity, and the overwhelming importance of sustaining the privilege of life. I think our no. 1 responsibility as human beings is to continue to elevate the bar of civilised behaviour, to make conditions [hospitable to] life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That's what captures my spiritual fancy these days.

Rather than being concerned about the moral implications of these devices, we continue to pursue them as if they were our salvation – as opposed to the prospective engine of our utter destruction. Human beings are by far the most destructive species on the planet; that the planet has ever seen. We kill each other for a variety of reasons, ranging from pleasure to vengefulness to fear for survival. As long as these weapons exist, and people hold them in such high regard for reasons of national esteem, they act as a brake on our capacity for advancing our humanity.

**KAZEL:** *Were you already thinking that when you were commander of Strategic Air Command?*

**BUTLER:** As they say, the prospect of hanging wonderfully concentrates the mind. When I finally began to understand the full import of the rather terse phrase ‘weapons of mass destruction’ – their acquisition, their operation, their targeting, the execution of that war plan – I began to think and reflect more deeply on the question, how did we ever get ourselves into this circumstance? And, by extension, how are we ever going to get ourselves out?

We had become so enamoured of nuclear weapons. Somehow, they had become an end in themselves; sort of a totem of power.

People embark on these sorts of messianic quests. Some people climb Mount Everest, some want to swim the Amazon. But for me, it was more about telling the story of how we escaped the Cold War without a nuclear holocaust by some combination of skill, luck and divine intervention – probably the latter in greatest proportion, for those who do believe in religious intervention. Because skill and luck certainly don’t account for it.

**KAZEL:** *Do you believe it’s ever ethical to bomb civilians in wartime?*

**BUTLER:** (Pauses.) One of the very first victims of all-out war is ethical considerations. In World War Two, as an example, we burned 200 of the largest Japanese cities to the ground. In the history of warfare, circumstances have produced a sort of scorched-earth policy and ethical considerations are simply abandoned. That was certainly the case in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There were ostensibly military installations nearby, which were used to rationalise the bombings, but there were other targets that we could have struck that would have put far fewer civilians at risk.

The cold, hard fact of the matter is that a nuclear weapon is, at its very core, anti-ethical. It is simply a device for causing wholesale destruction. Nuclear conflict is essentially an irrational activity, because essentially what you’re doing is signing your own death notice.

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