Discipline and threatened punishment: the theory of nuclear deterrence and the discipline of strategic studies, 1946-1960

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DISCIPLINE AND THREATENED PUNISHMENT: 
THE THEORY OF NUCLEAR DETERRENCE 
AND 
THE DISCIPLINE OF STRATEGIC 
STUDIES, 1946-1960 

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree 

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY 
from 
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This thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree to any other university or institution.

MARK DAMIAN RIX
This thesis reconstructs the history of the theory of nuclear deterrence and the
discipline of strategic studies in the period 1946 to 1960. The key elements of the
theory were the view that nuclear weapons were qualitatively different from
conventional weapons, that “deterrence” was the sole purpose of nuclear weapons,
and that in order to fulfil this purpose the weapons’ retaliatory capability had to be
protected from enemy attack. This amounted to a prescription for the non-use of
nuclear weapons in any capacity by either side. It is argued that the theory of
deterrence underwent a process of systematisation and formalisation during the
1950s. This process involved the application of systems analysis and game theory
to strategic analysis and led to the emergence of strategic studies.

It is also argued that strategic studies was developed in emulation of economics,
particularly neo-classical and quantitative economics. The strategic theorists who
were responsible for the development of the theory and discipline equated
quantitative strategic analysis with good strategic analysis. Both systems analysis
and game theory served as vehicles for the application of the methods of
quantitative economics to the analysis of “deterrence” and its requirements. As the
systematisation and formalisation of the theory took the view that “deterrence”
was the sole purpose of nuclear weapons to a higher level of abstraction so did the
theory, and the discipline, become increasingly irrelevant to the practical concerns
of American policy makers and military planners. The policy makers and planners
saw no qualitative difference between conventional and nuclear weapons. They
therefore did not accept the view that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons was
“deterrence” as the theorists understood the term. Moreover, by the mid 1950s the
military planners in particular had come to the conclusion that the only way to
“deter” an enemy nuclear strike was to pre-empt it. It is argued in the thesis that
the theorists’ awareness of the yawning gap between their and the policy makers’
and planners’ conception of the purpose of nuclear weapons was of paradigmatic
importance for the theory and the discipline.
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