The 1950s and early 1960s have been called the “Golden Age of Nuclear Strategy,” an era in which civilian scholars and practitioners, principally Americans but French theorists as well, dominated strategic thought. These theorists—physicists, military officers, economists and political scientists—defined nuclear strategy and the potentiality for Armageddon with a detached, cold calculus, granting negligible consideration to the moral implications of such a war. Ostensibly, the argument over nuclear strategy and its abstract constructs ceased when the four nuclear powers adapted to mutual assured destruction as an established element of the Cold War environment.

Nearly two decades later, however, after President Jimmy Carter withdrew the SALT II Treaty from U.S. Senate ratification, and President Ronald Reagan announced plans to introduce intermediate-range nuclear weapons into Western Europe, the debate was revitalized. It gathered energy from the dissenting voices of the European nuclear freeze and disarmament movements, but also from the U.S. Catholic bishops’ 1983 Pastoral Letter on War and Peace. In this document, the bishops examined the key issues of modern warfare, including nuclear weapons and deterrence. It is at this point
that Michael Quinlan, a Jesuit-educated, senior British defense official entered the public discussion. He would remain a potent elucidator of the logic of nuclear weapons as it related to British national interests throughout his tenure as permanent secretary, the highest civil service rank, at the Ministry of Defence under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and continuing until his death in 2009.

This article explores Quinlan’s role as a significant thinker on nuclear strategy and international security by examining his arguments for the possession and potential use of nuclear weapons within the just war tradition. Some critics contend that Quinlan entered the civic contest primarily to uphold British defense policy by arguing that its nuclear weapons provided a “second centre of decision” (in addition to the United States) that deterred the Soviet leadership from believing it could risk a nuclear attack on Europe without prompting U.S. retaliation. However, such a narrow perspective removes an important impetus to Quinlan’s actions: the tension that existed in his conscience. For Quinlan, the argument was not solely about nuclear strategy, the employment of these weapons, and the ethical norms associated with targeting. As a member of British strategic culture, he also needed to reduce the conflict between his temporal identity as a senior civil servant (defender of the realm) and his spiritual identity as a devout Roman Catholic. Moreover, his profound identification with these two cultures, while recognized but not fully examined, accounts for his decision to act as a bridge between them through his personal correspondence as well as his writings and speeches to various public audiences. Thus, Quinlan stands astride British strategic culture and Catholicism. To interpret his thinking on the role of the state, deterrence and the morality of nuclear weapons first requires an understanding of these two cultures.

Cultures and Tradition

C. P. Snow, the British scientist and novelist who served in several high-ranking civil service positions, declared in his 1959 Rede lecture...
the existence of two prominent cultures in modern society, science and humanities, and lamented the communication barrier that existed between them. He argued that this obstruction diminished both sides and impeded efforts to solve the problems of the world. Quinlan, who represented a new generation of intellectuals, decried the strains between two other cultures of which he was part, ones more venerable and ancient than the ones Snow identified: the temporal and the spiritual or more specifically, that of the political order and Christianity.

Quinlan considered the Ministry of Defence (MoD) as his “home” and his 1981 transfer to the treasury after nearly three decades of service in the defense establishment resulted in considerable vexation; he characterized the reassignment as a “deportation.” For several years thereafter, he yearned as well as vocalized a desire to return to the MoD. His emotional response is indicative of the depth of his connection with British strategic culture, one in which he had been inculcated as a young man.

Jack Snyder, one of the earliest promoters of the concept of strategic culture, defines it as “the sum of ideas, conditioned emotional responses and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national security community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other.” He contends that individuals are socialized into a distinct mode of strategic thinking and as a consequence of this socialization process, they absorb a “set of general beliefs, attitudes and behavioral patterns” that “places them on the level of ‘culture’ rather than mere ‘policy.’” Each state has a distinct strategic culture for an assortment of historical and organizational reasons and by ascertaining these features, the strategic culture approach attempts to make clear the genesis and enduring strength of attitudes and behaviors that might otherwise seem to outside viewers as enigmatic, foolish, or odd.

Quinlan’s socialization as a British civil servant actually begins with his student days at Oxford and in particular, his humanistic education, as institutions of higher education, particularly Oxford
The British civil service grew out of reforms deeply embedded in its political culture of moderate and evolutionary change. In essence, the strategic culture of a state originates from its history, geography, and political culture, that is, a polity’s structure of power and decision-making, and it epitomizes a collection of attitudes and patterns of behavior of the most influential voices of the nation whether they are the political élite, the military leadership, or public opinion.

Quinlan studied classics at Oxford University (awarded a double first), a discipline long held in British government and academic circles since the Elizabethan age, as “developing intellectual discipline and rigor through language acquisition,” competencies necessary for the prudent leadership of the kingdom and later, the empire. In essence, Quinlan joined a privileged group, an “exclusive caste,” as Oxbridge humanism has made two salient “contributions to the character of public administration in Great Britain: a high degree of cognitive skill development and the creation of an élite professional corps with a common Weltanschauung and vocabulary.” The study of ancient political and moral philosophy not only reinforces traditional British social values, but the texts perpetuate the image of a “highly integrated, organic society” in which those with superior intellectual capacity are educated for governance in support of the common good and the advancement of a “harmonious functioning of society.”

Thus, with Quinlan’s entrance into university, he had already absorbed a way of thinking about his role in British society and government. As a career civil servant, he understood that role to be that of “the true governors of England rather than the ‘here-today-gone tomorrow’ politicians.” These servants of the state imagine themselves as “ballast in the ship of state, always attempting to right the balance between doctrinal extremes and excesses of interest.” The study of moral and political theory contributes to a sense of oneself as a professional in the governance of society, a “consciousness of ethical principles embodied in public policies” and their implementation that
not only advances reliable and just government but also contributes to the “stability and well-being of the entire social order.”

It was during Quinlan’s service in the Air Ministry and the Air Force Department of the unified Ministry of Defence that brought him into contact with the air force’s leaders as well as gaining familiarity with the issues surrounding Britain’s strategic nuclear role. These assignments also led him to identify more deeply with the defense establishment’s strategic culture. In this respect, he is a product of the post-WW II era, under the influence of Britain’s primary “symbolic foreign policy issue—nuclear weapons and a ‘strong defence.’” This step in his socialization at the strategic level resulted in a furtherance of his understanding of how defense policy linked to the British perception of its role in the international system and its legacy as a great power. For the political and military élites, the development of nuclear weapons was means of ensuring its status during the Cold War, thereby making the British nuclear deterrent a vital element of British strategic culture, as well as being integral to the defense of the realm and the NATO region from Soviet predation.

However, Quinlan could not shed the other culture that influenced his life so instrumentally—Catholicism. As a committed Christian, he was well aware of the dichotomous nature of the allegiance to God and obedience to the state or secular authority and equally mindful of the biblical injunction found in the gospel of Matthew: “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s and render unto God the things that are God’s (Mt 22:21). Quinlan refused to confront the distinction as an either/or proposition. Instead, he believed it possible to serve both “God and Caesar.” He admitted publicly that he never felt challenged between undertaking service to his nation and his personal convictions. Nonetheless, he was forever mindful of “two truths”: that “none of us can leave our conscience or our ethical standards behind us when we go to work. . . . The second is that public servants of all kinds in Britain have chosen . . . to work for a community that is diverse in many ways, not least in religion (or its
absence) and in views of what morality requires.” He recognized that problems surface in specific situations, which bring “these two truths into tension with one another.”

Given such a view, Quinlan was ever attentive to the teaching of the Catholic Church, which remains not only a Christian denomination, but also a culture, a Catholic tradition comprising doctrines, rituals, institutions and spirituality. One scholar argues that there is a distinct Catholic sensibility, a worldview, which a person acquires through socialization, thereby resulting in a “Catholic perspective on time and space and community and creation and salvation.”

Quinlan’s initiation into this culture came through the Church’s sacramental rites, his family life, his education at Wimbledon College, a Jesuit secondary school, as a member of a community that consisted of the parish, and even something more far-reaching. No matter its minority status within the state, English Catholicism was part of the broader Western tradition but it also encompassed an intellectual community that had substantial influence on the British culture of his youth. George Orwell named this phenomenon, “political Catholicism,” which he recognized as being more than a religion, a specific theology or a form of worship. Quinlan’s childhood and adolescence also encompassed an era in which the Catholic Church was vociferously anti-communist. Thus, for Quinlan and many other Catholics, the political realm cannot be separated from the religious sphere for society is viewed as a network of relationships. These relationships, found in public service for example, promote “social living” and provide a “legitimate contribution to the community,” but they also “impose certain duties—certain ethical requirements” that have a collective purpose.

This linkage between the political and the religious also finds an articulation in the just war tradition. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, first worked out the foundations of Christian just war thought in his *City of God* in the fifth century c.e., from which the roots of modern international law derive. It is also an authoritative Catholic Church teaching. For Augustine and the tradition that
develops after him, just war is an attempt to balance two competing moral principles. It attempts to maintain the Christian concern with nonviolence and to honor the principle that taking human life is a grave moral evil. However, it also attempts to balance that concern with the recognition that, the world, being what it is, important moral principles, such as the protection of innocent human life, require the willingness to use force and violence. As an official of the British government and a pious Catholic, Quinlan understood the framework of principles commonly called “just war criteria” and recognized that the structure does not provide moral certainty. Given that limitation, he was well aware that careful and judicious reasoning was necessary for the valid application of this schema.

Speaking His Mind—In Public

Quinlan gained a reputation for his work in arms control during the late 1960s as one of the directors of defense policy, and from 1970 to 1973, he served as the defence counselor in the United Kingdom’s delegation to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This assignment was followed by service as under-secretary in the cabinet office (1974–77), and then a key policy position at the Ministry of Defence as deputy secretary (policy and programmes). However, his work on nuclear weapons strategy is what earned him the moniker the “high priest of deterrence” from his colleagues in Whitehall.25

His first written public expression of his views on nuclear deterrence and its ethical ramifications occurred in a book chapter, entitled, “The Meaning of Deterrence,” based on two talks he had delivered in July 1981 to a civil defense conference in York, and in March 1982 in a Lenten lecture series at an Anglican parish in London. Until that time, he had expressed his views to others only in private correspondence. The book began as a response to the Anglican Church’s report The Church and the Bomb,26 which represented a larger transnational movement against nuclear weapons.

Lawrence Wittner has characterized this period, from the late
1970s to the mid-1980s, as a third wave of the nuclear disarmament movement. The catalyst was a perceived upsurge in the nuclear arms race, indicated by the deterioration of US-Soviet détente, the deployment of Soviet SS-20 missiles in Eastern Europe, the NATO decision in 1979 to position Pershing II and cruise missiles in Western Europe, and the Reagan administration's propensity to articulate views about fighting and winning a nuclear war. The revival of the British anti-nuclear movement during that period was, in general, exceptionally remarkable, with the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament growing from 90,000 to 250,000 members. Additionally, there was also a full-throated critique of the nuclear arms race by mainline Protestant and Catholic churches.\(^{27}\)

Quinlan's essay lacks the sophistication of his later work, but it provides the foundation for his analysis of nuclear deterrence and nuclear weapons as a moral problem. He begins his argument with the stance that with the introduction of atomic bombs and their huge destructive power, the prevention of war became a "compulsion" for governments and that they have been unable to find "no surer practical method of prevention than deterrence."\(^{28}\) Moreover, he holds that it is "imperative to prevent all war" for he believes that nuclear war is most likely to result from an escalation (a term to be used advisedly and not to be understood as analogous to a chain reaction) in an already "bitter conflict."\(^{29}\) While he recognizes that the alternative to deterrence is non-resistance, he proposes that it is better to preserve human freedom and the current way of life as opposed to Soviet domination. Further, he supports civil defense to minimize damage and loss of life, but also states that NATO does not believe in the idea of winning limited nuclear wars in the classical sense of achieving victory in a conclusive and successful way.\(^{30}\)

After a discussion of escalation and the stability of deterrence, he turns to the morality of nuclear weapons. In this instance, he grounds his thinking less patently in just war principles, offering instead, a pragmatic approach, "practical principles," based on "two bitter facts": nuclear weapons exist and there is a tendency among humans
to act aggressively and savagely, and to oppress others, a world in which “evil leaders and evil systems” also exist.\textsuperscript{31} There are only two ways to cope with such facts. One is deterrence and the other is renunciation. Of the latter, he expresses concern about the “likely consequences,” arguing that such ramifications are a component of “what determines the moral quality of any act” and concluding that renunciation would leave Britain “effectively defenceless against any determined aggressor who possesses nuclear weapons.”\textsuperscript{32} The other approach raises the issue of whether it is moral, “even where the aim is to prevent war and even where the likelihood of success in that aim is high, to contemplate and indeed prepare for the hypothesis of actually using nuclear weapons if aggression ever pushes us that far.”\textsuperscript{33} He argues that such steps, given the just war criteria, are morally legitimate and that effective deterrence does not “inescapably imply pure counter-population targeting,” though he does recognize that in planning for such use would result in tremendous destruction and death. However, the very step in making plans can serve a deterrent effect and if the weapons should be used, then the outcomes might be preferable than oppression under a totalitarian regime.\textsuperscript{34}

Ultimately, Quinlan believes that Christians must follow positive goals, consisting of arms control and diplomacy, to reduce nuclear arsenals, which he characterizes as unnecessarily large and financially burdensome. He ends by declaring that “international justice and freedom and openness and trust, real and not just rhetorical, can radically transform it; and there, in my view, is where Christian goals must lie.”\textsuperscript{35} Nonetheless, he holds fast to the notion that given the East-West tension, the nuclear deterrent “is more likely to serve peace and freedom and justice, the goals which all Christians share,” better than nuclear renunciation.\textsuperscript{36}

Quinlan’s second essay on the ethics of nuclear deterrence appeared in the Jesuit-sponsored journal \textit{Theological Studies} four years later though written in early 1984 as a reply to the U.S. Roman Catholic bishops’ pastoral letter, “The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response.” In this article, Quinlan presents a moral justification
for the possession of nuclear weapons and deterrence that he will use as the basis for his future writings on the subject while serving as refutation of the bishops’ views on the challenges of international security. Specifically, he finds their argument to be logically flawed and inconsistent, conveying “moral tolerance of deterrent possession of nuclear weapons, at least for a while, alongside what seems virtually comprehensive condemnation of their use.”

In making his argument that the “complete condemnation of nuclear use was mistaken,” Quinlan offered three basic ethical positions: (I) “Use of nuclear weapons must always be wrong, and possession for deterrence must also be wrong;” (II) use might in some forms and circumstances be legitimate, and possession can therefore be justifiable;” and (III) while use must always be wrong, possession for deterrence can be justifiable.” He recognized that each of these stances presented problems. By embracing the first proposition, its proponents would have to explain how it could be rational to allow for such a weighted option only for “the unscrupulous and aggressive” to possess and use nuclear weapons, thus remaining “unconstrained by countervailing power.” Advocates of the second position have to explain how the use of nuclear weapons could be squared with the moral principles of the just war tradition regarding the use of discriminate and proportional force. Lastly, adherents of the remaining position must explain how it can be justifiable and useful for effective deterrence to produce and sustain a means that can never be employed. Since neither the bishops nor Quinlan subscribed to the first position, it was dismissed from consideration, while Quinlan held to the second position and bishops to the third. His moral analysis of deterrence contends that the second position is “ethically and practically coherent,” while the bishops’ stance is not.

Quinlan argues that deterrence in itself diminishes the likelihood of using nuclear weapons, but he recognizes he must address his contention that the use of nuclear weapons may be justifiable under certain circumstances. In this section of the article, Quinlan brought to fore the just war framework, noting that in taking such a position,
two main difficulties surfaced no matter how unlikely he believed the circumstances to be, both of which relate to *jus in bello* principles. The first is that use of such weapons would be inherently indiscriminate, that is, not discriminating between combatants and noncombatants, the central idea being that only combatants are legitimate objects of deliberate attack. The second is proportionality, the attacks be proportionate to the military value of the target or the result to be attained.

With respect to the first point, Quinlan maintains, “But the certainty of harm to noncombatants does not, in itself and irrespective of degree and of proportion to other effects, mean that action entailing it cannot be legitimate.” He contends, “Modern war has always “entailed virtual certainty of such harm, and most ethical analysis has tolerated this within ‘double effect,’ ‘lesser of two evils’, or similar concepts.”42 Regarding proportionality, he does not deny the calamitous effect of nuclear weapons, and the huge number of deaths, but he submits this must be weighed against the “appalling calamity” of “world conquest or domination,” by a tyranny. Quinlan notes that the bishops’ letter recognizes that the “defence of truth and human rights” has a discrete moral weight.43 While there would undoubtedly be substantial loss of life to halt an aggressor, this does not necessarily mean that attaining that objective, with its consequent toll on human life, should not be viewed as a lesser evil than letting tyranny prevail and the suffering that would result.44

Here, Quinlan has cleverly maneuvered the discussion of proportionality from *jus in bello* to *jus ad bellum*, the moral authority of the state to protect its citizens and that the costs of war are legitimate because there is just cause, in this case, to counter aggression. This is the baseline standard for modern just war thinking, states are justified in going to war in response to aggression and could respond proportionately (proportionate cause) through counterforce targeting (vice counter-city). Quinlan connects this part of his argument to that of no “first strike.” The Western powers (through NATO) adhered to the convention that it would not use nuclear weapons in
a pre-emptive strike to destroy or diminish an adversary’s nuclear capability. However, NATO would use nuclear weapons “rather than acquiesce in conquest by a totalitarian aggressor.” Further, the defender cannot, as he pointed out, “count upon an aggressor’s observance of a no-first use undertaking.”

For Quinlan, “deterrence and use can be distinguished, but not wholly disconnected.” Weapons have a deterrent effect because the possibility of their use halts aggression. Quinlan observes tangentially that the use of nuclear weapons is not merely a war fighting capability or military use, but a political act in which the state has a responsibility to preclude aggression, but if confronted, to protect the society against such aggression. In this respect, Quinlan argues that just intent is in play because the Warsaw Pact, as the aggressor, directed an attack on the territorial integrity and political sovereignty of a NATO state. He concludes by asserting that the bishops’ letter suffers from a number of defects ranging from the acceptability of defeat to the logical incoherence of its argument. It is an argument which is based on two propositions: first, a nation prepares a capability that would be morally wrong to employ, and second, a nation renounces the use of nuclear weapons while trusting that other nations will nevertheless believe it will use them.

**Beyond the Cold War**

With the end of the Cold War, the board of directors of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* at the University of Chicago adjusted the hands of the “Doomsday Clock” to reflect the diminished probability of global nuclear war. With this fear now in decline, Quinlan also turned his attention toward other issues regarding nuclear weapons such as arms control and nonproliferation, but he remained convinced of the West’s need to retain a nuclear military capability albeit on a smaller scale, especially for Britain and France. He rested his argument on the concern that there was still sufficient military force in the world requiring deterrence and nuclear weapons served as an instrument.
to prevent war, to preclude “military adventurism,” and to preserve world order. Even his first monograph on the topic, Thinking About Nuclear Weapons, includes only an annex on the morality of nuclear weapons, and is essentially a précis of his earlier Theological Studies article.

Yet, Quinlan did not completely desist in his discussion of the just war tradition and its implications for the new strategic environment. In a 2004 address to the Thomas More Institute, an organization dedicated to debating public policy issues and their ethical implications, he expressed grave reservations about the concept of pre-emptive self-defense (or more accurately preventive war), though he also recognized the criticality of thwarting imminent threats. His remarks on this particular topic were in response to the Bush administration’s 2002 National Security Strategy, which he believed asserted a claim that in current circumstances, with the threat of weapons of mass destruction alongside the phenomenon of international terrorists keen to inflict unlimited damage and careless of their own lives, there needed to be a readier and more salient option than in the past, and the attack on Iraq saw this assertion placed high among the justifications offered by that administration.

From a just war perspective, Quinlan suggested that this concept of pre-emption bridged the just war criteria of just cause and proportionate cause. He argued that before such a preemptive measure could be taken, deterrence must be shown to be incapable of working as well as an “honest weighing of proportionate and comparative risk.” In this particular case, he held that there was insufficient evidence to support the invasion based on the linkages that had to exist: that Saddam Hussein had an arsenal of weapons of mass destruction and that he would give some to terrorists, and that they would succeed in delivering a horrific attack on the U.S. was highly improbable. This low probability risk, he insisted, must be weighed against a war that would cost the lives of thousands of Iraqis, whether civilian or military. He concluded, “That is the other term in the risk balance, the risk comparison, which the concept of
sufficient and proportionate cause asks us to consider.” He questioned whether the United States government had examined the situation in this manner.\textsuperscript{52} Thus, for Quinlan, the Iraq War failed to meet the just war criteria, suggesting a moral failure on the part of the Bush administration. He would also deem the British government under Prime Minister Tony Blair to be complicit in such a moral breakdown.\textsuperscript{53} These governments failed to “think lucidly and soberly” about the implications of their actions and rested upon emotion or fear, not on an ethical approach that is “capable of disciplining and examining and justifying the killing of people without denying their individual value or treating them merely as means to ends.”\textsuperscript{54}

Four years later, in 2008, Quinlan revisited his thinking on the morality of nuclear deterrence in response to the ongoing debate in the United Kingdom regarding whether the government should retain its nuclear deterrent capability by upgrading the aging Trident missile system that delivered the nuclear weapons from submarines or rid itself of its nuclear weapons entirely. Again, Quinlan, who supported Trident replacement, found himself debating with Roman Catholic bishops, this time from Scotland, who argued that nuclear weapons were morally intolerable and that they always and unconditionally must be renounced, regardless of the circumstances and consequences.

In a lecture, “The Morality of Nuclear Deterrence,” Quinlan maintained that the three positions he laid out more than twenty years earlier were still relevant in the contemporary strategic environment. He remained convinced his third position was an ethical stance: some use of nuclear weapons which could maintain an effective deterrence, might be in extreme circumstances (a point he underscored) morally tolerable and that their possession for the prevention of war were legitimate. As he observed, in accepting this position, it did not mean approval of “everything that was done during the Cold War, or everything that is being done now,” adding that “there is no doubt that some of the planning for their use, on both sides, would have been morally intolerable to execute in any circumstances whatsoever.”\textsuperscript{55}
Discussing his position, Quinlan had refined his thinking and believed three practical imperatives were now required. First, although these weapons were useful in preventing war, it was incumbent on governments (right authority) to ensure their security, to promote international or regional stability to preclude their use, and to reduce the costs associated with their maintenance because of the financial burden that carries. Moreover, he highlighted his concern about nuclear targeting to ensure that the killing of non-combatants was minimized. The British government had never specifically stated its targeting concepts, but when it acquired the Trident missile system in 1980, the explanatory document spoke of posing a threat to “key aspects of Soviet state power.” Additionally, the government never indicated it took a counter-city, counter-population stance as France and the United States had once declared. Quinlan does not reveal that he drafted the document he refers to, “The Future United Kingdom Strategic Nuclear Deterrent Force.”

Second, Quinlan recognizes that his continuing adherence to position III is a difficult moral position to sustain, but he contends that it is consistent with the “underlying pragmatic and prudential philosophy of the just war tradition.” An absolutist prohibition of effective resistance would, quoting Francisco de Vitoria, one of the tradition’s principal developers, essentially prohibit “the just side from fighting.” He also uses the language of Gaudium et spes, one of the major documents of the Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council, to support his position. The document states, “As long as the danger of war remains and there is no competent and sufficiently powerful authority at the international level, governments cannot be denied the right to legitimate defense once every peaceful means of peaceful settlement has been exhausted.” Quinlan argues, “It is hard to suppose that the right to legitimate defence absolutely excludes what in extreme situations might be the only effective means available to it.” To do otherwise, is to be driven to “an ethics of distress,” by which he means that the problem is so intractable ethically that the attempt to apply “normal or general moral rules” is simply abandoned.
This is tantamount to a “counsel of despair,” rather than embracing a practical response in the “spirit of the moral criteria.”

As to the third imperative, Quinlan holds that while his third position may be the most practical and morally defensible for those who bear responsibility for the protection of citizenry and the survival of the state, he agreed that in the long-term it was unacceptable to hold fast to the third position. Quoting a 1981 defence paper, Quinlan, granted that no one “can acquiesce comfortably in [nuclear deterrence] as the basis for international peace for the rest of time. We have to search unremittingly, through arms control and otherwise, for better ways of ordering the world.” Quinlan did not disclose to his audience that he wrote those words. He would reveal this information a year later with the explanation that the “language was deliberately chosen—partly with ethical considerations in mind—to convey that, while cities could not be guaranteed immunity, the UK approach to deterrent threat and operational planning in the Trident era would not rest on crude counter-city or counter-population concepts.” Nonetheless, in the lecture, he did caution that the technical and political conditions for nuclear disarmament, immediate or otherwise, did not currently exist. He conceded that identifying the conditions that would have to exist and the mechanism that would need to be in place, and achieving international understanding of such a goal were possible and were being pursued by the British government.

Lastly, Quinlan directly commented on the stance of the Catholic Church on this issue, charging the Scottish Bishops Conference for misrepresenting this stance. The Scottish bishops had held since the early 1980s that nuclear weapons were morally reprehensible and disarmament was the only morally acceptable course but in doing so were at variance with the authoritative teaching of the Pope, specifically Blessed John Paul II, who in a statement at the 1982 United Nations Special Session on Disarmament stated, “In current conditions deterrence based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself but as a stage on the way towards progressive disarmament, can still be judged morally acceptable.” While Benedict XVI indicated
in his New Year message of 2006 that the belief that nuclear weapons could contribute to security was “completely fallacious,” Quinlan argued that this assertion was an articulation of a judgment concerning “practical effects in the world,” and not a pronouncement of ethical or theological principle. Additionally, such an opinion is contrary to neither position III nor incompatible with John Paul’s 1982 statement. It is notable, Quinlan states, that Benedict did not take up position I, which would have entailed a repudiation of that statement as well as those of several Catholic Bishops’ Conferences. Thus, Quinlan concludes, for the Scottish bishops to hold that position I is the clear and consistent teaching of the Church is plainly mistaken and is inconsistent with the position of the bishops of England and Wales who urged the British government not to continue as a nuclear power, but refrained from taking an absolutist stance.64

Quinlan’s final thoughts regarding the ethics of nuclear weapon and deterrence is contained in a chapter in his last written work, *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons: Principles, Problems, Prospects*, published in the year of his death. It is essentially, a restatement of his earlier thoughts on the ethical issues surrounding nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, it is notable in that he underscores that the just war tradition, while fashioned by Christian thinkers, is based on “the concepts of natural law entirely accessible to those of any or indeed no religious faith,” and continues by noting that it is not a “fixed doctrine” but a “living stream of practical reasoning which has continued to develop in line with the realities and challenges of new political and technological circumstances.”65 In short, the just war tradition recognizes “moral common sense,” although he reiterates the grave responsibility that holders of position III, such as himself, have to reduce the costs and risks of nuclear arsenals, which in themselves have moral dimensions. However, even such considerations cannot “purport to settle difficult questions by reference to a categorical imperative overriding all practical and prudential appraisal.”66
Quinlan’s Moral Stance

Quinlan was well aware of the conflicted nature of his stance as both a civil servant and devout Catholic layman: the official public role and individual conscience. In a 1979 letter to the Quaker scholar Sydney Bailey, Quinlan admitted that his views on the moral acceptability of nuclear weapons were built on his official role as a civil servant: “Let me admit first, as I did at the Canterbury conference, to a certain predisposition: I do not want to condemn possession of nuclear weapons. That predisposition, I recognize, may well be motivated in a significant degree by my particular situation—it would unquestionably be directly awkward for me to find myself driven to a conviction that having these weapons was ethically intolerable.” As one scholar has observed, a convincing defense of his beliefs in the morality of nuclear deterrence was one of the most challenging arguments he had to make and the reasons were both religious and strategic; that his work was morally licit as well as his conviction that maintenance of nuclear deterrence depended on a shared belief in its legitimacy. Thus, his position on nuclear weapons relied on ethical and strategic considerations, but the latter could not be privileged over the former. The two, while in tension, had to remain compatible in order for him to remain loyal to both the spiritual and temporal domains. On this point, he was adamant and it is best reflected in his statement in his final work that the just war tradition “had always been the prime intellectual influence upon my own approach to the exceptionally severe ethical problems posed by nuclear weapons.”

Quinlan worked diligently to balance the two cultures as his views on nuclear targeting attest, particularly with respect to the concept of double effect, which some ethicists consider morally justified in particular circumstances. Specifically, the use of any weapon can have a double effect. It can have the intended effect of destroying or debilitating a target, and the unintended consequence of harming people or property near the target. It is this notion that led Quinlan not only to press for the UK’s government position on
nuclear weapons targeting that did not deliberately seek to harm noncombatants as a means of strengthening the moral argument, but is also mirrored in his rejection of a belief in the “lesser of two evils” approach to rationalizing the collateral damage of weapons, nuclear or otherwise. He categorically denied the belief that it was licit or legitimate to pursue an immoral or evil (a term Quinlan consistently eschewed in public) act in the pursuit of peace or a higher good. As he informed one correspondent, a fellow civil servant who shared Quinlan’s overall position on nuclear weapons, “I do not believe that good ends can justify bad means; nor do I believe in the possibility of situations in which we have no choice but to commit some kind of moral evil, in the sense of sin.” Ethical and strategic considerations were always connected in Quinlan’s mind because the credibility of deterrence was also contingent upon it being viewed as legitimate by the British public.

Quinlan’s moral stance during the Cold War cannot be separated from his religious and his political beliefs in another respect, both had a substantial connection to his experiences as a child and adolescent during World War II and the anxiety over Hitler and totalitarian regimes in general. He often refers to Hitler and Stalin as examples of the ruthless and aggressive leader that must be stopped from attaining military victory, with the resultant oppression of the people certain to follow, as occurred under Nazism and communism. Moreover, as a Christian, he feared and was repelled by “atheistic communism, against which our security arrangements primarily seek to protect us.” He described communism as “an enormous evil, in terms of lost life as well as lost liberty, as is shown by its fruits from Lenin through to Stalin and Mao to Pol Pot.” Countering such an evil served as the underlying rationale for his willingness to view the launching of a nuclear attack in a “grave emergency” as a moral obligation to protect Western freedoms and his belief that a policy of no first-use were perilous and undermined the logic and credibility of deterrence as well as its legitimacy. While nuclear weapons were a “terrible necessity,” “the least bad option,” they were not evil and could
potentially effect war termination when the aggressor recognized the cost of continued war outweighed the benefit.\textsuperscript{73}

Scholars have pointed to Quinlan’s stance as consequentialist, utilitarian, or possibly realist, as understood in terms of a school of international relations theory.\textsuperscript{74} However, such labels are misleading or ultimately, incorrect. Consequentialism is a broad philosophical family. Generally, it holds that “whether an act is morally right depends only on the consequences of that act or of something related to that act, such as the motive behind the act or a general rule requiring acts of the same kind.”\textsuperscript{75} Categorizing Quinlan as a consequentialist and then declaring that he always framed his argument within the just war tradition does little to advance an interpretation of Quinlan’s moral stance.\textsuperscript{76} In fact, traditional Catholic moral theology does not permit consequentialism,\textsuperscript{77} as Quinlan well understood. Quinlan also repudiates such a notion in discussing Socrates’s reply to Thrasymachus in Plato’s \textit{Republic} that “justice” cannot be equated with the “convenience of the strong.”\textsuperscript{78}

Quinlan’s position is also contrary to that of the Protestant theologians and academics associated with Christian realism, regardless of the variant (e.g., Reinhold Niebuhr, Herbert Butterfield, and Martin Wight). Niebuh’s realism repudiates the natural law tradition found in Augustine, Aquinas, and Roman Catholic theology as well as Calvin’s reaffirmation of this tradition wherein a “civil magistrate” uses force as a “positive obligation.” Instead, it holds to an ethic based on the choice between lesser or unavoidable evils so that good may be achieved, including the use of lethal force or going to war.\textsuperscript{79} Such a position often ensues from a presumption against war as the foundational moral code of Christianity, which Quinlan rejects. Quinlan also does not share Herbert Butterfield’s dismissal of the deterrent value of nuclear weapons as an illusion and their employment an evil (a “sin” and a “crime”) because their “destructiveness is so out of relation with any end that war” can attain for humankind.\textsuperscript{80} Nor can Quinlan countenance the otherworldliness found in Wight’s ecclesiology, which like Niebuhr called for a
prophetic character: the Christian is part of a “distinct community amidst the world of power politics,” a “church of the catacombs” rather than the “corridors of power.” Such differences with these views actually become the catalyst for Quinlan’s decades-long debate with academics and ecclesiastical leaders over nuclear weapons.

Further, there is no disputing that Quinlan was a practitioner and not an academic; so, such categories as realist or liberal internationalist had little meaning for him personally. Nonetheless, he did not count himself among the realists, later rejecting as “dismissive realists” those who held arms control to be “fanciful thinking.” In Quinlan’s mind, realism meant being realistic, the necessity of dealing with the world as it is, though his views of human nature were largely consistent with adherents of classical realism.

Instead, Quinlan’s stance is perhaps better understood within the context of virtue ethics and its three components: *arête* (excellence or virtue), *phronesis* (practical or moral wisdom), and *eudaimonia* (usually translated as happiness or flourishing) as derived from ancient Greek philosophy, particularly Plato and Aristotle, and later incorporated into moral theology by Ambrose of Milan (Augustine’s mentor) and in the late Middle Ages by Thomas Aquinas. However, Quinlan’s views are also filtered through his upbringing and his nation’s political culture.

For Aristotle, the polis was the epitome of political organization, and the role of the virtues was to enable human beings to flourish in that environment. Aristotle writes, “Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good; for mankind always acts in order to obtain that which they think good. . . . The state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims . . . at the highest good.” The natural end of human life is happiness or well-being, which is closely tied to virtue or excellence. The state has a role in the promotion of moral habits, not in the abstract but as part of the realities of life and consistent with embodied tradition. Quinlan follows that line of reasoning—Western democracy is the pinnacle
of political organization and the purpose of practical wisdom is to ensure the flourishing of this form of governance. The state and the temporal spheres are interdependent; both serve a moral end, the common good. Further, Quinlan’s arguments align with those of Aquinas. As Quinlan noted in a 2004 speech, “there is nothing in the [just war] approach that need be exclusive to Christianity. . . . [Yet,] there are elements of the Geneva Convention that could almost have come straight from Aquinas. So this tradition is, I believe the best basis for approaching a general ethic of war, and the best framework for considering whether we need to develop our ethic further, or to modify aspects of it.” For Aquinas, politics is “the locus of warfare,” and in warfare, charity demands that leaders seek the good of the community over all other claimants. “Wars,” Aquinas writes, “are directed to the preservation of a community’s temporal peace.” Thus, the political leader “must act otherwise for the common good, and for the good of those with whom he is fighting.” The tradition is not “doctrine” or law, or even a theory, but, as Quinlan maintained, a “discipline” based on “practical reason” (emphasis added), informed by humanity-wide values, not upon institutional or scripture-type authority.” Hence, reason is the source of moral judgment for Aquinas and it is to reason that he appeals in the *Summa theologiae* establishing the three criteria for a just war—proportionality, right authority, and right intention. As Quinlan refined his thinking about just war in the post-Cold War era, he relied on Aquinas’s criteria, recognizing Aquinas’s proposition that just war making is rooted in “right intention and virtue—especially the virtue of charity.”

**Conclusion**

Within days of Quinlan’s death, numerous tributes flowed from former colleagues, intellectual opponents, and journalists declaring him “among the most gifted civil servants of his generation,” describing him as a “philosopher of defence,” and the “leading
civilian thinker within the British government on defence policy and particularly nuclear weapons issues." In the three years since his death, a selection of his correspondence and a book of tributary essays have been published. Undoubtedly, as time passes, we will learn more about Quinlan’s particular role within the British defense policymaking apparatus. Nonetheless, his public role is largely visible and with it, we can see clearly that he was well known for his strategic thinking and his devout Catholicism, a belief that led him to speak about “the opportunities which participation in public life gives the convinced Catholic.”

His strong moral views, which make him distinct among Cold War strategists, demanded that he reconcile his religious beliefs with his official responsibilities but he also admitted that the nuclear weapons issue appealed to him. It was “intellectually congenial perhaps because of its combination of complexity and abstractedness.”

Yet, Quinlan was also not a prisoner of the past. In 1992, still a turbulent period in the immediate dissolution of the Soviet Union, he addressed a group of Russian military experts stating, “War-making capability has reached and passed the limit of meaningful rationality. An unrestrained conflict between nuclear superpowers would, therefore, be not just an immense human calamity, it would be, in the strictest sense, a logical absurdity.” Further, when public debate soared around the British government’s decision to replace the Trident missile system, Quinlan, while supportive of this step, also issued a caution in 2006: “I am in favour but not at any price. [We should consider] the option of cutting back a bit, with fewer boats and [a smaller] stockpile of weapons. . . . We should stop and think at each stage.” He remained open-minded and his thinking on nuclear weapons evolved, but he remained convinced that the abolition of nuclear weapons was contingent on what he termed, “disarmament mechanics,” that is, the technical aspects associated with this objective, and more importantly, “political conditions” because of human nature and the ambitions of states.

Thus, Quinlan’s intellectual legacy is his thinking on nuclear
weapons, but it is more than the pleasure he derived from this process made congenial by his education, his experience, and his religious beliefs. Sir Michael Howard, Professor of the History of War at Oxford and Regius Professor of Modern History, wrote in his foreword to Quinlan’s book *Thinking about Nuclear Weapons: Principles, Problems, Prospects*, “he [Quinlan] has, to put it succinctly, taught our masters how to think.” Quinlan understood that the possession and potential use of nuclear weapons must always be understood as a political as well as a military subject, that the larger political community had a stake in this issue, critical to the functioning of a harmonious society. Quinlan also noted the dearth of ethical discussion as part of the UK’s 1954 decision to acquire a nuclear weapons capability and in the years succeeding. He decried the lack of emphasis on the “operational aspects (with ethical implications) like targeting” with its unquestioned acceptance of the destruction of cities until 1980, at which time he attempted to remedy with his draft of the paper on the strategic deterrent force. Such an ethical lapse was unconscionable to Quinlan.

Moreover, Quinlan’s work restored attention to one of the forgotten dimensions of strategy, the social dimension. Again, Howard is our guide.

Works about nuclear weapons, war and deterrence normally treat their topic as an activity taking place almost entirely in the technological dimension. From their writing not only the socio-political but the operational elements have disappeared. The technological capabilities of nuclear arsenals are treated as being decisive in themselves, involving a calculation of risk and outcome so complete and discrete that neither the political motivation for the conflict—nor indeed the military activity of fighting—are taken into account at all.

Quinlan understood that deterrence rested on its credibility, not only in terms of destructive power of the weapons, but on the willingness of a free and democratic peoples to possess such weapons as a symbol
of “social unity and political resolve which is as essential an element in nuclear deterrence as any invulnerable second strike capability.”

Political participation held an integral place in the democratic control of nuclear forces consistent with the political and constitutional character of the state. Thus, the legitimate authority of the state’s leaders and public debate were critical to the democratic legitimacy of decisions regarding nuclear weapons.

Such a position was coherent with Quinlan’s underlying belief that, derived from both of his nurturing cultures, such decisions are made for the common good.

Notes


5. Ibid., iii.

6. Ibid., v.


8. Ibid., 11–19.


10. Ibid., 19, 22.

11. Ibid., 21, 22.

12. Ibid., 23.

13. Ibid., 25.

30. Ibid., 137–43.
31. Ibid., 148.
32. Ibid., 150.
33. Ibid., 152.
34. Ibid., 152–53.
35. Ibid., 154.
36. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 4.
40. Ibid., 4–5.
41. Ibid., 17.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 18
44. Ibid., 18, 19.
45. Ibid., 22.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., 24.
48. Ibid., 15–16.
49. Ibid., 13–16.
54. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
64. Ibid.
92. Ibid., 188.
102. Ibid., 111.