
Defense Report

AUSA



“Deterrence cannot be a bluff; it must be credible”—Harold Brown, Secretary of Defense, June 1978

This statement by Secretary Brown in a speech to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco could best be defined as a truism—a declaration whose truth is so obvious it probably should not have been said at all—for surely, if our military deterrence against aggression is not credible **we have no defense.**

Secretary Brown was “viewing with alarm” the opinions of others who are concerned over comparisons of the military capabilities of the United States and the Soviet Union. All too frequently, the Secretary said, the concern over an apparent imbalance is caused by choosing the wrong factors to compare. He implied that some alarmists bias their findings by comparing only those factors they know to be out of balance. “. . . the simple comparisons you hear so much about,” Brown said, “rarely illuminate more than the idiosyncracies of their authors.”

Our interests are different,” Brown continued. “We do not need four million men, 45,000 tanks, or 10,000 surface-to-air missile launchers.” Applying basic military principles, the Secretary is correct. If we assume that the United States and its allies will not be the aggressors in a future European war we can take advantage of our defensive posture and make the Soviets and their allies come to us on our ground and on our terms. But what if we don’t want to fight very long on our own ground? Certainly the West Germans who would be the unhappy first hosts of a new European war would like to shift the scene elsewhere as rapidly as possible. That means the NATO defenders must become the attackers, with a concurrent loss of any defensive advantage.

Since Secretary Brown would prefer that we be very precise in setting up our comparisons, we should limit our analysis of the number of tanks available at the outset of a Warsaw Pact/NATO war to those immediately available in that theater. There would be about 20,500 for the Pact against 7,000 for NATO. Expected heavy attrition in the initial attacking force would make the number more even when a NATO counterattack started. But no smart commander has ever been very enthusiastic about attacking without achieving at least momentary superiority to start the enemy moving backward.

At the moment the NATO counterattack begins Allied superiority in strategic weapons will have little impact. It will be up to the men, tanks and artillery slugging it out on the ground to see who begins to retreat. Secretary Brown’s broad brush would paint the world in a false rosy hue. The tip of the commander’s pencil on a map of Germany marks in no-nonsense black and white.