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## EDITORIAL

### STANDARDS WARS AND MUTUALLY ASSUED DESTRUCTION

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With the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by atomic bombs, the world entered a new era of uncertainty and strategic readjustment. For a few years, the West rested easy, secure in the knowledge that only the United States possessed the ability to use this new weaponry. Soon, however, not only Britain and France, but also the Soviet Union, and later, China had mastered the new technology as well.

The acquisition of nuclear devices by these nations was the first tactical reaction to the possession by the United States of a powerful new strategic weapon. Merely achieving parity in technology did not constitute a strategy, however, but only the ability to incorporate a new weapon into a strategy that needed to adapt to a world that was changing in many ways. But how could such an enormously destructive weapon be incorporated any rational strategic plan?

For all but the Soviet Union and the United States, the default decision was to manufacture and deploy a sufficient number of weapons to ensure that any invasion of the homeland would be prohibitively costly, and to augment that strategy through alliances with other nations, some of which themselves controlled nuclear weapons. But the United States and the Soviet Union were soon locked into what became known as the "nuclear arms race."

This competition, many would agree, was fueled more by fear than reason, and often by internal politics. The result was that by the end of the 1960's, each country was theoretically capable of destroying the other many times over. In point of fact, not all warheads would penetrate the defenses of the opponent, but the excess of destructive capability amply demonstrated that no amount of defensive technology could ever reliably protect the homeland from such a massive and overpowering assault.

The label given to this drastic strategy, in the emotionless parlance of the Cold War, was "mutually assured destruction," a name that yielded an appropriate acronym: MAD.

Happily, nuclear weapons were never used by the two Cold War superpowers, and any war waged directly between the two nations became impossibly risky, to the possibility of uncontrolled escalation. Unhappily, much of the world became an ideological battleground for the two adversaries instead, as each sought to spread its influence in emerging nations in order to secure allies and foster its own political ideology. The result was a series of proxy wars conducted in many nations, each with one of the two superpowers supporting one side to prevent the ally of the other from becoming victorious.

Throughout this whole mindless period, there were few, if any, winners, and many losers. Perhaps the best that could be said was that it could have been much worse – and may yet be in the future, either between these two powers, or some other pairing of rivals that have joined the nuclear club.

The lesson of Mutually Assured Destruction is instructive in many areas of life, from politics to standard setting. When rationality is retained, it usually becomes clear that the risks of losing so outweigh the benefits that can possibly be gained that another strategy ultimately prevails.

In the standards world, the phrase "standards war" is bandied about freely. In fact, only a very small percentage of standards are ever deliberately set in direct competition with each other in "winner take all" settings. Instead, many confrontations between opposing groups could more accurately be described as "standards competitions." Nor are such contests necessarily destructive, especially in the field of emerging technology, where it is often unclear which technologies will be developed successfully, or which may prove to be best suited to address market needs that are themselves still emerging.

In such a situation, standards are being developed in real time, coincident with the technologies that they are intended to enable. Typically, only some of these standards will ever become widely adopted, but the marketplace benefits from the immediate availability of those that do, because the technologies they serve may be immediately introduced into networked settings.

Occasionally a true standards war of MAD proportions does break out, most commonly among the giants of the consumer electronics sector, which seem constitutionally committed to driving not only themselves to the brink of destruction in lemming-like cycles, but also to dragging content providers, distributors, video rental stores and end-users up to, and sometimes over, the precipice as well.

If there is any value to the phenomenon of MAD standards wars, it is their cautionary impact. Just as the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki created a powerful taboo against the use of nuclear weapons that has never (yet) been broken, the commercially destructive spectacle of an irrational standards war makes clear how mad a strategy is being pursued, providing incentives to those in other sectors to follow a more rational and beneficial way.

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