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The Nuclear Taboo

The United States and the Non-Use
of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945

Nina Tannenwald

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The Nuclear Taboo

Why have nuclear weapons not been used since Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945? Nina Tannenwald disputes the conventional answer of “deterrence,” in favor of what she calls a nuclear taboo – a widespread inhibition on using nuclear weapons – which has arisen in global politics. Drawing on newly released archival sources, Tannenwald traces the rise of the nuclear taboo, the forces that produced it, and its influence, particularly on US leaders. She analyzes four critical instances where US leaders considered using nuclear weapons (Japan 1945, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War 1991) and examines how the nuclear taboo has repeatedly dissuaded US and other world leaders from resorting to these “ultimate weapons.” Through a systematic analysis, Tannenwald challenges conventional conceptions of deterrence and offers a compelling argument on the moral bases of nuclear restraint as well as an important insight into how nuclear war can be avoided in the future.

NINA TANNENWALD is Associate Research Professor of International Relations at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University.

The Nuclear Taboo

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The Nuclear Taboo

*The United States and the Non-Use
of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945*

Nina Tannenwald



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Preface

This book had its origins in what seemed to me a disconnect between how ordinary people, including many policymakers, have viewed nuclear weapons and how academic deterrence theory has approached the analysis of such weapons. In college I had been involved in the nuclear freeze movement, aimed at halting the US-Soviet nuclear arms race. Most people in this movement shared a deep sense of revulsion at the tremendous destructive power of nuclear weapons, and held their use to be immoral and irrational.

Later, in graduate school, I studied academic deterrence theory. It focused on the cold, hard calculus of making credible threats of massive destruction. These game-theoretic analyses, I found, had little to say about issues of revulsion and morality. Further, when I studied how we managed to avoid nuclear war during the Cold War, it increasingly appeared to me that deterrence was not the whole story. Deterrence could not explain, for example, why nuclear weapons had not been used when the other side did not possess such weapons. I found it hard to avoid a sense that a powerful revulsion associated with nuclear weapons had played a role in inhibiting their use.

If indeed a nuclear taboo exists, how do we know, and how exactly did this taboo emerge? How has it influenced leaders? I decided to find out. This book is the result.

Although this book is primarily a work of historical analysis, I hope that, in shedding light on how we survived sixty years without using the bomb, it provides some insights for the future. Nuclear weapons no longer pose the threat of immediate annihilation of the planet that they once did. Yet, the risk of their use remains. Use of even a single bomb would be catastrophic. In a world where deterrence is less relevant, power is more asymmetric, and nuclear weapons are

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increasingly spread around the globe, the nurturing of normative inhibitions on use may be crucial to surviving the next sixty years.

In its long process of development, this book has accumulated many debts. My greatest debt goes to Peter Katzenstein, who, in one of my moments of crisis, reminded me that we do not slay dragons single-handedly. His intellectual guidance and unwavering support gave me the confidence to pursue this study. He provides a model of scholarship and mentorship to which I can only aspire. Richard Ned Lebow's cogent critiques of deterrence theory inspired my own thinking on the subject. Lawrence Scheinman's deep knowledge of the nuclear non-proliferation regime and international law helped me to refine my interpretations in this area. Henry Shue's insights strengthened my understanding of the role of ethical norms in international affairs. I could not have asked for a better group of advisors.

I am also especially grateful to Scott Sagan and Lynn Eden, who offered crucial encouragement early on and challenged me to sharpen my arguments. They and their colleagues at Stanford's Center for International Security and Arms Control provided, more than once, a wonderful environment for doing so. Halfway around the world from Stanford, Harald Muller made possible my research on arms control at the Frankfurt Peace Research Institute. His foundational work on security regimes has inspired and deeply influenced my thinking. A fellowship at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard, made possible by Joseph Nye, immersed me in a stimulating intellectual environment and plunged me more deeply into US nuclear policy. At the University of Colorado at Boulder I benefited from some wonderful colleagues and the opportunity to try out my ideas on students. In recent years, my intellectual home has been at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown. I am grateful to Thomas Biersteker for creating such a vibrant intellectual community there.

Many additional individuals have provided important feedback. William Burr read numerous chapters closely and saved me from egregious historical errors. He brought his prodigious knowledge of archival sources to bear and was extraordinarily generous with both his time and his documents. Daniel Ellsberg, Raymond Garthoff, James Blight, and Peter Hayes provided valuable comments on the Vietnam chapter. Alexander Wendt, David Dessler, Hein Goemans, and Mark Suchman provided extensive comments on the theoretical chapters. Scott Sagan read an early version of the entire manuscript.

Others who provided valuable comments at various points along the way include Emanuel Adler, Stephen Brooks, Elizabeth Cousens, Matthew Evangelista, Abbott (Tom) Gleason, David Holloway, Terry Hopmann, Mark Lichbach, John Meyer, Richard Price, Randy Rydell, Duncan Snidal, Lawrence Wittner, Dean Wilkening, and William Wohlforth. Any errors of fact or interpretation remain mine, of course.

Numerous knowledgeable archivists at the National Archives made research there a pleasure. David Haight, archivist at the Eisenhower Library, and John Wilson, archivist at the Johnson Library, were indispensable in digging up ever-blacked-out nuclear weapons documents and assisting with declassification requests. I thank George Bunn for sharing with me his extensive personal files on no first use. William Arkin, many years ago, when he was still at Greenpeace, let me make use of his extensive clippings files on the 1991 Gulf War. Peter Hayes of the Nautilus Institute generously shared newly released documents on Vietnam.

For able research assistance I am grateful to Jeffrey Dillon, Cathryn Cluver, Stephan Sonnenberg, Emily Patton, Emily Kanstroom, and Joseph Nagle.

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I would not have made it through this project without the companionship, counsel, and encouragement of numerous friends along the way: Jeremy Adelman, Doug Blum, Chuck Call, Cathleen Fisher, Bobby Herman, Paul Kowert, Barbara Little, Anne Nolin, Steve Rauch, Andrew Tauber, Jeremy Telman, and Alex Wendt. Sarah Mendelson and Wendy Schiller knew when to drag me out for a drink and when to make sure I stayed in my seat.

My parents were wonderfully supportive throughout the process, although they began to worry that a nuclear bomb would get used before I finished the book. My stepfather, Kenneth Ford, an award-winning science writer and my favorite copyeditor, sharpened my prose in numerous chapters. My mother, Joanne Ford, remained ever encouraging. This book is dedicated to my parents – all three of them (my father, Peter Tannenwald, in memoriam).

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Finally, I thank my husband and fellow traveler, Mark Suchman, who undoubtedly has heard more than he ever expected about the nuclear taboo. He has been a constant source of support, tough critiques, good humor, two-by-two typologies, and, in the last three years, child care. Not only would this book not have been completed without him, it would not have been nearly as much fun, either.

Abbreviations

ABM	anti-ballistic missile
ACDA	Arms Control and Disarmament Agency
AEC	US Atomic Energy Commission
DDEL	Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS
DDRS	Declassified Documents Reference System
ENDC	Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee
FRUS	<i>Foreign Relations of the United States</i>
GA	United Nations General Assembly
GPO	Government Printing Office
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JFDP	John Foster Dulles Papers
JFKL	John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, MA
LBJL	Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, TX
NA	National Archives, Washington, DC
NSA	National Security Archive, Washington, DC
NSC	National Security Council
NSF	National Security Files
NPMP	Nixon Presidential Materials Project, College Park, MD
NPT	Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty
PALs	permissive action links
PNE	peaceful nuclear explosion
PNW	Preventing Nuclear War (treaty)
PP	Pentagon Papers, Senator Gravel edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971–72).
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitation Talks
SGML	Seeley G. Mudd Library, Princeton, NJ
VN	Vietnam

1 Introduction: the tradition of nuclear non-use

Within, at the most, ten years, some of those [nuclear] bombs are going off. I am saying this as responsibly as I can. That is the certainty.¹
C. P. Snow, 1960

Who could have believed fifty years ago that a new century would arrive – a new millennium – without any nuclear weapons being fired at a target? . . . Something quite unanticipated happened. Rather, something widely expected didn't happen.²
Thomas C. Schelling, 2002

More than sixty years have passed since the American use of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the only use of nuclear weapons in warfare. The non-use of nuclear weapons since then remains the single most important phenomenon of the nuclear age. Yet we lack a full understanding of how this situation arose and is maintained, and of its prospects for the future. As military historians have noted, it is rare for a weapon found useful on one occasion to remain unused in the next. Such an outcome was not inevitable. At the height of the nuclear arms race in the 1980s, nearly 70,000 nuclear weapons existed in the world's nuclear arsenals. In addition, an extensive array of military plans and organizations, national policies, public commitments, and alliances all contemplated the employment of such weapons. Many reasonable observers expected that nuclear weapons would be used at some point during the Cold War. It was thus by

¹ C. P. Snow, "The Moral Un-Neutrality of Science," address given December 28, 1960, reprinted in *Science*, vol. 133, no. 3448 (January 27, 1961), p. 259.

² Thomas C. Schelling, "Foreword," in Jeffrey A. Larsen, ed., *Arms Control and a Changing Environment* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), p. iii.

no means inevitable that, after their use against Japan in August 1945, a “tradition” of non-use would arise.

Why have nuclear weapons not been used in war since 1945? Why, for instance, did US leaders not use a small nuclear weapon on Iraqi troops during the 1991 Gulf War, when such a weapon would have been useful militarily and, in the desert battlefield, would not have killed many civilians? Iraq did not possess nuclear weapons and could not have retaliated in kind. If the military costs of using nuclear arms against Iraq were low, was US leaders’ desire to avoid use of nuclear weapons based on other considerations?

There is a widespread and systematic explanation for the non-use of nuclear weapons since 1945 – deterrence – but, as I show in this book, it is inadequate. Instead, while an element of sheer luck no doubt played a part in the fortuitous outcome of non-use, I argue that a normative element must be taken into account in explaining why nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945.³ A powerful taboo against the use of nuclear weapons has developed in the global system, which, although not (yet) a fully robust prohibition, has stigmatized nuclear weapons as unacceptable weapons – “weapons of mass destruction.” Without this normative stigma, there might have been more “use.”⁴ This book examines this taboo in the context of the nuclear experience of the United States and global nuclear politics from 1945 to the present.

This book is motivated by several empirical anomalies in deterrence, the conventional explanation of the non-use of nuclear weapons since 1945. First is the use of nuclear weapons in cases where there was no fear of nuclear retaliation, that is, the adversary could not retaliate in kind. This includes the first ten years or so of the nuclear era, when the United States possessed first an absolute nuclear monopoly and then an overwhelming nuclear advantage over the Soviet Union. It also includes non-use by the United States in Vietnam (where the United States dropped conventional tonnage equivalent to dozens of Hiroshima bombs), the 1991 Gulf War, the 2002 war in Afghanistan, and the 2003 war in Iraq. Fear of retaliation also does not account for why Britain did not use nuclear weapons in the Falklands, and does

³ For an appreciation of the fortuitousness, see Scott Sagan, *The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents and Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁴ By “use” I mean dropping or launching nuclear weapons in all circumstances other than testing. States have obviously relied on nuclear weapons in other ways, including for deterrence, threatmaking, and alliance relations.

not explain why the Soviet Union did not resort to nuclear weapons to avoid defeat in Afghanistan.

We could also turn the question around to reveal a second anomaly by asking why have nuclear weapons, supposedly fearsome deterrent weapons, *not* deterred attacks by non-nuclear states against nuclear states? China attacked US forces in the Korean War, North Vietnam attacked US forces in the Vietnam War, Argentina attacked Britain in the Falklands in 1982, and Iraq attacked US forces and Israel in the 1991 Gulf War. Knowledge of a widespread normative opprobrium against nuclear use may have strengthened expectations of non-nuclear states that nuclear weapons would not be used against them. A third anomaly is that, as Harald Müller has pointed out, the security situation of small, non-nuclear states has *not* been rendered as perilous in the nuclear age as a realist picture of a predatory anarchy would predict, even though they are completely defenseless against nuclear attack and could not retaliate in kind.⁵ Most non-nuclear states do not live daily in a nuclear security dilemma. Finally, if deterrence is all that matters, then why have so many states *not* developed nuclear weapons when they could have done so? Realist arguments that US security guarantees extend the US nuclear umbrella to these non-nuclear states are inadequate since some of these non-nuclear (but nuclear-capable) states lack US guarantees.⁶

This book argues that these patterns cannot be accounted for without taking into account the development since the end of World War II of a normative prohibition against the first use of nuclear weapons. This norm is essential to explain why nuclear weapons have remained unused even when it might have been militarily advantageous to use them, and in accounting for their special status as “taboo” weapons. The effect of this taboo has been to delegitimize nuclear weapons as weapons of war, and to embed deterrence practices in a set of norms, both regulative (regulating behavior) and constitutive (defining roles and identities), that stabilize and restrain the self-help behavior of states. In other words, the progressive development of larger and more deadly nuclear arsenals during most of the Cold

⁵ Harald Müller, “Maintaining Non-nuclear Weapon Status,” in Regina Cowan Karp, ed., *Security with Nuclear Weapons? Different Perspectives on National Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 301–39.

⁶ For example, states like Sweden and Switzerland. Scott Sagan offers a compelling exploration of this issue in “Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?: Three Models in Search of a Bomb,” *International Security*, vol. 21, no. 3 (Winter 1996/97), pp. 54–81.

War coincided with, and in fact took place within the context of, a collective cognitive and normative evolution moving in the opposite direction. This counterevolution enshrined the increasing unacceptability of using precisely those arms that were being acquired. This latter fact seems anomalous, too.

The deterrence explanation of the non-use of nuclear weapons is a “realist” one. Realism emphasizes the role of material power and interests, and the anarchical structure of the international system, in explaining political outcomes. A realist account claims that the non-use of nuclear weapons can be explained solely or primarily on the basis of material factors and that norms have played little role. Norms, if they exist at all, are simply a function of power and interests and thus produce no independent analytical leverage.⁷ Realists would deny that a taboo exists or that, if it does, it can be meaningfully distinguished from either the material interests of the actors or the behavioral pattern of non-use.

I show, in contrast, that the nuclear taboo has had an autonomous effect, and that an explanation involving a normative element is a better explanation for nuclear non-use than one without. I do not claim that the taboo is the sole explanation for non-use or that it explains most of non-use. Rather, in contrast to realism, which claims that material forces matter completely, I argue that the taboo is a necessary element in explaining the historical pattern of non-use. The taboo does not simply account for the “residual variance,” however. Norms often do not determine outcomes, they shape realms of possibility. They influence (increase or decrease) the probability of occurrence of certain courses of action. The nuclear taboo, by delegitimizing a particular weapons technology, has decreased the likelihood that nuclear weapons will be used.

At issue in this investigation is the mutual shaping of norms and interests. International relations scholars frequently suggest that international norms facilitate cooperation among states, but widespread skepticism remains regarding the role of norms in security issues – traditionally considered a “hard case” for demonstrating the existence (let alone the impact) of norms. A growing body of research

⁷ John Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994–95), pp. 5–49; Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Kenneth Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better*, Adelphi Paper No. 171 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981).

increasingly suggests the important role of norms even in security issues, however.⁸ Providing further support for this finding, this book argues that norms have played a much more important role in constraining the use of nuclear weapons than scholars have traditionally appreciated. While “interests” are a central part of the story of nuclear non-use, how these interests came to be defined is itself an important question. In the nuclear case, US leaders perceived they were constrained by an emerging “taboo” on nuclear weapons, which helped to shape their conceptions of US interests with regard to use of such weapons. The larger issue is how conventions (norms, taboos) affect military capabilities and thus the practice of self-help in the international system.

The unexpected tradition of non-use

Although the conviction that nuclear weapons should not be used is widely held today, the historical record suggests that at least through the 1950s this was not necessarily the case. In the first decades after World War II, many military and political leaders, and much of the public, expected or feared that nuclear weapons would be used again at some point. Nuclear threats issued by the United States (and also by the Soviet Union), although often difficult to assess precisely, were certainly more frequent in the 1940s and 1950s.⁹ High-level American officials also actively considered using nuclear weapons several times in the 1950s.¹⁰ In the Korean War and the Quemoy and Matsu crisis of 1954, for example, some (but not all) top American decisionmakers

⁸ See, for example, the collection of essays in Peter Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), and Ward Thomas, *The Ethics of Destruction* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001).

⁹ For in-depth analysis of cases of US use of nuclear threats, see Richard Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1987).

¹⁰ See, for example, Gordon Chang, “To the Brink: Eisenhower, Dulles and the Quemoy–Matsu Crisis,” *International Security*, vol. 12, no. 4 (Spring 1988), pp. 96–122; Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War: American Policy and Dimensions of the Korean Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Marc Trachtenberg, “A ‘Wasting Asset’: American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949–1954,” *International Security*, vol. 13, no. 3 (Winter 1988–89), pp. 5–49; Appu K. Soman, *Double-Edged Sword. Nuclear Diplomacy in Unequal Conflicts: The United States and China, 1950–58* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000). For the argument that US decisionmakers have generally been extremely cautious regarding the use of nuclear weapons, see McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Decisions About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988).

talked openly, loosely, and apparently seriously about using nuclear weapons to end these crises, and they introduced plans to back up their talk. Thereafter, one dangerous threat of nuclear war occurred during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, and eleven years went by before the superpowers again faced a nuclear crisis (the 1973 Middle-East war). By the time of the Cuban missile crisis, however, top US decisionmakers engaged in little serious discussion of using nuclear weapons.

Since then, although successive US administrations have worried about the resort to nuclear weapons in a crisis, scarce evidence exists that high-level officials have considered seriously the deliberate use of nuclear weapons to achieve either military or political aims. Over time, the era of nuclear crises came to be replaced by stable nuclear deterrence between the superpowers, and a more than fifty-year “tradition” of nuclear non-use emerged. This remained true even during the 1991 war against Iraq, when the changed circumstances of the post-Cold War world made nuclear exchange between the superpowers much less likely.

This “unexpected tradition” provides the starting point for this book. The book addresses three central questions: (1) why nuclear weapons have remained unused by the United States since 1945; (2) what factors have gone into establishing the tradition – or norm – of nuclear non-use; and (3) the political and military effects of this prohibitory norm on contemporary world politics.

The challenge of explaining non-use

The question of why nuclear weapons were not used during the Cold War is a difficult one, because the causes of “non-events” are notoriously difficult to pin down. A number of factors complicate efforts to isolate why nuclear weapons were not used, including the fact that non-use correlates with several other significant features of the Cold War: the absence of conventional wars between the major powers, the bipolar structure of the postwar world, and the *de facto* division of Europe into accepted spheres of influence.¹¹

¹¹ These are discussed in John Lewis Gaddis, “The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System,” in Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 215–45, and Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

For instance, while deterrence has been the widespread explanation, the lack of conventional wars between the major powers in the post-war period raises the possibility of deeper, underlying causes of nuclear non-use. As James Lee Ray and John Mueller have observed independently, it is unclear whether the real question should be why there was no war, or why nuclear weapons were not used.¹² The realist case (i.e., that fear of nuclear retaliation is the reason leaders avoided using nuclear weapons) would be easier to make if conventional wars had occurred and yet nuclear weapons were not used. As it stands, the situation leaves open the possibility that lack of interest in war in general was the real reason that war of any kind – nuclear or conventional – did not occur.

This possibility allows Ray to make the provocative suggestion that “moral progress” has to be taken into account in explaining why nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945. According to him, it is plausible that “a rising aversion to war has been a *necessary* intervening variable between the existence of those horrible [nuclear] weapons and the peaceful outcome of all crises among major powers since 1945.”¹³ In other words, in his view, if a moral abhorrence of war had not developed, nuclear weapons would likely have been used at some point after 1945. John Mueller goes even further to argue that nuclear weapons were “irrelevant” in the context of a more profound and generalized “obsolescence” of major war in the industrialized world that began to emerge after World War I.¹⁴

These arguments bear serious consideration and raise important questions about the direction of causal arrows: whether abhorrence of war has prevented use of nuclear weapons, or whether nuclear weapons have prevented war. I return to this issue in Chapter 2. It is clear, at a minimum, that any attempt to answer larger questions about the obsolescence of major war in the Western world must come to terms with the role and nature of nuclear weapons since 1945. Mueller’s provocative claims to the contrary notwithstanding, nuclear weapons have been the defining feature of the international relations of the postwar world. Sorting out the causal arrows first requires an understanding of the nature of normative constraints on

¹² James Lee Ray, “The Abolition of Slavery and the End of International War,” *International Organization*, vol. 43, no. 3 (Summer 1989), pp. 405–39; John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

¹³ Ray, “The End of International War,” p. 431, emphasis in original.

¹⁴ Mueller, *Retreat From Doomsday*.

nuclear weapons themselves. Moreover, Ray and Mueller are talking about major wars, but of course there were plenty of smaller wars, and it is precisely in these kinds of limited (and nuclear-unbalanced) conflicts that deterrence is least satisfying as an explanation of non-use.

The nuclear taboo

It is widely acknowledged today among nuclear policy analysts and public officials that a “nuclear taboo” exists at the global level. It is associated with widespread popular revulsion against nuclear weapons and widely held inhibitions on their use. Such hard-nosed analysts and prominent theorists of deterrence as George Quester, Bruce Russett, and Thomas Schelling have noted this phenomenon and suggested that it has played a role in explaining non-use.¹⁵ Schelling has argued that “the evolution of that status [nuclear taboo] has been as important as the development of nuclear arsenals.”¹⁶ Historian John Lewis Gaddis has argued for the important role of “moral concerns” in accounting for American non-use of nuclear weapons in the first decade or so of the Cold War, although he does not connect this sentiment specifically to the development of a taboo.¹⁷ McGeorge Bundy emphasized the weight of the “tradition” of nuclear non-use, and T. V. Paul has analyzed the relationship between a nuclear taboo and war initiation in the 1973 Middle-East war and the Falklands.¹⁸ As Schelling first noted more than forty years ago, the

¹⁵ George H. Quester, “Conceptions of Nuclear Threshold Status,” in Karp, ed., *Security with Nuclear Weapons?*, pp. 218–28; Bruce Russett, “The Real Decline of Nuclear Hegemony,” in James Rosenau and Ernst-Otto Czempiel, eds., *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges: Approaches to World Politics for the 1990s* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 177–93.

¹⁶ Thomas C. Schelling, “The Legacy of Hiroshima: A Half-Century Without Nuclear War,” Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy, at www.puaf.umd.edu/IPPP/Summer00/legacy_of_hiroshima.htm. See also Thomas C. Schelling, “The Role of Nuclear Weapons,” in L. Benjamin Ederington and Michael J. Mazarr, eds., *Turning Point: The Gulf War and US Military Strategy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 105–15.

¹⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, “The Origins of Self-Deterrence: The United States and the Non-use of Nuclear Weapons, 1945–1958,” in Gaddis, *The Long Peace*, pp. 104–46.

¹⁸ McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York, NY: Random House, 1988); T. V. Paul, “Nuclear Taboo and War Initiation in Regional Conflicts,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 39, no. 4 (December 1995), pp. 696–717. See also Peter Gizewski, “From Winning Weapon to Destroyer of the World: The Nuclear Taboo in International Politics,” *International Journal*, vol. 51, no. 2 (Summer 1996), pp. 397–419, and Theo Farrell and Helene Lambert, “Courting Controversy: International Law, National Norms and American Nuclear Use,” *Review of International Studies*, vol. 27 (2001), pp. 209–326.

special status of nuclear weapons is something we have come to take for granted today. No one today views a nuclear weapon as “just another weapon.” Whereas once countries such as Sweden and Switzerland assumed they would acquire nuclear weapons as simply the latest in modern weapons technology, no one in those countries now thinks this way.¹⁹ Major world leaders no longer talk about the possibility of using nuclear weapons on the battlefield.

The world-wide shift in attitudes toward nuclear weapons from 1945 to the present is well documented based on global public opinion, disarmament politics at the United Nations, and diplomatic statements in, and repeated resolutions of, the UN General Assembly. The outspoken antinuclear weapons stand of many developing countries has contributed to this shift. Other small countries such as New Zealand, joined more recently by Australia – which once thought about using nuclear explosions to excavate harbors – have openly opposed nuclear weapons. Events such as the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Soviet Union in April 1986, which dramatized the severe environmental disruptions and consequences associated with nuclear technologies, further contributed to antinuclear sentiment.

More recently, following the end of the Cold War, a small stampede to join the non-nuclear camp ensued. South Africa gave up its nuclear devices, and the newly independent states of Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, finding little use and much burden in the former Soviet nuclear weapons deployed on their territories, returned them to Russia, concluding that their futures looked rosier as non-nuclear states. A rejuvenated movement for total abolition of nuclear weapons arose, spearheaded in the United States by, among others, the unlikely figure of General George Lee Butler, former commander of the US strategic nuclear arsenal. The movement illustrated how far the shift in attitudes toward nuclear weapons had progressed since the days when President Dwight Eisenhower declared at a press conference that nuclear weapons should be “used just exactly as you would use a bullet or anything else.”²⁰

¹⁹ For how some countries came to abandon their nuclear aspirations see Mitchell Reiss, *Bridled Ambition: Why Countries Constrain their Nuclear Capabilities* (Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

²⁰ Dwight D. Eisenhower, Press Conference, March 16, 1955, in *Public Papers of the President of the United States* (Washington, DC: GPO), p. 56.

The decreasing legitimacy of nuclear weapons is not simply reflected in public attitudes, however. It is also manifested in, and reinforced by, numerous bilateral and multilateral nuclear arms control agreements, which together circumscribe the realm of legitimate nuclear use and restrict freedom of action with respect to nuclear weapons.²¹ Troubling developments in recent years include the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests of May 1998 and policy changes in the United States and Russia in the late 1990s and early 2000s suggesting new missions for, or renewed reliance on, nuclear weapons. Despite these worrisome events, however, the overall trend line since 1945 of decreasing legitimacy and increasingly circumscribed legality of nuclear weapons remains clear.

What makes it a taboo?

The “nuclear taboo” refers to a powerful *de facto* prohibition against the first use of nuclear weapons. The taboo is not the behavior (of non-use) itself but rather *the normative belief about the behavior*. In this book I refer to both norms and taboos. By norm I mean a shared expectation about behavior, a standard of right or wrong. Norms are prescriptions or proscriptions for behavior “for a given identity.”²² A taboo is a particular type of norm. According to the anthropological and sociological literature, it is a particularly forceful kind of normative prohibition that deals with “the sociology of danger.”²³ It is concerned with the protection of individuals and societies from behavior that is defined as or perceived to be dangerous, and it is central to the classification and identification of kinds of transgression.²⁴ A taboo typically refers to a “ritual avoidance,” something that is not done, not said, or not touched.²⁵ It thus involves socially constructed notions of danger as well as institutional mechanisms to localize the danger and regulate behavior (for example, to prevent “contagion” following a violation).

²¹ For example, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (1968), the Comprehensive Test Ban (1996), treaties that create nuclear-weapons-free zones in Latin America, the South Pacific, Africa, and on the Moon and the seabed, as well as US-Soviet arms control agreements such as the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (1972, no longer in force).

²² Peter Katzenstein, Alexander Wendt, and Ronald Jepperson, “Norms, Identity and Culture in National Security,” in Peter Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 54.

²³ Franz Steiner, *Taboo* (London: Cohen and West, 1956), pp. 21, 147; Margaret Mead, “Tabu,” *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. VII (Macmillan, 1937), pp. 502–05.

²⁴ Steiner, *Taboo*, p. 112.

²⁵ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Taboo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), pp. 18–19.

A taboo is also generally associated with such qualities as absoluteness, unthinkingness, and taken-for-grantedness. Its authority depends on individuals not thinking in detail about it. Individual adherence to taboos does not follow from deep reflection or calculation. As Verna Gehring notes, “the strength of taboos depends not on considered reflection, but on revulsion.”²⁶ Finally, a taboo may also often counteract deep urgings or temptations (the taboo on incest or pronouncing the deceased’s name). Other usages of the term associate it with notions of sacred and profane, and with religious imaginings.²⁷

What makes the prohibition against using nuclear weapons a *taboo* rather than simply a norm? There are two ways to assess the existence of a taboo: in terms of its objective qualities or in terms of its inter-subjective, phenomenological aspect, that is, the meaning it has for people. Objectively, the nuclear taboo exhibits many, although not all, of the characteristics of a taboo noted above. Like the anthropological conception of taboo, it is a prohibition, it refers to danger, and involves expectations of awful or uncertain consequences or sanctions if violated.²⁸ Further, it is also a “bright line” norm: once the threshold between use and non-use is crossed, one is immediately in a new world.²⁹ With conventional (non-taboo) norms, violations tend to be judged in terms of relative degrees of severity. Thus the use of one bomb, ten bombs, or 100 (conventional) bombs would represent an increasingly severe violation of a “regular” norm against their use. But in the case of a taboo, use of even *one* nuclear bomb moves one irrevocably to a new world, with all the unimaginable consequences that could follow. It opens a Pandora’s box. In other words, crossing this line has a transformative effect, and extensive measures might have to be undertaken to reconstruct the familiar world. Finally, historically, the nuclear taboo counteracts the deep attraction nuclear weapons present to national leaders as the “ultimate weapon,” a guarantor of national security and a symbol of great-power status. The taboo is a

²⁶ Verna Gehring, “The Nuclear Taboo,” Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy, Summer 2000, at www.puaf.umd.edu/IPPP/Summer00/nuclear_taboo.htm.

²⁷ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966/95).

²⁸ Radcliffe-Brown, *Taboo*, p. 26.

²⁹ “Taboos control such changes as the passage to an alien or strange setting from a more familiar one,” Steiner, *Taboo*, p. 116. Deterrence analysts commonly refer to the “nuclear threshold.” For an analogous non-nuclear example of such a threshold, one might consider the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on the United States. They produced this sense of crossing a bright line and creating a “new world” from which it may be impossible to return.

reminder of the danger that lurks behind this temptation and why the latter should be resisted.³⁰

Several aspects of the nuclear prohibition, however, are decidedly unlike that of other taboos: it is not legalized (many taboos in modern society are), and it does not entirely prohibit the acquisition of taboo objects or overt preparations for their use (unlike, say, the Hindu taboo on eating beef). Under the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the vast majority of states are prohibited from acquiring or possessing nuclear weapons. However, the five “declared” nuclear states (United States, Britain, France, Russia, and China) are allowed by the treaty to possess nuclear weapons temporarily pending complete disarmament and to prepare to use them.³¹ The prohibition is thus more legalized for non-nuclear powers (who are prohibited from acquiring the taboo objects) than for the declared nuclear states, who are instead constituted as a select priesthood with regard to the taboo objects.³² Although special status with respect to taboos appears quite common in traditional societies, in contemporary international relations this special status with respect to nuclear weapons is deeply contested. This book focuses primarily on the taboo as a prohibition on use, not on possession. However, there are connections between the two, which I explore in Chapter 9. Finally, in an era of modern, written history and self-reflecting actors, it is unlikely that the basis of the nuclear taboo remains obscure, or that it has developed or been adhered to entirely without benefit of either reflection or calculation.

Even if the nuclear prohibition does not quite possess all the objective characteristics of a taboo, however, it also possesses an intersubjective or phenomenological aspect: it is a taboo because people *believe it to be such*. Political and military leaders themselves began to use the term to refer to this normative perception starting in the early 1950s, even when, objectively, a tradition of non-use hardly existed yet. Of course, emphasizing talk as the criterion for the existence of a taboo invites skepticism. Why should we take this talk seriously if it does not correspond to the objective facts of the world? If decisionmakers see the use of nuclear weapons *as if* it were taboo,

³⁰ The dual nature of the bomb as both awesome and awful temptation to leaders is evident in the internal deliberations of almost every country that has thought about acquiring (or has acquired) nuclear weapons.

³¹ Under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the declared nuclear states are obligated to pursue complete nuclear disarmament.

³² On special statuses in relation to taboos, see Steiner, *Taboo*, p. 88.

however, as their rhetoric suggests, then this could affect their choices and behavior. In the words of sociologists William Thomas and Dorothy Thomas, “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”³³ This belief need not correspond precisely to an objective state of affairs out there in the social world. The fact that the word taboo is used sheds important light on how its users perceive the world.

This subjective and intersubjective sense of taboo-ness is one of the factors that makes the tradition of nuclear non-use a taboo rather than simply a norm. Even so, this belief is not entirely detached from objective reality. Evidence for the taboo lies in discourse, institutions, and behavior. The most obvious evidence for the taboo lies in discourse – the way people talk and think about nuclear weapons – and how this has changed since 1945. This includes public opinion, the diplomatic statements of states and leaders, the resolutions of international organizations, and the private moral concerns of individual decisionmakers. The discourse evidence is supplemented by international law and agreements that restrict freedom of action with respect to nuclear weapons, and by the changing policies of states that downgrade the role of nuclear weapons (e.g., shifts in NATO policy, the denuclearization of the army and marines; the build-up of conventional alternatives). In its early days, the emerging tradition of non-use was not technically a taboo in the objective sense described above, even though some decisionmakers referred to it as such. As the inhibition on use has developed over time, however, it has taken on more “taboo”-like qualities – unthinkingness, taken-for-grantedness. As a systemic phenomenon, the taboo exists at the collective level of the international community (represented especially by the United Nations), but this need not mean that all countries have internalized it to the same degree.

Some might argue that it is a contradiction to speak of an emerging taboo, because a taboo is simply the ultimate stage of the development of a norm. Taboos are not merely a final stage of normative development, however. Rather, they are a specific type of norm with their own development course. Thus taboos, like other norms, may indeed become more robust and taken-for-granted over time. But because taboos have certain distinctive aspects – the bright line

³³ William I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas, *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1928), p. 572.

quality, the prohibition, the sense of danger, and the intersubjective meaning – it is quite accurate to speak of an “emerging” taboo.

The distinction between norm and taboo is a subtle one, and for some purposes they can be treated as the same (I use both terms in this book). The importance of this distinction is that it highlights potentially distinctive behavioral consequences. We have suggestive evidence that people behave differently if they think something is a taboo. Most people who talk about use of nuclear weapons behave as if such use would be more of a breach of a taboo than a norm – that is, a violation would have transformative qualities.

A taboo and not simply a “tradition”

A further useful conceptual distinction can be made between a taboo and a tradition. Scott Sagan has questioned the existence of a nuclear taboo, suggesting that the phenomenon of non-use is better understood as a “tradition of non-use” than as an expression of a taboo because it is best explained by prudential rather than normative concerns. A tradition, he suggests, depends heavily on precedent and is easily disrupted by a violation, whereas a taboo is more robust. Non-use may be “due less to an internalized nuclear taboo,” he writes, and more to “longer-term material factors” and to “concerns about precedent setting.”³⁴

Sagan’s distinction is a useful one, and his notion of a prudence-based tradition is a strong argument and forms an important part of the explanation for the taboo. For two reasons, however, the nuclear taboo is not simply a tradition. First, as noted earlier, leaders and publics have come to view this phenomenon not simply as a rule of prudence but as a taboo, with an explicit normative aspect, a sense of obligation attached to it.

Second, a strong case can be made that the nuclear taboo qualifies as a “taboo” even according to Sagan’s definition. Not all violations would necessarily disrupt the nuclear taboo, suggesting that it indeed is more of a “taboo” than simply a “tradition.” As the pedophilia scandals engulfing the US Roman Catholic church in 2002 showed, the taboo against pedophilia was not lessened even by revelations

³⁴ Scott Sagan, “Realist Perspectives on Ethical Norms and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” in Sohail H. Hashmi and Steven P. Lee, eds., *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 82, 83.

of multiple offenses, implicitly sanctioned by moral authority and over long periods.³⁵

Similarly, although use of a nuclear weapon would certainly violate the taboo, whether such use disrupted the taboo would depend on the circumstances of its use and how other nations responded to the violation. A use by terrorists or so-called “rogue” states could be framed as an aberration, from which other nations could salvage a deeper appreciation of the negative effects of nuclear weapons and an increased sense of revulsion. A violation of this sort would likely spur new measures to strengthen the taboo. Indeed, such measures would be necessary to contain the danger posed by the violation. Inadvertent, accidental use would likely have a similar impact.

The harder case would be deliberate, “rational” use by one of the major nuclear powers, such as the United States. Still, even here, whether the violation fatally disrupted the taboo would depend heavily on the circumstances. Was US survival at stake? Were all other options exhausted? Other crucial considerations would include the specific consequences of the attack (e.g., the degree of collateral damage), and the international community’s interpretation of the event and the lessons that leaders and publics drew from it about the circumstances in which a nuclear attack could be justified. Containing the danger posed by the violation would require extensive political and diplomatic efforts to reconstruct the now-transformed world. Such efforts might be beyond the political capacities of the international community. In the most hopeful case, however, these efforts could actually reinforce the taboo, rather than signaling its demise. These factors suggest that the nuclear taboo is indeed more a taboo than simply a tradition.

Sagan’s notion of a tradition anchored in precedent is similar to Ward Thomas’ notion of “convention-dependent” norms – norms that are anchored in reciprocity and therefore last only as long as reciprocity does. Thomas gives the example of the norm against strategic bombing of civilians during World War II. Once one side breaks such a norm, the other side then feels free to (and generally does) follow suit.³⁶ There is a strong notion of “contract” at the core of these norms.

In contrast, in the case of a taboo, violation by one party does not necessarily constitute permission for violations by others. The single

³⁵ I thank Duncan Snidal for discussion on this section.

³⁶ Thomas, *The Ethics of Destruction*, pp. 34–37, 130–31.

use of a nuclear weapon would not necessarily constitute a permission for other countries to follow suit. If a rogue actor used a nuclear weapon against US troops or allies, strong reasons exist for the United States and others not to respond in kind – most importantly to maintain the perception that nuclear weapons are unacceptable weapons, and perhaps as well the distinction that only “barbarians” would use them. Although there might well be calls to respond with nuclear weapons, significant international pressure would also exist to resist such action and to reaffirm the taboo and the unacceptability of such weapons (this would be made easier by the fact that the United States possesses adequate conventional alternatives).³⁷

Still, the nuclear taboo is probably more fragile than other kinds of taboos, and thus is not quite the equivalent of a taboo on pedophilia or incest. Numerous violations of the latter can occur, and they remain fairly resilient. This is unlikely to be the case with the nuclear taboo. It may be that, in certain scenarios, even limited use of nuclear weapons could set a precedent, legitimizing their use for at least some conflict scenarios and thus fatally disrupting the taboo.³⁸ This is because a violation of the nuclear taboo is a very public event and the affected collectivity, the international state system, is a small one that lacks robust social mechanisms to contain the violation and prevent contagion from spreading. In contrast, a violation of the pedophilia taboo can be kept secret or quarantined. The relevant collectivity is large and a sizable community remains beyond the affected individuals that can still maintain the taboo. Few equivalent mechanisms of social containment exist in international society.

Thus while a violation of the taboo would not necessarily mean that the taboo would no longer hold, extraordinary measures would need to be taken to restore and reconstruct the world. Because it is hard to be certain precisely how fragile (or how resilient) the nuclear taboo is, and because reconstruction of a transformed world is vastly more challenging than maintaining the existing one, it is vitally important to err on the side of preventing any violations of the taboo. If a violation occurs nonetheless, for the taboo not to be fatally broken

³⁷ The shift from contract to taboo is exhibited quite clearly with regard to chemical and biological weapons, and the practice of torture, for example, where, through formal treaties, nations have essentially given up the right to retaliate in kind.

³⁸ This point was made by Thomas Schelling in the 1950s with respect to the Korean War. Thomas Schelling, *Nuclear Weapons and Limited War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1959).

the international community would have to respond extremely strongly with measures to reconstruct and strengthen it.

In sum, although the nuclear prohibitory norm has developed out of, and is associated with, a tradition of non-use, it can be viewed as a taboo and not simply a tradition both because people believe it is a taboo (with associated taboo-like qualities) and because, as it strengthens over time, it becomes decreasingly based on reciprocity.

Evaluating the role of the taboo

This book explores both how the taboo matters and how we account for its origin and development. The book does so through a set of decisionmaking studies and a broader process-tracing narrative that together analyze the rise and development of the taboo since 1945. About half the book consists of a comparison and analysis of US decisionmaking on the use of nuclear weapons in four historical cases: Japan 1945, the Korean War 1950–53, the Vietnam War 1961–73, and the 1991 Persian Gulf War. These are revealing cases for several reasons: they include both “use” and “non-use” (the dependent variable varies), and they span the Cold War, reflecting representative periods (before, during, and after), thus facilitating the analysis of normative change across time. In reality, these are not independent cases. Instead, there is an evolutionary or recursive quality to them, because what happens in one case has affected behavior in the next.

Most importantly, these are all cases in which mutual nuclear deterrence did not operate or operated only weakly. US leaders could have used nuclear weapons had they wished to, without significant fear of nuclear retaliation (and in one case they did so).³⁹ I focus on non-deterrence cases here on the assumption that if we can explain non-use on the basis of mutual assured destruction (MAD), we need not care about a taboo. Subsequently, however, I set aside even this assumption and expand the analysis of the taboo into “deterrence” itself.

US leaders used nuclear weapons on Japan to end World War II, contemplated their use to avoid defeat or stalemate in Korea – the most serious crisis of the early Cold War – but hardly considered their use

³⁹ US leaders worried about escalation in the Vietnam War, but not much about a direct retaliatory use of nuclear weapons by Soviet or Chinese friends of North Vietnam. See Chapter 6.

at all against non-nuclear Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War. Given that the initial Cold War decade set a precedent for subsequent years, the fact that nuclear weapons were not used in Korea warrants particular attention. And the 1991 Gulf War, far from being unremarkable, raised the question of whether normative restraints on nuclear weapons developed during the Cold War would extend into the “new world order.”

The decisionmaking studies are set in the context of a broader analysis, which traces the origins and development of the taboo during the Cold War and after, its institutionalization in multilateral and bilateral arms control and security cooperation institutions, and its effects on international politics more broadly. This broader analysis identifies and analyzes the primary causal factors and processes behind the development of the taboo in its various stages, and its sources in global antinuclear weapons politics, strategic concerns, and moral and ethical beliefs.

To show the autonomous role of the taboo, I identify three effects of norms: regulative, constitutive, and a secondary effect that I call “permissive.” While the regulative or “constraining” effect is a conventional conception of how norms work – largely compatible with rationalist formulations – constitutive and permissive effects take the analysis in a more constructivist direction. I show how these three effects have been reflected in empirical outcomes. The taboo has constrained (regulated) behavior. But it does so in part by helping to constitute the identities of “civilized” states, the category of weapons of mass destruction, and the practice of stable nuclear deterrence. The taboo may also inadvertently legitimize other forms of violence – a permissive effect. In other words, the taboo operates through indirect as well as direct effects. It has had more effects than both realists and rationalists recognize.

The analysis points specifically to several consequences of this normative development. First, it has decreased the perceived usefulness of nuclear weapons even where they might seem to be militarily useful. By delegitimizing nuclear weapons, the nuclear taboo has constrained self-help in the international system. Specifically, it has undermined the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence against non-nuclear states. Second, at the same time – and paradoxically – the taboo has helped to stabilize and legitimate the practice of nuclear deterrence between the superpowers. Although some strategic analysts and policymakers have long rejected making “no first use”

an official policy on grounds that it would weaken deterrence, this book argues that stable deterrence has been facilitated by precisely such a *de facto* assumption. The taboo has helped to stabilize, not undermine, mutual nuclear deterrence. This is not due to any of the conventional “technical” and “political interest” explanations, but results from a process over time of embedding deterrence practices in a set of norms (regulative and constitutive) that stabilize and restrain the self-help behavior of states. Thus the question here is not one of “norms” *vs.* “deterrence,” but rather one of norms *and* deterrence – that is, how norms are part of the practice of deterrence itself.

A third consequence of the taboo has to do with its implications for the status and identity of states in the international system. Although the taboo has helped to stabilize mutual nuclear deterrence between the superpowers, nuclear deterrence has not been viewed as a legitimate practice for most other states of the world. The taboo thus also helps to legitimize a hierarchical world order in the post-Cold War world through helping to define the identities of “civilized” states. The “normalizing” of stable deterrence has been increasingly challenged by developing nations that resent the fact that nuclear deterrence is considered legitimate for the nuclear powers but illegitimate for them. Developing nations contest the collective identities that are implied by the hierarchy that the non-use norm imposes on global politics. Hence they threatened, for example, to oppose the indefinite extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in April 1995, not primarily out of realist but out of status concerns. Norms are often contested. Thus has emerged a politics of nuclear non-use between the nuclear powers and the majority of non-nuclear states over how to deepen and strengthen the taboo and how to distribute the burden of responsibility for doing so. This “politics of non-use” involves the complex interrelationship among deterrence, the taboo, and the issue of who has access to the status of “responsible nuclear power.”

The origins of the taboo

What gave rise to the taboo? Within the field of international relations, there has been little systematic analysis of the taboo. As I noted earlier, traditional realists would be skeptical of the existence of a taboo, tending to see it as largely indistinguishable from prudential behavior. To the extent that a “tradition” of non-use existed, it would

reflect the interests of the most powerful (nuclear) states.⁴⁰ Rationalist approaches, which are often sympathetic to norms, could easily incorporate the existence of a taboo.⁴¹ They would emphasize the uniquely destructive nature of nuclear weapons, the impossibility of defense, and therefore the (obvious) rationality of having a social convention on their use.⁴²

However, the rise of the taboo historically has not been a simple function of the interests of the nuclear powers. Although the Soviet Union advocated such a norm, at least rhetorically, the United States, especially for the first fifteen years of the nuclear era, did not. Indeed, the taboo developed *in the face of* consistent, vociferous, and long-standing official resistance by the US government and other democratic nuclear powers. I argue for a broader explanation that emphasizes the role of a global antinuclear weapons movement and non-nuclear states, as well as Cold War power politics, in the development of the taboo. The model of norm creation here emphasizes the role of discourse and antinuclear politics in the rise of the taboo. Although rationalist variables are important, the taboo cannot be explained simply as the straightforward result of rational adaptation to strategic circumstances.

As Schelling has argued, the special status that nuclear weapons have come to possess is not purely a matter of technological singularity but is in part a matter of convention.⁴³ As Martin van Creveld emphasized in *Technology and War*, a study of the historical role and development of military technology, the shaping of particular understandings about weapons is very much a cultural and historical phenomenon. Weapons development and debates over them have not been couched entirely, or even mainly, in terms of military effectiveness as such; they are driven by cultural, social, and political considerations. Nobles in the sixteenth century, for example, objected

⁴⁰ For realist arguments on norms, see Krasner, *Sovereignty*, and Sagan, "Realist Ethical Principles."

⁴¹ For rationalist arguments on norms, see James D. Morrow, "The Laws of War, Common Conjectures and Legal Systems in International Politics," *Journal of Legal Studies*, vol. 31, pt. 2 (January 2002), pp. S41–S60; Jon Elster, "Social Norms and Economic Theory," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Fall 1989), pp. 99–117; Russell Hardin, *One for All: The Logic of Group Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), chs. 4, 5; and Edna Ullman-Margalit, *The Emergence of Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁴² They are uniquely destructive per pound or per weapon, but of course need not be more destructive than bombardment by conventional weapons in the aggregate.

⁴³ Schelling, "The Role of Nuclear Weapons."

to firearms and tried to ban them, partly on the grounds that they erased the distinction between nobleman and commoner.⁴⁴

Likewise, the rationalist account does not explain *how* the taboo developed nor some of the peculiar features of this development. The unique physical features of nuclear weapons have influenced but not determined their stigmatization as “taboo” weapons. The most important feature of the taboo is that the line that separates conventional from nuclear war has been meticulously preserved since 1945. In the process, notions such as “peaceful nuclear explosions” and the quite discriminate neutron bomb, both useful and defensible on various grounds, have been doomed to illegitimacy because they appeared to blur this distinction. But the preservation of this line was not the result of any clear vision on the part of governments – certainly not of the US government. Rather, it was the partly contingent outcome of ongoing domestic and international political struggles and debates over nuclear weapons policy (along with the fortuitous fact that nuclear weapons did not get used at some point along the way). At the core of these debates lay the enduring question of what constitutes “rationality” with respect to nuclear weapons and deterrence. Notions such as “peaceful nuclear explosions” or the neutron bomb, which today are regarded as merely scandalous if not crazy, were once dear to the hearts of government science and military bureaucrats, who offered all manner of “rational” arguments in their justification. Had such plans succeeded – and some of them nearly did – how we think about nuclear weapons today would likely be different. We might view them as more legitimate weapons.

Thus the taboo, as it exists today, is – like the pattern of non-use itself – more the fortuitous outcome of a successful “muddling through” the nuclear era than a clear-eyed rational development. The problem with a more rationalistic account is that it assumes what needs to be explained, that is, how interests with regard to nuclear weapons came to be defined. Simply attributing “abhorrence” to nuclear weapons fails to account adequately for the changing attitudes toward them, for they were not seen as prohibitively abhorrent during World War II but came to be seen so afterward.

⁴⁴ Martin Van Creveld, *Technology and War: From 2000 B.C. to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1989), p. 88. For a discussion of changing perceptions of “unfair” weaponry, see pp. 67–78.

Conventional rationalist analysis has little to say about either the origins or the stability of deterrence because it cannot deal with the origins of interests. Probing the latter issue requires investigating the politically and historically constructed nature of “deterrence” and nuclear weapons technology. This book draws in part on the recent “constructivist” turn in international relations theory to illuminate how evolving interpretations of nuclear weapons were shaped by cultural, political, and historical factors.⁴⁵ The account here highlights the non-linear and often contradictory path of normative development, as well as the role of implicit and *de facto* norms in international relations.

The larger question here is where global norms come from, how and why they develop, and how they are maintained, disseminated, and strengthened. The case of the nuclear taboo is important theoretically because it challenges conventional views that international norms, especially in the security area, are created mainly by and for the powerful. It is important practically because it illuminates key factors and processes that may contribute to normative restraint with regard to use of nuclear weapons.

Why the United States?

Although a full accounting of the tradition of nuclear non-use would necessitate telling the domestic stories of the other nuclear powers – Russia, Britain, China, France, India, Pakistan, and Israel – the United States presents the most interesting case. US leaders seriously considered the use of nuclear weapons and threatened their use on more occasions than any other nuclear power. The United States relied on nuclear weapons most heavily in its defense and alliance policies (the Soviet Union, in contrast, possessed large conventional forces, while China has had a “no-first-use” nuclear policy from the beginning), and “use” was well institutionalized in US military doctrine and operational planning. The United States also actually used the atomic bomb in war, the only country to do so.

At the same time, the United States is a democracy with a self-proclaimed tradition of the laws of war and a strong role for public opinion in the governing process. It is thus in some respects a “least

⁴⁵ For other examples, see Lynn Eden, *Constructing Destruction: Organizations, Knowledge, and the Effects of Nuclear Weapons* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), and Richard Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

likely" case for a nuclear taboo (heavy reliance on nuclear weapons) and in other respects a "most likely" case (democratic values domestically). Thus, it most clearly reveals the tension between a rationalistic military strategy (deterrence) and a socially constructed popular and elite opinion. US nuclear doctrine itself has exhibited significant changes over time in response to changing technologies, new interpretations of nuclear weapons, and evolving political context. Finally, the American experience of nuclear weapons has been both central to nuclear history and, given the US leadership position, has also significantly affected the rest of the world. These factors make the non-use of nuclear weapons by the United States after 1945 the most intriguing, important, and complex case.

How generalizable is this story? Although the circumstances of the United States were unique, aspects of this story may well be generalizable to other democracies, an issue I explore at greater length in the concluding chapter. The US case will be less relevant to illuminating how the taboo operates in non-democracies, a topic about which we know much less. Still, to the extent that this taboo has become a systemic norm, this study may yield meaningful insight concerning contemporary choices and possibilities. From a policy perspective, illuminating the role of the taboo in the decisionmaking of the most powerful nuclear state may offer important lessons for the goal of preventing nuclear war.

Although this book deals with US policy for use of nuclear weapons, it is not primarily about the evolution of US nuclear strategy and doctrine. There are by now many excellent works that recount and analyze in detail the bureaucratic and political process of planning for nuclear war and the development of US nuclear strategy and doctrine.⁴⁶ This book focuses primarily on the development of a nuclear taboo, and engages matters of nuclear strategy and doctrine only as they are necessary to understanding the rise and influence of that taboo.

The sources I draw on consist of the US documentary record on decisionmaking on nuclear use, including archival sources, other primary documents, memoirs of participants, secondary historical works, and, for the more recent cases, interviews with policymakers. I also

⁴⁶ Two of the classics are Lawrence Freeman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), 2nd edn, and David Alan Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960," *International Security*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Spring 1983), pp. 3–71.

draw on UN documents and records of other international organizations and arms control conferences dealing with nuclear weapons, as well as secondary and some primary works on the antinuclear and peace movements. The more liberal US declassification rules instituted after the end of the Cold War have permitted the release of hitherto highly classified and unavailable primary documents on nuclear weapons. While much remains to be released, these newly available documents, most of which have been obtained under the Freedom of Information Act by me and by others, along with new memoirs by key former high-level officials, permit a much more complete record of decisionmaking on nuclear weapons than we have had before, and thus a much fuller assessment. My research on the Vietnam War and on arms control policy has been facilitated by the recent publication of several new volumes of the US Department of State Foreign Relations Series of primary documents, as well as by an initial release of National Security Council records of the Nixon administration.

Implications

The analysis here joins a growing body of literature on prohibitory norms in international relations that seriously challenges realist arguments that norms are merely epiphenomenal.⁴⁷ While material constraints are part of the story of nuclear non-use, a purely materialist account of this phenomenon is impossible. Both theoretically and empirically, the evidence presented here illuminates the normative and institutional bases of stable nuclear deterrent relationships, forcing us to recast our understanding of how deterrence works. The analysis thus challenges narrow conceptions of deterrence that have dominated the field. Additionally, by illuminating the social and political processes by which a weapon has become stigmatized, and the categories through which we understand weapons, it sheds light on the nature and sources of restraints on the use of military technology.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Jeffrey W. Legro, *Cooperation Under Fire: Anglo-German Restraint During World War II* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Ethan Nadelmann, "Global Prohibition Regimes: The Evolution of Norms in International Society," *International Organization*, vol. 44, no. 4 (Autumn 1990), pp. 479–526; Richard Price, "Reversing the Gun Sights: Transnational Civil Society Targets Landmines," *International Organization*, vol. 52, no. 3 (Summer 1998), pp. 613–44; Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*; Thomas, *The Ethics of Destruction*.

One of the central findings of this book is the intimate link between rational self-interest and morality in nuclear policy. The nuclear taboo evolved out of, and is sustained by, a combination of strategic interests and moral opprobrium. But it is sometimes difficult to separate these two elements clearly. In the 1940s and 1950s, moral objections to nuclear weapons played a small but important role in shaping American inhibitions about the bomb. Later, moral objections were largely submerged when growing Soviet nuclear capabilities and the emerging superpower relationship of mutual assured destruction in the 1960s and 1970s made narrow self-interest an obvious rationale for US leaders to avoid use of nuclear weapons in Cold War conflicts.

But in the 1980s, the most extensive public moral discourse ever on nuclear weapons flourished in the context of a renewed and widespread antinuclear weapons movement. This discourse challenged both the morality *and* the rationality of nuclear deterrence. The taboo against first use of nuclear weapons is thus a norm of moral opprobrium which also reflects states' interests. There is no contradiction here, however. Norms are templates for interests and thus for what counts as "rational." In the end – as the evolving debate in the United States over the wisdom and morality of the use of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki reminds us – both morality and rationality are socially constructed.

This is not a story of moral progress *per se*, however. It is the story of how a weapon once viewed as legitimate has come to be widely regarded as illegitimate and abhorrent. Further, there is also a "dark side" to the taboo, as is evident in some of its indirect or "permissive" effects: the legitimation of other forms of violence. To date much of the research on international norms has emphasized their good and beneficial effects. The operation of the nuclear taboo also illustrates some less appreciated aspects of norms, including some of their "pathologies."

A final implication of this study has to do with the relationship between the taboo and the tradition of nuclear non-use in the future. As the world moves further into the post-Cold War era, a central question is whether the normative constraints on the use of nuclear weapons built up over the forty-five years of the Cold War will persist in the face of structural changes in the world that make nuclear escalation between the nuclear superpowers a much less likely prospect than it was during the Cold War. This removes a powerful

material constraint on use of nuclear weapons. Technological advances toward very small nuclear weapons, which some argue could be employed in a more discriminate fashion, along with the proliferation of nuclear weapons to new states or even non-state actors, could also challenge such constraints.⁴⁸

Plan of the book

The book is divided into ten chapters. The following chapter, Chapter 2, develops the central theoretical arguments of the book regarding the role, origins, and impact of the nuclear taboo. Chapters 3 through 9 constitute the empirical core of the book. The first five of these (Chapters 3–7) trace the evolution and role of an emerging nuclear taboo during the Cold War, while the last two (Chapters 8–9) analyze its role since the end of the Cold War in 1989. Chapter 3 begins with an analysis of the US decision to drop atomic bombs on Japan – the only use of nuclear weapons in war – and the elite and public reactions to it. It then traces the origins of the taboo from 1945 up to the start of the Korean War in 1950, locating its sources in early policy precedents and discursive categories established by President Truman and by the United Nations, and in a gradually growing revulsion regarding the effects of atomic weapons.

Chapter 4 analyzes US leaders' consideration of use of nuclear weapons during the Korean War, the most serious crisis of the early Cold War, when they contemplated use of nuclear weapons to avoid defeat or stalemate. The evidence suggests that their perceptions of an emerging nuclear taboo played a role in constraining their resort to the use of nuclear weapons during the war, even though such use might have been militarily advantageous for the United States. Chapter 5 analyzes the subsequent development of the taboo during the 1950s. During this crucial period, global antinuclear weapons politics played a key role in strengthening the taboo against competing norms of "use" of tactical nuclear weapons that were being promoted by the Eisenhower administration and institutionalized in the US military. This chapter highlights the role of societal pressure and Cold War power politics in the emergence of the taboo.

⁴⁸ The utility of "micro-" and "tiny nukes" is discussed in Thomas W. Dowler and Joseph S. Howard, II, "Countering the Threat of the Well-Armed Tyrant: A Modest Proposal for Small Nuclear Weapons," *Strategic Review*, vol. 19, no. 4 (Fall 1991), pp. 34–40.

Chapter 6 analyzes the role of nuclear weapons in the Vietnam War. Little has been written on this topic, yet the Vietnam War presents an excellent “test” of the nuclear taboo: the United States ultimately chose to lose this highly destructive and frustrating war rather than “win” it by resorting to tactical nuclear weapons. The chapter explores the reasons why nuclear weapons were not used, nor even considered seriously, and shows how the taboo became more firmly entrenched as a result of this experience. Chapter 7 traces the development of the taboo from the early 1960s to the end of the Cold War in 1989, and the beginnings of its institutionalization in bilateral (US–Soviet) and multilateral nuclear arms control and security cooperation agreements. The demise of the notion of “peaceful nuclear explosions” during this period, and the political defeat of the neutron bomb in 1978–79, contributed to the consolidation of the taboo.

Chapters 8 through 10 then examine the taboo in the post-Cold War era, when the bipolar structure of the international system eased and the risk of a superpower confrontation declined dramatically. Chapter 8 is a case study of the non-use of nuclear weapons by the United States in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the opening crisis of the post-Cold War world. Despite fears that Iraq might use chemical weapons against US forces and allies, and even though no danger of nuclear retaliation existed, top US decisionmakers scarcely considered the use of nuclear weapons. Instead, the United States deployed tremendous conventional firepower to the Gulf and at the same time rallied public support for a highly destructive war, in part by setting as one of its objectives the destruction of Iraqi nuclear facilities. The conduct of the war, as well as the convergence in destructive power of low-yield nuclear weapons and high-tech conventional weapons, raise questions about the “permissive” effects of the nuclear taboo, as well as some difficult issues for just war theory.

Chapter 9 broadens the focus to examine the implications of the nuclear taboo for non-use globally, and its world ordering impact. The politics of nuclear weapons are now primarily a North–South, not East–West, issue. The chapter analyzes nuclear trends since the Gulf War and the links between the nuclear taboo and non-proliferation. Today the politics of strengthening the taboo are centered on North–South disputes over asymmetrical obligations imposed by the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Through its selective and incomplete delegitimization of nuclear weapons, the nuclear taboo helps to structure a hierarchical, but increasingly contested, world nuclear order.

The final chapter, Chapter 10, summarizes the conclusions of the book, evaluates the implications of the taboo argument for both theory and policy, and extends the argument in various ways. It considers the robustness and future prospects of the taboo, the types of policies or activities that may support or undermine it, how it might unravel, and what institutional arrangements support or weaken it. Finally, it considers alternative normative routes to non-use, and the relationship between the taboo and changing normative attitudes toward war more generally.

I hope that by tracing the history and role of the nuclear taboo, we may understand more deeply how robust or fragile is the tradition of non-use, and how best to preserve it in the future.

2 Explaining non-use

The dog did nothing in the night-time. That was the curious incident, remarked Sherlock Holmes.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *Silver Blaze* (1894)

The dominant explanation for why nuclear weapons have remained unused since 1945 is deterrence, an explanation routinely mentioned in almost any text on the role of nuclear weapons during the Cold War.¹ In this chapter I critique this explanation, along with several other competing explanations for the non-use of nuclear weapons, on both theoretical and empirical grounds. I then introduce the taboo argument and outline the role of a nuclear taboo in inhibiting the use of nuclear weapons by the United States since 1945. I lay out a framework for evaluating the influence of the taboo in terms of three effects of norms and three pathways by which norms have effects. I then review the leading theories of norm formation and offer a model of how the nuclear taboo developed.

It is often noted that studying non-events – such as the non-use of nuclear weapons – poses special challenges for analysis. It would seem especially difficult to identify the causes of something that did not happen. Yet the study of important non-occurrences is central to the study of international politics (and social life in general, for that matter). We study why revolutions did not occur in some countries, why the debt crisis of the 1980s did not bring the international

¹ For systematic discussions see Michael Mandelbaum, *The Nuclear Revolution: International Politics Before and After Hiroshima* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), and Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

monetary system down, why the Cold War did not become a hot war, or why ethnic conflict does not break out in some regions.²

In reality, there is no such thing as explaining a non-event. Any such perception arises simply from our theoretical predispositions, which affect how we frame the issue. As James Fearon has usefully noted, the study of important non-occurrences depends crucially on the use of counterfactuals. What is actually being explained is a contrast between an actual event and a possible alternative or counterfactual event.³ Thus in the well-known short story by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle from which the epigram above is drawn, Sherlock Holmes was explaining not simply “why the dog didn’t bark,” but “why the dog sat silently, or slept all night, rather than barking.” In the nuclear case, the actual event (to be explained) is the resolution of a crisis through use of conventional weapons (or diplomacy) while the counterfactual is the resolution of a crisis through use of nuclear weapons. The important point is that we have a reasonable expectation that the counterfactual (barking, using nuclear weapons) was likely to or could easily have happened but for the crucial factor or factors that we identify.

Competing explanations for nuclear non-use

A review of the international relations and historical literature suggests five competing explanations for the non-use of nuclear weapons: (1) deterrence; (2) the undesirable or uncertain long-term consequences of a use of nuclear weapons; (3) nuclear weapons’ lack of military utility; (4) non-deterrence practical considerations (i.e., bureaucratic and readiness factors); and (5) the obsolescence of war. After showing why these explanations are insufficient, I turn to a sixth explanation, a nuclear taboo.

Deterrence

Deterrence is the dominant explanation for why nuclear weapons have remained unused since 1945. Although scholars have disputed the

² On the non-occurrence of revolutions, see Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). On why no hot war, see John Lewis Gaddis, “The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System,” in Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 104–46.

³ James Fearon, “Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science,” *World Politics*, vol. 43 (January 1991), pp. 169–95. I thank David Dessler for discussion of this issue.

effectiveness and consequences of deterrence during the Cold War, most agree that the overwhelming destructive power of nuclear weapons inhibited decisionmakers from resorting to their use, out of fear of retaliation by the adversary. Some accounts imply that this was a rational, unsurprising outcome of such fearsome weapons.⁴ Other accounts see it as the contingent (but not inevitable) outcome of a learning process on the part of national leaders.⁵ I describe the deterrence argument in more detail and consider its major strengths and weaknesses in explaining non-use.

The deterrence explanation for the non-use of nuclear weapons is grounded in rational deterrence theory, which dominated nuclear policy during the Cold War. Rational deterrence theory, associated with the “neorealist” perspective in international relations, claimed to provide both a general explanation of the US–Soviet nuclear stand-off and a set of guidelines for putting deterrence into practice.⁶ It focuses on the use of threats of retaliatory use of force to deter attack.⁷ The analytical power of the theory derives from a set of simplifying assumptions about how states seek to maximize their utility. Most deterrence theorists stress a strong material cost–benefit logic to deterrence and a strong rationalism.⁸

⁴ Kenneth Waltz, “The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better,” in Kenneth Waltz and Scott Sagan, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1995), pp. 1–45.

⁵ Joseph Nye, “Nuclear Learning and the US–Soviet Security Regimes,” *International Organization*, vol. 41, no. 3 (Summer 1987), pp. 371–402.

⁶ The literature on deterrence theory is extensive. Good overviews are Robert Jervis, “Deterrence Theory Revisited,” *World Politics*, vol. 31, no. 2 (January 1979), pp. 289–324; Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp. 9–103; and Paul Stern, Robert Axelrod, Robert Jervis, and Roy Radnor, eds., *Perspectives on Deterrence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁷ Rational deterrence theory posits three basic requirements for deterring an adversary: credible capabilities, a clearly communicated threat, and a credible willingness to carry out the threat. See William Kaufman, “The Requirements of Deterrence,” in Kaufman, ed., *Military Policy and National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1956), p. 19.

⁸ The best discussion in support of rational deterrence theory is Christopher Aachen and Duncan Snidal, “Rational Deterrence Theory and Comparative Case Studies,” *World Politics*, vol. 41, no. 2 (January 1989), pp. 143–69. Deterrence theory has at its core rational choice theory, to which it adds a set of assumptions about the nature of strategic actors. Rational choice theory provides a formal analysis of rational decisionmaking based on a set of simplifying assumptions about how individuals seek to maximize their utility. Useful discussions are Daniel Little, “Rational Choice Theory,” in *Varieties of Social Explanation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 39–67, and Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis*, Sage Library of Social Research, vol. 40, (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1977), pp. 77–100.

Deterrence is defined as dissuading an adversary from doing something it otherwise would want to do (and which is perceived as threatening) through threats of either *denial* or *punishment*, or a combination of these. First, a state can try to deter an adversary by convincing the adversary that it will fail to achieve its goals, in other words, by a credible threat of denial. Second, a state can try to deter an adversary by a credible threat of punishment, that is, by convincing the adversary that the state will inflict unacceptable costs (i.e., damage and destruction) on it if it persists in carrying out its course of action.⁹ Nuclear deterrence theory developed mainly around punishment strategies. It focused on the role of strategic nuclear weapons and strategic deterrence – the threat to attack a city with enormously destructive weapons and to inflict unacceptable damage on the population. According to the logic of deterrence theory, given the overwhelming destruction of a nuclear strike, even a small probability of nuclear retaliation suffices to make non-use the preferable course of action.

The role of tactical nuclear weapons, in contrast, emphasizes the denial side of the deterrence equation.¹⁰ Tactical nuclear weapons would supposedly be used to prevent the adversary from achieving its objectives on the battlefield (atomic land-mines might be used to stop breakthroughs of forces; tactical nuclear weapons could be used against concentrated forces and against armored divisions and elements).¹¹ The threat of radioactive fallout from a tactical nuclear attack might still deliver an element of punishment to the adversary, but this does not seem to be a primary purpose of such weapons. Moreover, tactical nuclear weapons have, over the years, been designed to minimize fallout.¹²

Applied to the US–Soviet relationship, deterrence theory appeared to offer a compelling and parsimonious explanation, based on rational self-interest, of why the superpowers did not use nuclear weapons

⁹ The distinction between punishment and denial was elaborated by Glenn H. Snyder in *Deterrence and Defense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 14–16.

¹⁰ There is a great deal of debate over the exact distinction between strategic and tactical nuclear weapons, and it depends in part on the context. In general, tactical nuclear weapons are short-range, low-yield compared to strategic nuclear weapons, are generally smaller and more portable, are of more diverse types, and involve decentralized command and control arrangements. See “Briefing Book on Tactical Nuclear Weapons” (January 2003) at www.armscontrolcenter.org/prolifproject/tnw/index.html

¹¹ Ivo H. Daalder, *The Nature and Practice of Flexible Response* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 58–63.

¹² The neutron bomb is an example of this.

against each other or each other's allies for the period after the late 1950s or so. The United States enjoyed undisputed nuclear superiority from the end of World War II through the mid-to-late 1950s.¹³ No wonder, then, that US leaders actively considered the use of nuclear weapons in Korea and other crises throughout this period. And they might well have used nuclear weapons to end the Korean War, for example, had the Chinese not finally agreed to US armistice terms. By the late 1950s, however, the situation had changed. With the development of thermonuclear weapons on both sides and increasing Soviet nuclear delivery capabilities, the United States began to be vulnerable to a Soviet attack. The US Strategic Air Command could no longer guarantee in a way convincing enough for cautious US policymakers that, in a nuclear war with the Soviet Union, New York would survive *under all circumstances*. Thus, according to this view, from the late 1950s, US leaders were deterred from seriously considering the use of nuclear weapons.¹⁴ This parsimonious explanation, it could be further argued, not only accounts for US and Soviet caution during the Cuban missile crisis but also for the subsequent emergence of arms control.

This explanation is compelling as far as it goes. However, it fails to explain fully the non-use of nuclear weapons, for three reasons. First, as noted in Chapter 1, there are a significant number of cases of non-use where deterrence simply did not operate. These include cases during the early years of the Cold War when the United States possessed a literal and then a virtual nuclear monopoly, and conflicts between nuclear powers and non-nuclear states. For these cases we must turn to other explanations.

Second, even when deterrence is applicable, gaps in the theory leave unclear on what basis deterrence actually operated. Specifically, the theory leaves undefined the crucial notion of "unacceptable costs" that is central to the question of "what deters?" Like all rationalist theory, deterrence theory takes interests as exogenously given. This is often a useful – indeed powerful – theoretical assumption for explaining a variety of behavioral outcomes in international relations. In this case,

¹³ Until 1957 the Soviet Union lacked a long-range bomber capability and thus could not credibly threaten the United States. For analysis of the nuclear balance see Richard Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1987).

¹⁴ For this view, see Robert Art, "The United States: Nuclear Weapons and Grand Strategy," in Regina Cowen Karp, ed., *Security with Nuclear Weapons?* SIPRI (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 57–99.

however, taking interests as given leaves us fundamentally unable to explain the criteria for “deterrence,” that is, what goes into leaders’ calculations of “unacceptable costs.” On what grounds precisely was the United States deterred from using nuclear weapons? Why did President Truman agonize over the possibility of using nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear adversary while President Eisenhower actively considered use of nuclear weapons in situations of less than compelling national interest? Why were only a few nuclear weapons considered enough to deter the Soviets in the early years while in later years deterrence was defined as requiring a much higher level of damage?¹⁵

For some deterrence theorists, the answer to the “what deters?” question is to be found in the nature of the weapons themselves. In the view of these theorists, nuclear weapons, because of their horrifying nature and overwhelming destructive power, are virtually automatic deterrents.¹⁶ Power capabilities themselves create deterrence. According to Kenneth Waltz, because of the high costs of nuclear war, and uncertainty about retaliation and uncontrollable escalation, “the presence of nuclear weapons makes war less likely” and “deterrent balances are inherently stable.”¹⁷ Power capabilities theorists tend to see mutual nuclear deterrence as quite robust in practice and some advocate the spread of nuclear weapons around the world as a stabilizing development.¹⁸ In their view, because it would be so irrational to use nuclear weapons, it is therefore not so surprising that they have remained unused.

There are several problems with this argument. One is that it assumes a high degree of rationality on the part of actors, i.e., that all actors will “correctly” perceive the deterrent threat and will act in some objectively rational way to avoid destruction. As I discuss below, the empirical support for this assumption is weak. A second problem is that to view deterrence as an innate quality of a weapon amounts to a kind of technological determinism. Often, in the past, beliefs that the destructive power of a weapon would cause war to be avoided (and the weapon to be unused), such as Alfred Nobel’s prediction

¹⁵ On this issue see Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance*.

¹⁶ A classic statement of this position is Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons*. See also Susan B. Martin, “Realism and Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Consequentialist Analysis,” in Sohail H. Hashmi and Steven P. Lee, eds., *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 96–110.

¹⁷ Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons*, pp. 33, 31.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

in the 1860s that dynamite would “lead to peace,” or Jules Verne’s claim that the submarine would make war “impossible,” unfortunately were shown to be wrong.¹⁹ Hopes during World War II that, in the words of British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, “mankind might be spared certain horrors because of fear of reprisals” were not borne out by the subsequent mutual bombing of cities and submarine attacks on merchant ships (although they were with regard to chemical weapons).²⁰ These examples are a useful reminder that what makes a weapon “too terrible to use” are not only its physical characteristics but also the strategic, normative, and cultural context, including “a civilization’s attitudes toward conflict.”²¹ As nuclear strategist Bernard Brodie observed, “technological facts are never by themselves alone decisive of the important issues.”²² Indeed, empirical evidence from the Cold War suggests that leaders’ confidence in nuclear deterrence varied greatly.²³

The assumption that nuclear weapons are self-evident deterrent weapons appears even less true when only one side possesses nuclear weapons, as examples of attacks by non-nuclear states on the forces of nuclear-armed states suggest. Thus even the combined 20,000 warheads of the US and Israeli nuclear arsenals failed to deter Iraq’s attacks with conventional weapons on Kuwait, Israel, and American forces in Saudi Arabia during the 1991 Gulf War. This example raises a central anomaly for deterrence theory, and especially for the power capabilities school: why does the nuclear threat appear to have little credibility in some cases? Here, normative factors appear necessary to any satisfactory explanation.²⁴

Further, contrary to what the power capabilities school would lead us to expect, US efforts during the Gulf War to destroy nascent Iraqi nuclear facilities suggested that US leaders were unwilling to rely on the enormous US nuclear arsenal to deter use of a future Iraqi bomb. Many lacked confidence that Saddam Hussein could be deterred, in part because he did not appear to subscribe to a range of international

¹⁹ Ray, “The End of International War,” pp. 429–30.

²⁰ Quoted in Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 2nd edn, p. 40.

²¹ Martin Van Creveld, *Technology and War: From 2000 B.C. to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1989), pp. 71–72.

²² Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 392.

²³ Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 357–61.

²⁴ On this point see also Harald Müller, “Maintaining Non-Nuclear Weapons Status,” in Cowen Karp, ed., *Security With Nuclear Weapons?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) p. 304.

norms cherished by “civilized” nations, including the belief that nuclear weapons should not be used.²⁵ Thus the West was reluctant to rely solely on nuclear deterrence against a future nuclear-armed Iraq and preferred to forcefully eliminate the nascent threat.²⁶ The Iraq example suggests the key role of shared norms in bolstering or undermining nuclear deterrence. Lawrence Freedman’s concept of “internalized deterrence” points in a similar direction, linking stable deterrence to the inculcation of norms in the target. He argues that a norms-based, rather than interest-based, approach to deterrence “may better reflect how deterrence actually works in practice, through actors internalizing a sense of appropriate limits on their actions.”²⁷

In sum, nuclear capabilities alone do not automatically produce deterrence. If nuclear weapons have come to be viewed as deterrent weapons, this is because of a process of historical development and construction. It is not a fact that can be deduced from the nature of the technology alone. In order to determine “what deters” and how deterrence “works,” including what goes into defining “unacceptable costs,” the identity and interests of the actors, as well as the political and normative context, must be examined.

This point leads to a third major weakness of deterrence theory – that important causal factors appear to lie outside the theory. These include psychological factors, domestic politics, and, as I emphasize in this book, normative factors. Even as the prospect of mutual annihilation came to play the dominant role in deterring the superpowers from using nuclear weapons against each other during the Cold War, significant gaps between the theory and practice of deterrence in the postwar period raised questions about just how, and on what basis, deterrence actually functioned.²⁸ Beginning in the mid-1970s, the

²⁵ Of course, Iraq was not deterred by US conventional forces either, even though there was no norm constraining use of such forces in these circumstances. Thus the conclusion may be either that the US threat of force (of any kind) was not credible or the Iraqi government was simply irrational. If the former, one must then ask why the threat was not credible, and this opens the door to a variety of explanations, including normative ones. The nuclear deterrence point remains relevant, however, because claims made for the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons are vastly more sweeping and confident than the claims made for the deterrent effect of conventional forces.

²⁶ For the power capabilities argument that US nuclear deterrence would deter Iraq’s use of weapons of mass destruction, see Richard Rhodes, “Bush’s Atomic Red Herring,” *New York Times*, November 27, 1990, p. A23.

²⁷ Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (Polity, 2004), p. 5.

²⁸ In evaluating the effectiveness of deterrence, it is useful to distinguish between “general deterrence” – preventing the outbreak of nuclear war – and “immediate deterrence” – preventing specific threatening actions by the adversary. General deterrence

accuracy and usefulness of rational deterrence theory became a matter of serious dispute among scholars. Critics charged variously that it was inadequate on psychological grounds and that it failed to accurately predict outcomes. Many empirical findings could not be squared with the assumptions of rationality, and the actual practice of deterrence often depended on factors other than those identified by the theory.²⁹

For example, deterrence theory assumes that aggressors are opportunity-driven, instrumentally rational actors who dispassionately calculate the defender's resolve and military capability before acting. Yet psychological factors such as "wishful thinking," "motivated bias," or crisis-induced stress, for example, or domestic political pressures or perceived defensive needs may drive leaders to act contrary to the predictions of the theory.³⁰ Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat launched a war against Israel in 1973 knowing Egypt would lose against the much more powerful Israeli military. Domestic politics, in this case the need to stand up to Israel, helps explain why he would launch a war he would surely lose (and did). Japan's fateful attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and Iraq's willingness to fight the United States in 1991 provide similar examples. In these cases, domestic politics put pressures on leaders to act in ways that rational deterrence theory cannot explain.³¹

This discussion points to significant anomalies for rational deterrence theory, suggesting the need to take other causal factors into

held up during the Cold War, while immediate deterrence failed on several occasions. See Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, pp. 351–55. For a slightly different definition of this distinction, see Morgan, *Deterrence*, pp. 25–45.

²⁹ Important critiques are Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, "Rational Deterrence Theory: I Think, Therefore I Deter," *World Politics*, vol. 41, no. 2 (January 1989); Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*; Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*. For an excellent overview, see the debate in the January 1989 issue of *World Politics*.

³⁰ Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 58–113; Richard Ned Lebow, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: Reading the Lessons Correctly," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 98 (Fall 1983), pp. 431–58.

³¹ Lebow and Stein, "I Think, Therefore I Deter," p. 220. For an extended discussion see Lebow and Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War*, pp. 328–33. Note that failure of deterrence policy is not the same as failure of deterrence theory. Rational deterrence theory implies that deterrence will not always be successful (i.e., when the defender carries out deterrence poorly or improperly). On this point see Jervis, "Rational Deterrence," p. 187, and Aachen and Snidal, "Rational Deterrence Theory," p. 152.

account. Deterrence theory does not apply in numerous cases of nuclear non-use, and even when it does, important explanatory factors appear to lie outside its purview. This suggests that one must look beyond deterrence theory itself to understand what supports (and what undermines) nuclear deterrence.

Non-deterrence explanations

In the absence of deterrence, what might explain why US leaders refrained from using nuclear weapons even in cases where there was little fear of retaliation? I suggested earlier that five answers are possible: first, leaders were concerned about the uncertain long-term military consequences of the use of nuclear weapons; second, nuclear weapons lacked military utility; third, other military and bureaucratic constraints on use of nuclear weapons operated; fourth, major war itself has become obsolete; and fifth, the rise of a nuclear taboo. I consider the first four and then turn to the taboo.

Shadow of the future

A first non-deterrence explanation emphasizes the “shadow of the future,” that is, concerns about the long-term military consequences of a use of nuclear weapons. According to this line of argument, US leaders refrained from using nuclear weapons – even against only conventionally armed adversaries – out of fear of the long-term consequences of such use.³² That is, a use by the United States of nuclear weapons would set a precedent, and down the road, other nuclear-armed states might feel free to use them against US territory, troops, allies, or other countries.

Although this explanation might be folded into a deterrence account (because it involves military cost-benefit calculations of using nuclear weapons), it is more usefully seen as a non-deterrence explanation because it can also operate in the absence of deterrence, as a result of concerns about nuclear proliferation, for example. If this factor explains particular instances of non-use, we should expect to see in the evidence decisionmakers arguing that using nuclear weapons would have undesirable or uncertain long-term military consequences apart from any concerns about immediate retaliation by the adversary.

This is a strong, parsimonious argument. In fact, at first glance it is the most powerful materialist alternative to the taboo explanation

³² For this argument see Sagan, “Realist Perspectives on Ethical Norms,” pp. 82–83.

because it can account for non-use even when deterrence is not operating. As I discuss later, however, this explanation is somewhat slippery because it is not entirely materialist.

Nuclear weapons lacked utility

The most extreme view of why nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945 is the occasionally cited argument that they lacked military utility. In this view – a hyperrealist argument – norms, if there are any, are simply frosting on the cake. They merely prohibit what states did not want to do anyway. As the philosopher Max Black noted, there is no need for rules prohibiting cats from barking. Leaders did not find nuclear weapons useful and hence did not use them.³³

It is difficult to either demonstrate decisively the utility of a weapon, or disprove its utility, when it has been used so rarely. Still, the lack of utility argument is weak on both empirical and theoretical grounds. First, if the rather sweeping claim that nuclear weapons lacked military utility is true, it is difficult to explain why the US and Soviet militaries devoted such enormous energy and resources to developing, acquiring, and deploying tens of thousands of warheads and to formulating detailed plans for their use. Bureaucratic politics and budget imperatives may account for some of this, but they cannot account for the gigantic scale of investment – more than \$5 *trillion* since 1940 for the United States alone³⁴ – if military leaders really believed such weapons lacked utility.

Second, there is strong *prima facie* evidence that many political and military leaders believed that nuclear weapons were indeed useful. To see this, one must draw the distinction between strategic and tactical nuclear weapons. Most leaders and publics came to view strategic nuclear weapons as city busters, suitable for use basically as weapons of terror. In practical terms, such weapons were unusable for anything but deterrence.³⁵ This was President Eisenhower's view, for example.³⁶

³³ Stephen Walt, in comments to the author. This argument essentially dismisses the usefulness of the counterfactual.

³⁴ Stephen I. Schwartz, ed., *Atomic Audit: The Costs and Consequences of US Nuclear Weapons Since 1940* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

³⁵ It was only with the development of thermonuclear weapons in the mid-1950s that nuclear weapons really took on this genocidal quality.

³⁶ See Andrew P. N. Erdmann, " 'War No Longer Has Any Logic Whatever': Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Thermonuclear Revolution," in John Lewis Gaddis *et al.*, eds., *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 87–119.

In contrast, similar doubts did not attach to tactical nuclear weapons. War planners have viewed tactical nuclear weapons, primarily intended for detonation on the battlefield, as militarily useful from their inception. Starting in 1951, during the Korean War, the United States moved to “forward deploy” such tactical nuclear weapons and components overseas, nearer to anticipated battlefields in Asia and Europe. It eventually deployed a wide variety of battlefield missiles, bombs, and atomic demolition munitions to twenty-seven locations around the world.³⁷ These weapons have consistently been treated as instruments of warfare and discussed in terms of warfighting, deterrence, and battlefield use. The blast, firestorm, and radiation make them more powerful than conventional weapons (although this also gives them some significant liabilities). Military planners have argued that such weapons would be useful for digging artillery tubes out of fortified sites, attacking massed troop formations, flattening bases, destroying bridges, tunnels and airfields, and establishing radioactive “hot” zones.³⁸ Since the advent of thermonuclear weapons, there has been no doubt as to their military effectiveness. As the cases in this book show, leaders debated whether nuclear weapons would be useful in specific contexts, but in every instance numerous political and military figures argued that such weapons would indeed be militarily useful.³⁹

Thus, if states did not find tactical nuclear weapons “useful” in actual crises, the question is *why*? Here the rationalist assumptions undergirding the “lack of utility” argument are limiting. The rationalist explanation would hold that the technical characteristics of nuclear weapons (their indiscriminate nature, radiation effects and so on)

³⁷ Robert Norris, William Arkin, and William Burr, “Where They Were,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 55, no. 6 (November/December 1999), pp. 26–31.

³⁸ Steve D. Biddle and Peter D. Feaver, eds., *Battlefield Nuclear Weapons: Issues and Options*, Occasional Paper No. 5 (Cambridge, MA: Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, 1989), and Daalder, *The Nature and Practice of Flexible Response*.

³⁹ In recent years, military analysts have argued that nuclear weapons would have tactical utility in destroying deeply buried targets, mobile strategic targets, and a ballistic missile armed with weapons of mass destruction preparing to launch. See, for example, Bryan L. Fearey, Paul C. White, John St. Ledger, and John D. Immele, “An Analysis of Reduced Collateral Damage Nuclear Weapons,” *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 22, no. 4 (October/November 2003), pp. 304–24. The US 2002 Nuclear Posture Review, portions of which were leaked, contained an increased emphasis on the tactical utility of nuclear weapons. Available at www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm. Of course, debates over utility are hardly unique to nuclear weapons. Debates over the utility of almost any weapon in battle – tanks, helicopter gunships, mines – are part and parcel of fighting any war.

made them unusable on the battlefield. However, if this is true, rational military services should have little interest in acquiring such weapons. This obviously has not been the case. This latter fact suggests either a “non-rational” reason for acquiring unusable weapons, or, alternatively, that the weapons were in fact useful but there were other (“non-rational”) reasons why they were not used.

In fact, decisionmaking on the use of nuclear weapons was never simply a debate about military utility but always involved political and normative considerations. In some cases, it was not military doubts that carried the day but arguments about political and normative costs. The 1991 Gulf War provides a strong case. It is hard to come up with a reason why tactical nuclear weapons would not be militarily useful in the desert of Iraq, but it is much easier to come up with a reason why using them is not worth the normative cost. The best that a realist explanation of this case could say is that the United States possessed adequate alternatives to nuclear weapons.

Some might argue that nuclear weapons were useful only in an extremely narrow range of circumstances and those circumstances never arose in Cold War or post-Cold War contingencies. This is certainly a “lesson” we have come to learn in retrospect, but it is not what many military and political leaders thought in the 1950s when the United States was increasing reliance on nuclear weapons in its security policy. Instead, as I show in future chapters, the development of the belief that nuclear weapons are useful, if at all, only in a narrow range of circumstances had as much to do with political and normative factors as with any lack of military utility *per se*.

Issues of military utility have certainly been central to considerations of use of nuclear weapons, but as an explanation of the overall pattern of non-use, the “lack of utility” argument is both historically incorrect and limited theoretically by its rationalist assumptions. It risks falling into the tautological trap of inferring lack of utility from the fact that the weapons were not used and then using that “lack of utility” to explain non-use. This would be an example of “revealed preferences,” but behavior ought not to be used to reveal preferences. As Jon Elster notes, the ease with which one can tell “just-so stories” – *post-hoc* accounts about the utility or rationality of almost anything – should make one suspicious of them.⁴⁰ The more interesting question

⁴⁰ Jon Elster, “Social Norms and Economic Theory,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1989), p. 115.

is how conceptions of the military utility of nuclear weapons changed over time, and the role of normative factors in this process.

Non-deterrence material constraints

A third explanation identifies a broad set of non-deterrence material constraints that would account for non-use, including an array of bureaucratic or internal considerations: lack of organizational readiness, shortage of bombs, shortage of delivery vehicles, and so on. Here the emphasis is on various kinds of material and military considerations other than deterrence.

If these factors explain particular instances of non-use, we should expect to see in the evidence decisionmakers arguing that there were not enough bombs to use or that the military was unprepared to wage nuclear war. We could rule out this argument if, for example, it appeared that leaders believed that the nuclear stockpile was adequate and sufficient delivery vehicles existed, that the military was prepared to use nuclear weapons, or if none of these factors appeared to be decisive in a decision. As I will show, many of these constraints did operate in the early years, but many of them eventually dropped away as the US nuclear arsenal expanded. Further, as I discuss below, some of these so-called pragmatic constraints may not be entirely independent of the rise of a nuclear taboo.

The obsolescence of war

A fourth non-deterrence explanation is an ideational one. It points to a growing abhorrence of major war on the part of Western publics and elites, and argues that this, not deterrence or a specifically *nuclear* taboo, is the main reason why nuclear weapons have remained unused since 1945. According to John Mueller, the experience of two horrific world wars drove home to Western publics and leaders the costliness and atrocity of war, leading to a profound and generalized trend under way since World War I toward the “obsolescence” of major war in the industrialized West. Fear of a conventional World War III has been sufficient to deter any major war during the Cold War, he argues, and nuclear weapons were peripheral or even “irrelevant” to this outcome.⁴¹

⁴¹ John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

This ideational argument is important and provocative, but it is overstated. If it were correct, no distinctions should exist between nuclear weapons and other kinds of weapons that can kill a lot of people, such as conventional bombing. Further, we should expect nuclear weapons to have been used in minor wars. For example, in the “minor” wars that did take place (Korea, Vietnam, the 1991 Gulf War, the 2002 war in Afghanistan, the 2003 Iraq War) we should have expected US leaders to have used nuclear weapons and not to have regarded them as anything special.⁴² Neither was the case. Further, if Mueller’s argument is correct, we would also expect that Cold War leaders were mainly concerned with a conventional World War III. Yet it is clear from the documentary record that leaders feared escalation to *nuclear* war, not simply conventional war, and that this played a key role in inducing caution in leaders during some Cold War crises (such as during the Cuban missile crisis).⁴³ Thus, although abhorrence of major war may have contributed to inducing restraint in US leaders during the Cold War, and perhaps to public distaste of the weapons of major war (such as nuclear weapons), it cannot by itself account for US leaders’ non-use of nuclear weapons in *any* war.

Beyond material explanations: a nuclear taboo

With the important exception of Mueller’s argument, a key feature of the deterrence and other conventional explanations for non-use is that they are primarily materialist. They emphasize the effect of material power and other more bureaucratic material considerations. Normative or ideational factors tend to play little role in these explanations. Indeed, the operation of rational “self-interest” in the case of nuclear non-use has seemed so self-evident that there has appeared little need to invoke the role of norms.

In this section, however, I propose a sixth explanation for nuclear non-use: the rise of a nuclear taboo. This taboo is not the sole explanation for the non-use of nuclear weapons (non-use has also occurred for other reasons), but it is an essential part of explaining this phenomenon. The taboo argument not only helps to explain non-use in cases where deterrence theory fails or does not operate, but can also address

⁴² Whether a use of nuclear weapons would have turned “minor” wars into major wars was an issue in the debates over “limited war” during the Cold War, but it has become a far less salient concern since 1989. See Chapter 5.

⁴³ See Gaddis *et al.*, *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb*.

some unresolved anomalies in the rational deterrence theory framework. This argument builds on other work on norms but adds some novel conceptions, in particular, on the constitution of permissive norms. I first present three effects of norms – regulative, constitutive, and permissive – and apply them to the case of the nuclear taboo. I identify three mechanisms or pathways by which norms influence decisionmaking and discuss how we would know that the taboo carries explanatory weight.

How norms work: three normative effects

It is useful to think about the role of norms in terms of three kinds of effects: regulative (or constraining), constitutive, and a subcategory of constitutive effects that I call “permissive.” It is frequently noted that there are different types of norms and rules.⁴⁴ Since any given norm can operate in different ways, however, and may have multiple effects, it is useful analytically to think in terms of different kinds of *effects* of norms.

Regulative effects, emphasized by rationalist approaches to international relations, refer to how norms constrain or “regulate antecedently existing activities.”⁴⁵ For example, a norm or law against killing regulates a behavior that would exist whether or not there were rules about it. Such normative effects may or may not be “functional” or rational.⁴⁶ The primary regulative effect of the nuclear taboo is embodied in the injunction against using nuclear weapons first. It constrains a behavior (nuclear use) that would exist whether or not there were any rules about it.

In contrast, *constitutive effects*, emphasized by constructivist perspectives, refer to how rules and norms, through actor practices, create or define forms of behavior, roles, and identities.⁴⁷ Norms shape

⁴⁴ Friedrich V. Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms and Decisions; On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁴⁵ John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 27. For rationalist approaches, see Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Barry Weingast, “A Rational Choice Perspective on the Role of Ideas: Shared Belief Systems and State Sovereignty in International Cooperation,” *Politics and Society*, vol. 12 (December 1995), pp. 449–64; Elster, “Social Norms and Economic Theory.”

⁴⁶ Jon Elster in *The Cement of Society: A Study of Social Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) provides a good discussion of irrational and “bad” norms.

⁴⁷ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Emanuel Adler, “Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism

fundamental categories through which actors conceptualize the world. They “tell us *how* certain acts are performed” and set up relations between actors.⁴⁸ The classic example in international relations is the sovereign state.⁴⁹ In a rationalist account, norms constrain exogenously given self-interest and behavior, or lead to recalculations of self-interest by changing the “price” of behavior.⁵⁰ In contrast, in the constructivist view – developed especially in the sociological literature – norms shape conceptualizations of interests through the social construction of identities.⁵¹ Actors conform to, and reproduce, norms in order to validate social identities; it is in the process of validating identities that interests are constituted.

The nuclear taboo exhibits several constitutive effects: the categories actors use to understand weapons, the practice of stable deterrence, and the identity of “‘civilized’ state.” First, the taboo helps to define a category of unacceptable “weapons of mass destruction,” distinguished from unproblematic legitimate and usable “conventional” weapons. A second constitutive effect of the taboo is the practice of stable nuclear deterrence. Stable nuclear deterrence could not be taken for granted before the end of the 1950s, since there was as yet no expected process by which US–Soviet relations were conducted, and few shared norms. After 1962, deterrence was stabilized by a host of US–Soviet arms control agreements, especially the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. These agreements embodied a variety of understandings about nuclear weapons and were based implicitly on the expectation that nuclear weapons should not be used. A non-use norm thus *helped to stabilize, not undermine*, mutual nuclear deterrence, not by any technical means but by helping to embed deterrence in a set of practices, institutions, and expectations.

and World Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 3 (1997), pp. 319–63; Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms and Decisions*; Nicholas Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

⁴⁸ G. H. von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 151.

⁴⁹ Thomas J. Biersteker and Cynthia Weber, eds., *State Sovereignty as Social Construct* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁵⁰ George Stigler and Gary Becker, “De Gustibus Non est Disputandum,” *American Economic Review*, vol. 67 (1977), pp. 76–90.

⁵¹ Francesca Cancian, *What Are Norms?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), part III, pp. 129–84; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Relations*.

Third, the taboo has also become part of a broader discourse – a set of practices – of the international law and diplomacy of the society of states, which defines what it means to be a “civilized” member of the international community. One of the requirements for being a “civilized” state is participation in the regulation of warfare which began among European states during the nineteenth century. Along with other requirements, the laws of war helped to define a notion of “civilization” by which Europeans distinguished between those nations who were members of the “civilized” world and those outside, “barbarians” or “savages.”⁵² Only those capable of complying with the rules were considered members of the community of nations and thus entitled to all its privileges and benefits. Others, the “uncivilized,” could be ostracized, and the restraints of the laws of war, which aimed to bring a minimum of humanitarian standards to the battlefield, could be dispensed with in any battle against the barbarians.⁵³

Thus at one level the standard of civilization was a set of behavioral injunctions, a set of regulative norms governing warfare. At the same time, however, compliance with these norms helped to define the collective identities of actors in the international system: the “civilized” and the “uncivilized.” The nuclear taboo has become part of the contemporary discourse of “civilization,” evoked in such phrases as were used in the 1991 Gulf War to demonize Saddam Hussein: “only a barbarian would use nuclear weapons.” This discourse is especially evident today in the politics of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, which, with its themes of the “responsible” and the “irresponsible,” is itself a discourse of civilization.

In addition to regulative and constitutive effects, there is a third type of effect I call a *permissive effect*. This refers to the way norms – taboos in particular – by serving as focal points, selectively divert our normative gaze. By categorizing weapons in certain ways, such as “weapons of mass destruction,” and drawing our attention to associated normative injunctions, norms and taboos may obscure other “facts” about the world and shield other practices from attention.⁵⁴ Thus one

⁵² Gerrit Gong, *The Standard of Civilization in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

⁵³ For evidence, see Michael Howard, George J. Andreopoulos, and Mark R. Shulman, eds., *The Laws of War: Constraints on Warfare in the Western World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

⁵⁴ Although their argument is too extreme, this notion underlies the analysis in Chris af Jochnick and Roger Normand, “The Legitimation of Violence: A Critical History of the Laws of War,” *Harvard International Law Journal*, vol. 35, no. 49 (Winter 1994), pp. 49–95.

permissive effect of the nuclear taboo may be to shield *non-nuclear* weapons from normative opprobrium.

Permissive effects are secondary, indirect or “shadow” effects, often unintended consequences of the operation of a norm. They tend to emerge with stronger, more developed norms (which have the capability to divert the normative gaze). They are defined in relation to the categories constituted by the norm or taboo and the larger normative context in which the taboo is nested.⁵⁵ The “diverted attention” effect can arise as the shadow of either regulative or constitutive effects. For example, focusing policing and punishment on raising the “price” of one set of pre-existing actions (e.g., using nuclear weapons) shifts “governance resources” away from other types of actions (and lowers the others’ relative price). Permissive effects can also arise from constitutive effects. For example, the fact that one can never constitute only half of a dichotomy means that when a category such as “weapons of mass destruction” is constituted, it simultaneously constitutes a category of “conventional weapons.” If a defining characteristic of weapons of mass destruction is that they cannot be used, then (at least implicitly) a defining feature of conventional weapons is that they can.

This book thus takes the rationalist account of norms as its starting point but extends it in a constructivist direction by emphasizing a broader range of normative effects and the multiple effects of a single norm. While the causal nature of norms, particularly the matter of constitutive “causality,” is currently an issue of some debate in the field, the important point is that both constitutive and causal effects influence outcomes, although in different ways.⁵⁶

Mechanisms of normative influence

What are the specific mechanisms by which the taboo influenced decisionmaking? The analysis in this book suggests three: domestic opinion, world opinion, and the personal moral convictions of individual leaders.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ The notion of permissive effects converges with Stephen Krasner’s notion of “organized hypocrisy,” the weak or inconsistent observance of norms. In his view, “organized hypocrisy” is primarily a function of power and interests, but here I suggest discursive mechanisms behind it. See Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁵⁶ See Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*. For a discussion of various notions of “cause” employed in social inquiry, see Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms and Decisions*.

⁵⁷ For a similar argument, see Robert W. McElroy, *Morality and American Foreign Policy: The Role of Ethics in International Affairs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

It is widely agreed that domestic public opinion plays an important role in shaping the foreign policies of democratic states. Within democracies, domestic public pressure works because leaders and elected officials want to be reelected. Some degree of responsiveness to public demands is required for leaders to remain in their jobs.⁵⁸ Nuclear weapons policymaking, however, has often been viewed as an exceptional case. Mainstream security analysts have typically asserted that domestic public opinion had little influence on nuclear weapons policy.⁵⁹ During the Cold War, nuclear policymaking was traditionally viewed as a realm of elite and expert decisionmaking and was often shrouded in secrecy. Accumulating evidence, however, including the analysis provided here, suggests that domestic pressure has indeed influenced important aspects of government behavior and policies with respect to nuclear weapons, necessitating a revision in how we understand the history of nuclear policymaking.⁶⁰ Domestic public opinion was an important factor both in constraining US leaders' resort to use of nuclear weapons and in forming the taboo itself. US leaders were sensitive to public attitudes toward nuclear weapons because they perceived that domestic support for US security policies was essential to waging the Cold War against the Soviet Union.

A second pathway by which norms influence decisionmaking is international reputation, as reflected in decisionmakers' concern about world opinion. Frank Rusciano defines world opinion as "the moral judgments of observers which actors must heed in the international arena, or risk isolation as a nation."⁶¹ What gives world opinion its power for leaders? Leaders perceive it as a force punishing

⁵⁸ Richard Sobel, *The Impact of Public Opinion on US Foreign Policy since Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). He finds a substantial correspondence between policies and public opinions and a reluctance by policymakers to defy an overwhelming public consensus.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Robert Jervis, "The Military History of the Cold War," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1991), p. 98.

⁶⁰ See Lawrence S. Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1954–1970* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Jeffrey W. Knopf, *Domestic Society and International Cooperation: The Impact of Protest on US Arms Control Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁶¹ Frank Louis Rusciano et al., *World Opinion and the Emerging International Order* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), p. 27. Based on content analyses of references to world opinion in leading newspapers from different countries, Rusciano and his colleagues concluded that "world opinion" includes six components, the most prominent of which is moral.

non-conformity with transnational attitudes, values, or moral judgments through isolation of a nation's citizens or leaders. Leaders care about their nation's reputation because isolation makes it hard to attract and keep allies.

Skeptics have often dismissed world opinion as merely "a construct created by the dominant states – the United States and other western powers – to legitimate their own interests and further their own values."⁶² Although this may be true at times, it is also clear that an autonomous "world opinion" does exist independent of the preferences of dominant states. The rise of international organizations as platforms for the opinions and views of less powerful states, the burgeoning of transnational networks and movements, the global spread of opinion polling, and the increase in communications have helped to give substance to an autonomous world opinion that escapes the control of powerful states. For example, the values and norms promoted by the United Nations have often gone against the preferences of the United States.

The evidence, both from this study and elsewhere, suggests that national leaders do take the notion of world opinion seriously. According to a European diplomat, "there is a sort of world opinion process parallel to democratic voting and opinions forming which history will take into consideration whether we like it or not."⁶³ In the findings of one study, leaders view having "world opinion" on their side as instrumentally advantageous, but they also associate it with some degree of impartiality, fairness, intelligence, legitimacy, and often with a strong global norm-setting and moral role.⁶⁴

During the Cold War, US leaders perceived favorable world opinion as crucial to sustaining their legitimate leadership of the Western alliance. Both US and Soviet leaders were enormously concerned with "winning world public opinion," which they saw as a central element of their Cold War campaigns for legitimacy. Propaganda battles over nuclear weapons and disarmament carried out by the United States and its allies, the Soviet bloc, the antinuclear weapons movement, and non-nuclear states were aimed at the important "international

⁶² Hans Morgenthau, "Is World Opinion a Myth?" *New York Times Magazine*, March 25, 1962, p. 23; Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993), p. 39.

⁶³ From a study based on interviews with some 190 diplomats from 88 countries. Mark H. Madsen, "The Image and Impact of World Opinion: Foreign Policy Making and Opinion Abroad," Ph.D. diss., Harvard Department of Government, 1986, p. 618.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 208, 607–10, 618, 622–31.

audience.”⁶⁵ Throughout the Cold War, the US government conducted substantial polling on domestic and foreign attitudes toward nuclear weapons, as a means of gauging support for its policies. It also tried to influence public opinion through information and propaganda campaigns, in order to cultivate more positive public attitudes toward nuclear weapons. US leaders’ inhibitions on resorting to nuclear weapons were influenced by their perceptions of negative world public attitudes toward use of nuclear weapons, which, starting with the Eisenhower administration, they tended to associate with a nuclear taboo.

The third pathway by which the taboo influences decisionmaking is the personal moral convictions of individual state decisionmakers.⁶⁶ Because a decision to use nuclear weapons centers on the president and a small circle of his top military and political advisors, the beliefs of individual decisionmakers may be crucial to outcomes. Individuals’ moral convictions regarding nuclear weapons were informed by other moral convictions, beliefs about American values, and conceptions of the appropriate behavior of civilized nations. Both the strength and salience of moral considerations will differ from decisionmaker to decisionmaker. Thus, for example, President John Kennedy’s advisors gave substantially more weight to moral considerations than did Eisenhower’s in their respective considerations of using nuclear weapons. Individual moral beliefs may also change over time, as I discuss later in the context of the development of the taboo.

More conceptually, norms work through both a “logic of consequences” and a “logic of appropriateness.” The logic of consequences refers to the instrumental operation of a norm. Actors comply with norms because doing so helps them get what they want. The logic of appropriateness refers to a more internalized or substantive operation of a norm – actors internalize roles and rules as scripts to which they conform because they understand the behavior to be good, desirable and “right.”⁶⁷ Under this logic, “notions of duty, responsibility, identity, and obligation (all social constructions) may drive behavior

⁶⁵ Thomas Risse, “International Norms and Domestic Change: Arguing and Communicative Behavior in the Human Rights Area,” *Politics and Society*, vol. 27, no. 4 (December 1999), pp. 529–59.

⁶⁶ On the role of the conscience of individuals, see McElroy, *Morality and American Foreign Policy*, pp. 40–43.

⁶⁷ James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, “The Institutional Dynamics of International Political Orders,” *International Organization*, vol. 52, no. 4 (Autumn 1998), pp. 949–54.

as well as self-interest and gain.”⁶⁸ In the nuclear case, the taboo operated both through appearing as a constraint on self-interested decisionmakers – entirely consistent with a rationalist conception of the instrumental operation of a norm as a “cost” – and in more substantive or principled fashion as reflected in decisionmakers’ beliefs about the growing illegitimacy of the use of nuclear weapons.

Material constraints *versus* the taboo argument

To evaluate empirically the autonomous influence of the nuclear taboo in accounting for non-use as compared to a purely materialist account, I set up a competitive test. What kind of evidence would discriminate between materialist and normative explanations? A purely materialist explanation would expect to see decisionmaking about nuclear use reflect cost-benefit type thinking in terms of “non-norms” factors such as fear of escalation, global war, or long-term retaliation, the military utility of nuclear weapons, weapons availability, the costs and feasibility of nuclear weapons and their alternatives, or the long-term military consequences of using nuclear weapons. Decision-making would not reflect any “taboo” factors. It would evaluate the nuclear option in terms of consequences for US military interests, not in terms of whether it was inherently “right” or “wrong.”

In contrast, a taboo explanation would expect to see explicit reference to a norm or what I call “taboo talk.” Taboo talk refers to explicit reference to a perceived taboo or normative inhibition. Evidence could take two forms: first, the taboo could enter the decisionmaking process instrumentally in the form of a perceived “cost,” manifesting itself as an exogenously given constraint on decisionmaking. In evaluating nuclear options, decisionmakers would be concerned about public, allied, or world opinion, the reputation of the United States, the instrumental consequences of violating the taboo, and so on. This formulation is consistent with a rationalist approach in which norms are viewed as a source of instrumental or external motivation or ethical constraint. Policymakers can be viewed as analyzing a situation, recognizing a series of constraints, and maximizing opportunities accordingly. In this model, reflecting a logic of consequences, decisionmakers do not internalize the norm into their own preference

⁶⁸ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change,” *International Organization*, vol. 52, no. 4 (August 1998), p. 913.

functions but merely calculate the “cost” of external sanctions imposed by the norm.

Second, one would also expect to see non-cost-benefit reasoning along the lines of “this is simply wrong in and of itself.” Upholding the norm becomes part of validating an identity. “We can’t drop bombs because . . .” (of who we are, what our values are, “we just don’t do things like this,” “because it isn’t done by anyone,” and so on). This reasoning reflects a logic of appropriateness. Here the taboo becomes more widespread and pervasive. It is no longer attached only to third parties who hold it, thereby appearing to decisionmakers primarily as an appeasement of others’ views. Rather, it has become more internalized. Third, at an even greater level of “taken-for-grantedness,” the taboo might become a shared but “unspoken” assumption of decisionmakers.⁶⁹ Here the norm can be deeply embedded – no one need talk about it. These are three different ways norms affect outcomes, reflecting differing degrees of robustness of the taboo.

Taboo talk is not just “cheap talk,” as realists might imagine. Although we should always be alert to the incentives actors have to misrepresent their motives, in this case decisionmakers *themselves* believed they were constrained by a taboo – including those who objected to it as an unwelcome constraint on their freedom of action and sought to do away with it. The fact that people talk and act as if they believe a taboo exists – especially when this talk is in private – is important evidence into what orients – and constrains – behavior.

The notion of “burden of proof,” which indicates where the normative presumptions in a discourse lie, provides a useful measuring device.⁷⁰ Norms shape expectations and thus shift the burden of proof in arguments about responsibilities, grievances, and legitimate courses of action. Departures from the purportedly dominant normative expectations are treated as exceptional and in need of special justification.⁷¹ Do decisionmakers acknowledge a greater burden of proof in choosing a nuclear option and where does it come from apart from questions of utility? The issue is not just behavioral compliance with norms but the justifications actors provide.⁷² I thus trace

⁶⁹ On unspoken rules during the Cold War see Paul Keal, *Unspoken Rules and Superpower Dominance* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983).

⁷⁰ Richard H. Gaskins, *Burdens of Proof in Modern Discourse* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

⁷¹ Jack Bilmes, *Discourse and Behavior* (New York: Plenum Press, 1986).

⁷² David Welch, *Justice and the Genesis of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

empirically shifts in the burden of proof for using nuclear weapons across time. In general, we can expect it to become more demanding as the normative effects of the taboo become deeper and more widespread over time.

Although I employ a competitive test between materialist and normative explanations, from a constructivist perspective the competitive test possesses limitations. One problem is that the supposed “non-norms” factors may *not* in fact be independent variables. They may only become politically salient because of the prior existence of a taboo or norm, however strong or weak. For example, public opinion or factors such as “readiness” may not be unrelated to a prior or emerging taboo, which influenced the framing of choices at an earlier period.

Additionally, the competitive test approach assumes that one can easily classify material and normative factors. This may not always be the case, however. Public opinion, for instance, is an ambiguous area. Depending on its degree of normative content, public opinion may be seen as an element of either a materialist or a normative hypothesis. Although public opinion enters as a factor into the self-interested cost-benefit calculations of decisionmakers, it may also provide a vehicle for the insertion of moral and other values into the policy process.⁷³ To give another example, to argue that nuclear weapons were not used because alternatives were available ignores the fact that alternatives would not even have been sought in the first place were nuclear weapons seen as just another uncontroversial weapon like grenades or artillery shells.

Clearly, any sufficient explanation of the non-use of nuclear weapons must synthesize material and normative factors, and a full account entails all three explanations: deterrence, non-deterrence material factors, and the taboo – though not, of course, equally in all instances. Because of the possible lack of independence among variables, however, it would be mistaken to treat the taboo as if it simply captured the residual variance that other factors leave unexplained. Most conventional theorists focus on the constraining effects of norms and tend to see material factors and norms as totally distinct and independent entities. This is often the case. But we should also recognize that norms exert other effects in which so-called “material” factors cannot be understood independently of the prevailing normative

⁷³ McElroy, *Morality and American Foreign Policy*, pp. 43–46.

context.⁷⁴ This does not mean that the norm or taboo did all the work itself, but neither does it mean that the taboo is simply residual.⁷⁵ Thus although the taboo is not the sole explanation for non-use, it is a necessary condition for the overall pattern of non-use.⁷⁶

The materialist and taboo explanations do offer some overlapping predictions. Both could account, for example, for the later trend toward “denuclearization” in US defense policy (including the development of conventional alternatives to nuclear weapons starting under President Kennedy, reduction of reliance on nuclear weapons in NATO, non-proliferation policy, arms control and eventually nuclear reductions). The material constraints account would explain this as a logical result of the achievement of nuclear parity and thus strategic stalemate between the superpowers. A taboo explanation would hold that as the taboo gained strength, nuclear weapons would become increasingly stigmatized and delegitimized, their utility would accordingly diminish, and leaders would seek non-nuclear alternatives. We would expect both explanations to do better further into the Cold War – when the taboo had strengthened or when the long-term consequences and risks of nuclear proliferation became clearer.

Despite the overlapping predictions, and support for both explanations in the empirical record, the taboo explanation is ultimately more powerful because it captures more of the evidence. The material constraints explanation cannot account for all the “taboo talk” that one sees in the historical record. This is especially significant in light of a pervasive characteristic of national security decisionmaking: the

⁷⁴ Douglas Porpora shows how material relations can emerge from constitutive rules. For example, the constitutive rules of capitalism set up objective conditions of inequality and competition which operate whether anyone is aware of them or not. Porpora, “Cultural Rules and Material Relations,” *Sociological Theory*, vol. 11, no. 2 (July 1993), pp. 212–29.

⁷⁵ Richard Price and Nina Tannenwald, “Norms and Deterrence: The Nuclear and Chemical Weapons Taboos,” in Peter Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 148.

⁷⁶ Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, “Normative Explanations,” in David Braybrooke, ed., *Social Rules: Origin, Character, Logic, Change* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 35–51. The taboo is not a *necessary* explanation for non-use, of course, since non-use could occur for other reasons, e.g., deterrence. Further, nuclear war could break out in ways *other than* as a result of an explicit intent to use nuclear weapons, including accidental or inadvertent use. In such a case, the explanatory status of the taboo (or of deterrence) would not be invoked. See Benjamin A. Most and Harvey Starr, “International Relations Theory, Foreign Policy Substitutability, and ‘Nice’ Laws,” *World Politics*, vol. 36, no. 3 (April 1984), pp. 383–406.

recasting of “moral talk” whenever possible into the language of interests and cost-benefit analysis. Even when moral values are widely perceived to be at stake, and are viewed as important, officials prefer to mask moral arguments with national security justifications because this is what is expected of leaders in security affairs.⁷⁷ The effect is to reduce the amount of “moral talk” in the historical record on security issues. Thus, if we do see “moral” or “taboo talk” in the historical record, it must be viewed as especially notable.

One problem of the materialist (realist) argument is the analytical difficulty of delimiting it in rigorous fashion. The long-term consequences argument, which emphasizes the role of precedent, looks strong because it is slippery. There is little that is realist about the notion of precedent, however. A use of nuclear weapons would certainly demonstrate their utility, a realist notion, but use will only have that effect if successful, which decisionmakers could not know in advance. Beyond that, however, the operation of precedent is a norm-laden activity: it involves the setting, breaking, and interpreting of rules, and the justification of behavior in terms of rules, norms, and informal standards.⁷⁸ One way that “dangerous” precedents (such as using nuclear weapons) work, for example, is that they “reduce the normative costs” of a particular undesirable action, thereby increasing the likelihood that others will engage in it.⁷⁹ It is, therefore, unclear why realism should care about precedent. In realism, state action is shaped by power and interests, not rules or examples set by others. If leaders emphasize the importance of maintaining a rule rather than doing what power would permit, or if maintaining a rule is seen as part of “interests,” then we have moved significantly away from realism. In sum, once one is talking about precedent (and therefore about legitimacy), one has slid into the norms camp.

I have thus far argued that deterrence and other conventional explanations are incomplete as an account of the non-use of nuclear weapons and that a full explanation requires taking into account the role of a nuclear taboo. I have suggested several strategies for assessing the role of a taboo in decisionmaking and argued that sometimes

⁷⁷ Sagan, “Realist Perspectives on Ethical Norms,” pp. 78–79.

⁷⁸ Precedent can be defined as “an act or a statement that serves or is intended to serve as an example, reason, or justification, for a later one.” Elizabeth Kier and Jonathan Mercer, “Setting Precedents in Anarchy: Military Intervention and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” *International Security*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Spring 1996), p. 79.

⁷⁹ David Stevens, “Dangerous Precedents: Emulation and Norm Violation in Foreign Policy Decision-Making,” unpublished paper, Columbia University, April 30, 2004, p. 12.

it may not be possible to draw a sharp distinction between the taboo and material factors. I now turn to the question of how and why this taboo emerged. I begin by laying out its main characteristics.

Explaining the rise of the nuclear taboo

Characteristics of the nuclear taboo

The nuclear taboo possesses a number of interesting features that make it an intriguing case of norm development. First, it evolved gradually “bottom up” as a result of societal pressure and only later began to become implicitly institutionalized in bilateral (US–Soviet) and multilateral arms control agreements and regimes. Second, the nuclear taboo is a *de facto*, not a legal, norm. There is no explicit international legal prohibition on the use of nuclear weapons such as exists for, say, chemical weapons. Although resolutions passed in the United Nations General Assembly and other international fora have repeatedly proclaimed use of nuclear weapons illegal, the United States and other nuclear powers have consistently voted against these. US legal analyses have consistently defended the legality of use of nuclear weapons as long as it was for defensive and not aggressive purposes, as required by the UN Charter.⁸⁰ As the 1996 World Court advisory opinion on the issue confirmed, although increasing agreement exists that many, if not most, uses of nuclear weapons are illegal under the traditional laws of armed conflict, there is by no means agreement that *all* use of nuclear weapons is illegal.⁸¹

Nevertheless, the sphere of legal use has been gradually chipped away through “nickel and dime” restrictions – an array of treaties and regimes which together circumscribe the realm of legitimate nuclear use and restrict freedom of action with respect to nuclear weapons. These agreements include nuclear-weapons-free zones, bilateral and multilateral arms control agreements, and negative security assurances – political declarations by the nuclear powers that they will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states who are members of the 1968 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty.⁸² Together,

⁸⁰ George Bunn, “US Law of Nuclear Weapons,” *Naval War College Review*, vol. 32, no. 4 (July–August 1984), pp. 46–62.

⁸¹ The World Court opinion is discussed in Chapter 9.

⁸² These include, for example, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (1968), the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (1996), treaties which create nuclear-weapons-free zones in Latin America, Africa, the South Pacific, on the moon and the seabed, and US–Soviet/Russian

these agreements enhance the normative presumption against nuclear use. By multiplying the fora where a decision to use nuclear weapons would have to be defended, they substantially increase the burden of proof for any such decision.⁸³ Many of these international legal constraints on nuclear weapons have been incorporated into US domestic practice, where they are reflected in constraints on deployments and targeting, proliferation, arms control, and use.⁸⁴

Thus while the legality of nuclear weapons remains in dispute, the trend line of decreasing legitimacy and circumscribed legality is clear. Although the World Court advisory opinion did not fully resolve the legal issue, it was important as part of the “agenda politics” of delegitimization. In short, the stigmatization of nuclear weapons has preceded any explicit legal ban. It has also proceeded in the absence of such a ban. The difficulty of reaching final conclusions about the legality of nuclear weapons makes it useful to think about their status in terms of legitimacy. It also raises some interesting questions about the relationship between formal and informal norms and their influence on behavior.

A third characteristic of the taboo is that it is an injunction against first use only and does not directly address the question of second (retaliatory) use. As I suggested in Chapter 1, however, the advent of a taboo should influence calculations about second use as well, since states might conclude that responding in kind with a “barbaric” weapon would be undesirable for both military and normative reasons, especially if alternative means were available.⁸⁵

Fourth, the taboo possesses an important moral component. In the anthropological literature, taboos are sometimes distinguished by their lack of moral or ethical content.⁸⁶ This is clearly not the case for the nuclear taboo. Moral norms can be distinguished from other kinds of norms (such as legal and social norms) by several features: moral norms tend to refer to broad principles and to be associated with

nuclear arms control agreements. See Hisakazu Fujita, *International Regulation of the Use of Nuclear Weapons* (Osaka: Kansai University Press, 1988).

⁸³ Harald Müller, “The Internalization of Principles, Norms and Rules by Governments: The Case of Security Regimes,” in Volker Rittberger, ed., *Regime Theory and International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 361–88.

⁸⁴ The single most important of these domestic legal rules is the rule requiring presidential approval for any use of nuclear weapons. Bunn, “US Law of Nuclear Weapons,” p. 59.

⁸⁵ The US decision shortly after the 1991 Gulf War to unilaterally renounce any right to retaliate with chemical weapons even in response to an Iraqi chemical attack represented an important strengthening of the taboo against use of chemical weapons.

⁸⁶ Franz Steiner, *Taboo* (London: Cohen and West, 1956), p. 130.

informal sanctioning mechanisms, while legal norms tend to be fairly specific and to possess more formal sanctioning mechanisms. Social norms may include moral norms, but also refer more broadly to more mundane kinds of norms or rules for social interaction, such as diplomatic protocol. The most distinctive feature of moral norms is that they require that an actor take the interests and point of view of others into account. They are rooted in impartiality and a consideration of the consequences of one's actions for others. Finally, they are also behavioral prescriptions that are universalizable in the claims that they make. That is, they are consistent behavioral rules that, in the Kantian sense, can be generalized to everyone without self-contradiction or disruption of the social order.

Moral norms are not exogenously given or self-evident but rather are "perceived by individuals and cultures in the encounter with history."⁸⁷ They emerge through a process of contestation and legitimation. In a given historical context a great deal of work may be needed to define the content of a value that has begun to be perceived dimly. New moral values are often nested in a prior ethical tradition. At the international level, moral norms emerge through a transnational process and, as Walzer observes, are fundamentally cultural, religious, and political phenomena, not governmental constructs.⁸⁸ Yet they can be formalized and accepted as valid by governments. The collective action of states may contribute to the formation of international moral norms through "clarification, delimitation, and an explicit mutual agreement by states to observe such norms."⁸⁹

The nuclear taboo can be characterized as a moral norm. At its core is the belief that nuclear weapons, because of their immense destructive power, flagrantly violate longstanding moral principles of discrimination and proportionality in the use of force. These principles, in turn, have at their core the moral intuition that it is wrong to kill

⁸⁷ James Turner Johnson, *Just War Tradition and the Restraint of War: A Moral and Historical Inquiry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 167.

⁸⁸ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument With Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 44–45. On the role of moral beliefs in the creation of international norms, see Nadelman, "Global Prohibition Regimes"; McElroy, *Morality and American Foreign Policy*; Kaufman and Pape, "Explaining Costly Moral Action"; Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); and David Lumsdaine, *Moral Vision in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). On the erosion of moral norms, see Ronald Schaffer, *Wings of Judgment: American Bombing in World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁸⁹ McElroy, *Morality and American Foreign Policy*, p. 36.

non-combatants, or more generally, the innocent, and to cause excessive destruction.⁹⁰ These appear to be quite widespread moral sentiments, and the sense of revulsion that many people feel with regard to nuclear weapons stems from these beliefs.

Nuclear weapons have been the subject of a specifically moral discourse from their inception. They have been both criticized and defended in moral terms. In the 1940s and 1950s, elites and antinuclear weapons activists debated the moral implications of nuclear weapons and the consequent imperative for arms control. In the 1980s, mainstream defense politics in the United States and Europe were permeated by public debates over the morality of nuclear deterrence. The United Nations has long been an incubator of moral discourse on nuclear weapons (as it has on many other topics). The technological trend toward the development of smaller, “cleaner” nuclear weapons has reflected the desire to make them more morally acceptable. The outspoken views of some top US policymakers, such as Robert McNamara, that use of such destructive weapons was inconsistent with American values and goals, have contributed significantly to these debates.

In sum, the nuclear taboo is a *de facto* non-use norm with a strong moral component. Although the taboo is widespread today, as judged by diplomatic statements, public opinion, and policies around the world, it is probably not universal. It is also not yet a fully robust norm. In the American context, as it developed it was a norm held by the public and increasingly by top American leaders, but not by the military as an institution. Indeed, the fact that “use” was what was institutionalized in the US military makes the development of a nuclear taboo all the more remarkable.

Even the US military and NATO, however, have over time moved away from the “early first use” plans of the early Cold War years toward what many have argued was a “*de facto*” no-first-use position. In contrast to the case of chemical weapons, which have been used intermittently despite the existence of a legal ban, nuclear weapons have never been used since their initial introduction. Thus the threshold between use and non-use remains clearer.

In sum, the transformation of a sense of revulsion over nuclear weapons into an international taboo was a matter of politics and history, and it is to this question that I now turn.

⁹⁰ On these principles see Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, and Johnson, *Just War Tradition*.

Anomalies for conventional explanations of the taboo

The dominant realist and rationalist perspectives on international relations emphasize the role of power and interest in the creation of norms. Realists (to the extent that they would accept the existence of a non-use norm at all) would emphasize that the taboo is promoted by, and reflects the interests of, the most powerful (nuclear) states.⁹¹ In this view, the taboo would largely be a function of the strategic stalemate, that is, the codification of deterrence. For rationalists, norms arise out of interests and are adopted because their existence is functional, rational, and advantageous for actors.⁹² Rationalist perspectives would emphasize the uniquely destructive nature of nuclear weapons,⁹³ the impossibility of defense, and therefore the (obvious) rationality of having a taboo against their use. The taboo and the resultant self-restraint are in the interests of the leading states, and this explains both the taboo's origins and why people continue to observe it.

Several anomalies exist for these explanations. First, the rise of the taboo historically has not been a simple function of the interests of the nuclear powers. Consistent with realist expectations, US leaders opposed creation of a taboo when the United States possessed a monopoly on nuclear weapons. The US government continued to resist a taboo even after the Soviet Union had acquired nuclear weapons because such a taboo would undermine the self-proclaimed right of the United States to rely on nuclear weapons for its security.

Inconsistent with realism, however, the taboo, pursued in part *against* the preferences of the United States, arose in spite of US government opposition. Although Cold War power politics played a role, the rise of the taboo was driven significantly by a grassroots global antinuclear weapons movements, the UN, and non-nuclear

⁹¹ Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*.

⁹² The classic discussion of norms and coordination games is David K. Lewis, *Convention: A Philosophical Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969). Other important rationalist arguments are Jon Elster, "Social Norms and Economic Theory," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1989), pp. 99–117; Edna Ullman-Margalit, *The Emergence of Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); Russell Hardin, *One for All: The Logic of Group Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), chs. 4 and 5; and James Morrow, "The Laws of War, Common Conjectures and Legal Systems in International Politics," *Journal of Legal Studies*, vol. 31, pt. 2 (January 2002), pp. S41–S60.

⁹³ Nuclear weapons are uniquely destructive per pound or per weapon, but of course need not be more destructive than bombardment by conventional weapons in the aggregate.

states. In the critical first fifteen years of the nuclear era, when important precedents of non-use were set, and continuing in some fashion through to the present, less powerful states and non-state actors have sought to stigmatize nuclear weapons, exerting pressure in favor of nuclear arms control and calling for a ban on the use of nuclear weapons. The eventual strategic stalemate between the superpowers also contributed to the development of the taboo, but this factor only entered into account later in the process, in the 1960s, after a tentative taboo had already begun to take hold. Thus, although power and interest are important, the taboo cannot be explained simply as the straightforward result of rational adaptation to strategic circumstances.

A second anomaly is that the case of nuclear weapons has not entirely reflected the typical pattern of moral objections to new weapons. Traditionally, moral objections to a new weapons technology are generally raised by the actual or intended victims of it. Eventually, however, as the weapon is acquired by all sides, moral objections subside and the weapon comes to be regarded as legitimate.⁹⁴ Consistent with this pattern, the Soviet Union, initially facing the nuclear monopoly of the United States, along with non-aligned states, regularly called for a ban on nuclear weapons in the early years of the Cold War. This was generally regarded as part of Cold War power politics, an instrumental attempt to curry favor with the Third World and delegitimize the weapons of the West, which relied more heavily on nuclear weapons. But it also converged with the views of Western antinuclear weapons activists, who opposed nuclear weapons for both moral and prudential reasons. Inconsistent with the traditional pattern, however, moral objections to nuclear weapons have grown, not weakened, across time, despite explicit US policies in the 1950s to normalize or “conventionalize” such weapons.

The growth of moral objections to nuclear weapons might suggest that their unique physical features (speed, destructive power, radiation) played a key role in explaining their stigmatization.⁹⁵ Indeed

⁹⁴ Martin Van Creveld, *Technology and War: From 2000 B.C. to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1989), pp. 67–73, 290.

⁹⁵ The principal damage mechanism of a nuclear weapon, representing about half its energy, is blast, the same predominant mechanism of a conventional weapon. But the difference between the two is more than a matter of scale. Some 35 percent of a nuclear weapon’s energy is in the form of heat from the fireball (thermal radiation), which can ignite fuel and flammable materials at a great distance, and burn people (nearly half of Hiroshima’s fatalities may have been burns). See Samuel Glasstone and P. J. Dolan, eds., *Effects of Nuclear Weapons* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense and Energy

this is so. Nevertheless, such features have influenced but not determined their stigmatization as taboo weapons. The evolution of the taboo has been shaped by the ongoing competition between two approaches to the moral interpretation of nuclear weapons. The first is grounded in the traditional military argument that technology itself is value-neutral and that the moral nature of a weapon depends on how it is used. In this view, certain uses of nuclear weapons would be banned (say, use on cities and civilians) while others might be permitted (use on naval ships at sea or on isolated troops in the desert). This line of argument is prominent throughout the Cold War and was even made by a few scattered advocates of use of tactical nuclear weapons during the 1991 Gulf War.⁹⁶ It finds its points of reference in the traditional just-war criteria of proportionality and discrimination. The contemporary development of very small, accurate “mini-nukes” which could meet these criteria should give this line of reasoning even more relevance today (and has already become a source of pressure on the norm).

The second view, which has ultimately prevailed, though not without struggle, is that *any* use of nuclear weapons is prohibited. That is, the normative prohibition has come to be an absolute one: the weapons themselves are proscribed. The dividing line was drawn between nuclear and conventional weapons rather than in terms of just-war criteria, for example. Rationalists might explain the success of the second view as providing the clearest and most easily agreed-upon threshold against further escalation, and thus as an example of a “focal-point” solution.⁹⁷ Focal points, however, are not natural or intrinsic. They depend on the cultural, political, and social context, and the identities of the actors.⁹⁸ The line between conventional and

Research and Development Administration, 1977). The temperature generated by a conventional explosion is much less, and its thermal radiation correspondingly less – even if it were scaled up to nuclear size. And nuclear radiation, absent from conventional explosions, accounts for some 15 percent of the energy released by a nuclear explosion (5 percent prompt and 10 percent delayed). See Federation of American Scientists, at www.fas.org/nuke/intro/nuke/effects.htm. For discussion of this issue, I am grateful to Kenneth W. Ford, personal communication.

⁹⁶ “Calls by Some on GOP Right to Consider a Nuclear Strike Spark Heated Debate,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 13, 1991.

⁹⁷ Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960, reprint 1980); and Schelling, “The Role of Nuclear Weapons.”

⁹⁸ Albert Yee, “Thick Rationality and the Missing ‘Brute Fact’: The Limits of Rationalist Incorporation of Norms and Ideas,” *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 59, no. 4 (November 1997), p. 1026; Robert Sugden, “The Role of Inductive Reasoning in the Evolution of Conventions,” *Law and Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 4 (1998), pp. 377–410.

nuclear weapons did not always exist but had to be created. Then it had to be maintained – sometimes precariously – in the face of repeated challenges made possible by advancing technology and the development of smaller, less destructive nuclear weapons. The arduous route historically to appreciation of this focal point by the dominant actors – who faced continuing strong incentives to blur the line to make nuclear weapons more usable – suggests that the development of a moral category of “weapons of mass destruction” played a key role in getting the line drawn and maintained where it was and not elsewhere.

Thus a straightforward rationalist account is inadequate. A full explanation must deal with the origins of moral categories and interpretations, and these cannot simply be deduced from the nature of the technology. Rather, they develop in the context of particular political and institutional structures – the emerging Cold War, the pre-existing normative tradition of the laws of war and its disregard in World War II, domestic institutions and values, and more taken-for-granted norms such as “civilization.” It is the interaction of such factors that help shape the categories that people use to understand weapons.

Explanation of the taboo

While preserving realist and rationalist insights about how norms can arise out of power and self-interest, I also draw on constructivist perspectives, which focus on the historically constructed and path-dependent nature of norms.⁹⁹ Scholars applying constructivist approaches have advanced arguments about the role of transnational advocacy networks, international institutions, domestic values, and “moral entrepreneurs” in the emergence of international norms.¹⁰⁰ They emphasize the internalization of norms and their influence on actors’ conceptions of their identity and interests.

⁹⁹ On constructivism, see Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Emanuel Adler, “Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism and World Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 3, no. 3 (September 1997), pp. 319–63. For a defense of analytical eclecticism, see Peter J. Katzenstein and Nobuo Okawara, “Japan, Asian-Pacific Security and the Case for Analytical Eclecticism,” *International Security*, vol. 26, no. 3 (Winter 2001/02), pp. 153–85.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Richard Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Ethan Nadelmann, “Global Prohibition Regimes: The Evolution of Norms in International Society,” *International Organization*, vol. 44, no. 4 (Autumn 1990), pp. 481–56; Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*; and Audie Klotz, *Norms in International Relations: The Struggle Against Apartheid* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink have identified three types of mechanisms by which international norms develop and become implemented domestically: processes of instrumental adaptation and strategic bargaining; processes of moral consciousness raising; and processes of institutionalization and habitualization.¹⁰¹ I draw on these to construct five mechanisms or pathways by which the nuclear taboo developed: (1) societal pressure; (2) normative power politics; (3) the role of individual state decisionmakers; (4) iterated behavior of non-use over time; and (5) institutionalization. Because norms have a recursive quality – they are strengthened each time they exert influence – there is significant overlap between the pathways of norm influence (discussed earlier) and those of norm formation.

A first pathway is *societal pressure*, a bottom-up process of normative change, in which domestic and transnational social groups – such as the antinuclear weapons movement – politicize issues and put pressure on decisionmakers to change state policy or practices.¹⁰² Norms are not necessarily internalized by elites, but, as discussed earlier, elites respond instrumentally to the pressure of domestic and world public opinion (instrumental adaptation). Societal pressure can refer to the activities of international and transnational, not simply domestic, groups. Such groups act especially through moral consciousness raising – identifying problems, providing information, framing issues, and shaping discourse.¹⁰³

A second pathway is *normative power politics*, in which states seek, by rhetoric and diplomacy, to publicly delegitimize weapons that are perceived to give the adversary a power advantage. The adversary, in turn, seeks to defend the legitimacy of its weapons. In this pathway, which draws on realist insights, actors can be viewed as engaging in processes of “strategic social construction,” in which the effort to create norms is part of the game of power.¹⁰⁴ Actors employ moral discourse to undermine or defend a power asset or strategy. Such moral discourse may be quite instrumental but it may eventually have

¹⁰¹ Thomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink, “The Socialization of International Human Rights Norms into Domestic Practices,” Introduction, in Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 5.

¹⁰² Jeffrey Checkel, “Norms, Institutions and National Identity in Contemporary Europe,” *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 43 (1999), p. 88.

¹⁰³ Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, pp. 17–19.

¹⁰⁴ Krasner, *Organized Hypocrisy*.

a boomerang effect: by legitimizing a moral discourse in the first place, it provides an opening to other actors who have genuinely held moral views and who mobilize on the issue.¹⁰⁵ Both the US and Soviet governments engaged in normative power politics with regard to nuclear weapons, especially in the 1940s and 1950s but also in later years as well.

A third pathway is one noted earlier, the role of individual state decisionmakers who advocate nuclear restraint. Individual leaders may act for reasons of moral persuasion (e.g., they come to believe using nuclear weapons would simply be wrong) or on the basis of cognitive assumptions (e.g., they come to believe the weapons lack military utility).¹⁰⁶ This pathway reflects a top-down process of normative change. It refers to how decisionmakers acquire new understandings of means-ends relationships, and new values and interests, from both norms and experience. The behavior of decisionmakers, in turn, comes to be governed by new logics of appropriateness.¹⁰⁷ The historical process by which US leaders came to understand the bomb as a taboo weapon that both could not, and should not, be used may be described as a process of “nuclear learning.”¹⁰⁸

These first three mechanisms all involve some sort of moral discourse, which can be either instrumental or principled. A fourth pathway of normative development, *iterated behavior over time*, is similar to the notion of custom in international law, where obligation arises out of convention.¹⁰⁹ Custom emerges as “courses of conduct once thought optional become first habitual or usual and then obligatory.”¹¹⁰ The precise mechanisms of this transformation have long preoccupied legal scholars, who emphasize the importance of precedent, repetition, and the establishment of reliable expectations. Precedents are “focal-point solutions – conspicuous perceptual categories that, through usage, have achieved normative status.” Repetition

¹⁰⁵ On rhetorical action, see Frank Schimmelfennig, “Liberal Norms, Rhetorical Action and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union,” *International Organization*, vol. 55, no. 1 (2001), pp. 47–80.

¹⁰⁶ McElroy, *Morality and American Foreign Policy*.

¹⁰⁷ Checkel, “Norms, Institutions,” pp. 88, 90.

¹⁰⁸ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Nuclear Learning and US–Soviet Security Regimes,” *International Organization*, vol. 41, no. 3 (Summer 1987), pp. 371–402.

¹⁰⁹ George I. Mavrodes, “Conventions and the Morality of War,” in Charles Beitz, Marshall Cohen, Thomas Scanlon, and A. John Simmons, eds., *International Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 75–89.

¹¹⁰ Anthony D’Amato, *The Concept of Custom in International Law* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971).

matters because it increases “conspicuousness.”¹¹¹ This pathway thus emphasizes the role of precedent, habit, and pattern in the development of the norm. As each successive crisis comes and goes and nuclear weapons remain unused, expectations are created about behavior in future crises. The burden of proof shifts to those who would advocate a change from prevailing practice. The iteration of non-use may be particularly important for taboos because the “avoided test” creates a sense of mystery as to what is on the other side – the longer nuclear weapons go unused, the greater the bright line threshold.¹¹²

In the fifth pathway, norms may become embedded in institutions. Institutions are systems of formal rules and roles, compliance procedures, and standard operating practices. Institutionalization has several consequences. Like iteration, institutionalization enhances the clarity and conspicuousness of a particular focal-point solution. But institutionalization also codifies, publicizes, and provides procedures for the elaboration of norms. By embedding norms in practices, institutionalization gives norms staying power and influence in politics. Thus actors promoting the dissemination of a norm will often seek to get it institutionalized in the political process, either domestic or international. Moving from agency to institutions puts issues on the agenda and forces states to act on them.¹¹³ In the nuclear case, the UN’s role as an institutionalized forum for the expression of anti-nuclear weapons norms was critical to the creation of the taboo. Additionally, both state and non-state norm entrepreneurs sought to embed nuclear restraint in domestic policy processes, while some sought to codify the taboo into law to make it more precise and give it more force.

Finally, in addition to these five pathways of normative development, the role of historical contingency must be taken into account. The fact that Truman, with his post-Nagasaki abhorrence of nuclear weapons, was president before Eisenhower, or that Chinese leaders agreed to end the Korean War when they did, or that nuclear accidents and close calls did not inadvertently set off nuclear war at some point during the Cold War, were contingent but fortuitous circumstances

¹¹¹ Michael Barkun, *Law Without Sanctions: Order in Primitive Societies and the World Community* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 99–100.

¹¹² On “avoided tests” see Karl E. Weick, *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969).

¹¹³ Risse and Sikkink, “The Socialization of International Human Rights Norms.”

which themselves contributed to the practice of non-use. If Eisenhower had been president before Truman, or if nuclear weapons had been used in the Korean War, the development of the nuclear taboo might have proceeded quite differently, or not at all.

In the chapters that follow, I show how these mechanisms operated to shift the discourse on nuclear weapons. Some mechanisms are more prominent in some periods than others. For example, the antinuclear weapons movement was most active in the 1950s and 1980s, while the iteration of non-use has a cumulative effect, carrying more weight later in time. As the taboo develops it becomes increasingly internalized in the belief systems of decisionmakers and institutionalized within governments. As evidence of this, we should expect to see identity and self-interest defined in ways that increasingly take the taboo for granted. That is, the process of norm creation does not simply change the incentives for behavior (the rationalist view), it transforms the identity and interests of the actors themselves (the constructivist view). Further evidence of increasing internalization lies in the way prohibitory norms, as they develop, gradually raise the threshold for what is considered acceptable behavior. Prohibitory norms do not simply emerge full blown as absolute prohibitions. They rarely render violations impossible but instead “make them unlikely by raising the threshold of what counts as a legitimate exception to the rule.”¹¹⁴ The establishment of such thresholds is a principal way norms work in social life. As the nuclear taboo developed, it gradually ruled out use of nuclear weapons in a range of contingencies that were once thinkable and where their employment might have been advantageous. It shifted conceptions of both utility and legitimacy.

In tracing the emergence of the taboo, I draw loosely on an evolutionary metaphor to analyze why and how it came to be “selected” over other possible norms that were being directly or indirectly promoted.¹¹⁵ These include a norm of “use” (increasingly institutionalized in the US military as an organization), a norm of use of tactical nuclear weapons only (promoted by the Eisenhower administration’s

¹¹⁴ Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*, p. 122.

¹¹⁵ Emanuel Adler, “Cognitive Evolution: A Dynamic Approach for the Study of International Relations and Their Progress,” in Emanuel Adler and Beverly Crawford, eds., *Progress in Postwar International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Ann Florini, “The Evolution of International Norms,” *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 3 (September 1996), pp. 363–89; Robert Axelrod, “The Evolutionary Creation of Norms,” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 80, no. 4 (December 1986), pp. 1095–111.

“conventionalization” policy), or a norm of use defined by just-war criteria (the traditional military argument defending the morality of weapons in general). I seek to explain the pattern of strengthening over time, and the processes by which the taboo developed in different stages. I also seek to account for the content of the taboo (a total prohibition on use) and for its “soft law” status.

I divide the history of the taboo into two stages, an initial period of emergence, and a second period, starting in the early 1960s, when the taboo began to become institutionalized and internalized. Initially, nuclear weapons are regarded as legitimate and no taboo exists, although a longstanding prior ethical tradition existed deriving from just-war theory, international law, national manuals of military conduct, and state practice regarding necessity and proportionality in the use of force. In the first stage, the taboo is tentative and competes with other possible norms that were being promoted (such as “conventionalization”). The weapon starts to become redefined as dangerous, unacceptable, and immoral, generally by non-state actors and by states who are potential victims of it, or who oppose it on moral or prudential grounds. As a result of this “moral branding,” a taboo begins to emerge as a weak and tentative norm. It coexists and competes for political attention with other possible norms regarding the use of nuclear weapons.

In the second stage, the taboo begins to prevail over the competing discourses.¹¹⁶ It starts to become institutionalized, becoming stronger, more legitimate and widespread, while competing norms become weaker, more illegitimate and face challenges. It begins to become internalized and to exhibit more taboo-like qualities such as unthinkingness and taken-for-grantedness. Violating it is seen as “simply wrong.” Even though it is not fully robust, competing norms have been severely discredited. The taboo begins to be embraced *as* an interest in itself (not just compatible *with* interests).¹¹⁷ It undergoes a process of “mainstreaming,” beginning to spread beyond its original promoters to ever larger segments of society, including top US leaders and even the military as an institution.

Ultimately, should the taboo become a fully robust prohibition, it may become codified as a legal ban with associated legal penalties,

¹¹⁶ I have adapted these stages from Nadelmann, “Global Prohibition Regimes,” and Finnemore and Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change.”

¹¹⁷ Yee, “Thick Rationality,” p. 1017.

and become the subject of criminal law throughout the world. As use of nuclear weapons would be both criminal and unthinkable, they would be fully delegitimized and states would dismantle their nuclear arsenals. This stage has clearly not arrived.

Research design and methods

In this book I draw on a process-tracing approach to illuminate changing conceptions of both the legitimacy and the utility of nuclear weapons.¹¹⁸ As evidence I examine changes in discourse, institutions, and behavior. These foci derive from expectations about what kinds of “observable implications” we should see if indeed such a nuclear prohibitory norm is developing.¹¹⁹ The book traces the development of the taboo at the global level and its operation and influence in US policy and behavior.

In the following chapters, two story lines are interwoven – how the taboo mattered and how it arose. To show how the taboo mattered, I compare decisionmaking in four cases – Japan 1945, the Korean War 1950–53, the Vietnam War in the mid-1960s, and the Gulf War of 1991. These are cases of “use” and “non-use,” at different stages in the development of the taboo. I compare the cases with an eye to the role of the taboo in constraining US leaders’ use of nuclear weapons. To operationalize the analysis, I analyze the discourse for “taboo talk” and employ the notion of “burden of proof.” I evaluate the taboo against other military and material factors promoting or constraining resort to nuclear weapons. In 1945, the burden of proof was on those who *opposed* the use of atomic weapons to end World War II, and hardly anyone did. During the Korean War, a taboo was beginning to emerge, but it operated mostly instrumentally. More than a decade later, during the Vietnam War, the taboo was beginning to become internalized by civilian, though not necessarily by military, leaders. By the time of the Gulf War, the taboo operated at a more constitutive or “taken-for-granted” level. The normative stigmatization of nuclear weapons imposed a heavy burden of proof on anyone who might advocate their use.

¹¹⁸ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 205–32.

¹¹⁹ Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 28–31.

These decisionmaking studies focus on the president and his top advisors. The fact that the decision to use nuclear weapons rests with the president creates a significant gap between what the military plans for and what the president actually does. The historical record suggests that presidential thinking about nuclear weapons has been relatively independent of strategic planning in the military.¹²⁰ The president and his advisors operate under an understanding that the president must threaten the use of nuclear weapons if necessary, and he must publicly demonstrate willingness to use them. But what goes on behind this public face of policy may be a different story. High-level statements from policymakers such as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara or Secretary of State Dean Rusk to the effect that they would never advise the president to use nuclear weapons first (despite NATO's first use policy) create a "window" into the world behind official policy.

I find evidence for the taboo in a variety of constraining, constitutive, and permissive effects. Of these, constraining effects are visible the earliest. Constitutive effects are only just beginning to emerge by the time of the Korean case, visible, for example, in the contestation over the categorization of nuclear weapons as "unconventional." Other constitutive and permissive effects, such as the identity of "civilized" state, the practice of stable deterrence, and the legitimization of other forms of violence, only become evident in later periods. These phenomena point to deeper effects of the taboo later in time.

In chapters alternating with the decisionmaking chapters, I analyze the factors driving the emergence and development of the taboo. For the taboo, the stage of emergence was approximately the period 1945–62, with the 1962 Cuban missile crisis marking an important turning point in the development of the taboo, and a shift to the stage of institutionalization and consolidation. During this period, the taboo began to become implicitly institutionalized in bilateral and multilateral arms control agreements. The end of the Cold War in 1989 constituted an exogenous shock which shifted the dominant politics of the taboo, largely removing the East–West dynamic and leaving primarily a North–South dynamic.

When explaining non-use, it is important not to confuse the *history* of non-use with *specific incidents* of non-use. Despite the overall

¹²⁰ Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail*; Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (London: St. Martin's, 1989), 2nd edn.

“pattern of caution” with regard to use of nuclear weapons during the Cold War, leaders were not always cautious. In some cases they adopted incautious policies which, had things turned out differently, could have led to nuclear war.¹²¹ In the Korean War under Eisenhower, for example, the United States did not use nuclear weapons but not because of a decision not to use them. Rather, the particular scenario for which their use was envisioned was averted by fortuitous decisions taken by the Chinese and North Koreans.¹²² Thus, in some cases of non-use there was no definitive decision *against* using the bomb (this is not surprising, of course, since leaders and advisors are generally reluctant to rule out options in advance). In other cases – Truman during the Korean War, Johnson during the Vietnam War, Bush during the 1991 Gulf War – we have strong evidence of a presidential determination not to use nuclear weapons. This creates empirical variation, even in what might superficially appear to be a non-event.

Conclusion: norms and deterrence

Deterrence is an important part of the explanation for the non-use of nuclear weapons, but it is incomplete. A normative element – a nuclear taboo – appears to have played a crucial role, both by inhibiting resort to use of nuclear weapons in situations where there was little prospect of nuclear retaliation by the adversary, and by helping to stabilize the practice of deterrence itself. By illuminating the normative and institutional bases of deterrence, the perspective presented here challenges a narrow materialist conception of how deterrence works. Nuclear deterrence did not simply “happen”; it was learned, created, and reinforced by factors lying outside the purview of conventional deterrence theory. A full understanding of how deterrence operated both during and after the Cold War requires synthesizing deterrence with other non-deterrence material and normative factors. Conventional views of deterrence thus need to be supplemented and modified.

Additionally, the development of the taboo suggests an important role for less powerful states and non-state actors. Power places limits

¹²¹ See Gordon Chang, “To the Brink: Eisenhower, Dulles and the Quemoy–Matsu Crisis,” *International Security*, vol. 12, no. 4 (Spring 1988), pp. 96–122; H. W. Brands, Jr., “Testing Massive Retaliation: Credibility and Crisis Management in the Taiwan Strait,” *International Security*, vol. 12, no. 4 (Spring 1988), pp. 121–51; Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail*, pp. 37–47.

¹²² The case of Korea is discussed in Chapter 4.

on the norm creation process, and powerful states clearly matter – the absence of a formal legal prohibition on the use of nuclear weapons primarily stems primarily from the fact that the nuclear powers oppose such a ban. But the delegitimization of nuclear use for all but the most extreme cases suggests the force of the *de facto* prohibition and the key role of public opinion in constraining how states fight wars. In the following chapters I trace how this taboo came about.

3 Hiroshima and the origins of the nuclear taboo

If the United States were to lose a war because of the failure to use the bomb for humanitarian reasons, we should be guilty of the greatest disservice to civilization in the history of mankind.

Secretary of the Air Force Stuart Symington,
June 9, 1948, during the Berlin crisis.¹

On August 6 and 9, 1945, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan, ending World War II and inaugurating the nuclear age. This chapter examines the US decision to use atomic weapons on Japan and the origins of a nuclear taboo in the period up to 1950. In 1945, the atomic bomb was widely accepted as a legitimate weapon of war. Most politicians and generals regarded it as completely natural to use the atomic weapons they had at hand to end the war against Japan as speedily as possible. Yet by the time of the Korean War, five years later, significant inhibitions on the use of atomic weapons were already evident, and these cannot be accounted for by deterrence.

The origins of the taboo lay especially in a set of policy precedents and categories established by President Truman and the United Nations which marked out nuclear weapons as different from other weapons. These efforts were propelled by fears of the destructive power of the new weapon, the shock and horror of the Japan bombings, and the moral qualms of key leaders, especially Truman. At the same time, however, US military and political leaders perceived the military value of atomic weapons, and starting in 1948, they began to develop military policies relying on their use. Thus were laid the

¹ Cited in Bret J. Cillesen, "Embracing the Bomb: Ethics, Morality and Nuclear Deterrence in the US Air Force, 1945–55," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1 (March 1998), p. 114.

beginnings of two competing conceptions of nuclear weapons: that they were terrible weapons that should never be used again, and that they were powerful weapons essential for US security.

The initial precedent

Hiroshima and Nagasaki: the legitimacy of the bomb

No single event of the nuclear era has provoked more debate than the use of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 – the reasons, wisdom, and morality of doing so. It is unlikely that the “correctness” of Truman’s decision will ever be settled definitively – as both scholarly debate and recurring public controversy over the decision indicate.² The US decision to use the bomb is one of the best studied decision-making cases in history, and I draw on the extensive scholarship to explore why the bomb was not morally problematic for US leaders in August 1945.³

Why did American leaders use atomic bombs on Japan? In what ways did their use represent a continuation of, or disjunction with, previous normative traditions, thus shaping the path of subsequent history? While the decision itself remains controversial, it is clear that in 1945, unlike today, no special stigma attached to nuclear weapons. As the historical record indicates, in 1945 most generals and politicians were little troubled by atomic weapons. The burden of proof was clearly on those few officials who harbored doubts about the wisdom of using the new weapon. In the momentum and horrors of World War II, few did.

The question of why US leaders used the atomic bomb remains a matter of debate among historians. The first question is whether the

² On the controversy over the 1995 Smithsonian exhibit on the atomic bomber Enola Gay, see Martin Harwit, *An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of the Enola Gay* (New York: Copernicus Books, 1996).

³ Important recent contributions are Robert Maddox, *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 1995); Robert Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1995); Ronald Takaki, *Why America Dropped the Bomb* (New York: Little Brown & Co., 1995); and Barton J. Bernstein, “Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender: Missed Opportunities, Little-Known Near Disasters, and Modern Memory,” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1995), pp. 227–73. Two older but still valuable classics are Martin Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), and Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy. Hiroshima and Potsdam: The Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with Soviet Power*, 2nd expanded edn (London: Pluto, 1994).

bomb was really necessary to end the war against Japan promptly or whether some other means were available to achieve the same goal. The traditional view has been that American leaders used the bomb in order to save American lives and to end the war decisively.⁴ Some hold that the bomb was *not necessary* to end the war in Asia but that the main reason for the decision was to end it victoriously as soon as possible.⁵ So-called “revisionists” take a more critical view, holding that the decision had more to do with impressing and gaining diplomatic leverage over the Soviet Union than saving American lives. In this view, political rather than military considerations explain why the Truman administration did not explore alternatives to using the bomb to end the war, such as investigating the seriousness of Japanese peace initiatives, moderating the demand for unconditional surrender, or waiting for the Soviets to declare war on Japan.⁶

Most scholars reject the more extreme revisionist interpretation (although some argue that intimidating the Soviet Union may have been a “bonus” effect).⁷ However, a consensus has emerged among them that the bomb was probably not needed to avoid an invasion of Japan and end the war rapidly.⁸ The US Strategic Bombing Survey after the war has often been cited in support of this view. It concluded that “in all probability” Japan would have surrendered before November 1, 1945 even without the bomb, Soviet entry into the war, or an invasion of the Japanese islands.⁹ However, historians have challenged the reliability of this report because of bureaucratic influences on its conclusions and its selective use of evidence.¹⁰ A number of prominent advisors, including chief of staff William D. Leahy, General Dwight Eisenhower, and Undersecretary of the Navy Ralph

⁴ A highly influential articulation of this view was by Secretary of War Henry Stimson, “The Decision to Use the Bomb,” *Harper’s*, vol. 194, no. 1161 (February 1947), pp. 97–107.

⁵ Herbert Feis, *Japan Subdued: The Atomic Bomb and the End of the Cold War in the Pacific* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

⁶ Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy*.

⁷ For this argument, see Bernstein, “Understanding the Atomic Bomb.”

⁸ J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs Against Japan* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁹ US Strategic Bombing Survey, *The Effects of the Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, Chairman’s Office, June 30, 1946 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office).

¹⁰ See Gian P. Gentile, “Advocacy or Assessment? The United States Strategic Bombing Survey of Germany and Japan,” *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 66 (February 1997), pp. 53–79; and Barton J. Bernstein, “Compelling Japan’s Surrender Without the A-bomb, Soviet Entry or Invasion: Reconsidering the US Bombing Survey’s Early Surrender Conclusions,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1995), pp. 54–95.

Bard, told (or said they told) Truman that the bomb was not necessary to end the war.¹¹

A second major dispute is whether the bomb was necessary to save American lives, the issue at the core of a controversy in 1995 over a commemorative exhibit on the atomic bombings at the Smithsonian Institution.¹² Truman cited in his memoirs that an invasion of the Japanese islands could have led to 500,000 American deaths (or casualties), a figure he sometimes raised to 1 million.¹³ But several scholars have pointed out that during the war military planners never projected casualty figures that were even close to those cited by Truman after the war.¹⁴ Barton Bernstein argues that the number should be put at about 63,000, down from the 229,000 that had been widely accepted among historians.¹⁵ Others argue that Bernstein's figure is a miscalculation or, alternatively, that it comes from early summer 1945 and that casualty figures were undoubtedly revised upward over the course of the summer as intelligence estimates of the numbers of Japanese defenders on southern Kyushu went up.¹⁶ However, most historians would now agree that the claim that the bomb

¹¹ Some of this information is reported only in memoirs written well after the fact, and no documentary evidence from the time currently exists to corroborate it. On doubts about Eisenhower's views, see Barton Bernstein, "Ike and Hiroshima: Did He Oppose It?" *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 10 (September 1987), pp. 377–89. Bard's concerns are well documented (see further below).

¹² Harwit, *An Exhibit Denied*.

¹³ Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs: Year of Decisions*, vol. I (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), pp. 314, 417. In his 1953 memoirs, Winston Churchill inflated the figure of 1 million casualties mentioned in the influential 1947 Stimson article to 1 million deaths. Paul Boyer, *Fallout: A Historian Reflects on America's Half-Century Encounter With Nuclear Weapons* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1998), p. 21.

¹⁴ Rufus E. Miles, Jr., "Hiroshima: The Strange Myth of Half a Million American Lives Saved," *International Security*, vol. 10 (1985), pp. 121–40; Barton J. Bernstein, "A Post-war Myth: 500,000 US Lives Saved," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 42 (June/July 1986), pp. 38–40.

¹⁵ Barton J. Bernstein, "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 74, no. 1 (January 1995), pp. 135–52, and Bernstein, "Reconsidering Truman's Claim of 'Half A Million Lives Saved' by the Atomic Bomb: The Construction and Deconstruction of a Myth," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1999), pp. 101–48.

¹⁶ Michael Kort, "Casualty Projections for the Invasion of Japan, Phantom Estimates, and the Math of Barton Bernstein," *Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Newsletter* (December 2003); Maddox, *Weapons for Victory*, p. 126; Newman, *Hiroshima Cult*, ch. 1. Most estimates of American casualties were extrapolations from the casualty rates of the bitter fighting on Okinawa in the spring of 1945. Some estimates were based on early plans for two invasions, one in November 1945, called Operation Olympic, in which troops were to land near Kyushu, and a second in March 1946, Operation Coronet, in which troops were to land on the Tokyo Plain.

prevented 500,000 American deaths is unsupportable.¹⁷ It is important to remember that all figures, even those at the time, were highly speculative.

More likely, it appears that Truman, for whatever reason – guilt, perhaps – felt the need to exaggerate the estimated casualties greatly in order to justify the use of the bomb. It is clear that high casualty figures, whether informed or uninformed, were cited frequently by others in conversation as well, and that Truman and his advisors were intensely concerned with American losses. But it is also clear “that alternatives to the bomb existed and that Truman and his advisors knew it.”¹⁸

The momentum toward use

In reality, Truman had four possible options for ending the war, each with weaknesses and potential risks: the atomic bombing, an invasion of Japan, modifying the unconditional surrender demand to allow the Japanese emperor, revered by the Japanese as god, to remain, and strangulation of Japan through both intensified conventional bombing and a tightened blockade. In exploring why none of the alternatives got chosen, it becomes clear that the real question is not so much why none were chosen but why they were not seriously explored in the first place. There was no serious consideration of alternatives to using the bomb to end the war, nor even of alternative ways of employing it, such as in a demonstration or preceded by an explicit warning to Japan.

Instead, the decision on use was almost a non-decision, the outcome of a process set in motion much earlier by the expectation that any available atomic weapon would be used on Germany. When the war against Germany ended earlier, the common assumption was that the bomb would be used on Japan as soon as it was ready. While some scattered voices were raised in favor of alternatives, the assumption of use plus the special influence of key individuals such as General Leslie Groves, head of the Manhattan Project, and Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, who had strong domestic political incentives to use the bomb, made it unlikely that alternative courses of action would find serious examination.

¹⁷ J. Samuel Walker, “The Decision to Use the Bomb: A Historiographical Update,” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Winter 1990), p. 110.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

It is important to underscore how much the assumption of use came to permeate thinking. In September 1944, after the war with Germany had ended, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Franklin Roosevelt had agreed in a highly secret memo to consider the use of the bomb on Japan, without making any definite commitment on use.¹⁹ After Truman became president on April 12, 1945, he was briefed on the bomb on April 25 in a meeting significant for what was not discussed. There was no discussion of whether or how the bomb should be used against Japan. Instead, General Groves informed Truman that two kinds of bombs were being prepared, a test would take place in July, the bombs would be ready by August, and the special bombing unit was already in training and would shortly be deployed to the Pacific.²⁰

Two days later, on April 27, Groves' Target Committee held its first meeting. At no time during the committee's existence did it discuss alternatives to use on cities.²¹ Groves laid down the requirement that the military target should be "of such size" to fully show "the power of the bomb," and this clearly meant cities.²² The Interim Committee, formed to advise Truman on future atomic policy, and chaired by Secretary of War Henry Stimson, offered its judgment on June 1 for a "military" use of the bomb without warning, after an only incomplete examination of alternatives. Truman approved this recommendation on June 6. He seems to have made up his mind before the Alamogordo test on July 16, 1945, recording in his diary on July 5 that he had given Stimson his "final order of the bomb's use." Once the test was successful, although general authorization had been granted by the president and secretary of war, the actual speed and timing of use was determined by readiness and weather.²³ The number of attacks would be determined by the supply of bombs available.²⁴

¹⁹ Aide-memoire of conversation between the president and the prime minister at Hyde Park, September 18, 1944, *FRUS: The Conference at Quebec, 1944*, pp. 492–93.

²⁰ McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 59.

²¹ Maddox, *Weapons for Victory*, p. 31.

²² Leslie Groves, *Now It Can Be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project* (New York: Harpers, 1962), p. 267.

²³ Letter to General Carl Spaatz from General Thomas T. Handy, acting chief of staff, July 25, 1945, reprinted in Douglas J. MacEachin, *The Final Months of the War with Japan: Signals Intelligence, US Invasion Planning, and the A-Bomb Decision* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998).

²⁴ Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, p. 68.

Arthur Compton, a distinguished scientist and member of Truman's panel of science advisors, later recalled that the use of the bomb "seemed a foregone conclusion."²⁵ General Groves, who was responsible for everything short of actually conducting the bombing mission itself, later described Truman's eventual decision as "one of non-interference – basically a decision not to upset the existing plans."²⁶

The legitimacy of the bomb

For Truman and his advisors in 1945, there was no compelling reason *not* to use the bomb. The assumption was that atomic weapons were legitimate weapons of war. Why was this so and why did no one in authority challenge this assumption? Use of the bomb did not at the time raise a profound moral issue for most of the decisionmakers, for two reasons: the continuity between nuclear and conventional bombing, and the general erosion of moral restraints over the course of the war, much of it due to strategic bombing practices.

By the time atomic bombs were used, World War II had created a seamless web between nuclear and conventional bombing, and between "tactical" and "strategic" bombing. It was only later that distinctions and thresholds were created. As historians have noted, the atomic attacks on Japan represented a continuation of – not a rupture with – wartime bombing strategy. The detonation of atomic weapons culminated an effort by American strategic air power to lay waste to almost every important city in Japan, mostly through firebombing. "When Hiroshima and Nagasaki were subjected to atomic attack, the weapons were new and revolutionary, but the havoc they wrought on enemy cities was not." Nuclear weapons provided a more effective means of carrying out a strategy that was already widely and vigorously pursued through conventional bombing, and "it was not thought that any irreversible threshold had been crossed."²⁷ Leaders such as Air Force General Curtis LeMay, head of the 21st Bomber Command, made no sharp distinctions in methods of killing. As he put it in his characteristically blunt style, "We scorched and boiled and baked to death more people in Tokyo on that night of

²⁵ Arthur Holly Compton, *Atomic Quest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 238.

²⁶ Groves, *Now It Can Be Told*, p. 265.

²⁷ Sheldon Cohen, *Arms and Judgement: Law, Morality and the Conduct of War in the 20th Century* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), p. 91.

March 9–10 than went up in vapor at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.”²⁸

In fact, conventional bombing *intensified* after the nuclear attacks, and the heaviest conventional bombing of the war *followed* Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On August 14 and 15, 1945, a 1014 plane mission, the largest of the war, staged a 14-hour bombing attack on six Japanese cities, dropping 6,000 tons of conventional explosives. This was *after* Radio Tokyo had broadcast acceptance of US terms (but before the message had reached Washington through official channels). According to the US Air Force official history of the war, Air Force Chief of Staff Hap Arnold “wanted as big a finale as possible.”²⁹

For his part, General Groves wanted to drop as many nuclear bombs on Japan as were ready.³⁰ Plans were discussed for dropping a third atomic bomb, on Tokyo, in late August if Japan did not surrender. General George Marshall, army chief of staff, had briefly explored the tactical use of atomic bombs in connection with plans for the possible invasion of Japan to end the war.³¹ After news of the scale of the destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Truman was reluctant to do this but began to think he might have to. He had apparently not expected a second bomb to be dropped so soon after the attack on Hiroshima, and immediately ordered the military not to drop a third.³²

Thus the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, which caused less destruction than the firebombing of Tokyo only a few months earlier, was in some senses only the logical conclusion of the policy of bombing cities.³³ These facts suggest the continuity between atomic

²⁸ Quoted in Robert S. Norris, *Racing for the Bomb: General Leslie Groves, The Manhattan Project's Indispensable Man* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 2002), p. 324.

²⁹ Quoted in Leon V. Sigal, *Fighting to a Finish: The Politics of War Termination in the United States and Japan, 1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 254. “Superforts Stage 6-Target Wind-Up,” *New York Times*, August 15, 1945, p. 8. Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy*, p. 26.

³⁰ Sigal, *Fighting to a Finish*, p. 207.

³¹ See Barton J. Bernstein, “Eclipsed by Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Early Thinking About Tactical Nuclear Weapons,” *International Security*, vol. 15, no. 4 (Spring 1991), pp. 149–73; and Marc Gallicchio, “After Nagasaki: General Marshall’s Plan for the Use of Tactical Nuclear Weapons,” *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives*, vol. 24, no. 4 (1991), pp. 396–404.

³² Maddox, *Weapon for Victory*, pp. 141–43; Stanley Goldberg, “What Did Truman Know, and When Did He Know It?” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 54, no. 3 (May/June 1998), pp. 18–19; Boyer, *Fallout*, p. 23.

³³ Casualty estimates vary widely. Hiroshima is estimated to have killed immediately 70,000–80,000, Nagasaki about 35,000–40,000, while the firebombing of Tokyo killed an estimated 80,000–100,000 people and razed nearly half of Tokyo. Various fatalities estimates are listed in Barton J. Bernstein, “Truman and the A-Bomb: Targeting Non-combatants, Using the Bomb, and His Defending the ‘Decision,’” *Journal of Military*

weapons and existing military strategy and plans rather than any major disjunction.

A second reason atomic weapons posed no great moral problems for decisionmakers was because the accumulated barbarities of the war had already swept away the traditional moral codes and laws of war that required distinguishing between civilian and military targets. "By early 1945, World War II – especially in the Pacific – had become virtually total war. The strategic bombing of German cities, including the firebombing of Dresden, had helped set a precedent for direct air attacks on Japanese cities and civilians."³⁴ More innocent civilians died in the brutal battle of Okinawa from April to June 1945 than at Hiroshima, and the conventional explosives used on the island had arguably a more devastating effect on national life.³⁵ On August 1, only six days before Hiroshima, the secondary target of Toyama, a city of 130,000, was burned almost to nothing; one report described it as 99 percent ashes.³⁶ Under the overall command of General LeMay, who promised to beat Japan back to the Dark Ages, saturation raids reached down to cities of 55,000 in population because too little was left in Tokyo, Nagoya, Kobe, Osaka, Yokohama, Kawasaki and other industrial centers to make mass attacks on them worthwhile.

Any misgivings were swept away in what the historian Barton Bernstein has termed "a redefinition of morality" that made Hiroshima and Nagasaki possible.³⁷ This was a result of World War II and its barbarities, such as Germany's systematic murder of 6 million Jews, Japan's devastation of Nanking, and the incendiary bombing of civilians. Bernstein writes, "While the worst atrocities were perpetrated by the Axis, all the major states sliced away at the moral code – often to the applause of their leaders and citizens alike."³⁸ The earlier moral insistence on non-combatant immunity eroded under the

History, vol. 62 (July 1998), p. 565, fn 43. For comparison, Bernstein estimates about 450,000–700,000 fatalities from conventional bombing during the war. *Ibid.*, p. 566, fn. 43.

³⁴ Bernstein, "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered," p. 140.

³⁵ More than 200,000 people died in the "Raids of Iron and Steel" on Okinawa in April 1945. According to one scholar, conventional explosives did far greater damage to Okinawans than atomic bombs did to the Japanese. "It would have taken 150 atomic bombs to wreak on Japan the equivalent cultural and material devastation and to kill a comparable percentage of Japanese. A third of all Okinawans were probably killed, and most of the island's national and cultural artifacts were demolished. Few people have suffered a similar catastrophe." George Feifer, *Tennozan: The Battle for Okinawa and the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1992), p. 533.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 582.

³⁷ Bernstein, "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered," p. 151.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

pressures of a brutal war, and “by 1945 there were few moral restraints left in what had become virtually a total war.”³⁹

Several military and political leaders expressed misgivings about the morality of targeting the bomb on non-combatants. General George Marshall, army chief of staff, had urged unsuccessfully in late May 1945, ten weeks before Hiroshima, that an atomic bomb should be dropped only on a “straight military objective such as a large military installation,” and then, if necessary, on a manufacturing center – but only after civilians were adequately warned so they could flee.⁴⁰ He feared that the United States would otherwise have to bear the “opprobrium which might follow from an ill-considered employment of such force.”⁴¹ Marshall was never a strong advocate of the bomb but was not a strong opponent of it either. He generally took the army position that, with or without the bomb, an invasion of Japan would be necessary.⁴²

Admiral William Leahy, then the equivalent of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, later also likened the atomic bomb to poison gas, calling it “barbaric.” He wrote in his memoirs that its use had been unnecessary since Japan was ready to surrender under pressure from the Navy’s blockade and conventional bombing. He felt that in being the first to use this “barbarous weapon,” the United States “had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages.” As a former specialist in gunnery and head of the Bureau of Ordnance, he did not think this was an acceptable weapon, rather it was “a poisonous thing.”⁴³

Military organizational interests were not absent, though. The US Navy, eager to take credit for ending the war, believed that a combination of blockade, continued conventional bombing, and persuasion could preclude an invasion. While Admiral Leahy later had strong words for the immorality of the bomb, it is unclear to what extent he spoke up at the time. At the time, he did repeatedly state

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 151. The most detailed analysis of the erosion of moral constraints in World War II is Ronald Schaffer, *Wings of Judgment: American Bombing in World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁴⁰ Quoted in Bernstein, “Understanding the Atomic Bomb,” p. 261. Gar Alperovitz and Robert L. Messer; Barton Bernstein, “Marshall, Truman, and the Decision to Drop the Bomb,” correspondence in *International Security*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Winter 1991/92), pp. 204–21.

⁴¹ Quoted in Bernstein, “Understanding the Atomic Bomb,” p. 261.

⁴² Robert J. Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial* (New York: Putnam’s, 1995), p. 140.

⁴³ Adm. William D. Leahy, *I Was There* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950), pp. 440, 441.

his belief that the bomb would not work (the Navy would certainly benefit from raising doubts about the bomb and urging caution in its use).⁴⁴ Neither of the top commanders in the Pacific, however, Admiral Chester Nimitz or General Douglas MacArthur, expressed any reservations about using the bomb.⁴⁵ At the other end of the spectrum, General Groves, by summer 1945, headed what was in effect a new branch of the armed services – a nuclear strike command with fifteen aircraft and, after July 24, two atomic bombs. Groves feared that a premature end to the war would prevent a practical test of the bomb. Having made the bombs, Groves saw it as his duty to use them, so that their future effectiveness as weapons could be judged.⁴⁶

James F. Byrnes, Roosevelt's "assistant president," who had, by Potsdam, become Truman's secretary of state, emerges as the key influence in the decision to use the bomb without warning. Byrnes was the most active promoter in the Truman administration for a non-negotiable surrender and the use of the atomic bomb on Japan's cities.⁴⁷ The demand for unconditional surrender had originally been made to avoid negotiating with Hitler and then was transferred to Japan without much thought. Byrnes' primary concern was with domestic politics and "showing results" of the \$2 billion Manhattan Project. With no special knowledge of Japan, he did not want to modify the unconditional surrender demands as recommended by several State Department Japan specialists and repeatedly suggested by Secretary of War Henry Stimson. Byrnes feared a backlash among American voters over retaining the emperor. "Now that the United States has the bomb," he said, "I do not see why we should retreat from our demand for unconditional surrender . . . If any conditions are to be accepted, I want the United States and not Japan to state the conditions."⁴⁸

Because of his influence, Byrnes and his domestic politics viewpoints prevailed in the Interim Committee, and no discussions of the emperor's future took place at the crucial Potsdam conference in July 1945. Truman had a high estimate of Byrnes' character and a

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁴⁵ MacArthur did not learn about the bomb's imminent use until August 1. Maddox, *Weapons for Victory*, p. 124.

⁴⁶ Norris, *Racing for the Bomb*, pp. 376–78.

⁴⁷ David Robertson, *Sly and Able: A Political Biography of James F. Byrnes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), p. 369.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 401.

willingness to rely on his advice. Much less informed and less confident about atomic energy than Roosevelt was, Truman was anxious about his capabilities in foreign affairs. He was impressed with Byrnes and depended on his judgment.⁴⁹

Among political leaders, Secretary of War Henry Stimson appears to have experienced the most doubts about using the bomb. Earlier, he had opposed expansion of the air war and its indiscriminate mass killings of civilians. He advised Truman that the Air Force should confine its bombings to precision targets partly because he "did not want to have the United States acquire the reputation of outdoing Hitler in atrocities."⁵⁰ He argued that the reputation of the United States for "fair play and humanitarianism is the world's biggest asset for peace in the coming decades . . . The same rule of sparing the civilian population should be applied as far as possible to the use of any new weapon."⁵¹ Stimson was disturbed by the lack of compassion and indifference the war had ushered in and by the degradation it inflicted. Having visited Japan, he did not view the Japanese as sub-human, as depicted in much of the war propaganda. He increasingly tried to press the advantages of assuring Japan it could retain the emperor and insisted on removing Kyoto, an historical and cultural capital, from General Groves' target list. But he did not support warning Japan about the bomb and he never suggested that the bomb should not be used at all.⁵² McGeorge Bundy indicated many years later that Stimson strongly disapproved of city bombing and thought that he had tried to do something about it. But Stimson seemed out of touch with the real nature of the bombing, perhaps because he was 78 years old.

The most outspoken call for moral concerns came from Ralph Bard, the undersecretary of the Navy and a member of the Interim Committee, who had concurred with its recommendation but later began to have second thoughts. In a dissenting memo to Secretary Stimson on June 27, 1945, he invoked the moral traditions of the United States, arguing that because of "the position of the United States as a great humanitarian nation and the fair play attitude of our people," the

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 393–95; Gregg Herken, *The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Bomb in the Cold War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980).

⁵⁰ Stimson diary, June 6, 1945, quoted in Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, p. 133.

⁵¹ Stimson diary, May 16, 1945, quoted in Takaki, *Why America Dropped the Bomb*, p. 125.

⁵² Takaki, *Why America Dropped the Bomb*, p. 127; Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, pp. 77–79; Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), pp. 55–56.

decision to use the bomb without warning should have been given more consideration.⁵³ But his memo, which came well after the Interim Committee has given its recommendation, did not find a receptive audience.

While a number of scientists were concerned about the moral implications of the bomb, they were still a minority of the Manhattan Project team. According to Joseph Rotblat, a scientist who quit the A-bomb effort in December 1944 after it was clear that Germany was no longer a threat, and who later won a Nobel peace prize for his disarmament work, the majority of scientists “were quite content to leave it to others to decide how their work would be used.”⁵⁴ However, some of them had begun thinking about the implications of their creation long before the test explosion at Alamogordo in July 1945. In the Franck report of June 11, 1945, a group of them called for a demonstration use of the bomb in an uninhabited area, expressing their concern that US use of the new weapon would sacrifice the country’s “whole moral position.” They doubted whether Americans would approve of the United States “being the first to introduce such an indiscriminate method of wholesale destruction of human life.” They were also concerned about the implications of use for the “ethical credibility” of US efforts to enforce any postwar system of international control of the atom.⁵⁵

The scientific panel of the Interim Committee was sympathetic to the scientists’ concerns but unconvinced that a demonstration shot would have sufficient impact on Japanese thinking to end the war. In rejecting the Franck report on June 16, 1945, the panel concluded that it saw “no acceptable alternative to direct military use.”⁵⁶ A petition calling for warning Japan and publicly offering it peace terms before the bomb was used, signed by 69 scientists, was sent to the president in July 1945 by activist scientist Leo Szilard. Szilard’s petition was close in substance to the Franck report. It called on

⁵³ Bard’s memo is reprinted in Sherwin, *A World Destroyed*, Appendix; Robertson, *Sly and Able*, pp. 410–11.

⁵⁴ Joseph Rotblat, “Leaving the Bomb Project,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 41, no. 7 (August 1985), p. 18.

⁵⁵ “Report of the Committee on Social and Political Implications,” June 11, 1945, reprinted in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 1 (May 1946), pp. 2–4, 16.

⁵⁶ “Recommendations on the Immediate Use of Nuclear Weapons,” Science Panel’s Report to the Interim Committee on Nuclear Power, June 16, 1945, at www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/Interims.html. Harrison-Bundy File, Folder 76, Records of the Manhattan Engineer District, RG 77, NA.

Truman to take into account the moral obligations of the United States for “restraint,” and not just expediency, in a decision to use the bomb.⁵⁷ In the cover letter sent to scientists at Oak Ridge and Los Alamos laboratories, Szilard explained that his petition was “based on purely moral considerations.” Germans who “did not raise their voices against” the atrocities of the Nazis, he observed, were widely condemned for their silence. Manhattan project scientists had a special responsibility to speak out about the bomb.⁵⁸ Sent to General Groves at the end of July, the petition did not make it off his desk in time to affect the atomic bombing decision.⁵⁹

Even if Szilard’s petition had gotten through, it would likely have had little effect on Truman’s decision. It was an appeal endorsed by a minority of scientists at a single facility of the enormous Manhattan Project.⁶⁰ More importantly, however, Truman, a foreign policy novice, was unlikely to have reversed the momentum. Beholden to his more experienced foreign policy advisors, insecure about following in the great Roosevelt’s footsteps, he was committed to carrying out Roosevelt’s policies. His passion for being “decisive” seemed to be a way to compensate for his inexperience. There is some evidence that he did not fully comprehend that the bomb was to be used directly on civilians, although, given the nature of strategic bombing by this point in the war, such a belief borders on delusion.⁶¹ Committed to ending the war as speedily as possible, he never expressed any doubts.

Why did none of the doubts get through? Ultimately, the reasons are many: the influence of stereotypes in a racialized war and the concomitant raging hatred for the Japanese, Truman’s need to be “tough,”

⁵⁷ “A Petition to the President of the United States,” July 17, 1945, at www.dannen.com/decision/pet-gif.html. Harrison-Bundy File, Folder 76, Records of Manhattan Engineer District, RG 77, NA.

⁵⁸ “Szilard Petition, cover letter,” July 4, 1945; and “A Petition to the President of the United States,” July 3, 1945, at www.dannen.com/decision/45-07-03.html. Harrison-Bundy File, Folder 76, Records of Manhattan Engineer District, RG 77, NA.

⁵⁹ There were actually three versions of the petition with around 150 signatures total, but Szilard may not have been aware of this. Howard Gest, “The July 1945 Szilard Petition on the Atomic Bomb: Memoir by a Signer in Oak Ridge,” undated manuscript at www.bio.indiana.edu/Gest/HGSzilard.html.

⁶⁰ Maddox, *Weapons for Victory*, p. 87.

⁶¹ Barton Bernstein refers to Truman’s “self-deception” in Bernstein, “Truman and the A-Bomb,” p. 558. Truman wrote in his journal at the Potsdam conference that he had told the secretary of war to use the bomb “so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target, not women and children.” He added, “He & I are in accord. The target will be a purely military one . . .” Ferrell, ed., *Off the Record*, pp. 55–56.

and the demand for unconditional surrender. The slide toward strategic bombing had raised the levels of permissible violence. The Manhattan Project developed a dynamic of its own – after spending so much money the project would have to, in Byrnes' words, "show results." Its director, General Groves, saw Russia as the "enemy," and Byrnes was committed to demonstrating US power to the Russians. Truman would have had to resist the pressures of men like Groves and Byrnes, and this was probably beyond his capacities and experience. Finally, as Bundy observed, underlying all of this was that in 1945, unlike today, use of the bomb was regarded as primarily a military matter. By 1945 there was a deeply ingrained "disposition to separate military from political questions."⁶² The goal was to win the war, and this was the job of military professionals. Decisions on the bomb – the specific use to which it would be put, targets, timing, and so on – were thus largely determined by "a strictly military process" with relatively little intervention by civilians.⁶³

Some scholars argue that the atomic bomb decision can only be understood in light of the incomplete information decisionmakers had, in part a result of General Groves' policy of strict compartmentalization of information, and the absence of Japan experts from the Potsdam conference.⁶⁴ This is mistaken. The real issue was that the Japanese were not ready to surrender on allied terms. Truman and his advisors certainly got routine briefings on the US intercepts of Japanese cables. The "peace feelers" from the Japanese were for terms that were unacceptable to the allies. Besides seeking to preserve the emperor's authority, Japanese military chiefs also insisted that there be no military occupation of Japan by the Allies, that the Japanese military be allowed to demobilize and disarm itself voluntarily, and that war criminals be prosecuted by the Japanese government.⁶⁵ It would not have taken a Japan expert to understand that this provided no basis for talking peace. In any event, Japanese Army leaders, who were unconcerned with civilian casualties, rejected peace moves and were ready to fight to the end. As Sadao Asada shows, drawing

⁶² Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, p. 76.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 68. The major exception was Stimson's intervention to remove Kyoto from the target list.

⁶⁴ Murray Sayle, "Letter From Hiroshima: Did the Bomb End the War?" *The New Yorker*, July 31, 1995, pp. 40–64.

⁶⁵ Sadao Asada, "The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender – a Reconsideration," *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 67, no. 4 (November 1998), pp. 477–512.

extensively on Japanese sources, the Japanese leadership, especially the emperor, was “shocked” into surrender and the bomb was decisive in that respect.⁶⁶

In this context, Groves and Byrnes, driven by personal ambitions and the desire to protect the military and political reputation of the atomic project, were largely able to influence the decision – or rather, the momentum – in favor of using the bomb.⁶⁷ However, the basic fact is that most decisionmakers did not seek to avoid use of the bomb on Japan. They did not view the bomb as profoundly immoral nor did they fear the postwar consequences of using it in battle.⁶⁸ The burden of proof was clearly on those who opposed using atomic weapons, but there was no argument with great enough weight to stop their use. By the time of the Potsdam conference in July 1945, the burning question was not whether to use it, but whether it would *work*. Once the Alamogordo test was successful, the machinery for use just went into motion. Truman did not have to make a decision and no decision was ever recorded.⁶⁹

Truman is often seen as the president who used the bomb without hesitation. For years afterward, he remained defensive about his “decision,” saying that it did not trouble him. “Let there be no mistake about it. I regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never had any doubt that it should be used.”⁷⁰ In fact, using the bomb did trouble Truman, and quite quickly. On August 11, a day after the atomic attack on Nagasaki, Truman ordered a halt to further atomic bombings, even while he allowed incendiary bombing of Japanese cities to continue. Having received reports and photographs of the effects of the Hiroshima bomb, Truman did not want a third bomb dropped. He told his cabinet that “the thought of wiping out another 100,000 people was too horrible” to contemplate. As Secretary of Commerce Henry Wallace recorded in his diary, “He didn’t like the idea of killing, as he said, ‘all those kids’.”⁷¹

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Sigal develops a bureaucratic politics explanation for why alternatives were not pursued in *Fighting to a Finish*.

⁶⁸ Bernstein, “Understanding the Atomic Bomb,” p. 236.

⁶⁹ There is no signed or initialed order by Truman authorizing the atomic bombing of Japan. Bernstein, “Truman and the A-Bomb,” p. 555.

⁷⁰ Truman, *Memoirs: Year of Decisions*, vol. I, pp. 87, 419.

⁷¹ Quoted in John Morton Blum, ed., *The Price of Vision: The Diary of Henry A. Wallace, 1942–1946* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), pp. 473–74.

The legacy of Hiroshima

A number of themes emerge in this story: the existence of some ethical doubts about the new weapon based on America's own ethical traditions, which are nevertheless swept away by strategic, domestic and bureaucratic pressures of the war; the instrumental linkage of America's moral image to its ability to lead in the postwar world; and the secrecy surrounding elite deliberations on nuclear matters. These themes will return many times.

The early postwar years: relief and uncertainty

The initial response: The legitimacy and justice of use

The use of the atomic bomb to end World War II was widely supported by the American public. About 86 percent of those surveyed shortly after the war approved its use and, in newspaper editorials, approval was practically unanimous. Most Americans rejoiced that the horrific and costly war was over and were little troubled by atomic weapons. A *Fortune* magazine poll of September 1945 found only 5 percent of the American public opposed use of the bomb under any circumstances, 54 percent favored the use made of the weapons, and 14 percent would have preferred a test demonstration before use on cities. Nearly a quarter (23 percent) wanted to "use many more of them before Japan had a chance to surrender."⁷² Hiroshima and Nagasaki produced protests only from pacifists, a segment of the atomic scientists, and some religious leaders.

Truman's initial justifications for ordering the bombing invoked both moral and racist arguments. Initially, immediately after the August 6 Hiroshima bombing, Truman publicly justified it as fair retribution to the Japanese for their perfidious attack on Pearl Harbor, their rejection of the 1945 Potsdam ultimatum calling for a surrender, and their wartime atrocities. If Japanese leaders did not accept Allied war terms, Truman threatened, Allied forces would "obliterate more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise the Japanese

⁷² Thomas W. Graham, *American Public Opinion on NATO, Extended Deterrence, and the Use of Nuclear Weapons*, CSIA Occasional Paper Series (Cambridge, MA: Center for Science and International Affairs, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1989), p. 7; Boyer, *Fallout*, p. 25; and John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973), pp. 172–73.

have above ground” and inflict “a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth” (implying more atomic bombing).⁷³ As historian Paul Boyer observed, this threat implied that “the Japanese were subhuman creatures to whom the moral restraint of nations need not apply.”⁷⁴ Post-Hiroshima editorials, cartoons, and letters to the editor enthusiastically endorsed the fair retribution argument, and often included racist elements. During the war, American anti-Japanese propaganda had been deeply racist, and similar racist arguments and images were employed in the justification of the atomic bomb.⁷⁵ Americans thus endorsed the correctness, legitimacy, and even justice of the atomic bombings.

It was only two months later that Truman put forth the strategic argument, what became the dominant justification, that using the bomb had been necessary to save US lives. On October 3, 1945, in a message to Congress on atomic-energy legislation, Truman argued that use of the bomb had been a necessary alternative to a costly invasion of Japan.⁷⁶ This argument was given a fuller elaboration in Secretary of War Henry Stimson’s highly influential February 1947 article in *Harper’s* magazine (to be discussed later), which contributed greatly to the consolidation of the strategic argument as the dominant rationale for the atomic bombings.⁷⁷

Two features characterized the five years after 1945: the American public was not particularly bothered by atomic bombs – radiation did not really become an issue until the 1950s – and the atomic bomb was not viewed as a decisive weapon. Aside from a few scattered peace groups, for the first year or so after Hiroshima and Nagasaki the general public evinced little concern about the bomb. Although the atomic explosions produced a general sense of awe and dread, and psychological shock in many, concern about the bomb appeared

⁷³ “Statement by the President of the United States, August 6, 1945,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman*, April 12 to December 31, 1945 (Washington, DC: US GPO, 1965), pp. 198–99.

⁷⁴ Boyer, *Fallout*, p. 20.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 20–23, 26. On the racist aspects of the war, see John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

⁷⁶ “Special Message to Congress on Atomic Energy, October 3, 1945,” in *Truman Public Papers* (1960), pp. 362–66.

⁷⁷ Stimson, “The Decision to Use the Bomb.” Serious historical debate over, and criticism of, the Hiroshima decision began to appear only in the mid-1960s, in part because of the availability of new historical material, but also because the Vietnam War created a new climate of cynicism about government decisions.

sporadically, in waves, and was by no means universal.⁷⁸ Some of the atomic scientists, church leaders, and other prominent figures sought to raise concerns about the perils of a nuclear arms race. The atomic scientists' movement, small but vocal, played an important role in the eventually successful effort to put atomic weapons under civilian rather than military control.⁷⁹ On the whole, however, the public was either supportive or quiescent about nuclear matters during much of the first decade after Nagasaki. US government-controlled publicity about the bomb and censorship of news from Japan helped to prevent knowledge about the unique radiation effects of Hiroshima and Nagasaki from emerging.⁸⁰ Thus when the first postwar US atomic bomb tests on the Bikini atoll in summer 1946 were not as destructive as expected, this easily permitted the conclusion that maybe the bomb *was* just another weapon. A Gallup poll in the aftermath of the Bikini test confirmed this. When respondents were asked "How worried are you about the atomic bomb?" 50 percent answered "not at all."⁸¹

Military and political leaders, for their part, viewed the atomic bomb as a powerful but not necessarily decisive weapon. The Spaatz report of October 1945 highlighted the limitations of the bomb, given scarce numbers and the limited range of the only available delivery vehicles, the B-29 bomber. A study by the Joint Staff Strategic Survey also noted that the bomb might not be decisive, and conventional armies would still be needed.⁸² Although immediately after the war, strategist Bernard Brodie argued that the bomb was a revolutionary weapon whose value would lie in its non-use, at the same time Paul Nitze was touring the ruins of Hiroshima for the US Strategic Bombing Survey wondering if the bomb was really such an absolute weapon.⁸³ Little

⁷⁸ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

⁷⁹ This is recounted in Alice Kimball Smith, *A Peril and a Hope: The Scientists' Movement in America, 1945–47* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

⁸⁰ US government censorship is detailed in Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, pp. 40–64.

⁸¹ Lawrence S. Wittner, *Rebels Against War: The American Peace Movement 1933–1983* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1984), rev. edn, p. 167.

⁸² *The Implications of the Atom Bomb for the Size, Composition, Organization and Role of the Future Air Force* (Spaatz report) (October 23, 1945), and Joint Strategic Staff Survey, *Statement of the Effect of Atomic Weapons on National Security and Military Organization* (January 12, 1946), discussed in Freedman, *Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, p. 51.

⁸³ Bernard Brodie, *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946); Paul H. Nitze with Ann M. Smith and Steven L. Rearden, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision: A Memoir* (New York: G. Weidenfeld, 1989), pp. 42–43.

consensus existed among military and political leaders on the nature of the new weapons, how they should be used, or how they should be integrated into the military.

Thus a great deal of uncertainty prevailed regarding nuclear weapons. Although many individuals, including US leaders, were clearly troubled by the immense destructive power of the new weapon and its possibly revolutionary implications, others viewed it as just another military weapon. These factors help explain why the atomic bomb was not seen inherently as a taboo weapon and why it did not become so immediately following its initial use.

Several events threatened to raise doubts about the bombings, however. In December 1945 the US Strategic Bombing Survey concluded that Japan would have surrendered even without the bomb, Soviet intervention, or a US invasion of the Japanese islands, suggesting that the atomic bombings lacked a compelling military necessity.⁸⁴ On March 6, 1946, a draft statement by the Federal Council of Churches, reported on the front page of *The New York Times*, called the atomic bombing, especially without warning, "morally indefensible."⁸⁵ At the end of August 1946, *The New Yorker* devoted the entire issue to a powerful article by John Hersey offering the first detailed accounts of the effects of nuclear warfare on its survivors. In spare prose, he highlighted the effects of an act done with little understanding of the consequences.⁸⁶ The issue was sold out, newspapers everywhere excerpted editorials, and portions were read over the radio and broadcast around the world. Quickly turned into a book, *Hiroshima* sold more than 3.5 million copies. In an editorial on the story, a respected journalist described the bombings as "the crime of Hiroshima and Nagasaki."⁸⁷

The effects of the article are difficult to assess with certainty. According to one historian, "*Hiroshima* neither reenergized the international control movement nor launched a vigorous debate of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki."⁸⁸ However, Hersey's vivid depictions likely contributed to a growing sense of dread and revulsion regarding atomic weaponry increasingly felt by many

⁸⁴ See above, fn. 9.

⁸⁵ Robert W. Potter, "Japan Atom Bombing Condemned in Federal Church Council Report," *The New York Times*, pp. 1, 15.

⁸⁶ John Hersey, "Hiroshima," *The New Yorker*, August 31, 1946.

⁸⁷ Norman Cousins, "The Literacy of Survival," *The Saturday Review*, September 14, 1946.

⁸⁸ Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light*, p. 209.

Americans.⁸⁹ At minimum, the article penetrated a sense of complacency about the bomb that had built up. *The New York Times* editorialized that week:

Every American who has permitted himself to make jokes about atom bombs, or who has come to regard them as just one sensational phenomenon that can now be accepted as part of civilization, like the airplane and the gasoline engine, or who has allowed himself to speculate as to what we might do with them if we were forced into another war, ought to read Mr. Hersey.⁹⁰

The article may also have provoked the first official effort to defend the legitimacy of the bomb.

Constructing the legitimacy of the bomb

Harvard University president, James B. Conant, the era's most prominent educator, perceived a backlash developing against the bomb and was determined to do something about it. Conant, as a member of Truman's Interim Committee a key figure in the decision to build and use the bomb, had strongly defended the atomic bombings as no more immoral than strategic incendiary bombings of cities.⁹¹ He was worried because, in his view, it was necessary for world peace that "the American people stay tough with regard to use of the bomb."⁹² In September 1946 he asked former Secretary of War Stimson to write a piece restating the case for the bomb. Stimson reluctantly agreed. The piece was ghostwritten by his assistant, the young McGeorge Bundy, with input from several other government officials as well as Conant himself.⁹³ It was a self-conscious and carefully scripted effort to portray the atomic bombing decision as justified and defensible.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Steve Rothman, "The Publication of 'Hiroshima' in *The New Yorker*," unpublished paper, Harvard University, 1997, pp. 2-3.

⁹⁰ "Time From Laughter," editorial, *The New York Times*, August 30, 1946, p. 16. Hersey's obituary in the *The New Yorker* in 1993 suggested it might have been "the most famous magazine article ever published." "John Hersey" (obituary), *The New Yorker*, April 5, 1993, p. 111.

⁹¹ James G. Hershberg, "A Footnote on Hiroshima and Atomic Morality: Conant, Niebuhr, and an 'Emotional' Clergyman, 1945-46," *Newsletter - Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations* (December 2002).

⁹² Quoted in James G. Hershberg, *James B. Conant: Harvard to Hiroshima and the Making of the Nuclear Age* (New York: Knopf, 1993), p. 298.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 295-96.

⁹⁴ On the writing of this article, see *ibid.*, pp. 292-304; Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, pp. 93-114; and Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy, Brothers in Arms* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), pp. 89-94.

Appearing in *Harper's* in February 1947, the article argued that the bomb was considered "as legitimate as any other of the deadly explosives of modern war" and that the allies would have suffered endless losses without it.⁹⁵ Conant was pleased with the justification. If "propaganda against the use of the atomic bombs had been allowed to grow unchecked," he wrote Stimson, "the strength of our military position by virtue of having the bomb could have been completely weakened."⁹⁶

This article is significant because it reflected the first systematic effort by current and former government officials to defend the legitimacy of the bomb.⁹⁷ Its authoritativeness ensured it would have a significant impact on the public. In consolidating the strategic argument (saving American lives) as the primary justification for the bomb's use, the article appeared to squelch the doubts about the bomb that had been emerging among the public.⁹⁸ By the spring of 1948, the vast majority of public opinion still stood firmly behind US atomic policy and its decision to use the weapon on Japan.⁹⁹

Precursors to the taboo: two competing precedents

World War II had provided two competing precedents for how the bomb might be viewed in the years to come. On one hand, its use on Japan could easily have set a precedent for greater use. As a terror weapon it had been highly useful in forcing an end to the war. Given the widespread perception of the legitimacy of the atomic bombings, there was no necessary reason to expect that the bomb would not be used again. A course of action consistent with the August 1945 precedent would thus have been to simply further assimilate the bomb unproblematically into existing strategic bombing strategy and plans. This was certainly the view of the US Air Force, the military service that would deliver any atomic weapon. Early plans for future use of the atomic bomb, as established by a board led by Air Force Chief of Staff General Carl A. Spaatz, made clear that such plans included

⁹⁵ Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Bomb."

⁹⁶ Quoted in Hershberg, *Conant*, p. 298.

⁹⁷ Systematic efforts to shape the public interpretation of the bomb had begun even before Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however, as General Groves planned meticulously for the press releases that would announce the bomb.

⁹⁸ In Hershberg's view, the *Harper's* article, rather than Hersey's account, had the more dramatic impact on the public. See Hershberg, *Conant*, p. 301.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

dropping atomic weapons on enemy cities, just as had been done against Japan. For the Air Force, the bomb did not usher in any military or moral revolution.¹⁰⁰

The role of radiation and the poison gas analogy

An alternative precedent was suggested by the non-use of chemical weapons – poison gas – during the war, the first time in the history of nations at arms that a weapon used successfully in the previous war remained unused in the next. Poison gas had been used by all the major combatants in World War I, but remained unused on the European battlefronts of World War II.¹⁰¹ Thus, in contrast to British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin's famous pessimistic forecast in 1932 that "experience has shown us that the stern test of war will break down all conventions," one important convention – the prohibition on use of chemical weapons – was upheld during World War II.¹⁰² This precedent received explicit attention in the atomic scientists' Franck report of June 1945, which had suggested (hopefully) that the atomic bomb might come to be like poison gas after World War I; it could not be used because "public opinion would disapprove."¹⁰³

The Franck report received little attention at the time. The idea of non-use of atomic weapons, however, scarcely considered before August 1945, became one of the first issues raised after the war. Scattered voices both within and outside the US government suggested that restraint would be preferable to nuclear proliferation and use. Peace and church leaders, atomic scientists and other antinuclear activists argued on moral grounds that non-use must be the policy for

¹⁰⁰ Cillessen, "Embracing the Bomb," pp. 96–134. Spaatz's study of the bomb's role concluded, "the atomic bomb has not altered our basic concept of the strategic air offensive but has given us an additional weapon." Spaatz report, October 23, 1945, quoted in Samuel R. Williamson and Steven L. Reardon, *The Origins of US Nuclear Strategy, 1945–1953* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), p. 29.

¹⁰¹ Japan did use chemical and biological weapons in its war against China. See Richard Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); John Ellis Van Courtland Moon, "Chemical Weapons and Deterrence: The World War II Experience," *International Security*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1984), pp. 3–35; and SIPRI, "The Non-Use of CB Weapons during World War II," in *The Problem of Chemical and Biological Warfare*, vol. I (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1971), pp. 294–335.

¹⁰² From House of Commons debates, quoted in George Quester, *Deterrence Before Hiroshima: The Airpower Background of Modern Strategy* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966), p. 67.

¹⁰³ *Report of the Committee on Political and Social Problems*, Manhattan Project "Metallurgical Laboratory," University of Chicago, June 11, 1945 (Franck Report), at www.dannen.com/decision/franck.html.

the survival of the planet.¹⁰⁴ Strategists such as Bernard Brodie argued that non-use would come about because of the logic of deterrence.¹⁰⁵ Truman himself had expressed doubt in October 1945 about whether the bomb could ever be used again.

The poison gas precedent was not simply about non-use of a weapon but raised more troubling questions about the similarities between poison gas and radiation released during an atomic explosion, and thus about the nature and humanity of atomic weapons. Nevertheless, few officials involved in the Manhattan Project recognized before the war that radiation might be seen as analogous to poison gas. One of the few who did was Arthur Compton, a physicist, Nobel laureate and a member of the Interim Committee's scientific panel. In May 1945 he had noted that the atomic bomb "carries with it the question of possible radioactive poison over the area bombed. Essentially, the question of use . . . of the new weapon carries much more serious implications than the introduction of poison gas."¹⁰⁶ Shortly after the war, in a letter to Ernest Lawrence, director of the University of California Radiation Laboratory on August 30, 1945, Robert Oppenheimer, the scientific director of the Manhattan Project, compared working on atomic weapons to perfecting poison gas after World War I.¹⁰⁷

It was precisely this linkage that began to trouble some US officials after the war. As reports of deaths from radiation began to trickle out of Japan in the months after the war, they began to worry about the possible analogy between radiation and poison gas. General Groves and the US War Department embarked on a sustained effort to minimize evidence about Japanese deaths from radiation. In press releases, public statements, and delegation reports they assured Americans that there was no radioactivity at the bombing sites and suppressed evidence of radiation sickness in Japan. Privately, however, they knew the issue was far from certain.¹⁰⁸

Barton Bernstein asks why government officials such as General Groves found radiation casualties distressing, while deaths by blast

¹⁰⁴ Lawrence Wittner, *One World or None: A History of the World Disarmament Movement Through 1953*, vol. I of *The Struggle Against the Bomb* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 56–65.

¹⁰⁵ Brodie, *The Absolute Weapon*.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Bernstein, "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered," p. 143.

¹⁰⁷ Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, p. 71.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 40–64.

or heat appeared not to upset them.¹⁰⁹ Here part of the answer must lie in the assimilation of the atomic bomb with an already prohibited weapon. Poison gas had been banned by the 1899 Hague and 1925 Geneva Conventions. In 1943, President Roosevelt had publicly denounced poison gas and germ warfare as “terrible and inhumane” and “outlawed by the general opinion of civilized mankind.” He declared “categorically” that the United States would not use such weapons except in retaliation.¹¹⁰

For US officials needing to justify use of the atomic bomb after the fact, it thus became important that its radiation aspect be downplayed, so that the bomb seemed as much like a conventional weapon as possible. As Harvey Bundy, assistant to Secretary of War Stimson, wrote in retrospective notes in September 1946, “the atomic bomb would be dropped from a height that would minimize radio-active poisoning in order to avoid any contention that poison gases were being used.”¹¹¹ Bernstein suggests that, in fact, this statement is probably not true, as little evidence exists that US government officials thought much about the radiation issue or made efforts to minimize radioactive poisoning *before* the war.¹¹² To the extent that they worried about radioactivity, it was the danger to US troops who would enter Hiroshima after the blast.¹¹³

What Bundy’s statement probably more accurately reflects is US officials’ post-Hiroshima uneasiness about the potential association between the atomic bomb and weaponry widely regarded as inhumane. Commenting on a trip organized by the War Department to Japan in part to confirm that there was no radioactivity at Hiroshima, a June 1946 report in *The New Yorker* noted that radiation effects threatened “the humaneness of American methods of warfare,” and so the US Army, “sensitive to such criticism, felt called upon to prove as soon as possible, that the new bombs were entitled to the same

¹⁰⁹ Barton Bernstein, “Doing Nuclear History: Treating Scholarship Fairly and Interpreting Pre-Hiroshima Thinking About Radioactive Poisoning,” *Newsletter – Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations*, September 1996, p. 35.

¹¹⁰ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Statement Warning the Axis Against Using Poison Gas,” June 8, 1943.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Bernstein, “Doing Nuclear History,” p. 17. From draft by Harvey Bundy, “Notes on the Use by the United States of the Atomic Bomb,” September 25, 1946, in RG 77, Groves Top Secret Docs 20.

¹¹² Bernstein, “Doing Nuclear History,” pp. 32–35.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

degree of respect accorded by the civilized world to rockets, mines, incendiaries, and sixteen-inch shells."¹¹⁴

These two phenomena – use and non-use, ordinary and “unordinary” weapons – provided competing precedents for how the atomic bomb might come to be regarded in the future. Was it more like conventional weaponry or was it more like poison gas?

Categorization and the creation of precedents

A first step in stigmatizing an object or practice is to redefine it as belonging in a separate category from otherwise similar objects (in this case, weapons). With regard to atomic weapons, three factors in particular contributed to this process: (1) the initial nuclear policies, both domestic and international, of President Truman; (2) the establishment of the United Nations as an institution for the collective delegitimization of atomic weapons; and (3) the definition of the category of “weapons of mass destruction” by the United Nations in 1948. The emergence of a taboo was also facilitated indirectly by American domestic values prohibiting preventive war. After 1948, however, these factors favoring stigmatization coexisted with efforts by US officials to develop military policies relying on use of atomic weapons. I consider each of these issues below.

Truman’s early precedents

Truman was responsible for setting two conflicting precedents about the bomb: that it could be used in combat and be stunningly effective, and that it was not an ordinary weapon. On one hand, he is famous for his argument that he did not give dropping the bomb on Japan a second thought. His decisions on atomic policy starting in 1948 set the United States on the path of an immense nuclear arms build-up and made nuclear weapons the centerpiece of US defense policy. He presided over a rapid expansion of the nuclear stockpile, approved research that would produce tactical nuclear weapons and the thermonuclear bomb, and “left his successor a pattern of strategic planning which made a first strike on the Soviet Union’s nuclear capability the highest priority in the event of war.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Daniel Lang, “A Reporter at Large,” *The New Yorker*, June 8, 1946, p. 62.

¹¹⁵ David Alan Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill, Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960,” *International Security*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Spring 1983), p. 11.

On the other hand, Truman established important precedents in which the taboo took root. He helped put in place bureaucratic and institutional practices, both domestically and internationally at the UN, that singled out the bomb as different from other kinds of military weapons. Truman's own abhorrence of atomic weapons, seemingly derived from his experience of having used them against Japan, appeared to play an important role in this. Right from the beginning, Truman argued that nuclear bombs were not ordinary weapons and made little effort to legitimize them. He refused to let the military have custody of them, in 1946 putting them instead under the control of the newly created civilian Atomic Energy Commission, with the US president having sole authority over their use.¹¹⁶ Truman had come to regard nuclear bombs as weapons of last resort, and until 1949 was still interested in the possibility of international control, an idea that fitted in well with the goals of the "one worlders" and other proponents of world government active at that time.

Thus, until 1947, very little planning regarding the bomb went on, and Truman would not allow the military to plan for using it. As David Rosenberg has emphasized "For two years after Nagasaki, the Joint Chiefs of Staff did not collectively or formally review or approve any plan contemplating the use of atomic bombs, although war planners were convinced the United States would be forced to employ its atomic arsenal in any conflict with the Soviet Union."¹¹⁷ In May 1948, after a briefing by the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the current emergency war plan HALFMOON, Truman ordered an alternate war plan prepared that relied only on conventional weapons. According to Admiral Leahy, Truman wanted a non-nuclear plan "for the reason that we might not have them available either because they might at that time be outlawed or because the people of the United States might not at the time permit their use for aggressive purposes."¹¹⁸

Truman's position shifted somewhat during 1948–49 under the impact of the Berlin crisis. In 1948 – three years after Nagasaki – Truman

¹¹⁶ For a good discussion of the custody dispute, see Steven L. Reardon, *History of the Office of Secretary of Defense*, vol. I, *The Formative Years 1947–50* (Washington, DC: 1984), pp. 425–31.

¹¹⁷ Rosenberg, "Origins of Overkill," pp. 12–13.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Samuel R. Williamson and Steven L. Reardon, *The Origins of US Nuclear Strategy, 1945–1953* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), p. 85. The non-nuclear plan was never developed. Secretary of Defense Forrestal, citing budget constraints, eventually told the Chiefs to ignore Truman's request.

finally told the military it could plan for the use of nuclear weapons but should not plan *on* using them. After the Soviet Union rejected the US Baruch plan, Truman reluctantly abandoned the idea of international control. In October 1949 he approved an increase in bomb production, leading to a great expansion of the stockpile.¹¹⁹

Truman's special relationship with atomic energy commissioner Thomas E. Murray may have reinforced the former's views about the bomb. Murray, a man of strong Catholic beliefs, took a strongly moral view of nuclear weapons. This earned him the label of the "conscience of the AEC" (the Atomic Energy Commission). Murray concluded that any wartime employment of large-yield hydrogen bombs would clearly be immoral and should be banned by international agreement. The US nuclear arsenal should consist instead of "thousands and thousands" of low-yield weapons. He also argued that policymakers should witness nuclear tests so that they would fully appreciate the weapon's destructive power.¹²⁰ Murray's outspokenness about the moral aspects of nuclear weapons often irritated his fellow commissioners, especially Lewis Strauss, the head commissioner, a strong proponent of nuclear arms. However, Murray enjoyed a special relationship with Truman. Truman once told an advisor that Murray was the best AEC commissioner he had appointed and the only one on whom he could rely.¹²¹

Thus, in the years immediately following World War II, plans for using nuclear weapons moved slowly, in part because key US policymakers appeared to have developed some qualms about waging nuclear war. Truman's policy goals through 1948 focused exclusively on goals of establishing civilian control over US nuclear resources domestically, and international control of atomic energy at the UN. "International control remained the only official policy enunciated by the US government relative to atomic weapons through the summer of 1948."¹²² This helped to set the precedent that nuclear weapons were different.

¹¹⁹ Rosenberg, "Origins of Overkill."

¹²⁰ Thomas Murray, *Nuclear Policy for War and Peace* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Co., 1960), pp. 60–70, 207–18, 35–36.

¹²¹ Gerard Smith, *Disarming Diplomat: The Memoirs of Gerard Smith, Arms Control Negotiator* (Lanham, MD: Madison books, 1996), p. 4.

¹²² Rosenberg, "Origins of Overkill," p. 12.

The UN and collective delegitimization of atomic weapons

A second factor contributing to the initial stigmatization of the bomb was the establishment at the new United Nations of a commission tasked with pursuing nuclear disarmament. This created a permanent institutional forum for the stigmatization of nuclear weapons. The first resolution passed by the UN General Assembly at its opening meeting in January 1946 called for the new UN Atomic Energy Commission to make proposals for “the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction.”¹²³ The commission’s mandate to ensure the use of atomic energy “only for peaceful purposes” endowed the UN with an institutional interest in delegitimizing nuclear weapons. The UN and its disarmament bodies represented, in effect, the institutionalization of “antinuclear weapon-ism.”¹²⁴ Because of this, the UN played a central role in the creation and dissemination of antinuclear weapons norms. In addition to the General Assembly’s annual resolutions pressing for nuclear disarmament, its repeated resolutions in later years calling for a ban on the use of nuclear weapons did much to keep the issue on the international agenda, despite the opposition of the United States and its NATO allies to such a ban.

Power politics reinforced the UN position as, throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the Soviet Union regularly proposed a prohibition on the use of nuclear weapons as a first step toward a comprehensive program of disarmament.¹²⁵ US leaders viewed the Soviet action largely as a propaganda move at the time to curry favor with the Third World, since the Soviet Union was actively building its own nuclear weapons. Even at the rhetorical level, however, it tapped into global public sentiment and reflected wide appeal. Most Western governments rejected any declaratory ban on the use of nuclear weapons

¹²³ UN General Assembly Resolution 1(1), January 24, 1946, in *Documents on Disarmament, 1945–1959*, vol. I (Washington, DC: US Department of State, August 1960), p. 6.

¹²⁴ *The United Nations and Disarmament, 1945–1970* (New York: United Nations, 1970). The phrase is awkward, but many non-nuclear states opposed nuclear weapons but were interested in nuclear power. On the collective legitimization role of the United Nations, see Inis L. Claude, Jr., “Collective Legitimization as a Political Function of the United Nations,” *International Organization*, vol. 20, no. 3 (Summer 1966), pp. 367–79.

¹²⁵ John W. Spanier and Joseph L. Nogee, *The Politics of Disarmament: A Study of Soviet–American Gamesmanship* (New York: Praeger, 1962); and Alva Myrdal, *The Game of Disarmament: How the United States and Russia Run the Arms Race* (New York: Pantheon, 1976).

unaccompanied by verified disarmament.¹²⁶ The UN's disarmament agenda intersected with normative power politics to create an element of "rhetorical entrapment."¹²⁷ The superpowers, both of which were pursuing nuclear arsenals, nevertheless felt obliged, for purposes of moral legitimacy, to engage in disarmament talks – however cynically. In doing so, they actually helped to further an antinuclear weapons discourse.

The creation of categories: "Weapons of mass destruction"

A second important contribution of the UN, in addition to its role as a forum for delegitimation politics, was the creation of a new category of "weapons of mass destruction," distinguished from so-called conventional weapons. Although poison gas and a few other weapons had been banned formally prior to World War II on the grounds that they were inhumane, the category of weapons of mass destruction did not emerge until after World War II. The term was a creation of the great powers, based on language drafted by US officials. It was originally intended to refer to biological weapons. But the new UN immediately became seized with the issue of nuclear weapons, acting as an incubator for a discourse of "weapons of mass destruction." The phrase became an important discursive category in which the taboo took root.

The first use of the term appears to have been in a communiqué by President Truman, British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, and Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King on November 15, 1945, three months after the Hiroshima bombing. The leaders recommended that an international commission be set up to make proposals for "eliminating from national armaments atomic weapons and all other major *weapons adaptable to mass destruction*."¹²⁸ The declaration was

¹²⁶ See, for example, "Reply to Russian Proposal on Atomic Armaments," Study by Policy Planning Staff, April 23, 1954, *FRUS 1952-54*, 2(2), pp. 1389-92.

¹²⁷ On rhetorical entrapment, see Frank Schimmelfennig, "The Community Trap: Liberal Norms, Rhetorical Action, and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union," *International Organization*, vol. 55, no. 1 (2001), pp. 47-80.

¹²⁸ Joint Declaration on Atomic Energy, November 15, 1945, *United States Treaties and Other International Acts Series, No. 1504*, www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/post-war/451115b.html. See also William Safire, "On Language: Weapons of Mass Destruction," *New York Times Magazine*, April 19, 1998, p. 22. According to Safire, the phrase "weapons of mass destruction" may also have derived from a Russian term: *oruzhiye massovovo porazheniya*, a phrase used during the Cold War that translates roughly as *weapons of mass destruction*. The Russian phrase originally referred to any heavy attack from the air, but English speakers narrowed the meaning to "nuclear, chemical and biological" weapons.

drafted by Vannevar Bush, a former dean and engineering professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who led much of the American scientific effort in World War II. He was at the time director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development. Bush claimed in his memoirs that he coined the phrase. While drafting the communiqué, he suggested the phrase to his British counterpart, Sir John Anderson, who promptly agreed. The language was intended to refer to biological weapons. "We both thought that, while we were attempting to bring reason to bear on one terrible weapon [atomic bombs], we might as well include another that could be equally terrible, and might indeed have become so if the atomic bomb had not taken center stage."¹²⁹ In fact, Bush thought that biological weapons were even worse than atomic bombs. In August 1945, Bush had written to Conant that "[d]evastating though the atomic bomb is, it does not compare in horror with other weapons which we declined to use in war," giving as examples a "hideous catalog" of germ and poison gas weapons.¹³⁰

In late December 1945, a Moscow meeting of the foreign ministers of Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States, acting on a proposal by the United States, also recommended the establishment of such an international commission.¹³¹ The phrase then appeared in the very first resolution of the new UN General Assembly on January 1, 1946, when by unanimous decision it established a UN Atomic Energy Commission with the urgent task of making specific proposals "for the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction."¹³² The communiqué also formed the basis of the United States' Baruch Plan for atomic arms control, presented to the UN Atomic Energy Commission in June 1946, in which Bernard Baruch again used the phrase "other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction."¹³³ The phrase included

¹²⁹ Vannevar Bush, *Pieces of the Action* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1970), pp. 297–98.

¹³⁰ Quoted in Hershberg, *Conant*, p. 244. Conant himself opposed lumping atomic weapons together with chemical and biological weapons, since he viewed atomic weapons as much more militarily effective. *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Communiqué on the Moscow Conference of the Three Foreign Ministers, December 27, 1945, *FRUS 1945*, 2. General: Political and Economic Matters (Washington, DC: GPO, 1967), p. 824.

¹³² UN General Assembly Resolution, 1(1), January 24, 1946.

¹³³ "The Baruch Plan," June 14, 1946, at www.nuclearfiles.org/redocuments/1946/460614-baruch.html. Emphasis added.

nuclear bombs but was directed mainly at germ and poison gas warfare.

However, in pursuing its work, the UN Atomic Energy Commission concentrated largely on nuclear weapons. It was initially unclear what other weapons would be formally included in the category of weapons of mass destruction. A separate UN Commission on Conventional Armaments was established in 1946, at the request of the Soviet Union, to deal with the "general regulation and reduction of armaments," but it was to exclude weapons of mass destruction. In 1947, Gordon Arneson, assistant to Secretary of State Dean Acheson, noted in a memo the need to arrive at a definition of weapons adaptable to mass destruction in order to know what was covered by each commission. "What instruments of warfare are included in the latter category [weapons of mass destruction] has not been decided," Arneson wrote. "It is difficult, however, to see where the line should be drawn. Serious consideration must be given to this problem." He recommended setting up a study group to develop proposals for the control of biological weapons. Although biological weapons were not used in World War II, in his view they would "certainly be considered to fall within the category of weapons of mass destruction."¹³⁴

In August 1948 the UN Commission for Conventional Armaments adopted a definition of weapons of mass destruction: they "should be defined to include atomic explosive weapons, radioactive material weapons, lethal chemical and biological weapons, and any weapons developed in the future which have characteristics comparable in destructive effect to those of the atomic bomb or other weapons mentioned above."¹³⁵ The Soviet Union and the Ukraine opposed this resolution, however, because it meant the Conventional Arms Commission would not be allowed to discuss nuclear weapons when pursuing its mandate of general disarmament. The Soviets wanted arms regulation efforts to include both conventional and nuclear weapons. In their view, the first step toward the international control of atomic weapons should be to outlaw them, and they criticized US and UK opposition to such a ban. Due to disagreement between the superpowers over the mandates of the two commissions, the latter

¹³⁴ Staff Memorandum, Biological Warfare, January 29, 1947, by Gordon Arneson. Records of the Special Assistant to the Secretary of State for Atomic Energy Matters, 1944–1952, RG 59, 250, 50, Box 74, NA.

¹³⁵ United Nations, *The United Nations and Disarmament 1945–1970* (New York: The United Nations, 1970), p. 28.

got little work done in their short lives. Eventually, in 1952, the General Assembly collapsed them into one UN Disarmament Commission. The legacy of the two commissions, however, was the category of weapons of mass destruction.

The prohibition on preventive war

A more indirect but nevertheless crucial factor contributing to the emergence of a nuclear taboo was American moral opposition to “preventive war.” US leaders ruled out preventive war against the Soviet Union – which would have required the use of atomic weapons – on the grounds that it was inconsistent with American democratic values emphasizing peacefulness and non-aggression. The case of preventive war shows how the nuclear taboo was nested in, and facilitated by, previously existing norms regarding the use of force that influenced the choices and behavior of US leaders.

In the period when the United States possessed a nuclear monopoly, several top officials called for preventive war to “knock out” the Soviet Union while the United States had the chance. General Groves, now military liaison to the Atomic Energy Commission, argued in January 1946 that if the Soviets rejected the Baruch plan, the United States should consider a preventive attack against Soviet atomic research facilities.¹³⁶ The first US ambassador to the Soviet Union, William Bullitt, argued that the United States should threaten the Soviet Union with annihilation to force it to end its adventurism, and if that failed, then the United States should “annihilate the USSR.” James Burnham, a leading conservative anti-communist and geostrategist who wrote for *The Partisan Review* and later for *The National Review*, attempted in his book *The Struggle for the World* to justify preventive war on moral grounds.¹³⁷ Other prominent advocates, not all conservatives, included the philosopher Bertrand Russell, Leo Szilard, William Golden (President Truman’s science advisor), Winston Churchill, General Lauris Norstad, and General Curtis LeMay.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Norris, *Racing for the Bomb*, p. 472.

¹³⁷ James Burnham, *The Struggle for the World* (New York: The John Day Co., 1947).

¹³⁸ George H. Quester, *Nuclear Monopoly* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 2000), pp. 37–55. Quester analyzes the views of advocates in detail and distinguishes between those favoring a coercive threat of a countervalue strike to force nuclear abstinence on the Soviet Union, and those advocating a counterforce strike that would knock out all of Soviet industry and military capability – a much more ambitious goal.

US political leaders consistently rejected such a course of action as antithetical to American humanitarian values of peace and non-aggression, however. They did so despite the fact that they believed no moral considerations would limit the Soviets from launching aggressive war. In September 1945, Dean Acheson, at the time acting secretary of state, had written to President Truman that "the moral and political nature of our people is such that the use of the atomic bomb for an unwarned attack on another nation is not a practical possibility. Therefore, the advantage of unannounced attack would be with others."¹³⁹ During the 1948 Berlin crisis, several of Truman's advisors, including Defense Secretary James Forrestal and Air Force Chief of Staff Hoyt Vandenberg, recommended that Truman bypass intermediate military and diplomatic measures and launch a preventive attack on the Soviet Union. Truman declined, agreeing to put the war plan into effect only if the Soviets obstructed the airlift of supplies into Berlin.¹⁴⁰

Even after the Soviet Union had acquired atomic weapons of its own in 1949, US military planners believed preventive war would once again become feasible in the early to mid-1950s. At that time, thanks to the US arms build-up spurred by the Korean War, US leaders would have a window of opportunity to destroy the Soviet government in a surprise attack with nuclear weapons. Analysts estimated that this window would disappear within a few years as the Soviet Union built up its own nuclear capabilities.¹⁴¹ Support for a preventive war was voiced from time to time by assorted political and public figures, but was advocated most persistently by senior US military officers, especially by the Air Force, the heart of preventive war thinking.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Memorandum by the Acting Secretary of State to President Truman, September 25, 1945 [Acheson], "US Policy Regarding Secrecy of Scientific Knowledge About Atomic Bomb and Atomic Energy," *FRUS 1945*, 2, p. 49.

¹⁴⁰ Russell D. Buhite and Christopher W. Hamel, "War for Peace: The Question of an American Preventive War Against the Soviet Union, 1945–55," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1990), pp. 375–76.

¹⁴¹ A Net Evaluation Subcommittee report of January 1956 projected that by mid-1958, even with advance warning, the United States would be virtually defenseless against a devastating Soviet attack. The United States could probably inflict three times as much damage in retaliation, but the only real way to prevent losses would be to launch a surprise attack. Eisenhower, however, wrote that this was "impossible." Ferrell, ed., *Eisenhower Diaries*, pp. 311–12.

¹⁴² Buhite and Hamel, "War for Peace"; Marc Trachtenberg, "A 'Wasting Asset': American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949–1954," *International Security*, vol. 13, no. 3 (Winter 1988/89), pp. 5–49.

The preventive war issue was discussed at the highest levels in April 1950, when NSC 68 outlined three arguments against preventive war: its military effectiveness could not be guaranteed, it might be “repugnant” to many Americans and, for the same reasons, it might disrupt relations with allies.¹⁴³ According to General Nathan Twining, an advocate of preventive war options, the moral issue was the most important factor in NSC 68’s rejection of preventive war.¹⁴⁴ Paul Nitze, the primary author of NSC 68, did not mention this issue in his memoirs but he did write more generally that “initiating a first strike went against our culture and our self-image as a nation.”¹⁴⁵

After the outbreak of the Korean War, Truman’s secretary of the navy, Francis Matthews, gave a speech on August 25, 1950 calling for the United States to initiate a “war of aggression.” Americans should become the world’s first “aggressors for peace,” he argued.¹⁴⁶ He immediately offered to resign, but Truman let him stay on for another year. When shortly thereafter, in September 1950, General Orvil Anderson, the commanding officer at the Air War College, publicly advocated preventive war, Truman summarily dismissed him.¹⁴⁷ General Twining, sympathetic, later complained that Anderson’s views “were never given a fair hearing by the State Department, or for that matter, by the military establishment.”¹⁴⁸ As Truman put it in a speech to the American people, “we do not believe in aggression or preventive war. Such a war is the weapon of dictators, not of free and democratic countries like the United States.”¹⁴⁹ He warned strongly against preventive war in his “farewell speech” just before leaving office in January 1953.¹⁵⁰ Public opinion supported this view. In response to a September 1954 Gallup poll which stated, “Some people say we should go to war against Russia now while we still

¹⁴³ NSC 68, *FRUS 1950*, 1, April 7, 1950, pp. 281–82; Scott Sagan, “Perils of Proliferation,” *International Security*, vol. 18, no. 4 (Spring 1994), pp. 77–81.

¹⁴⁴ Nathan F. Twining, *Neither Liberty nor Safety* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 49.

¹⁴⁵ Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost*, p. 65.

¹⁴⁶ *The New York Times*, August 25, 1950; Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years at the State Department* (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 478.

¹⁴⁷ Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p. 478.

¹⁴⁸ Twining, *Neither Liberty nor Safety*, pp. 18–19; Trachtenberg, “A Wasting Asset,” p. 107.

¹⁴⁹ Truman, *Memoirs*, vol. I, pp. 385–89.

¹⁵⁰ “The President’s Farewell Address to the American People,” January 15, 1953, in *Truman Public Papers*, pp. 1200–01.

have the advantage in atomic and hydrogen weapons," 76 percent disagreed.¹⁵¹

Under pressure from senior military officers, the Eisenhower administration gave more systematic consideration to the issue of preventive war.¹⁵² Preventive war was initially option D of the top secret Solarium study of spring 1953, but it was deleted at the last minute from the study's agenda. Eisenhower expressed interest in the option in September 1953, but it was effectively ruled out as a US policy option in NSC 162/2 of October 29, 1953.¹⁵³ In December 1954, Eisenhower even more definitively ruled it out when he signed off on a national security statement that stipulated that the United States and its allies "must reject the concept of preventive war or acts intended to provoke war."¹⁵⁴ Knocking out the Soviet Union in one fell swoop obviously would be a tempting thought to US leaders waging the Cold War, and thinking about preventive war never entirely disappeared. Eisenhower gave it at least fleeting thought in later years but consistently rejected it.

Some analysts argue that Eisenhower ruled out preventive war largely for realist reasons of military costs and capability rather than normative reasons.¹⁵⁵ Yet, while he may not have personally believed that preventive war was wrong, he was clearly constrained by the fact that *others* believed this to be the case. In 1960, fed up with "Khrushchev and his threats," Eisenhower "strongly intimated that he wished there was no moral restriction that prevented him from one night pushing the proper button and sending all of our atomic bombs in the direction of the Communist bloc."¹⁵⁶

Factors other than normative ones certainly militated against waging aggressive war. US capabilities for delivering nuclear weapons to the Soviet Union in the early years were limited and initially

¹⁵¹ Hazel Gaudet Erskine, "The Polls: Atomic Weapons and Nuclear Energy," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 27 (1963), p. 177.

¹⁵² For discussion of military proposals, see Sagan, "The Perils of Proliferation," pp. 77–81.

¹⁵³ Memo from President to the Secretary of State, September 8, 1953, *FRUS 1952–54*, 2(1), p. 461.

¹⁵⁴ "Basic National Security Policy," NSC 5440, December 28, 1954, *FRUS 1952–54*, 2, pp. 806–44.

¹⁵⁵ Scott D. Sagan, "Realist Perspectives on Ethical Norms and Weapons of Mass Destruction," in Sohail H. Hashmi and Steven P. Lee, eds., *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 79.

¹⁵⁶ Quoted in Trachtenberg, "A Wasting Asset"; Notes for Files, September 25, 1960, AWF, Box 11, DDEL.

inadequate to carry out the various war plans developed in the 1940s. There were also alternative, non-military ways to contain the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, these factors do not appear to have posed decisive constraints. After reviewing nearly two dozen alternative hypotheses for why US leaders did not carry out preventive war during the period 1945–49 to preserve the US nuclear monopoly, George Quester concluded that “the failure to even threaten preventive war before 1949 has to be explained more by moral absolutes than by rational calculations of the American government.”¹⁵⁷ It appears that the alternatives to preventive war became more salient precisely because the preventive war option was ultimately “unthinkable” for the United States, even if it were feasible. Without this normative inhibition on preventive war, US leaders might have thought more seriously about taking advantage of their brief monopoly in this powerful new weapon to win the Cold War forty years earlier. If so, the development of the nuclear taboo might have taken quite a different course – if it had developed at all.

Developing a policy of use

Despite Truman’s initial policies establishing the atomic bomb as different from other weapons, once his effort to internationalize control of atomic energy failed in 1948, US military planning shifted toward institutionalizing a policy of use of atomic weapons. The Harmon Report of May 1948 concluded that an atomic attack by itself could not defeat the Soviet Union, but also stressed the advantages of “early use.”¹⁵⁸ When the Soviets blocked ground access to western Berlin in June 1948, provoking the first crisis of the emerging Cold War, Truman ordered B-29 bombers across the Atlantic in a veiled nuclear threat, although the planes were not actually nuclear-capable.¹⁵⁹ The United States had as yet no military policy on the use of the atomic bomb, but expectations that it would be used if

¹⁵⁷ Quester, *Nuclear Monopoly*, p. 189.

¹⁵⁸ President Truman never saw this report. John Lewis Gaddis, “The Origins of Self-Deterrence: The United States and the Non-use of Nuclear Weapons, 1945–1958,” in Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 112; Freedman, *Nuclear Strategy*.

¹⁵⁹ Gordon Arneson, assistant to Secretary of State Dean Acheson, recalled, “By sending the B-29s, we hoped to leave the impression that ... they were armed with nuclear weapons, and that we were prepared to use them ... [it was] psychological warfare.” John Newhouse, *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age* (New York: Knopf, 1989), p. 67. For an account of the crisis see Avi Schlaim, *The United States and the Berlin Blockade, 1948–49* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983).

necessary were clearly evident in internal debates. By Defense Secretary James Forrestal's account, military and political leaders with whom he spoke, including British Prime Minister Clement Attlee and General Lucius Clay, American military governor in Germany, were unanimous in the opinion that nuclear weapons would be used in the crisis if need be. John Foster Dulles, then deputy representative to the UN, accepted the use of the bomb as a foregone conclusion, telling Forrestal, "why the American people would execute you if you did not use the bomb in the event of war."¹⁶⁰ Since Forrestal himself was in favor of planning for the use of atomic weapons, such findings were undoubtedly welcome news.

Possessing a monopoly on atomic weapons, US elites widely believed that the bomb was their only card in light of widely perceived Western weakness in conventional forces. Had an air war broken out over Germany, the US Air Force would not only have supported but probably recommended the use of atomic weapons.¹⁶¹ In October 1948, Secretary of State George Marshall commented that "the Soviets are beginning to realize for the first time that the US would really use the atomic bomb against them in the event of war."¹⁶²

The major exception to these views came from the individual who would actually have to make the ultimate decision: President Truman himself. Despite the US monopoly on the bomb, the man who had never expressed any doubts about its use on Japan was now troubled by the possibility of having to use it again. Like most presidents after him, Truman spent little time on the details of nuclear policy and never specified under what conditions it would be necessary to use nuclear weapons. While publicly avoiding committing himself as to their use, he assured his advisors that he would use them "if it became necessary."¹⁶³ But he privately expressed horror at the thought of having to do so and hoped he would not have to. In July 1948, at the height of the Berlin crisis, Truman, after two days of thought, finally rejected a formal request by Forrestal to turn custody of atomic bombs over to the military, who, in the president's view, appeared overly enthusiastic about the new weapon. Truman explained:

¹⁶⁰ *Forrestal Diaries*, October 10, 1948, pp. 2560, 2642, 2497–98.

¹⁶¹ Cillessen, "Embracing the Bomb," p. 114.

¹⁶² *Forrestal Diaries*, October 10, 1948, p. 2560.

¹⁶³ *FRUS 1948*, 1, p. 625.

I don't think we ought to use this thing [the atomic bomb] unless we absolutely have to. It is a terrible thing to order the use of something ... that is so terribly destructive, destructive beyond anything we have ever had. You have got to understand that this isn't a military weapon ... It is used to wipe out women and children and unarmed people, and not for military uses. So we have got to treat this differently from rifles and cannon and ordinary things like that...¹⁶⁴

Responding in February 1949 to an article by a Navy admiral minimizing the distinctiveness of atomic weapons, Truman protested, "But this isn't just another weapon ... not just another bomb. People make a mistake when they talk that way." According to David Lilienthal, head of the Atomic Energy Commission, Truman later added grimly, "Dave, we will never use it again if we can possibly help it."¹⁶⁵

Truman was clearly disturbed by the disproportionate and indiscriminate nature of the weapon in 1948 in a way that he had not been in 1945. Whether or not he was fully cognizant of its destructive power at the earlier time, it is difficult to account for his dramatically changed demeanor other than by his personal experience of responsibility for Hiroshima and Nagasaki. His personal feelings, possibly very close to remorse, were very different from the bravado he showed in public, and those feelings enabled him to define nuclear weapons as "terror weapons," not to be used. Nevertheless, although Truman did pursue international control of atomic weapons, he was also committed to maintaining American superiority in them.¹⁶⁶

The casual and confident talk about using atomic weapons was permitted, of course, by the US nuclear monopoly and the relatively low risk nature of the Berlin crisis. But such talk also revealed that atomic weapons were not regarded as *inherently* immoral, but only came to be viewed that way later. The Berlin situation was never serious enough that Truman came close to using atomic weapons. Indeed he did not resort to arms of any kind. US and British planes

¹⁶⁴ *Forrestal Diaries*, July 21, 1948, p. 2373; David E. Lilienthal, *The Journals of David E. Lilienthal*, vol. II (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 391.

¹⁶⁵ Lilienthal, *Journals*, p. 474.

¹⁶⁶ David Broscious, "Longing for International Control, Banking on American Superiority: Harry S. Truman's Approach to Nuclear Weapons," in John Lewis Gaddis *et al.*, *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy Since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 15–38.

airlifted supplies into West Berlin from July 1948 to May 1949, when the Soviets lifted the blockade.

The Berlin crisis did force a policy decision on the use of nuclear weapons, however. NSC 30, adopted in September 1948, authorized the inclusion of atomic weapons in military planning. In the event of hostilities, it stated, national leaders would be ready to use all means available, "including atomic weapons," to protect US national security. NSC 30 also insisted that the Russians should "never be given the slightest reason to believe the US would consider not to use atomic weapons against them if necessary."¹⁶⁷

This latter statement reflected the rejection by most, though not all, top military and political leaders of any kind of no-first-use policy of atomic weapons. In the fall of 1949, George Kennan, head of policy planning in the State Department, produced his "long paper" for Secretary of State Dean Acheson, in which he opposed building the hydrogen bomb and expressed strong aversion to a first use commitment for atomic weapons, urging reconsideration.¹⁶⁸ Acheson was dismissive, telling Kennan that if that was his view he ought to resign from the Foreign Service and go out and "preach his Quaker gospel but not push it within the [State] Department."¹⁶⁹ Acheson withheld the paper from Truman. The new director of policy planning, Paul Nitze, was more receptive than Acheson, seeing some political advantages to a no-first-use policy, and recommended that the State Department study it.¹⁷⁰ Nevertheless, four months later, the influential NSC-68 – the same document that had ruled out preventive war – roundly rejected Kennan's view. "No first use," wrote Nitze in NSC 68, "would be interpreted by the USSR as an admission of great weakness and by our allies as a clear indication that we intended to abandon them."¹⁷¹ Truman tacitly accepted the emerging atomic strategy.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ NSC-30, September 16, 1948, "United States Policy on Atomic Warfare," *FRUS* 1948, 1, pp. 624–28.

¹⁶⁸ For an extended discussion of Kennan's memo and its reception, see Catherine Girrier, "The No-First-Use Issue in American Nuclear Weapons Policy: 1945–1957," *Memoire, Institut Universitaire de Hautes Etudes Internationales*, 1985, pp. 38–53.

¹⁶⁹ David S. McLellan, *Dean Acheson: The State Department Years* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1976), p. 176.

¹⁷⁰ Memo by the Director of the Policy Planning Staff to the Secretary of State, January 17, 1950, *FRUS* 1950, 1, pp. 13–17.

¹⁷¹ "NSC-68," April 7, 1950, *FRUS* 1950, 1.

¹⁷² Williamson and Reardon, *Origins of US Nuclear Strategy*, pp. 62–66, 86–96; Rosenberg, "Origins of Overkill," pp. 11–19; Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, pp. 26–37.

Thus by 1950, two diverging trends became clear: at the global level, the politics of nuclear delegitimization were well under way, while domestically in the United States, atomic weapons had become the centerpiece of US defense strategy.

Conclusion

No taboo on the use of atomic weapons existed either during World War II or in the few years immediately following, while the precedent set by the atomic attacks on Japan took the use of such weapons out of the realm of the unthinkable. The fact that the atomic bombs of the time were seen as powerful but not necessarily decisive weapons militarily meant that they themselves were not determining of a taboo; they were not born as inherently taboo weapons, nor was their power so overwhelming as to suggest without doubt that they would or should inevitably become so. While some saw them as indiscriminate weapons that should never be used, many also saw them as powerful weapons that were indispensable for US security.

Nevertheless, cognitive, normative and institutional factors helped prepare the ground for the initial stigmatization of the bomb during this period. These included important policy precedents and categorization processes that marked out nuclear weapons as distinct from ordinary arms. The possible analogy between atomic radiation and poison gas, and the discursive association of the atomic bomb with other repulsive arms in the new category of weapons of mass destruction, were crucial initial steps in the process of stigmatization. The establishment of the UN as a disarmament forum provided an institutional home for antinuclear weaponism. The personal moral qualms of key individuals, especially Truman, and a gradually developing sense of revulsion at the destructive power of atomic weapons were critical to these developments. Further, by inhibiting a nuclear war of opportunity against the Soviet Union, principled American opposition to preventive war indirectly facilitated the emergence of a taboo. The nuclear-conventional distinction that began to take shape during this period would become the principle qualitative restraint on the bomb.

What role did the atomic bombings themselves play in fostering a taboo? There were those – among them Albert Einstein and Robert Oppenheimer – who argued that any use of atomic weapons would

be followed by further use.¹⁷³ Others, including many of the atomic scientists such as James Conant, Edward Teller, and Vannevar Bush, as well as Secretary of War Henry Stimson, argued that using the bomb was essential to shocking the world into non-use and discouraging major war and further use of nuclear weapons.

Skeptics might argue that this latter view was merely rationalization after the fact, a desperate effort to salvage some moral and practical benefit from this horrendous event. It does appear, however, that the “demonstration effect” of the bomb did contribute to the shock and horror, to the sense of revulsion that later emerged among the public, and to the rise of a taboo and subsequent efforts to control the bomb. However, perhaps these same effects might also have been achieved with a true demonstration shot, as some atomic scientists had proposed in 1945, which would display the destructive power of the weapon without killing any civilians. Or, even if the bomb had never been used in 1945, since nations engaged in nuclear testing, nuclear explosions would be regular events for all to see. Since nuclear testing was a major stimulus of the antinuclear weapons movement in starting in the mid-1950s (discussed in Chapter 5), perhaps the tradition of non-use could have been achieved without use of the bomb in anger.

Still, as we shall see in the [next chapter](#), one of the major factors inhibiting US leaders’ resort to nuclear weapons after 1945 was their repeatedly stated concern about the terrible consequences that would arise if they used the bomb again on Asians. This inhibition would not have existed without a first use on Japan.

¹⁷³ Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*, p. 191.

4 The Korean War: the emerging taboo

Somehow or other we must manage to remove the taboo from the use of these weapons. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, October 1953¹

Only two years after the Berlin crisis, and five years after the end of the war against Japan, US leaders were again forced to confront the issue of use of nuclear weapons. As the first case of overt aggression against a US ally in the postwar period, the North Korean attack upon South Korea in June 1950 could well have provided an occasion for use of atomic weapons by the United States. The Korean War was the most serious crisis of the first postwar decade. Like the war against Japan, the Korean War was fought against illiberal Asian aggressors. In December 1950, with Chinese troops routing US-UN forces, the Cold War was in full swing. In the eyes of some observers, the United States faced “the greatest danger in our history” including the “destruction of Western civilization and of our American way of life.”²

The Korean War was also the first war since World War II in which a country possessing atomic weapons had engaged in combat. Given that nuclear weapons had become the centerpiece of US defense strategy after 1948, there was every reason to expect that US leaders would use their new weapon to defend or advance American interests in any Cold War conflict. Indeed, numerous American military leaders fully expected that this would be the case.³ The precedent for use of the weapon had already been established, and, at the time, the United

¹ 165th NSC Meeting, October 7, 1953, *FRUS* 1952-54, II(1), p. 533.

² Hanson W. Baldwin, “Greatest Peril for US: Western Civilization Faces Destruction if Threat From East Is Not Met Boldly,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 1950.

³ General Maxwell Taylor, later Chief of Staff in the Kennedy Administration, was at the time of the Korean attack the US military commander in Berlin. He recalled that he had expected “a mushroom cloud” to rise from the battlefield “at any moment” after US

States possessed overwhelming nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union, which had only a negligible nuclear capability. The Soviet Union had tested its first atomic weapon in 1949 but had few if any atomic bombs available at the time the Korean War broke out, and no feasible means of delivering them to American targets. By late 1950 the Soviet Union possessed about a dozen atomic weapons, the United States over 300.⁴ North Korea and China had no nuclear capability. The United States thus had an *effective* atomic monopoly at the beginning of the war. Yet US leaders chose to fight the Korean War with conventional means, at a cost of 58,000 American lives, rather than resort to their ultimate weapon.

Why did they not use nuclear weapons? In this chapter I examine why neither President Truman nor President Eisenhower resorted to nuclear weapons during the Korean War. US forces were in desperate straits twice during the war – first, immediately following the North Korean attack in June 1950, and then when Chinese troops entered the war in late November 1950. Nevertheless, Truman and his advisors, after deliberation, rejected the use of nuclear weapons in the war. Later, in spring 1953, in the face of a frustrating stalemate in the war, Eisenhower and his advisors considered seriously the use of tactical nuclear weapons to force an end to the war. Although military and bureaucratic factors exerted some restraining influence, normative considerations appeared to play a significant role in inhibiting the US leaders' use of atomic weapons. For Truman, a personal moral abhorrence of such weapons operated as a powerful restraint, whereas for Eisenhower and his advisors, more interested in actually using atomic weapons, perceptions of an emerging but unwelcome taboo helped to restrain them from a casual resort to the bomb.

forces landed in Korea. Maxwell Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: Norton, 1972), p. 134.

⁴ Until 1957 the Soviet Union lacked a long-range bomber capability and thus could not credibly threaten the United States. Some analysts refer to the period until 1957, when the Soviets deployed long-range bombers and demonstrated an intercontinental missile capability, as one of American invulnerability, and the period up to the mid-1960s as one of only middling vulnerability. According to nuclear strategist Colin Gray, the United States Strategic Air Command probably "could have won WWII at any time from the early 1950s until the mid-1960s, at very little cost in direct nuclear damage to US society." Colin Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Press, 1986), p. 103. Richard Betts argues that "by any reasonable 'best' estimate, the Soviet Union would have been unable to do devastating damage to the United States before at least the mid-1950s, even by striking first." Richard Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1987), p. 147.

Truman and the Korean War

The North Korean attack on June 25, 1950 and then the surprise entry of Chinese troops into the war at the end of November threatened a military disaster for the US–UN coalition. Forced repeatedly by battlefield circumstances to consider the use of tactical atomic weapons, Truman and his advisors discussed them off and on throughout the first year of the war. But although they took at least minimal steps to deploy atomic bombers at staging areas during the war, they repeatedly decided against using such weapons in the war.

The issue came up at the very first meeting of Truman and his advisors during the crisis, when Truman learned that the United States could only “knock out” Soviet air bases in the Far East with atomic bombs. Truman did not pursue the topic but did order the Air Force to prepare a contingency plan. No one present raised any objections.⁵ At a Cabinet meeting on July 7, the CIA chief proposed seeking UN sanction for use of the atomic bomb, but Truman found that too overt a threat.⁶ On July 11, the United States sent unarmed but nuclear-configured B-29 bombers – the nuclear cores remained in the United States – to Britain in a modification of the Berlin 1948 feint. It was presented publicly as a “normal rotation” though it would usefully remind Soviet leaders of US nuclear strength. At the end of July, Truman approved transfer of non-nuclear components of the bomb to the military for deployment to the US base on the island of Guam in the Pacific. In early August, the B-29s were sent to Guam, but they did not take part in any bombing and had returned to the United States by the time the Chinese entered the war.⁷

Initial considerations

Throughout the initial crisis in July, administration planners studied the military and political utility of a use of atomic weapons in North Korea. Assessments, some undoubtedly influenced by organizational interests, sometimes sharply diverged. A study by the Army Operations Division argued that atomic attacks might soften up ports prior to an amphibious assault. It called for the use of penetration-type

⁵ Memorandum of Conversation, June 25, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, 7, pp. 159–60.

⁶ Roger Dingman, “Atomic Diplomacy During the Korean War,” *International Security*, vol. 13, no. 3 (Winter 1988/89), p. 113.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 63–64.

bombs against enemy forward bases.⁸ A US Air Force study argued that using atomic weapons on tactical targets would probably be ineffective, demonstrating US impotence and cruelty while doing considerable damage to South Korean territory. It would place America in “the untenable propaganda position of a butcher discarding his morals and killing his friends in order to achieve his ends.”⁹ The Air Force, however, had an organizational incentive to downplay tactical uses of the bomb which could undercut its primary mission of strategic bombing. A Pentagon staff study suggested that there might be greater utility in the deterrent value of atomic weapons than in their actual use, especially if the latter produced indeterminate results on the battlefield.¹⁰

In the State Department, sensitive to political considerations, a Policy Planning study concluded that atomic bombs should be used only if the Soviet Union or China entered the war, and if employment of atomic weapons promised military success.¹¹ On July 17, 1950, a lengthy article in *The New York Times* by Hanson Baldwin argued strongly that the bomb must not be used in North Korea under any circumstances for “overpowering moral, political, psychological and military reasons.”¹² At a press conference on July 27, Truman publicly denied that he was considering the use of atomic weapons in Korea. This statement was later singled out for criticism by those who regretted US failure to make use of its best weapon in the war or to rely on deterrent threats.¹³

Throughout the war, Truman’s generals were divided, with commanders in the field and weapons specialists in the Pentagon more interested in atomic options than his top military advisors, the Joint

⁸ “Employment of Atomic Weapons against Military Targets,” Joint War Plans Branch of the Army Operations Division, June 30, 1950, Hot Files, Box 11, Army General Staff Operations Division papers, RG 319, NA.

⁹ Quoted in Conrad C. Crane, “To Avert Impending Disaster: American Military Plans to Use Atomic Weapons During the Korean War,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 23, no. 2 (June 2000), p. 73.

¹⁰ Report by the Ad Hoc Committee, Plans Division, “Employment of Atomic Bombs in Korea,” July 12, 1950, Ops 091 TS Korea (July 12, 1950), RG 319, NA.

¹¹ Carleton Savage to Paul Nitze, July 15, 1950, Atomic Energy-Armaments folder, 1950, Box 7, Policy Planning Staff Papers, RG 59, NA.

¹² Hanson W. Baldwin, “Atomic Bomb Is Not the Weapon,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1950.

¹³ *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1950* (Washington, DC: US GPO, 1965), p. 562. General Nathan Twining, later chairman of the Joint Chiefs under Eisenhower, was among the sharpest critics. See Chapter 5.

Chiefs of Staff (JCS). On July 9, the JCS had set aside Chairman Omar Bradley's suggestion to put atomic weapons at the disposal of General MacArthur, the commander in Korea.¹⁴ The Chiefs identified several military reasons against using atomic weapons: the stockpile of bombs was too small to risk their use in Asia rather than in Europe, the core security interest of the United States (the US still lacked sufficient A-bombs to credibly claim it had a nuclear deterrent in Europe); they felt few useful targets existed in Korea, and they feared that atomic weapons might not be decisive, thus diminishing their deterrent effect elsewhere.¹⁵ These views were not uniformly shared, however, as others argued that indeed the war did present suitable targets for tactical use of nuclear weapons (I discuss these further below). Still others, such as General Curtis LeMay, head of the Strategic Air Command, opposed using atomic weapons tactically in Korea mainly for organizational reasons unless it was part of an overall campaign of strategic bombing against China.¹⁶

After Chinese "volunteers" began to enter the fighting on October 19, 1950, US planners studied the possibility of both conventional and atomic bombing operations against China. On November 16, the Army's Plans and Operations Division, whose assistant chief of staff, Charles Bolte, was one of General MacArthur's staunchest supporters, had suggested that the case for using nuclear weapons be reconsidered, and his request was granted.¹⁷ The Plans and Operations Division thought that "from a military point of view, the situation is more favorable for employment of atomic bombs than it was in July."¹⁸ It persuaded General J. Lawton Collins, army chief of staff, to submit a memorandum to the JCS that "in the event of an all-out effort by the Chinese Communists, the use of atomic bombs against troops and materiel concentrations might be the decisive factor in

¹⁴ Dingman, "Atomic Diplomacy," p. 57; James F. Schnabel and Robert J. Watson, *The History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, vol. III, *Korean War*, part 1 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1979), hereafter *JCS History*, p. 185.

¹⁵ Memorandum of Conversation, *FRUS 1950*, 7, pp. 1276–81; Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, p. 134.

¹⁶ Peter Roman, "Curtis LeMay and the Origins of NATO Atomic Targeting," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1 (March 1993), p. 55.

¹⁷ Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 116.

¹⁸ "Possible Employment of Atomic Bombs in Korea," JCS 2173, Nov. 21, 1950 General Decimal File, 1950–51, 091 Korea, Box 34-A, RG 319, NA, and Crane, "To Avert Impending Disaster," pp. 74–75.

enabling UN forces to hold a defensive position or to effect the early drive to the Manchurian border."¹⁹ On November 20, on Collins' recommendation, the JCS directed new contingency studies on the possible use of nuclear weapons.²⁰

But the public horror of atomic weapons presented a serious political obstacle. State Department studies suggested that foreign governments and peoples would strongly oppose the use of atomic weapons.²¹ The bomb had come to have a special horrifying status. A planner in the State Department's Bureau of Far East Affairs warned in November 1950 that even though "the military results achieved by atomic bombardment may be *identical* to those attained by conventional weapons, the effect on world opinion will be vastly different. The A-bomb has the status of a peculiar monster conceived by American cunning, and its use by us, in whatever situation, would be exploited to our serious detriment." Because of the "special place" occupied by the bomb as a "weapon of mass destruction," the "moral position" of the United States would be damaged by its use. Use of the bomb could also undermine support for UN collective security. A positive outcome could be expected only if victory were decisive. The planner concluded that, given the political costs, atomic weapons should be used "only on the basis of overriding military considerations," to produce "decisive results either unobtainable by conventional warfare" or obtainable only at great cost in men and materiel.²² This analysis was clearly recommending that, for normative reasons, the bomb should not be treated as an ordinary weapon and that any decision to use it must meet a more demanding test.

Paul Nitze, the new head of Policy Planning in the State Department, came to a similar conclusion after discussing the nuclear option with Brigadier General Herbert Loper, a top army nuclear weapons specialist, in early November. Militarily, the bomb would probably be effective on the battlefield in Korea against troop concentrations, it might even deter the Chinese, and it would probably not kill many

¹⁹ Memo, G-3 to Chief of Staff, US Army, "Possible Employment of Atomic Bombs in Korea," November 16, 1950, General Decimal File, 1950-51, 091 Korea, Box 34-A, RG 319, NA. Crane, "To Avert Impending Disaster," pp. 74-75.

²⁰ Foot, *The Wrong War*, p. 116.

²¹ "Views of Western European Nations on Use of the Atomic Bomb," October 16, 1950, External Research Staff, Department of State.

²² "Use of Atomic Bomb on China," Memorandum by the Planning Advisor, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, November 8, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, 7, pp. 1098-100 (emphasis added).

civilians. On the negative side, it would probably not be militarily decisive and could bring the Soviet Union into the war. But political costs might outweigh military gains. Use of the bomb, especially in the context of a UN operation, would have “worldwide repercussions.” UN authorization might “keep the moral forces of the world with us” while unilateral use of atomic weapons might leave the United States in a “disadvantageous moral position.” Use on Chinese cities would “result in the destruction of many civilians,” which “would help arouse the peoples of Asia against us” and would “almost certainly” bring the Soviet Union into the war.²³

With the surprise massive intervention of Chinese troops into the war at the end of November, UN troops were forced to retreat in disarray. The Truman administration faced a renewed crisis. The use of atomic weapons might be the only way to avoid defeat. Administration planners had identified two main possibilities for using the bomb if China entered the war: in Korea for tactical purposes against troop concentrations and artillery support positions, or on Chinese military targets – which effectively meant cities.²⁴ If Truman had chosen to expand the war outside Korea, atomic weapons could have been used to advantage – and in fact military leaders believed their use would be required – to attack air bases and military facilities in Manchuria. Air Force Chief of Staff General Hoyt Vandenberg placed the Strategic Air Command on worldwide full alert, and ordered preparation of two more B-29 groups armed with atomic bombs for use in the Far East, and the designation of suitable targets.²⁵

On November 28, General MacArthur sent the first of his famous “entirely new war” messages with its insistence on new and more aggressive political decisions and plans.²⁶ The same day the Joint Chiefs’ secretary asked a JCS committee that had been studying the matter for its recommendations regarding the bomb’s use against China and against Russia should the Soviets intervene in Korea.²⁷ The JCS committee responded the next day that the employment of

²³ Memorandum by the Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Nitze), November 4, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, 7, pp. 1041–42.

²⁴ “Questions to Be Considered Regarding Possible US Use of the Atomic Bomb to Counter Chinese Communist Aggression in Korea,” November 8, 1950, NSA.

²⁵ Philip S. Meilinger, *Hoyt S. Vandenberg: The Life of a General* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 175.

²⁶ The Commander in Chief, Far East (MacArthur) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, November 28, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, 7, pp. 1237–38.

²⁷ Foot, *The Wrong War*, p. 116.

atomic weapons might be necessary to prevent UN forces from being overwhelmed in Korea, and a decision at the highest level would be required. But it recommended against their use, advising that it was inappropriate except under the most compelling military circumstances, citing, in addition to battlefield factors, the risk of escalation, and world opinion.²⁸

The United Nations as a restraining influence

The following day, November 30, Truman inadvertently left the impression at a press conference that atomic weapons were “under active consideration,” and implied that the decision on their employment rested with the field commander – which was not true. A political and diplomatic furor ensued. The administration quickly clarified its position. But British Prime Minister Clement Attlee rushed to Washington for anxious discussions on nuclear use policy, and other European leaders agreed that a course of restraint must be pressed on the Americans. *The New York Times* reported that “Nothing has so fully awakened the French to the seriousness of the Korean situation as Mr. Truman’s reference to the possibility of atomic bombing.”²⁹

Reports followed from Third World officials suggesting that the United States was “willing to use mass destruction methods on Asians but not on Europeans.”³⁰ From US embassies around the world, US diplomats warned that use of the bomb in non-Soviet Asia would create waves of “horror and antipathy.”³¹ The reaction in India, leader of the non-aligned countries, to Truman’s statement on the atomic bomb was overwhelmingly negative. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was “vehemently denouncing any suggestion of use of atomic weapons,” while the Indian representative at the UN emphasized a widespread feeling in Asia that “the atomic bomb is a weapon used only against Asiatics.”³²

²⁸ The Joint Strategic Survey Committee recommendations are in “Possible Employment of Atomic Bombs in Korea” (TS-RD), JCS 2173/1, November 29, 1950, cited in Schnabel and Watson, *JCS History*, pp. 372–73. A report by the Joint Strategic Plans Committee was not received until December 27. *Ibid.*, p. 339.

²⁹ “Truman Warns We Would Use Bomb in Korea, if Necessary,” *New York Times*, December 1, 1950, p. 1. “Paris Is Opposed to Atom Bomb Use,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 1950.

³⁰ Telegram, The United States Representative at the United Nations (Austin) to the Secretary of State, December 1, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, 7, pp. 1300–01.

³¹ Lawrence Wittner, *One World or None: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement Through 1953*, vol. I of *The Struggle Against the Bomb* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 261.

³² The Ambassador in India (Henderson) to the Secretary of State, December 4, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, 7, p. 1344; Memorandum of a Telephone Conversation by Assistant Secretary

At the UN, the topic dominated conversations. Legal experts agreed that the UN command could legally use atomic bombs in Korea but that it would be politically disastrous. Although delegates from Greece, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Liberia, as well as from Latin American countries, approved Truman's November 30 comments, those from Europe and the commonwealth "appeared greatly shocked" and several from the emergent "Arab-Asian" group expressed concern both that the bomb would be used again on Asian peoples and that it would precipitate a third world war.³³ The Philippines delegate emphasized the UN's right to speak out on the "moral aspect," which he was sure the US president would take into consideration. Delegates asserted that Asian peoples would be "horri-fied" by the use of the atomic bomb by UN forces, and some declared that it would be the greatest possible victory for Soviet propaganda.³⁴ Truman later remarked that the "furor" over his comments demonstrated "just how sensitive and on edge" the world had become.³⁵

In high-level meetings in the first week of December, Truman and his advisors groped for a response to the disastrous situation on the battlefield. Initially, expanding the war to China or retreating in defeat seemed like the only two options. While some military advisors expressed interest in attacking China, military and political leaders eventually agreed that US-UN forces should attempt to hold on in Korea but that the United States should not get into a major ground war with China. No new troops would be sent, and the Pentagon and State Department agreed that, unless the preservation of US troops required it, the United States should not bomb China or use atomic weapons, nor should it take any overt action.³⁶

Secretary of State Dean Acheson was the major voice among Truman's advisors in favor of the limited course of action. He wrote later that he thought that the Chinese might not act "rationally" if

of State for United Nations Affairs (Hickerson), December 3, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, 7, p. 1334; William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 132.

³³ Telegram, The United States Representative at the United Nations (Austin) to the Secretary of State, December 1, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, 7, pp. 1300-01.

³⁴ A. M. Rosenthal, "UN Circles Wary on Atom Bomb Use," *The New York Times*, December 1, 1950.

³⁵ Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs: Years of Trial and Hope*, vol. II (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 395.

³⁶ Memo of Conversation, December 3, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, VII, pp. 1323-34; Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years at the State Department*, (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 472; Schnabel and Watson, *JCS History*, vol. III, p. 373.

atomic weapons were used, and that such use could lead to “incalculable consequences,” including escalation to global war.³⁷ He was adamant that the war be kept limited, that military operations be localized, and that MacArthur retreat rather than resort to atomic weapons.³⁸ On December 3, the JCS recommended that British Prime Minister Attlee, who was arriving for consultations the next day, be told that the United States had “no intention” of using nuclear weapons in Korea unless they should be needed to protect the evacuation of UN forces or to prevent a “major military disaster.”³⁹ The next day, the journalist James Reston, summarizing his assessment of the US government position in *The New York Times*, wrote that the government “will not defy the feelings within the United Nations against use of the atomic bomb in Korea” as long as UN members continued to support the principles of the UN.⁴⁰

The crisis continues

Nevertheless, the JCS continued to think about some form of retaliation against China through mid-January 1951. The administration again discussed employing atomic weapons in late December when a threat loomed of Soviet air strikes in support of a Chinese offensive against US–UN forces. On December 24, General MacArthur asked his superiors for thirty-four atomic bombs, submitting a list of “retardation targets which he considered would require 26 bombs” and requesting “four bombs to be used on invasion forces and four bombs to be used on critical concentrations of air power, both targets of opportunity.”⁴¹ In response, the JCS reaffirmed its view that Korea was “not the place to fight a major war” and did not authorize atomic strikes.⁴²

By late January the US–UN position was more secure and the crisis had passed. By February 1951, Acheson and his limited war views had prevailed, and a consensus was reached to keep the war confined

³⁷ Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, p. 472.

³⁸ Memorandum of Conversation, December 3, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, 7, pp. 1312–13; J. Lawton Collins, *War in Peacetime: The History and Lessons of Korea* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), pp. 230–31.

³⁹ Charles Bolte to General Collins, December 3, 1950, G-3 comments on JCS 2173/2, Operations Division, Hot Files, tab 67, Box 11, RG 319, NA.

⁴⁰ James Reston, “President Confers on the Emergency,” *New York Times*, December 4, 1950.

⁴¹ Quoted in Foot, *The Wrong War*, pp. 114–15.

⁴² The Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Commander in Chief, Far East, December 29, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, 7, p. 1625.

to the Korean peninsula, chiefly because of divided views over the probable Soviet reaction to an attack on China.⁴³ The British made it clear they would not support an expanded war against China.

The Truman administration faced one more risk of a major military setback in April 1951. Intelligence reports suggested the possibility of a massive Soviet intervention with aircraft and troops. After consultations with his advisors, Truman dispatched nine atomic weapons to the Pacific, though making clear at the same time that he had not yet made a decision to use them.⁴⁴ On April 11 the JCS directed General LeMay to prepare targeting plans.⁴⁵ This was the first time atomic bombs had been deployed overseas since 1945. While it is not clear that the Chinese were ever aware of the deployment, it may have been essential to winning JCS support for Truman's decision to recall MacArthur.⁴⁶ General Matthew Ridgway, taking over as commander in Korea, was given qualified authority to attack air bases in Manchuria and for an atomic strike in retaliation for a major Chinese air strike originating outside Korea – a policy close to what MacArthur had been advocating.⁴⁷ A month later Paul Nitze told the Canadian ambassador that "our preliminary thinking was that a massive Soviet entry into the Far Eastern situation would lead to use of atomic weapons."⁴⁸ Fortunately, this situation never developed. After the removal of MacArthur, the Truman administration began to think of bringing the war to an end by negotiation. The Soviet Union was receptive, and armistice talks began July 8, 1951. The B-29s with their nuclear cargoes returned home in June 1951, and Truman never again sent nuclear weapons abroad.

The war settled into a frustrating stalemate after summer 1951. Military planners and commanders in the field continued to periodically recommend expanding the war, including the use of atomic weapons, as necessary to force an end to the conflict. But the earlier crises appeared to reinforce top leaders' reluctance to resort to atomic

⁴³ Foot, *The Wrong War*, pp. 126–27.

⁴⁴ Roger Anders, ed., *Forging the Atomic Shield: Excerpts from the Office Diary of Gordon E. Dean* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p. 137.

⁴⁵ Crane, "To Avert Impending Disaster," p. 78.

⁴⁶ See Dingman, "Atomic Diplomacy," p. 74. However, Crane says there is no good evidence for this claim. Crane, "To Avert Impending Disaster," p. 87, fn. 14.

⁴⁷ The Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Commander in Chief, Far East (Ridgway), April 28, 1951, *FRUS 1951*, 7, p. 386, and *ibid.*, May 1, 1951, p. 396; Schnabel and Watson, *JCS History*, pp. 485–86.

⁴⁸ Wittner, *One World or None*, p. 261.

weapons, and the restriction on planning for their use remained in place. An Air Force staff study in May 1952 concluded once again that the political drawbacks of employing atomic weapons in the Korean conflict except to avert a disaster outweighed any military advantages.⁴⁹ After discussing a plan to end the stalemate in September 1952, the Joint Chiefs decided it placed too much emphasis on nuclear weapons and sent it back for further study. The following month General Mark Clark, Ridgway's replacement as commander in the field, requested the authority to include use of atomic weapons in his planning. He favored a more aggressive approach and was chafing under his operating restrictions limiting the scope of the war. His superiors again rejected his request.⁵⁰ The limitations on planning remained in place for the remainder of the Truman administration.

The explanation for non-use

Why did Truman and his advisors not use atomic weapons? Disagreements over the battlefield utility of atomic weapons and the risk of Soviet intervention in the war, along with, initially, a scarcity of bombs, clearly played a constraining role. However, the escalation risks and the utility of atomic weapons in the war were open to sharply opposing views. Moreover, these factors were not seen as posing any serious obstacle to the use of atomic weapons by those in favor of such use. In the face of significant domestic pressures for more aggressive measures in the war, political and normative factors appear to have played a key role in inhibiting the use of atomic weapons by Truman and his advisors during the war. I consider in turn decisionmakers' perceptions of escalation risks, political and normative considerations, and the issue of military utility and suitable targets.

Declining escalation risks

The main escalation scenario was a US attack on China with atomic weapons, which might bring the Soviet Union into the war. Even a US attack on China with conventional weapons might bring Soviet air power into battle, forcing US leaders to then initiate use of atomic

⁴⁹ USAF Director, "Staff Study on Use of Atomic Weapons in Korea," May 23, 1952, File 285.2 Korea, July 28, 1950, Section 4, Box 907, RG 341, NA.

⁵⁰ Schnabel and Watson, *JCS History*, pp. 929, 932; Foot, *The Wrong War*, pp. 176–77. For more detailed discussion of Clark's plan, see Crane, "Averting Impending Disaster," pp. 82–83.

weapons. In a February 1950 mutual assistance treaty, the Soviet Union had pledged to come to the assistance of China in the event of hostilities. One possibility is that this pact enhanced US leaders' perception of the risks of escalating the war to China, thus deterring their resort to atomic weapons or other aggressive measures. General Collins, for example, argued for limiting the war to Korea in order to minimize the need to use atomic weapons.⁵¹

Significant disagreement existed among US officials, however, on whether extension of the war to China would provoke Soviet intervention in the conflict. As Rosemary Foot's extensive study of US officials' assessments of the Soviet threat during the war documents, some, including Dean Acheson, Paul Nitze, and the intelligence establishment, thought such action would lead to the invoking of the Sino-Soviet treaty and the onset of major war between the United States and the Soviet Union.⁵² Others, such as the three civilian service secretaries, thought that Soviet intervention was a risk worth taking "given the US preference for boldness over caution."⁵³ Finally, a third group, including the Joint Strategic Plans Committee, George Kennan, Generals MacArthur, Vandenberg, Clark, K. D. Nichols, and James Gavin, as well as Philip Jessup, Dean Rusk, and Gordon Dean, head of the Atomic Energy Commission, argued that there would be no serious reaction by the Soviet Union and that its global security interests dictated that it would not become involved in hostilities.⁵⁴ Many high-ranking officers understood that the Truman administration sought to avoid a third world war, yet few viewed war with the Soviets as a likely possibility. Admiral C. Turner Joy, the chief naval commander of the Far East command, later recalled, "I know of not a single senior military commander of the United States forces in the Far East – Army, Navy or Air force – who believed the USSR would enter war with the United States because of any action we might have taken relative to Red China."⁵⁵

Accumulating evidence and the administration's own intelligence analyses increasingly supported this view. Although fear of provoking some form of Soviet intervention initially acted as a constraint

⁵¹ Memorandum of Conversation, December 1, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, 7, p. 1279. Emphasis added.

⁵² Foot, *The Wrong War*, p. 124.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 126–27.

⁵⁵ Admiral C. Turner Joy, *How Communists Negotiate* (Santa Monica, CA: Fidelis Publications, 1955, 1970), p. 176.

on expanding the war, American leaders uniformly thought that the Soviet Union would not risk global war at this time and would wait until it was in a stronger position *vis-à-vis* the United States. The failure of Soviet leaders to make the expected threats in support of their treaty commitment to China when US-UN forces crossed the 38th parallel in early October 1950, for example, provided encouragement to those in the United States who wanted to see a military solution to the Korea problem. The Soviets had also not invoked the treaty when China entered the hostilities at the end of October. This suggested that Soviet leaders were treating their obligations very cautiously. Intelligence reports in 1951 concluded that the Soviet Union did not intend to become involved in the fighting, although it would continue to engage in covert assistance.⁵⁶ The Truman administration's analysis concluded that the Soviets would enter hostilities only if the survival of the Chinese Communist regime were threatened or if bombs were dropped close to the Soviet border area, a view the Eisenhower administration continued to hold. As the war wore on and it became clear that the Soviets were being quite cautious in their behavior, US leaders could entertain relatively aggressive policies.⁵⁷

Thus it appears that, as John Lewis Gaddis has argued, "had the United States been determined to use atomic weapons in Korea or China, the prospect of Soviet intervention, at least in retrospect, would not appear to have been that great."⁵⁸ Indeed, during the critical period between early December 1950 and mid-January 1951, the Joint Chiefs considered more aggressive courses of action against China, and such ideas continued to be recommended even after armistice negotiations began. During deliberations in December 1950, General

⁵⁶ "International Implications of Maintaining a Beachhead in South Korea," SE-1, January 11, 1951, *FRUS 1951*, 7, p. 61; and Memo by the Special Assistant for Intelligence to the Secretary of State, May 10, 1951, *ibid.*, pp. 423-24.

⁵⁷ Foot, *The Wrong War*, pp. 26, 85-87. Both Foot and Marc Trachtenberg argue that aggressive ideas were considered seriously at the highest levels during the war. According to Trachtenberg, "The key to the history of the Korean War, in fact, is America's increasing willingness to escalate the conflict." Marc Trachtenberg, "A 'Wasting Asset': American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949-1954," *International Security*, vol. 13, no. 3 (Winter 1988/89), p. 28. See also Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 367-70; and Paul H. Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: a Memoir* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), p. 109.

⁵⁸ John Lewis Gaddis, "The Origins of Self-Deterrence: The United States and the Non-use of Nuclear Weapons, 1945-1958," in Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 118.

Vandenberg argued with his JCS colleagues that China should be punished and that targets in Manchuria should be struck.⁵⁹ General Bradley stated that if a ceasefire could not be obtained promptly at a reasonable price, the United States might have to blockade China, bomb the mainland, and do “a good many other things to bother them.” He did add, however, that “we would probably not use the A-bomb” but this limitation did not appear to stem from fear of provoking a Soviet response.⁶⁰

In sum, although concerns about provoking Soviet intervention may have played some role in inhibiting the Truman administration from using atomic weapons, such concerns do not appear to have been decisive. Instead, as I argue in [the next section](#), political and normative factors were much more salient.

Political and normative constraints

Perceived public opprobrium toward atomic weapons made it difficult, if not impossible, for Truman and his advisors to think about the atomic option in any purely military fashion. US leaders worried that using atomic weapons would destroy Asian and others’ support for the United States in any future global war with the Soviet Union – an instrumental concern. If the United States acted “immorally” (by using atomic weapons) it would sacrifice its ability to lead. Use of the bomb again on Asian populations, wrote one analyst, would cause a “revulsion of feeling” to “spread throughout Asia . . . Our efforts to win the Asiatics to our side would be cancelled and our influence in non-Communist nations of Asia would deteriorate to an almost non-existent quantity.”⁶¹

The State Department followed public opinion closely, reporting in the months after Truman’s infamous press conference in November 1950 that European public opinion on atomic weapons was generally negative. In strong language, the report described the attitude in France as one of “a general public repugnance to use of the weapon under any but the most dire circumstances.”⁶² When, in January 1951,

⁵⁹ Memo of Conversation, December 3, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, 7, p. 1330.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1324.

⁶¹ Memorandum by the Planning Advisor, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, November 8, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, 7, p. 1100.

⁶² “Survey of Western Opinion on the Atom Bomb as an Immoral Weapon,” Office of Intelligence Research, Department of State, February 13, 1951, p. 1, Box 7, Special Assistant to the Secretary of State for Atomic Energy, Department of State Records, NA, pp. 6–7, 10, quoted in Wittner, *One World or None*, pp. 98, 116–17, 140–41.

National Security Resources Board Chairman Stuart Symington insisted that the atomic bomb was America's "political ace," Dean Acheson retorted that it was a "political liability" whose threatened use would "frighten our allies to death" without worrying the Soviets.⁶³ Acheson vetoed a trip by General LeMay to Korea in January 1951 because LeMay was known as "Mr. Atom Bomb" and his presence in Korea would "excite people unduly."⁶⁴

Opposition to use of nuclear weapons by British allies also acted as a source of constraint. In a series of summit talks between Prime Minister Attlee and President Truman in early December 1950, the British pressed strongly for the right of consultation on any use of atomic weapons. In private, Truman promised Attlee not to employ atomic weapons without consulting Britain, but Acheson persuaded the president that such a policy would cause too much trouble in Congress, and the final communiqué from the leaders mentioned no such commitment.⁶⁵ When Winston Churchill became prime minister the following year, he was adamant that no atomic bombs be used in Korea or on China. Churchill and his foreign minister Anthony Eden continued to urge a policy of restraint on the United States and the right to be consulted on any use of atomic weapons.⁶⁶ They feared it would bring the Soviet Union into the war, making Britain a good target for retaliation. While US leaders refused to concede veto power over a decision to use the bomb, they did promise to consult as much as possible.⁶⁷ Allied anxieties over expanding the war or using atomic weapons added one more political obstacle to any easy use of atomic weapons.

Not all leaders shared this opposition to the use of nuclear weapons, of course. A number of voices in the general public and Congress criticized the Truman administration's "appeasement" of the Chinese and called for more aggressive action, including the use of atomic weapons if necessary. These included the national commanders of the four largest veterans' organizations, Bernard Baruch, former American representative to the UN Atomic Energy Commission,

⁶³ NSC meeting minutes, January 25, 1951, NSC file, PSF, Box 220, Truman papers, HSTL, quoted in Dingman, "Atomic Diplomacy," p. 69.

⁶⁴ Memo by the Special Assistant to the Secretary of State, January 12, *FRUS* 1951, 7, p. 68.

⁶⁵ Dean Acheson, *The Korean War* (New York: Norton, 1971), pp. 84–91.

⁶⁶ Memo by Secretary of State, January 6, 1952, *FRUS* 1952–54, 1, pp. 742–46.

⁶⁷ Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Cooperation Among Democracies: The European Influence on US Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), ch. 4.

Senator Owen Brewster and Senator Stuart Symington – who called for use of the bomb to demonstrate its moral legitimacy – and Congressman Mendel Rivers. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge later joined those who advocated employment of atomic weapons if they could be used “efficiently and profitably.”⁶⁸

General Douglas MacArthur, commander in the field, was the most influential military voice to call prominently for nuclear use. MacArthur, who felt Washington did not understand politics in the Far East, argued that the United States would be able to restore Chiang Kai Shek to the mainland only by defeating the Communist Chinese armies, which could be done only with nuclear weapons. MacArthur had briefed his superiors on July 13, 1950 that a Chinese intervention would bring a “unique opportunity” to use the bomb to turn the Korean peninsula into a *cul de sac* by bombing tunnels and bridges leading from Manchuria and so trap Communist forces and destroy them.⁶⁹ He repeatedly requested an atomic capability for use both within and beyond the borders of Korea before Truman relieved him of his position for insubordination in April 1951.

Dean Rusk, at the time assistant secretary of state for the Far East, shared MacArthur’s advocacy of a more aggressive China policy during the war but opposed use of nuclear weapons as entirely disproportionate. “MacArthur urged all-out war against China,” he recalled. “All-out war would have required the mass destruction of Chinese cities. We would have worn the mark of Cain for generations to come. The political effect would have been devastating. Truman never spent an instant even thinking about it.”⁷⁰ Rusk was worried about the political and moral repercussions of attacking a non-nuclear state. He wrote later that “Truman’s own military advisors told him that the only strategy which could possibly affect the situation in Korea would be the mass destruction of Chinese cities with nuclear weapons. That option was never seriously considered since Truman refused to go down that trail.”⁷¹ Nitze also reaffirmed that “no one

⁶⁸ Foot, *The Wrong War*, pp. 114–15, 157.

⁶⁹ Meilinger, *Vandenberg*, p. 165.

⁷⁰ Interview with Rusk, in Newhouse, *War and Peace*, p. 84. Also Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1990), p. 170.

⁷¹ Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 170. Truman’s abhorrence of nuclear weapons is often illustrated by an incident early in the war when he was meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to discuss military plans. One of the chiefs remarked, “If the Chinese enter the war, this will mean the use of atomic weapons.” Truman came out of his chair, turned to the general, and said, “Who told you that?” The general replied that it was “part of our strategic

in the executive branch to my knowledge was pushing for use of nuclear weapons."⁷²

It is clear that some US leaders objected to the atomic bombing of cities as a violation of perceived American values. They did not interpret the use of atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki as establishing any kind of legitimate precedent. Indeed, quite the opposite. The State Department reported in November 1950 that "A repetition of Hiroshima and Nagasaki [i.e., use on Asian cities] would produce the most damaging reaction."⁷³ General Matthew Ridgway, commander of the Eighth Army in Korea, who succeeded MacArthur in 1951 and later became Army chief of staff, wrote later that using nuclear weapons in situations short of retaliation or survival of the homeland was "the ultimate in immorality" (he was thereby implicitly rejecting the Hiroshima precedent). He went on, "If we put 'victory' at any cost ahead of human decency, then I think God might well question our right to invoke His blessing on our Cause." He added that use of nuclear weapons "against industrial and population centers – unless an enemy uses them first against our territory or forces – would so revolt free world opinion as to leave us, quite possibly, friendless and isolated in a hostile world."⁷⁴ Ridgway's moral concerns can be taken seriously because he held similar views about preventive war plans in the 1950s. At that time he had argued that preventive war would be "contrary to every principle upon which our nation has been founded" and "abhorrent to the great mass of the American people."⁷⁵ Paul Nitze, who believed that nuclear weapons represented continuity, not change, and were not an "absolute" weapon nevertheless found them "offensive to all morality."⁷⁶ He lobbied for a build-up of US conventional forces.

At one point, some of Truman's advisors thought about bombing a large dam on the Yalu river. General Hoyt Vandenberg, Air Force Chief of Staff, had gone to Korea, flown a plane over the dam, and

doctrine." Truman said, "You are not going to put me in that position. You'd better go back and get yourself some more strategic doctrine!" Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 126.

⁷² Interview with Nitze, in Newhouse, *War and Peace*, p. 83.

⁷³ Memorandum by the Planning Advisor, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, November 8, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, 7, p. 1098.

⁷⁴ Matthew Ridgway, *The Korean War* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 76, 247.

⁷⁵ Ridgway memorandum for the record, May 17, 1954, quoted in Rosenberg, "Origins of Overkill," p. 34.

⁷⁶ From a letter written on July 1, 1954 to his friend Joseph Alsop, quoted in Strobe Talbott, *Master of the Game: Paul Nitze and the Nuclear Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1988), p. 64, also pp. 35, 63–64.

dropped the largest conventional bomb in the US arsenal on it. It had made only a little scar on the dam's surface. Returning to Washington, he reported that the United States could knock the dam out only with nuclear weapons. "Truman refused," recalled Rusk.⁷⁷ Truman later recalled his resistance to the pressures of some of his generals to use nuclear weapons on Chinese cities. "I could not bring myself to order the slaughter of 25,000,000 . . . I just could not make the order for a Third World War."⁷⁸ At his infamous November 30 press conference, Truman had gone on to say, "I don't want to see it used. It is a terrible weapon, and it should not be used on innocent men, women and children who have nothing whatever to do with this military aggression. That happens when it is used."⁷⁹

Indirect effects of an emerging taboo: Military utility and the issue of suitable targets

Inhibitions about nuclear weapons may have operated in more indirect ways as well, for example, by influencing perceptions about suitable targets and the state of readiness for tactical nuclear warfare. As noted earlier, military officers disagreed about whether Korea offered suitable targets for the tactical use of nuclear weapons. Displaying the kinds of cognitive consistency linkage political scientist Robert Jervis has often noted, those in favor of the use of nuclear weapons (weapons specialists and MacArthur) tended to argue that there were suitable targets in Korea, whereas those opposed to the use of nuclear weapons (such as the Joint Chiefs) tended to argue that there were no good targets. Few argued positions in between that were less "cognitively consistent" (for example, that nuclear weapons should be used but unfortunately there were no good targets; or that there were many good targets in Korea but nevertheless nuclear weapons should not be used).

It is therefore difficult to determine objectively whether there really were "suitable targets." Gaddis has ascribed the Joint Chiefs' difficulty in identifying appropriate targets for the atomic bomb in Korea to "a psychological abhorrence military officers have for

⁷⁷ Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 170. Yalu river hydroelectric plants were eventually bombed with conventional weapons in June 1952 on request from the commander in Korea, General Mark Clark. Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1989), p. 19.

⁷⁸ Ferrell, *Off the Record*, p. 304.

⁷⁹ November 30, 1950 press conference, *FRUS 1950*, 7, p. 1262.

fighting in unfamiliar ways.”⁸⁰ Some of those who thought Korea presented suitable targets saw the real problem as a lack of readiness to deliver atomic weapons in a tactical fashion, not an actual lack of “targets” *per se*. In March 1951 a Johns Hopkins University research group working with the Far East Command informed MacArthur that there were many “large targets of opportunity” for nuclear attack. But the group found US forces ill-prepared for tactical nuclear warfare. Virtually no US or allied troops had been trained in using nuclear weapons on the battlefield.⁸¹ The only way to deliver a bomb would have been with B-29s flying from Japan or Okinawa. In late September and early October 1951, Operation Hudson Harbor confirmed how difficult it would be to locate tactical targets, such as large masses of enemy troops, in a timely fashion.⁸²

Why was the state of readiness for tactical nuclear warfare low? Here Truman’s general reluctance to consider nuclear weapons as like any other weapon and his lack of enthusiasm for developing nuclear capabilities in the years immediately after World War II must be taken into account. Because of this, as David Alan Rosenberg and others have documented, US planning for nuclear warfare lagged in the years before Korea.⁸³ Although atomic scientists were already at work developing tactical nuclear weapons and had been promoting them as a more moral alternative to the H-bomb and strategic nuclear bombing, military planning for their use moved more slowly.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 106.

⁸¹ L. Rumbaugh *et al.*, “Tactical Employment of Atomic Weapons,” Operations Research Office, Far East Command, J. H. U. report to Operations Research Office, F. E. Command report ORO-R-2(FEC), Tokyo, March 1, 1951, quoted in Peter Hayes, *Pacific Powderkeg: American Nuclear Dilemmas in Korea* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1991), pp. 9–10, 344.

⁸² Foot, *The Wrong War*, pp. 105. Operation Hudson Harbor involved several simulated atomic strikes in support of US–UN ground troops in Korea. This helped to devise plans for the tactical use of nuclear weapons there. Schnabel and Watson, *History of the Joint Chiefs*, pp. 613–14.

⁸³ For discussions of early nuclear war planning see Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill”; Robert Art, “The United States, Nuclear Weapons and Grand Strategy,” in Regina Cowan Karp, ed., *Security With Nuclear Weapons? Different Perspectives on National Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 57–99; and Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*.

⁸⁴ Matthew Evangelista, *Innovation and the Arms Race: How the United States and the Soviet Union Develop New Military Technologies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), ch. 4. The Army seized upon the Korean War as a laboratory for testing tactical nuclear strategies. The result was a major acceleration of development, testing, and deployment of tactical nuclear weapons by the end of the war. A new field manual for the Army, “Tactical Uses of Atomic Weapons,” was published in November 1951. Michael Yaffe,

In short, inhibitions about using nuclear weapons in general may have delayed readiness and planning for tactical nuclear use – which in turn influenced perceptions of “lack of suitable targets.”

Challenging the emerging taboo

Certainly those who opposed the limited course of action Truman took in Korea thought such inhibitions unreasonably affected decision-makers. Two of those most in favor of using nuclear weapons in Korea were General K. D. Nichols and General James Gavin. In late 1952, General Nichols, chief of the Armed Services Special Weapons Project, and probably the principal Pentagon authority on, and promoter of, nuclear weapons, expressed his disappointment over the failure to use nuclear weapons in Korea. He had pressed his views in favor of the use of nuclear weapons personally upon each of the three Joint Chiefs but found them “lukewarm” to the idea. In a memo, he argued for a deliberate use of nuclear weapons in the war against China as a way to demonstrate US resolve and willingness to use any weapon in the arsenal, but fretted that “I knew that many individuals in the United States opposed such thinking for idealistic, moral or other reasons.”⁸⁵ Nichols actually recommended deliberate action to *prevent* any kind of special status from attaching to nuclear weapons. That he was moved to make such a recommendation serves as an indicator of an emerging – though contested – norm.

Army General Gavin, a member of the Weapons Systems Evaluation Group (WSEG) and a principal promoter in the military of the development of tactical nuclear weapons, had accompanied Nichols on this pro-nuclear lobbying effort and shared Nichols’ disappointment. He recounted in his memoirs their recommendation to General Ridgway that the president use nuclear weapons against North Korean forces, feeling that “it would have been militarily inexcusable to allow the 8th Army to be destroyed without even using the most powerful weapons in our arsenal.” Gavin had visited Korea in the fall of 1950, accompanied by weapons scientists, as part of a WSEG research trip, and returned enthusiastic about the value of tactical nuclear weapons for battlefield use. In his view, as he wrote later, the United States

“Nuclear Weapons and US Army Organization,” unpublished manuscript, September 1990, p. 3.

⁸⁵ K. D. Nichols, *The Road to Trinity* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1987), p. 291.

and its allies were defeated in Korea and later at Dien Bien Phu because of the lack of readiness to use tactical nuclear weapons:

If in the past ten years we had spent even a small part of [the resources spent on general war] in developing and procuring the means of dealing with limited war, we could have settled Korea and Dien Bien Phu quickly in our favor. Tactical nuclear missiles, sky cavalry, and increased assault airlift can contribute decisively to that kind of an operation . . .⁸⁶

In Gavin's view, the United States had not pursued tactical nuclear options aggressively enough because of "old thinking" that nuclear weapons could only be used strategically and also because of moral qualms about nuclear weapons in general. He complained, "the situation in the summer of 1950 offered us a number of well worth-while tactical nuclear targets if we had had the moral courage to make the decision to use them."⁸⁷

Gordon Dean, chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission at the time, also thought that suitable tactical targets existed for atomic weapons in Korea. Dean, the manager of the nation's nuclear stockpile and, in this capacity, the president's chief expert on the physical characteristics and effects of nuclear explosives, often communicated directly with President Truman. He thought in the summer of 1951 that the newly available smaller nuclear weapons might be useful to break the stalemate with the Chinese "in a fashion which takes the heart out of the Chinese army effort." Chinese troops could be "virtually destroyed in the Korean operation by an intelligently planned atomic attack."⁸⁸ In a meeting with the president on August 31, 1951, he assured Truman that while atomic artillery shells would not be available until fall 1952, the United States currently possessed atomic weapons that could be employed "effectively at any moment against troop concentrations," that is, in tactical fashion.⁸⁹ He noted in his diary, "There is no need to wait for the purely tactical weapons."⁹⁰

⁸⁶ James M. Gavin, *War and Peace in the Space Age* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), pp. 124, 127–28.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁸⁸ Diary entry July 12, 1951, in Anders, *Forging the Atomic Shield: Excerpts from the Office Diary of Gordon E. Dean* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), pp. 158–59.

⁸⁹ Diary entry, August 31, 1951, *ibid.*, p. 161.

⁹⁰ Diary entry, July 12, 1951, *ibid.*, p. 159.

Dean had discussed the need for tactical nuclear weapons for use by the Army in meetings with Brigadier General James McCormack, Jr., director of the Division of Military Application, and Karl Bendetsen, assistant secretary of the Army. Like General Gavin, the three agreed that one of the “real hurdles” to more effective atomic policy was the public’s persistent belief that the atomic bomb was a strategic weapon suitable for use only on cities and civilians. But, as Dean noted in his diary, Army studies in Korea had now shown that “at least on three occasions there were targets” consisting of North Korean and Chinese troop concentrations. The studies also “pretty much killed” the view that the hilly Korean terrain was unsuitable for the use of A-bombs, since troop concentrations would be susceptible to atomic air bursts. Dean and his colleagues tried to come up with a new word other than “tactical” to describe the new “small bang” weapons, to distinguish them from strategic weapons and make them more acceptable to the public, but admitted that “no very good names were produced.”⁹¹

Dean did not think that use of tactical nuclear weapons would set off a third world war. He thought that their use on China not only would not provoke the Russians but might even deter them from their plans to invade Europe. He also thought that the American people were tired of the stalemate in Korea and would “generally applaud” use of the bomb if it eliminated 40 percent to 60 percent of a 250,000-man Chinese army in Korea.⁹²

A few months later, on October 5, 1951, Dean made these views public in a controversial speech on “Responsibilities of Atomic World Leadership” at the University of Southern California in which he stated that the United States was entering an era in which atomic bombs could be used tactically as well as strategically. He also suggested that tactical atomic weapons could be viewed more like conventional weapons. Like General Gavin, he attributed the non-use of nuclear weapons by the United States when it had exclusive possession of the bomb to the “important role played by the moral factor” in US deliberations. Unfortunately, the Soviets had “counted on” this “moral restraint” and had “taken advantage of it” to promote Communist aggression around the world. Suggesting that it was time to end this freedom of action, he asserted that it would no longer be immoral to use nuclear weapons since the new smaller atomic

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 158–59.

weapons being developed were more like conventional weapons in their destructive power. He expressed little concern about Soviet retaliation in response to a US use of nuclear arms (presumably other than against Soviet territory), since the US strategic arsenal would deter the Soviet Union from retaliating with nuclear arms.⁹³ The speech was his most controversial as chairman, aroused criticism, and increased speculation in the press about tactical nuclear weapons.⁹⁴

Another who thought there were suitable targets was Samuel Cohen, a weapons scientist who worked for the RAND Corporation and was an enthusiast for developing more discriminate tactical nuclear weapons. Cohen visited Korea in 1951 as part of an Air Force sponsored trip to see if “there was any good way to use atomic bombs in that war.” He was instructed to be discreet about his mission, in order not to provoke rumors that the United States was actually contemplating such use. As he later described, as a result of the trip he “got hooked” on the virtues of tactical nuclear weapons, going on to be among the few advocating their use in the Vietnam War and against Iraq in 1991.⁹⁵

Upon his arrival in Seoul, he was struck right away with ideas for targets. As he drove across a bridge into the city, he noted how the very sturdy bridge was pockmarked by hundreds of unsuccessful efforts to destroy it by bombing with conventional weapons. He thought, “What an ideal spot for an atomic bomb.” Upon returning from Korea, he reported to the Air Force his ideas for using tactical nuclear weapons there, concluding that “there was an extensive target system for such use.”⁹⁶ The Air Force, however, was adamantly opposed to using atomic weapons for tactical warfare, fearing that it would undermine the primary Air Force mission of strategic bombing.

But Cohen also ran up against moral and political objections. Presenting his ideas to two scientists from the California Institute of Technology who had worked closely with Robert Oppenheimer in the latter’s efforts to promote development of tactical nuclear weapons, he found, much to his surprise, that rather than being

⁹³ The speech is reprinted in *ibid.*, pp. 276–85.

⁹⁴ Anders, *Forging the Atomic Shield*, p. 154.

⁹⁵ Samuel Cohen, *The Truth About the Neutron Bomb* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1983), p. 30.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 33. The level of destruction inspired him to reprint in his memoirs side by side a photo of Hiroshima leveled by an atomic bomb, taken October 12, 1945, and one of Seoul, leveled by conventional bombing, taken November 1, 1950. The cities look about equally leveled and he asks which one was destroyed by nuclear weapons.

receptive, they were “aghast that anyone would consider using atomic weapons again in Asia.” They could only conceive of using them to defend Europe against a Soviet attack. Cohen reported later that he believed that this “Hiroshima syndrome” – the intense belief that the United States should never use atomic weapons in Asia again – reigned in many parts of the US government and was “instrumental in shaping our tactical nuclear weapons policy.”⁹⁷ This statement illustrates how the general nuclear weapons policy was colored by more narrow normative concerns in the Asian context.

In sum, military and bureaucratic constraints on use of atomic weapons appear to have been important but not decisive in restraining use of atomic weapons in Korea – had Truman wanted to use them. Although military leaders disagreed about the military utility of atomic weapons on the battlefield in Korea, numerous military and political officials did view nuclear weapons as militarily useful, and they uniformly agreed that such weapons would be useful strategically against China in a wider war. Fear of the consequences of a wider war helped keep the war limited, as did concerns about a limited stockpile of bombs. However, Truman’s advisors disagreed about the escalation risks and, indeed, some thought that the use of atomic weapons would even have a deterrent, not a provocative, effect on the Soviets or Chinese.

In this context, political and normative concerns about atomic weapons reinforced an overall policy of restraint. Moral concerns on the part of some officials about using such a disproportionate weapon and perceived opposition from world publics and leaders, including accusations of racism, had an inhibiting effect on Truman and his advisors during the war. Truman’s own personal post-Hiroshima abhorrence of atomic weapons, discussed in Chapter 3, appears to have been a critical factor in discouraging their use.⁹⁸ His rejection of a more aggressive China policy appeared to be linked to his great reluctance to be put into a situation in which he might be forced to use the bomb on Chinese cities. In one of his last communications as president, Truman reaffirmed his continued aversion to using nuclear weapons. On January 19, 1953, he wrote to his friend Thomas Murray, the chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, that the

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁹⁸ David E. Lilienthal, *The Journals of David E. Lilienthal*, vol. II (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 391; and Paul Boyer, *Fallout: A Historian Reflects on America’s Half-Century Encounter with Nuclear Weapons* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1998), ch. 3.

use of the atomic bomb was “far worse than gas and biological warfare because it affects the civilian population and murders them by the wholesale.”⁹⁹

The overall picture is that Truman and many of his advisors sought to avoid using nuclear weapons in ways that American leaders at the end of World War II did not. While officials identified multiple reasons not to use nuclear weapons, the evidence suggests that the normative opprobrium that was already developing heightened the salience of moral and political concerns, which at times colored the analysis of military options and capabilities. Nuclear weapons were clearly acquiring a special status that encouraged political leaders to view them as weapons of last resort.

Eisenhower and Dulles

This attitude changed somewhat when Dwight D. Eisenhower entered office. It was during his tenure as president that the issue of a nuclear taboo became quite explicit – a taboo which he and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles deplored and disparaged. Eisenhower took office in January 1953 frustrated by the stalemated war in Korea and determined to find a way to end it. By this time smaller tactical nuclear weapons were becoming available.¹⁰⁰ Eisenhower viewed them as a rapid and less costly way to force an end to the conflict. As he recalled in his memoirs, “to keep the attack from becoming overly costly, it was clear that we would have to use atomic weapons.”¹⁰¹ But an emerging “taboo” posed an obstacle to the administration’s freedom to use such weapons. Here the contested nature of the taboo becomes increasingly evident, as Eisenhower administration officials – following General Nichols and General Gavin earlier – perceived a taboo emerging and sought to challenge it.

The strategic and policy context

It was during Eisenhower’s presidency that the unique features of the nuclear era began to take shape. By the mid-1950s both the

⁹⁹ Truman to Thomas Murray, January 19, 1953, quoted in Bernstein, “Truman and the A-Bomb,” p. 562.

¹⁰⁰ The air-delivered Mark 9 bomb was deployed in July 1952, and the United States tested its first ground system, the 280 mm atomic cannon, in May 1953. US missiles with tactical nuclear warheads were deployed abroad for the first time in fall 1953, to Europe.

¹⁰¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953–56: The White House Years* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), p. 180.

United States and the Soviet Union had acquired significant arsenals of atomic weapons. They had tested the terribly destructive thermonuclear bomb, procured advanced jet-powered bombers to deliver bombs to the other's territory, and were developing intercontinental ballistic missiles which would greatly increase the ability of each side to attack the other's homeland. The thermonuclear bomb, a hundred times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, forced a significant transformation in strategic thought. First tested in deliverable form by the United States in January 1953, thermonuclear weapons pushed casualty estimates from a multi-weapon strike from millions to tens of millions. Any doubts about the decisiveness of nuclear weapons came to an end, since, as Eisenhower commented, "nobody can win a thermonuclear war."¹⁰²

At the same time, however, the United States was developing small tactical nuclear weapons, creating the possibility of limited nuclear use. Further, thanks to a tremendous build-up in fissionable material since 1950, scarcity no longer carried any weight as an argument against the use of nuclear bombs in Korea. By 1953, US leaders were confident that they could wage nuclear war in Europe against the Soviets and still have some atomic bombs left over for Korea. Policy Planning director Paul Nitze wrote to Dulles in January 1953 that "we now have a stockpile of sufficient size to enable us to use these weapons locally where their use would be militarily effective and did not involve more than offsetting political disadvantages."¹⁰³

Eisenhower's and Dulles' complex, often seemingly contradictory, attitudes toward nuclear weapons have perplexed historians. On one hand, Eisenhower may have opposed the use of atomic weapons on Japan as unnecessary to win the war, and he was eloquent and frequent in his denunciations of the possibility of winning strategic nuclear war.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, he displayed a persistent interest in the use of tactical nuclear weapons as a cost-effective means of

¹⁰² Special NSC Meeting, February 7, 1956, AWF-AS, Box 27, "National Security Council (2)." DDEL.

¹⁰³ Memo by the Director of Policy Planning to the Secretary of State, January 12, 1953, *FRUS 1952-54*, 1, p. 204. By January 1953, the United States possessed about 1,600 warheads and the Soviet Union about 50, doubling to 100 by mid-year.

¹⁰⁴ Eisenhower wrote in 1963, "The Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing . . . I hated to see our country be the first to use such a weapon." Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change*, p. 312. However, Barton Bernstein doubts he actually expressed this view at the time. See Chapter 3.

resolving Cold War conflicts.¹⁰⁵ Like Truman, Eisenhower was no stranger to mass destruction. As Supreme Allied Commander in Europe during World War II, he had authorized the total destruction of Nazi Germany, the firebombing of French and German cities, and thus the incineration of tens of thousands of non-combatants. As Campbell Craig has observed, "Perhaps no one in history is more properly associated with the phenomenon of total war than he."¹⁰⁶ Eisenhower was also probably more familiar with nuclear weapons than any other president entering office. As NATO's first commander, General Eisenhower had relied on a massive strike that would paralyze the enemy with atomic weapons. He was reportedly impressed with a briefing for the allies by Robert Oppenheimer in December 1951 on the VISTA project to develop tactical nuclear weapons for the defense of Europe.¹⁰⁷

Eisenhower's penchant for tactical nuclear weapons was reinforced by his secretary of state and foreign policy spokesman, John Foster Dulles, who had gone from viewing the bomb in the immediate post-war period as an immoral device unsuited for Christians to being an equally enthusiastic proponent of it in the 1950s.¹⁰⁸ The seemingly intense fascination of these two leaders with the advantages of tactical nuclear weapons has produced a unique documentary record particularly revealing of their perceptions of a developing nuclear taboo.

The pursuit of the freedom to use

Discussions in Eisenhower's National Security Council (NSC) provide some of the best records we have of high-level serious consideration

¹⁰⁵ He later even recommended the use of nuclear weapons to President Kennedy and President Johnson during, respectively, the Laos crisis and the Vietnam War. See Chapter 6.

¹⁰⁶ Campbell Craig, *Destroying the Village: Eisenhower and Thermonuclear War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. ix.

¹⁰⁷ Gregg Herken, *Counsels of War* (New York: Knopf, 1985), p. 66.

¹⁰⁸ Recent historical scholarship has explored the nature and sources of the pair's puzzling positions and has offered a more nuanced view of Dulles' support for the policy of "massive retaliation" than the traditional interpretations. See, for example, Craig, *Destroying the Village*; Andrew P. N. Erdmann, "'War No Longer Has Any Logic Whatever': Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Thermonuclear Revolution," in John Lewis Gaddis *et al.*, eds., *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 87–119; Neal Rosendorf, "John Foster Dulles' Nuclear Schizophrenia," in Gaddis *et al.*, eds., *Cold War Statesmen*, pp. 62–86; and Stephen G. Rabe, "Eisenhower Revisionism: a Decade of Scholarship," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 17 (Winter 1993), pp. 97–115.

of nuclear weapons. The subject was brought up at least seven times in the spring of 1953. Both Eisenhower and Dulles sought to resist an emerging perception that nuclear weapons should not be used, and appeared far more concerned with the constraints imposed by a perceived taboo on their use and negative public opinion than with any fear of Soviet retaliation. "This moral problem," as Dulles referred to it, "and the inhibitions on the use of the A bomb," could potentially be an obstacle, hindering its use. He lamented what he saw as Soviet success in setting nuclear weapons apart from all other weapons in a special category, and urged that the United States "try to break down this false distinction."¹⁰⁹

Eisenhower had first suggested the use of atomic bombs just after the war broke out in June 1950. Still the NATO commander, he shared with the Army Staff in Washington, DC, his views about how to resolve the crisis, and even suggested "the use of one or two atomic bombs in the Korean area, if suitable targets could be found."¹¹⁰ As president, in early 1953, less than a month in office, Eisenhower told the NSC, "We should consider the use of tactical atomic weapons" in Korea.¹¹¹ General Mark Clark, the commander in Korea since May 1952, had requested authority to use atomic bombs to attack a build-up of three new Chinese armies in the Kaesong area, the first site of the armistice negotiations. The Joint Chiefs – veterans of the Truman administration's deliberations over the same issue – advised caution, noting the difficulties the issue could raise with the allies and skeptical as well of the military advantages of the use of atomic weapons in Korea, since Communist troops were deeply dug in across the 150 mile front. However, the Chiefs did think atomic weapons would be useful against airfields in China.¹¹²

Yet Eisenhower repeatedly questioned his military advisors' conclusion that atomic weapons would have little battlefield utility in Korea. In his view, the Kaesong area "provided a good target for this type of weapon."¹¹³ Like Truman, Eisenhower believed that anything other than unrelenting military pressure would not end the war, but he was also highly sensitive to the costs of a seemingly endless conventional war. A special estimate in early March argued that a naval

¹⁰⁹ 131st Meeting of the NSC, February 11, 1953, *FRUS 1952–54*, 15(1), p. 770.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Crane, "To Avert Impending Disaster," p. 73.

¹¹¹ 131st Meeting of the NSC, February 11, 1953, *FRUS 1952–54*, 15(1), p. 770.

¹¹² *Ibid.* ¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 769, 770.

blockade and conventional bombing would not be enough to force the Chinese to accept a Korean settlement on UN terms, thus providing fuel for advocates of atomic options.¹¹⁴ Eisenhower repeatedly insisted that the use of atomic weapons “should depend on military judgment as to the advantage of their use on military targets,” implying that his military chiefs’ skepticism about the utility of the weapons was being influenced by something other than pure military cost-benefit analysis.¹¹⁵

Outside consultants advising the administration on the budget implications of national security policies, an enduring concern of Eisenhower’s, certainly found the cost-benefit case for using nuclear weapons compelling. The consultants were mostly businessmen from the internationalist wing of the Republican party.¹¹⁶ In a meeting in late March 1953, Paul Nitze reported the consultants’ view that Korea provided a good opportunity to test atomic weapons in combat conditions, especially since the United States had gone to such great expense to develop them. Nitze himself continued to express reservations, noting possible political and military disadvantages, but General Bradley thought the consultants’ views accurately reflected widespread public pressure to avoid casualties, which might force US leaders to “use every type of weapon that we have.”¹¹⁷

Four days later, at a special NSC meeting on March 31 attended by the consultants, Eisenhower continued to press his interest in nuclear weapons. He suggested their use to achieve a substantial victory and to obtain a truce line at the “waist” of the peninsula. The consultants thought the American people would support an all-out effort in Korea. One of them, Deane Malott, president of Cornell University, argued that the United States ought to “use a couple of atomic weapons in Korea” despite the “public hysteria” surrounding them.¹¹⁸ Eisenhower noted the need to pay attention to the sensitivities of the allies, but asserted that nevertheless he and Dulles were in complete agreement

¹¹⁴ “Probable Effects on the Soviet Bloc of Certain Courses of Action,” *FRUS 1952–54*, 14, p. 150.

¹¹⁵ Memorandum by the Administrative Assistant to the President for National Security Matters (Cutler) to the Secretary of Defense (Wilson), March 21, 1953, *FRUS 1952–54*, 15(1), p. 815.

¹¹⁶ The consultants were Dillon Anderson, James B. Black, John Cowles, Eugene Holman, Deane W. Malott, David B. Robertson, and Charles A. Thomas.

¹¹⁷ Memorandum, Department of State–JCS Meeting, March 27, 1953, *FRUS 1952–54*, 15(1), pp. 817–18.

¹¹⁸ Special NSC Meeting, March 31, 1953, *FRUS 1952–54*, 2(1), p. 276.

that “somehow or other the tabu which surrounds the use of atomic weapons would have to be destroyed.”¹¹⁹

Military analyses concluded that the bomb would be highly useful militarily and even politically, despite some potentially serious negative political and military costs. A report in April, NSC 147, the most detailed study to date of measures to end the war through increasing military pressure, outlined six alternative courses of action, all but the first permitting, though not requiring, use of atomic weapons. The report identified as the advantages of nuclear weapons their effectiveness, their decisive destruction of Chinese troops, their ability to achieve results at less cost to the United States, and the possible deterrent effect on the Soviet Union. Politically, the use of atomic weapons might be necessary to achieve a political settlement without widening hostilities or to prevent a US–UN military disaster.¹²⁰

On the negative side, the report noted, the deterrent effect of atomic bombs would be diminished if they were not decisive. Their use would require expanding the war outside Korea, it would establish an undesirable precedent for use (thus inviting retaliatory use), and it would diminish US capabilities for global nuclear war if large numbers of weapons were used. Political costs would accrue if other free world nations “believe that” (whether true or not) use of atomic weapons would not achieve decisive military or political results, or would result in general war with China or the Soviet Union or in retaliation against US–UN forces. Recognizing how sensitive the nuclear issue was, the report noted that even “merely raising the question” of employing nuclear weapons might dissipate support for the US position.

Notably absent from this list of possible negatives is any clear statement that use of atomic weapons would risk provoking global war with the Soviet Union, a deterrence concern. Given the dominance of the deterrence explanation for non-use of nuclear weapons in the international relations literature, this absence is noteworthy. Indeed, as noted above, although the report notes the possibility of Soviet nuclear retaliation, it also makes precisely the *opposite* point that use of atomic weapons might *deter* the Soviet Union and achieve a settlement *without widening the war*.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 827.

¹²⁰ NSC 147, “Analysis of Possible Courses of Action in Korea,” NSC Planning Board, April 2, 1953, *FRUS 1952–54*, 15(1), pp. 838–46.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

As for the likely domestic and foreign reaction to these courses of action, NSC 147 estimated that the American public could be rallied to support either a continuation of current policy or more aggressive action, but foreign opinion would support only the most cautious plan, the only one that did not permit the use of atomic weapons. Foreign opinion “would strongly oppose” the more aggressive policies that involved expanding the war into Manchuria and China and most likely the use of atomic weapons. Nevertheless, the study argued confidently, a substantial US–UN victory would deflate the prestige and influence of the Communists and enhance the position of the United States in Asia. The study had little to say about the Communist reaction to a nuclear attack other than that it would be “in large part determined by the extent of damage inflicted.” The Communists would recognize a use of atomic weapons “as indicative of Western determination to carry the Korean War to a successful conclusion.”¹²²

NSC 147 avoided making recommendations but provided the basis for the NSC’s final deliberations on the use of atomic weapons. In May 1953, as frustration mounted at the stalemate in negotiations, the NSC again considered using atomic weapons to dislodge the Chinese from their positions in Korea. At an NSC meeting on May 6, Eisenhower suggested employing tactical atomic weapons against four North Korean airfields which the US–UN force was already attacking with conventional bombs. Such a move would “test the effectiveness of an atomic bomb.” He insisted “We have got to consider the atomic bomb as simply another weapon in our arsenal.”¹²³

A week later JCS staffers briefed the NSC on the six options of NSC 147. Eisenhower kept insisting against his skeptical military advisors that nuclear weapons were more cost-effective than conventional ordnance and that criteria for evaluation should be purely military cost–benefit analysis. The JCS expressed doubt as to whether the use of atomic weapons “could really be justified in terms of the large-scale destruction of enemy personnel and material.” Eisenhower nevertheless insisted that “it might be cheaper, dollarwise, to use atomic weapons in Korea than to continue to use conventional weapons against the dugouts which honeycombed the hills along which the enemy forces were presently deployed.” While skeptical of the utility of atomic weapons inside Korea, the Joint Chiefs thought their use

¹²² *Ibid.*, pp. 846, 849.

¹²³ NSC meeting, May 6, 1953, *FRUS 1952–54*, 15(1), p. 977.

outside Korea would be “highly advantageous” and that they should be used in considerable numbers to make a difference. Walter Bedell Smith, Eisenhower’s chief of staff during World War II and now undersecretary of state, argued that while relations with the allies might be disrupted over the use of atomic weapons, a quick victory would bring them back to the fold. He thus recommended “the boldest” line of action, which would leave the United States in “the best position.”¹²⁴

With continued lack of progress at the Panmunjom peace talks, at the end of May 1953, the NSC approved the contingency plan by the Joint Chiefs for a major attack on China, including use of atomic weapons, to force an end to the conflict if the talks broke down. The JCS had recommended a combination of courses D, E, and F – the most serious. Their recommendation for use of atomic weapons emphasized the element of surprise associated with atomic weapons, the speed of destruction, and the ability to achieve results at less cost to the United States.¹²⁵ As outlined by General Collins, US forces would first use mustard gas to drive the Chinese out of their dug-in positions. The Chinese troops would then be effective targets for US tactical atomic weapons.¹²⁶ The plan would take effect the following year. Although Eisenhower expressed concern about the possibility of Soviet air retaliation against defenseless Japanese cities, he urged the JCS to move with all dispatch. He also proposed preparing the allies for an expanded military offensive and the use of atomic weapons. General Clark was advised to revise his war plan, OPLAN 8-52, to meet the new objectives and the decision to employ nuclear weapons.¹²⁷ As it turned out, only a few weeks later the

¹²⁴ All quotes in this paragraph are from 144th NSC meeting, May 13, 1953, *FRUS 1952-54*, 15(1), p. 1014.

¹²⁵ Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (Wilson), May 19, 1953, *FRUS 192-54*, 15(1), pp. 1059-64.

¹²⁶ General Collins’ statement about mustard gas and tactical nuclear weapons, deleted from the *FRUS* version of the document, was declassified only in September 1998 at the request of the author. 145th NSC meeting, May 20, 1953, NSC Series, Whitman Files, DDEL, p. 8. The rest of the document appears in *FRUS 1952-54*, 15(1), pp. 1064-68. The relevant US policy on chemical weapons at the time, promulgated in NSC 62, approved on February 17, 1950, prior to the outbreak of the Korean War, stated that “chemical, biological and radiological weapons will not be used by the United States except in retaliation.” It was reiterated in NSC 147, *FRUS, 1952-54*, 15(1), p. 844. The policy was only changed on March 15, 1956, long after the Korean War.

¹²⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense, May 19, 1953, *FRUS 1952-54*, 15(1) and NSC meeting, May 20, 1953, pp. 1064-68; Schnabel and Watson, *JCS History*, pp. 961-62.

Chinese agreed to acceptable terms, and a truce was signed a month after that.

How did the taboo matter?

It is sometimes argued that Eisenhower, famous for his dissembling, merely talked a “tough” line on tactical nuclear weapons in order to maximize “deterrence.” But these discussions were internal policy deliberations at the highest level where the audience he was attempting to persuade were his own advisors, not foreign enemies. These were not statements for public consumption. Although it is difficult to know with certainty, the evidence is strong that Eisenhower was serious about using atomic weapons.¹²⁸ In late July 1953 he approved a policy statement that if the Chinese broke the armistice, the United States would use nuclear weapons to defeat them.¹²⁹ He reiterated this to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Foreign Minister Anthony Eden at a meeting in Bermuda in early December 1953, despite their strong objections to such a policy. Dulles also confirmed in December 1953 that it had been the administration’s intention to use atomic weapons against Korea and China. In an NSC meeting in early December he and others again proposed atomic strikes against Korea, China, and Manchuria if the Chinese resumed hostilities.¹³⁰ Two years later, in February 1956, Eisenhower reminded the NSC of his administration’s frustrations over the limitations on fighting the Korean War, and said that in the future “peripheral” wars must be fought on the same basis as general war. In July 1959, during an NSC meeting on policy on the use of nuclear weapons, the president again recalled the frustrations of Truman’s policy of limited engagement in Korea and pointed out that “as far back as 1953 we had publicly stated that if the Korean War continued the US would make use of nuclear weapons.” He added that this was “the kind of a war in which we would obviously use nuclear weapons.”¹³¹

The fact that in May 1953 the Eisenhower administration launched extensive air attacks on the North Korean irrigation dam system – major civilian targets – provides a strong indicator of its willingness

¹²⁸ Eisenhower’s history suggests that he was a risk-taker and often asserted himself against more cautious advice. See Richard Immerman, “Eisenhower and Dulles: Who Made the Decisions?” *Political Psychology*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1979), pp. 3–20.

¹²⁹ 156th NSC meeting, July 23, 1953, Whitman Files, NSC Series, Box 4, DDEL.

¹³⁰ 173rd NSC meeting, December 3, 1953, NSC series, Box 5, DDEP, DDEL.

¹³¹ 412th NSC meeting, July 9, 1959, Whitman Files, NSC Series, Box 19, DDEL, p. 6.

to inflict civilian casualties. These attacks were part of the ongoing effort to increase the air pressure campaign against the Communists and to create “unacceptable damage.” As Robert Pape has noted, the willingness to carry out such attacks against civilian targets suggests that Eisenhower would have had little compunction about using nuclear weapons.¹³²

The important point is that Eisenhower and his advisors clearly perceived an emerging taboo as an unwelcome constraint on their freedom to use any weapon in the arsenal. They discussed ways to challenge it, to “dissipate” or “destroy” it, analyzed how serious it was, and whether, for example, if the United States did use tactical atomic weapons, possibly ruptured relations with the allies could be repaired.¹³³ Thus while they disagreed on the utility of atomic weapons in Korea, there was little disagreement on the taboo. In his memoirs Eisenhower maintained that he was ready to challenge it: he asserted that he was prepared to use atomic weapons if necessary to get a settlement at the peace talks and that he “would not be limited by any world-wide gentleman’s agreement.”¹³⁴

Further, the constraints imposed by a perceived emerging taboo appeared to carry more weight with decisionmakers than any deterrent effect posed by the Soviet Union. In the final decision at the end of May to plan for using atomic weapons against China, Eisenhower and his advisors exhibited remarkably little concern about a Soviet reaction. NSC 147’s brief mention of the risk of retaliation had clearly been set aside in favor of its aggressive atomic options. Historian Marc Trachtenberg argues that this more aggressive or “undeterred” stance was permitted by a significant US military build-up, both conventional and nuclear, since 1950. This build-up had shifted the balance of power significantly in favor of the United States by 1953, allowing US leaders to entertain more aggressive policies, confident that the Soviet Union would be deterred from any serious involvement. Thus the same Joint Chiefs who had been more hesitant to take

¹³² Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 168; and Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, pp. 23–24. The aim of the attacks was to inundate the rice crop, thereby causing a serious food shortage and leading to massive starvation of the civilian population. The raids made eleven out of thirteen hydroelectric dams unusable, and caused a two-week blackout across Northern Korea. Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, pp. 18–19.

¹³³ 144th NSC meeting, May 13, 1953, p. 11, NSC Series, DDEL.

¹³⁴ Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change*, p. 181.

risks before now advocated expanding the air war to include attacking bases in Manchuria, which would require nuclear weapons.¹³⁵

What role did the taboo play, then? To be sure, the non-use of nuclear weapons was clearly due in part to a fortuitous sequence of events in which the Chinese, for their own reasons, decided to terminate the conflict when they did.¹³⁶ For the United States, with contingency plans in place for atomic strikes in the event of an armistice breakdown, it was to some extent a case of non-decision. Thus non-use was in part a function of Chinese forbearance. But the taboo appears to have had a constraining effect by preventing a casual resort to nuclear weapons. It bought time for other things to happen. Leaders *themselves* believed they were constrained by it. During the discussion with the president on March 31, 1953 on the need to destroy the “tabu,” Dulles admitted that since “in the present state of world opinion we could not use an A-bomb, we should make every effort now to dissipate this feeling, especially since we are spending such vast sums on the production of *weapons we cannot use*.”¹³⁷ Until world opinion changed, he agreed, the United States would just have to keep fighting with conventional weapons. During an NSC discussion on atomic use policy in August 1953, shortly after the Korean War had ended, Admiral Arthur W. Radford, now chairman of the Joint Chiefs, complained that the United States had been “spending vast sums on the manufacture of these weapons and at the same time we were holding back on their use because of our concern for public opinion.” In his view, it was “high time” that nuclear use policy was clarified.¹³⁸ It is hard to imagine clearer statements of a constraint than these.

There is only scant evidence from this period of concern over the consequences of demonstrating that nuclear weapons were usable, which would provide support for a long-term-consequences

¹³⁵ Trachtenberg, “A ‘Wasting Asset.’” See also Foot, *The Wrong War*, pp. 82–83.

¹³⁶ The role of a US nuclear threat in bringing about this outcome is disputed but does not appear to have played the role that Dulles later claimed for it. Eisenhower’s nuclear threats were made in May 1953, two months after the Soviet government resolved to bring the war to an end. See “New Russian Documents on the Korean War,” introduction and translations by Kathryn Weathersby, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 6–7 (Winter 1995/96), p. 3; and Rosemary J. Foot, “Nuclear Coercion and the Ending of the Korean Conflict,” *International Security*, vol. 13 (Winter 1988/89), pp. 92–112.

¹³⁷ The final clause of the sentence, starting with “especially,” was declassified only in December 1996 at the request of the author. It can be found in NSC meeting, March 31, 1953, Whitman Files, NSC Series, Box 4, DDEL, p. 13 (emphasis added). The rest is reprinted in *FRUS 1952–54*, 15(1), p. 827.

¹³⁸ 160th NSC meeting, August 27, 1953, *FRUS 1952–54*, 2(1), p. 447.

(materialist) explanation. In May 1949, the controversial Harmon Report had been the first to suggest that use of nuclear weapons by the United States could have adverse political consequences, reflecting awareness of the undesirable precedent such use might set. Atomic bombing, it noted, “would open the field and set the pattern for all adversaries to use any weapons of mass destruction.”¹³⁹ However, this probably refers to retaliation with chemical and maybe biological weapons, since at the time planners did not assume that any other country would have nuclear weapons for some time to come. NSC 147 noted that one military disadvantage of using nuclear weapons in Korea was that “a precedent would be established” for use, in which case the US–UN forces and installations would offer a good target for enemy retaliation with atomic weapons.¹⁴⁰

In general, however, such concerns seemed remote from policy-makers’ minds during the first part of the Cold War, at least until proliferation became an issue in the early 1960s. It was the taboo issue, not fear of retaliation, that was prominent at the time of the Korean War. Dulles was acutely attuned to public opinion for most of his life. As I show in Chapter 5, the theme of public opposition to use of nuclear weapons was one he returned to frequently throughout the 1950s.

Public opinion polls supported the link between public opinion and an emerging taboo, showing the public supporting some, but not all, uses of atomic weapons. Polls taken during the Korean War show that American public support for using atomic weapons against North Korean forces never went above 20 percent, even though North Korea did not possess nuclear weapons. However, the American public did support using nuclear weapons against China after it entered the war.¹⁴¹ Initially, in 1950, only a minority (27 percent) supported using atomic weapons against (non-nuclear) China. However, after China entered the war, the public increasingly supported their use against

¹³⁹ “Evaluation of Effect on Soviet War Effort Resulting from the Strategic Air Offensive,” May 11, 1949. From Records of the Organizational Research and Policy Division of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations (Op-23), Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC, edited version reprinted in Thomas H. Etzhold and John Lewis Gaddis, eds., *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy, 1945–50* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 361.

¹⁴⁰ NSC 147, Analysis of Possible Courses of Action in Korea, NSC Planning Board, April 2, 1953, *FRUS 1952–54*, 15(1), p. 845.

¹⁴¹ Thomas Graham, *American Public Opinion on NATO, Extended Deterrence and the Use of Nuclear Weapons: Future Fission?* CSIA Occasional Paper (Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, 1989), p. 72.

China in various circumstances. Toward the end of 1951 – a year after Chinese forces had intervened – a Gallup poll reported that 39 percent of respondents supported use of the atomic bomb “on enemy military targets in Korea” by United Nations forces, while 10 percent gave it qualified approval. In 1953, 45 percent supported using atomic weapons against Chinese cities *if* the United States got into a war with China, and a majority (56 percent) supported using atomic artillery shells against China *if* peace talks broke down.¹⁴² Thus the public supported using nuclear weapons first, but only against the Soviet Union or China, and *not* against North Korean forces even though North Korea was non-nuclear.¹⁴³ As the State Department’s polling showed, world and allied opinion was even more strongly opposed to using atomic weapons than was the American public, largely because European allies felt they would be the battleground in any atomic war between the superpowers.¹⁴⁴

The taboo, while closely equated with public opinion at this stage, became much more than this as time passed. The fact that leaders themselves used the word taboo suggests the special status that was already beginning to attach to such weapons, a meaning that went well beyond simply public opinion.

Conclusion

The Korean War showed that nuclear weapons would not necessarily be weapons of first resort for the United States, which undoubtedly came as a surprise to those, such as General Nichols, General Gavin, and General LeMay, who were planning for, and anticipating, their use. Although the atomic bomb had been deemed a legitimate weapon of war in World War II, by the time of the Korean War perceptions of an emerging taboo against first use shaped how US leaders defined their interests. An emerging taboo appeared as a constraint to them and operated indirectly through constitutive processes of stigmatization and categorization. In contrast to the moral opprobrium Truman

¹⁴² *Ibid.* ¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁴⁴ In February 1953, the State Department reported it had twelve officers overseas solely or mainly concerned with public opinion research, and was currently conducting seventy-four public opinion polls overseas. Memorandum from W. J. McWilliams to the Secretary of State, “Overseas Public Opinion Polls,” February 27, 1953; and Memorandum to W. J. McWilliams from W. Park Armstrong, Jr. “Public Opinion Polls,” February 20, 1953; Subject Files of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), 1945–60, Lot 58D 776, Entry No. 1561, RG 59, NA.

personally felt, the taboo operated mostly instrumentally for Eisenhower and Dulles, constraining a casual resort to tactical nuclear weapons. The burden of proof for a decision to use such weapons had already begun to shift. For those who wanted to challenge a tentative taboo, the best way to do so would have been to actually use such weapons, but the political costs of doing so were already high. Thus the regulative or constraining effect of the taboo was most prominent at this point. But deeper constitutive effects, such as the perception of suitable targets and the category of weapons of mass destruction, were also beginning to emerge, providing further evidence for the effects of a developing taboo.

Although material constraints are part of the story of non-use during the Korean War, it is clear that a purely materialist explanation is insufficient. Both those who found the taboo desirable or “right” and those who found it inconvenient and sought to do away with it thought it constrained behavior – often their own – providing powerful evidence against skeptical arguments that “taboo talk” is simply “cheap talk.” An array of military and bureaucratic constraints clearly operated – an initial scarcity of bombs, a remote risk of Soviet intervention, and disputes over military utility. But concerns about the first two subsided over time, while the disagreement over the military utility of atomic weapons also appeared to be sharpest at the beginning of the war and to subside eventually in response to Eisenhower’s arguments in favor of utility. Further, estimates of military utility were not purely “objective” but were themselves shaped by normative considerations and individuals’ predispositions toward atomic weapons. Political and normative factors – the perceived disproportionate nature of the weapon and the immorality of using it again on Asians – thus appeared to have played a key role.

Finally, one has to conclude that democracy contributed to the non-use of nuclear weapons during the Korean War.¹⁴⁵ It is clear that both American democratic structures and American values made US leaders react to public opinion pressures and moral concerns in a way that leaders of an authoritarian state would not. Public opinion, however, was not monolithic. There were also significant domestic pressures to expand the war and to limit American casualties. Thus democracy domestically may have been insufficient. Two additional, external layers of accountability and justification were significant.

¹⁴⁵ Gaddis, *We Now Know*, p. 111.

First, the fact that the United States was the leader of an alliance of democracies – NATO – created an accountability to allies' opinions. Second, the fact that the Korean War was officially a UN operation enlarged the realm of accountability to "free world nations." As some US officials noted, perhaps the only legitimate way to use the bomb would have been with UN authorization. The fact that many members of the UN – the idealist symbol of the international community and its aspirations – found the thought of the UN using the atomic bomb horrifying, and that US leaders were sensitive to this, provided an additional element of restraint. Thus the international institutional structure of collective security, even in its infancy and on the margins, may have played a role in preventing the use of nuclear weapons.

I have focused in this chapter on showing how an emerging and still tentative taboo influenced decisionmaking and outcomes during the Korean War, in contrast to the absence of such a taboo at the end of World War II. The period of the Korean War is particularly significant because that is when a substantial battle of ideas about weapons and warfare began to be waged. I now turn to the question of how the taboo developed in the years following the Korean War.

5 The rise of the nuclear taboo, 1953–1960

Nuclear weapons will become conventional for several reasons, among them cost, effectiveness against enemy weapons, and ease of handling.

Lt.-Gen. James M. Gavin,
War and Peace in the Space Age, 1958

As late as 1958 Lt.-Gen. James Gavin, a principal promoter in the US military of the development of tactical nuclear weapons, could still confidently assert that they would become just another weapon in the US arsenal because of their clear military utility and cost-benefit advantages. Indeed, during the 1950s, numerous US leaders fully expected that nuclear weapons would eventually become “just another weapon.” Secretary of State John Foster Dulles accepted the “ultimate inevitability” that tactical nuclear weapons would gain “conventional” status.¹ Admiral Arthur Radford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under President Dwight Eisenhower, predicted in 1956 that the use of nuclear weapons “would become accepted throughout the world just as soon as people could lay their hands upon them.”² Instead, the developing public opprobrium against such weapons continued to grow. To the distress of Eisenhower and many of his advisors, it came to apply to *all* nuclear weapons, not just to large bombs or to certain types or uses of nuclear weapons.

In Chapter 4 I showed how, already during the Korean War, a tentative taboo on nuclear weapons constrained US leaders from a casual resort to their use, even though such weapons might have been militarily useful in the war. In this chapter I focus on the rise

¹ NSC Meeting, May 27, 1957, *FRUS*, 1955–57, 19, p. 499.

² NSC Meeting, February 27, 1956, *FRUS*, 1955–57, 19, p. 211.

and strengthening of the taboo during the period 1953–60, and the active efforts of the US government to counter it. A global grassroots antinuclear weapons movement, which emerged in the mid-1950s in response to nuclear testing in the atmosphere, played a key role in mobilizing popular sentiment against the bomb and fostering a taboo against its use. The Eisenhower administration sought to counter the influence of a developing taboo with a policy of “conventionalizing” nuclear weapons, reflected both in operational planning and in an intensive public relations campaign to make nuclear weapons normatively acceptable. This chapter shows how societal pressure and disarmament politics in the 1950s helped to delegitimize nuclear weapons, in the face of explicit resistance by the US government.

Stigmatizing the bomb

In the wake of the Korean War, the effort to stigmatize nuclear weapons took three forms: a widespread grassroots protest campaign, disarmament diplomacy at the United Nations, and Soviet power politics. These efforts did not form a coalition in the sense of a conscious strategy to coordinate activities; rather, they were separate but overlapping and mutually reinforcing efforts.

The grassroots antinuclear weapons movement

Starting in the mid-1950s, a global grassroots antinuclear weapons movement began to stigmatize nuclear weapons. As noted in Chapter 3, up to this time, the American public was overall quite quiescent regarding the atomic bomb. Elsewhere, however, in October 1949 citizens of Hiroshima had violated US occupation regulations and staged the first rally to openly demand abolition of the atomic bomb. In March 1950 the Stockholm “ban the bomb” petition, an appeal for the prohibition of nuclear weapons initiated by the Communist-led World Peace Council, was quickly signed by 473 million people all over the world. This petition was partly power politics, since it was an element of the Soviet Union’s strategy to delegitimize US nuclear weapons. US leaders dismissed it as propaganda, but it nevertheless held great appeal for people around the world.³

³ Phillip Deery, “The Dove Flies East: Whitehall, Warsaw and the 1950 World Peace Congress,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2002), p. 451.

Then, starting in 1954, in the wake of the first US hydrogen bomb test, and cresting in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a grassroots movement against nuclear weapons spread across broad portions of the globe. It was sparked by public concerns over the health and environmental effects of US and Soviet atmospheric nuclear weapons tests, which were spreading radioactivity around the world. The initial US and Soviet tests of the powerful H-bomb, in 1954 and 1955 respectively, did much to stoke public anxieties about nuclear weapons.⁴ Taking hold primarily in North America, Western Europe, and Japan, the antinuclear movement came to include prominent intellectuals, scientists, pacifist and church groups, housewives, and students.⁵

Already by July 1953 radioactive strontium 90, which can cause cancer and genetic defects, had been detected in animal bones and milk products.⁶ The protests were set off when radioactive fallout from the US H-bomb test, code-named BRAVO, at the Bikini atoll in the Pacific on March 1, 1954, unexpectedly showered a Japanese tuna ship, the *Lucky Dragon*, trawling 85 miles away. Its twenty-three crewmen became seriously ill with radiation sickness. A political furor broke out in Japan, creating headlines in the US press and leading to a public debate about radiation and the implications of the H-bombs themselves.⁷

Following this event, nuclear weapons and nuclear testing in particular became a subject of increasing public concern. Scientists' groups, such as the Federation of American Scientists, immediately launched a public campaign to halt nuclear testing, providing public information on the effects of nuclear fallout.⁸ The Federation had been

⁴ The United States tested its first thermonuclear device, the "Mike" shot, in November 1952, but it was not a deployable bomb. The Soviet Union followed shortly thereafter with its first thermonuclear test – though not a true hydrogen bomb – in August 1953. Its first real hydrogen bomb test came in November 1955.

⁵ For the history of the antinuclear weapons movement, see Lawrence S. Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1954–1970*, vol. II, *The Struggle against the Bomb* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); April Carter, *Peace Movements: International Protests and World Politics since 1945* (London: Longman, 1992); and Frances B. McCrea and Gerald E. Markle, *Minutes to Midnight: Nuclear Weapons Protest in America* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989).

⁶ Joseph J. Mangano, Ernest J. Sternglass, Jay M. Gould, Janette D. Sherman, Jerry Brown, and William McDonnell, "Strontium-90 in Newborns and Childhood Disease," *Archives of Environmental Health*, vol. 55, no. 4 (July/August 2000), p. 240.

⁷ Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb*; Robert Divine, *Blowing on the Wind: The Nuclear Test Ban Debate, 1954–1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 3–9.

⁸ Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1999), pp. 47–48.

founded in the fall of 1945 by scientists involved in the Manhattan Project who wanted to ensure that nuclear weapons were never again used in war.⁹ Public and diplomatic pressure mounted on the United States to halt nuclear testing and to enter into negotiations with the Soviet Union on a test ban. Third World countries, becoming an increasingly important force on the international scene, exerted significant political pressure to halt testing. The Bandung Conference in April 1955, which launched the Third World non-aligned movement, concluded with an appeal for a moratorium on nuclear testing. India took a leading role in this movement and in publicly denouncing nuclear tests, registering formal objections with the UN Trusteeship Council. Countries such as Japan and Norway, concerned by evidence that the tests were producing greatly increased levels of radiation in many parts of the world, also called for a halt to testing. The Soviet Union, although engaged in nuclear testing itself, saw the political advantages of appearing to respond to Third World concerns, and after 1955 publicly called for a test ban.¹⁰

Domestically, public concern over testing began to grow in the United States and Western Europe. After the death of Stalin in March 1953 and the discrediting of Communist-hunter Joseph McCarthy by the end of 1954, the Cold War grip on public attitudes began to loosen. Nuclear testing became an issue in the 1956 US presidential elections when Adlai Stevenson made a test ban part of his platform.¹¹ By 1957 public concern in both the United States and Britain crystallized into campaigns against nuclear testing. The organization National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) was founded in the United States in 1957, drawing liberal professional and business people. Norman Cousins, advocate of world federalism and editor of the *Saturday Review*, played a key role as its founder and president. By mid-1958 it had 25,000 members and 130 local committees. Numerous other peace groups were founded at this time.¹² Both reflecting and fostering growing antinuclear public sentiment, in addition to SANE, groups such as the Committee for Non-Violent Action in the United States, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in Britain

⁹ Alice Kimball Smith, *A Peril and a Hope: The Scientists' Movement in America, 1945-57* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1965), pp. 298-99.

¹⁰ Carter, *Peace Movements*, pp. 34-35; Divine, *Blowing on the Wind*, pp. 27, 59, 75.

¹¹ Divine, *Blowing on the Wind*, pp. 84-112.

¹² Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb*; Kleidman, Robert, *Organizing for Peace: Neutrality, the Test Ban, and the Freeze* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993), pp. 96-106; Carter, *Peace Movements*, pp. 40-53.

(CND), and the Pugwash group of scientists, as well as numerous church and peace organizations, subjected nuclear weapons to an onslaught of criticism and called for a test ban and a halt to the arms race.¹³

Scientists in both the United States and Britain took a leading role in the public campaign against nuclear testing, debating the scientific risk of radiation to human health. Linus Pauling, the Nobel laureate biochemist, was an outspoken critic of the effects of radioactive fallout in the United States. British philosopher Bertrand Russell's effort in Britain in 1954 to launch an international petition drive, signed by Albert Einstein, the world's best-known scientist, and nine other eminent scientists, led to the creation of the Pugwash Movement, a transnational organization of scientists, in 1957.¹⁴ Mobilization of scientific protest across the world was dramatically illustrated when Pauling presented a petition signed by 9,235 scientists to UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld in January 1958 calling for an end to nuclear tests.¹⁵

The protesters were initially mobilized by the testing issue, but they also sought an end to the nuclear arms race more generally. The movement was driven by fear, self-interest, and moral objections to nuclear weapons. Protesters held demonstrations and meetings, circulated peace petitions, ran ads in major newspapers, organized letter-writing campaigns, and persuaded respected public figures, such as the renowned humanitarian and physician Albert Schweitzer, to speak out publicly. Starting in 1957, protesters engaged in civil disobedience and direct action protests, including trespassing onto nuclear weapons sites and sailing into testing zones. That year, what became the Committee for Non-Violent Action organized a vigil and trespass onto the US Nevada test site. In the next three years protesters sat in for a week at the US Atomic Energy Commission headquarters, obstructed the Omaha missile base, and took to small boats

¹³ The activities of these groups are documented in detail in Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb*; Carter, *Peace Movements*, ch. 3, and Richard Taylor, *Against the Bomb: The British Peace Movement, 1958–1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). For the Russell–Einstein manifesto, July 9, 1955, see www.pugwash.org/about/manifesto.htm

¹⁴ On the activities of the scientists' Pugwash group, see Joseph Rotblat, *Scientists in the Quest for Peace: A History of the Pugwash Conferences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972). In 1995 Pugwash was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its work addressing the threat of nuclear war.

¹⁵ Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb*; and Kleidman, *Organizing for Peace*, pp. 97–98. On the key role of scientists in influencing the Soviet government on the test ban issue, see Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces*, pp. 45–89.

to demonstrate against the new Polaris missile submarines.¹⁶ The most dramatic protests focused on nuclear tests, however. Between 1958 and 1962, protesters made several attempts to sail yachts into the US testing area at Eniwetok. Protest movements also developed in Britain, West Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Norway, Denmark, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and to a lesser extent in France and Greece. The largest one of all was in Japan.¹⁷ Many of the demonstrations, and especially the protest voyages, generated widespread media coverage.

No ragamuffin bunch, at the outset many of the leading antinuclear organizations began as elite pressure groups. Taylor and Pritchard described the British CND leadership as “a glittering array of the nation’s progressive intelligentsia . . . nobody could deny its immense and charismatic impact.”¹⁸ In the United States, the founding members of Hollywood SANE in 1959 included a star-studded list: Marilyn Monroe, Arthur Miller, Henry Fonda, Marlon Brando, Harry Belafonte, and Ossie Davis.¹⁹ These elite pressure groups were relatively quickly transformed into a mass-based campaign with a large rank-and-file movement, however. In 1958 the first of what became annual protest marches to Aldermaston, Britain’s bomb manufacturing site, drew as many as 10,000 people; by the early 1960s the annual march attracted 50,000 to 150,000 supporters.²⁰ A SANE rally in Madison Square Garden in 1960 attracted 20,000 people, with speakers including Eleanor Roosevelt, Norman Cousins, the singer Harry Belafonte, Presbyterian minister and leading socialist Norman Thomas, and labor leader Walter Reuther, president of the United Automobile Workers. Additionally, the antinuclear movement incorporated a number of different strands and ideologies – those emphasizing street tactics of nonviolent direct action, for example, along with those who preferred advancing their argument via the conventional channels of direct access to decisionmakers. The latter was feasible given the high social standing and public prominence of many of the leaders of the CND and their US counterparts in SANE.²¹

¹⁶ Carter, *Peace Movements*, ch. 3.

¹⁷ For coverage of these, see Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb*.

¹⁸ Richard Taylor and Charles Pritchard, *The Protest-Makers* (London: Pergamon, 1982), p. 6.

¹⁹ www.peace-action.org/abt/timeline.html

²⁰ Paul Byrne, *The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), p. 45.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.

The contribution of the antinuclear weapons movement

The antinuclear weapons movement contributed to the formation of a taboo in three ways: by shifting the discourse on nuclear weapons, engaging in moral consciousness-raising, and mobilizing public support in favor of nuclear restraint. First, by providing information on, and alternative interpretations of, nuclear weapons, the antinuclear movement contributed to expanding the political discourse on nuclear weapons beyond national security to include the health, medical, and environmental effects of nuclear weapons. One of its main accomplishments was to help shift the perception of nuclear weapons from primarily explosive devices to more insidious implements, more akin to chemical or biological weapons. This was a result of a growing understanding of the long-term effects of radiation exposure and fallout from nuclear testing, disseminated by the efforts of scientists and peace groups. The radio appeals of Albert Schweitzer, for example, calling for an end to nuclear testing, made a substantial contribution to mobilizing public opinion against nuclear weapons.²² In his April 1957 “Declaration of Conscience” and in several subsequent radio addresses, he argued that increased radioactivity from atomic bombs would be “a catastrophe for the human race.”²³

Second, the antinuclear movement engaged in moral consciousness-raising by castigating nuclear weapons as morally abhorrent weapons that would destroy humankind. It tapped into the public’s fear of nuclear war and helped foster a moral opprobrium toward nuclear weapons. For many in the antinuclear weapons movement, nuclear disarmament was primarily a moral issue. The leaders of the CND in Britain defined their main thrust as publicizing the moral case against nuclear warfare.²⁴ Their political strategy was to convince – by reasoned argument – leading members of the British Labour Party (and, if possible, the “Establishment”) of the moral rectitude of unilateral British nuclear disarmament.²⁵ As Canon John Collins, a leader of the campaign, told a meeting of 5,000 people in February 1958,

²² Milton S. Katz, *Ban The Bomb: A History of SANE, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, 1957–1985* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986), p. 116.

²³ Quoted in Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb*, p. 31.

²⁴ Taylor, *Against the Bomb*, pp. 36–42.

²⁵ Byrne, *The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament*, p. 46.

“The question of whether we arm ourselves with nuclear weapons is, perhaps, the supreme moral issue of our day.”²⁶

Third, antinuclear groups mobilized public opinion to put pressure on leaders to justify and even change their nuclear policies. In doing so, antinuclear groups emphasized that nuclear policymaking could not simply be the prerogative of nuclear-armed governments but legitimately engaged a global constituency. As SANE put it in an advertisement in *The New York Times* in November 1957, the great “challenge of the age” is to move beyond the traditional interests of the nation-state to “a higher loyalty” – a loyalty “to the human community.”²⁷

In short, by castigating nuclear weapons as abhorrent weapons and calling for a halt to the nuclear arms race, the peace groups helped to stigmatize nuclear weapons and to delegitimize them as acceptable weapons of war. As I show later in the chapter, strong evidence exists that increasing antinuclear sentiment had a direct effect on national leaders.²⁸

Delegitimation politics: Disarmament diplomacy at the UN

In addition to the antinuclear weapons movement, a second pathway of stigmatization was the ongoing diplomatic efforts in the United Nations to create limitations on the use of nuclear weapons and to promote nuclear disarmament. From 1946 onward, the UN General Assembly passed resolutions each year, based on reports from the UN Disarmament Commission and the General Assembly’s First Committee, calling for “the elimination and prohibition of atomic, hydrogen and other types of weapons of mass destruction” as well as for international control of atomic energy to ensure its use only for peaceful purposes.²⁹ In 1954, the GA called for an international disarmament convention to provide for “the total prohibition of the use and manufacture of nuclear weapons and mass destruction weapons of every type.”³⁰ The next year, the GA called for the establishment of

²⁶ Quoted in Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb*, p. 47.

²⁷ Ad reprinted in Katz, *Ban the Bomb*, p. 27.

²⁸ See also Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb*, chs. 6–8, and 15–17, and Jeffrey Knopf, *Domestic Society and International Cooperation: The Impact of Protest on US Arms Control Policies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chs. 4 and 5.

²⁹ UN GA Resolution 715 (VIII), November 28, 1953; UN GA Res. 914 (X), December 16, 1955; UN GA Res. 1011 (XI), February 14, 1957; UN GA Res. 1148 (XII), November 14, 1957.

³⁰ UN GA Res. 808 (IX), November 4, 1954.

a scientific committee to investigate the problem of radioactivity from nuclear testing.³¹ By 1958 the focus of the annual resolution shifted from the prohibition of nuclear weapons to the issues of testing and surprise attack.³² Reflecting the growing voting power of Third World states, it also called for the savings from disarmament to be funneled to developing countries and expanded the disarmament commission to include all UN parties as members.

As non-binding statements, the General Assembly resolutions were mainly hortatory and produced little in the way of concrete results. This helps explain why, after 1948, even when US leaders had no real intention or expectation of disarming, the United States could take a leading role in these debates and vote for these resolutions. The United States enjoyed widespread support in the UN at this time, and the public symbolism of appearing to support disarmament was important. Nevertheless, in doing so, US leaders were inadvertently contributing to the UN's effort to delegitimize the very weapons on which the United States was increasingly relying.

Normative power politics: the Soviet campaign against nuclear weapons

The third pathway of stigmatization was Soviet efforts to delegitimize the West's nuclear weapons. The Soviet Union, preoccupied by its nuclear inferiority, engaged in a propaganda campaign against nuclear weapons. After Stalin's death in 1953, subsequent Soviet leaders pursued a "peace offensive," making them seem less intransigent and thus harder to discredit. The Soviet Union used atomic issues to stress its peaceful policy and to portray the West as aggressors. In June 1954, the Soviet delegate to the UN, Yakov Malik, in a typical Soviet statement, asserted that the Soviet Union would not use nuclear weapons even if attacked, but would rely on the General Assembly to find that the state first using nuclear weapons was a war criminal. In line with Soviet leaders' longstanding stress on the moral force of a declaration and the decisive character of public opinion in the event of war, Malik claimed that the whole world would thereafter rise against such a war criminal.³³ For their part, the United States and

³¹ UN GA Res. 913 (X), Effects of Atomic Radiation, December 3, 1955. It called again for a report on radiation in UN GA Res. 1147 (XII), November 14, 1957.

³² UN GA Res. 1252 (XIII), November 4, 1958.

³³ Moscow Uses Atomic Issue to Stress "Peaceful Policy," preliminary report of OCB, Soviet Affairs, August 1954, OCB, Central Files, Box 8, DDEL.

its allies submitted disarmament proposals stating their willingness to ban the use of nuclear weapons except in the case of “defense against aggression,” and insisted that any disarmament be subject to verification. Soviet leaders branded these propositions as a “legitimization” of the use of nuclear weapons.

It came as little surprise, then, when early disarmament negotiations were frustrating exercises – “ritualistic gestures and propaganda battles” – that were mainly for appearances and made scant progress, mostly involving proposals that were completely unacceptable to the other side.³⁴ Comprehensive US–Soviet disarmament negotiations, which began in 1955 in Geneva, fared only a little better, but they did raise systematically the issue of limitations on nuclear weapons. There was one moment in the negotiations when East and West positions seemed to coincide. In May 1955 the Soviet Union came close to accepting a British–French proposal for a prohibition on the use of nuclear weapons to become effective after 75 percent of agreed reductions of armed forces and conventional armaments had been carried out (the Soviet Union also no longer insisted on a prohibition on manufacture at the outset). Nevertheless, the United States, caught unprepared, did not endorse this compromise, which reflected a recognition of the intimate link between nuclear and conventional armaments.³⁵

The US Joint Chiefs and the Defense Department strongly opposed negotiations with the Soviets, but US political leaders, even while rejecting Soviet proposals, worried about the propaganda success of the Soviet Union. In January 1956, Dulles expressed his concern to Eisenhower that despite the initial positive reception to the United States’ December 1953 “Atoms for Peace” and “Open Skies” proposals, it had become apparent that “the United States had no broad plan for nuclear disarmament” even if these proposals were accepted. The Soviets had moved into the resulting “vacuum” with their own sweeping proposals, Dulles fretted, causing the “great masses to feel that at least the Russians *want* to end the thermonuclear danger while we

³⁴ Coit D. Blacker and Gloria Duffy, eds., *International Arms Control: Issues and Agreements* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984), 2nd edn, p. 99. See also John W. Spanier and Joseph L. Noguee, *The Politics of Disarmament: A Study of Soviet–American Gamesmanship* (New York: Praeger, 1962); Alva Myrdal, *The Game of Disarmament: How the United States and Russia Run the Arms Race* (New York: Pantheon, 1976).

³⁵ Frank Blackaby, Jozef Goldblat, and Sverre Lodgaard, eds., *No First Use*, SIPRI (London: Taylor and Francis, 1984), p. 8.

are represented as stalling and trying to think up good reasons for perpetuating the danger and making it even greater.”³⁶

Efforts to limit nuclear weapons continued at the UN Disarmament Subcommittee negotiations that began in London in March 1957. These represented the first genuine US–Soviet disarmament negotiations, as well as the first real, if aborted, effort to find a common formula on “use.” US disarmament negotiator Harold Stassen offered an informal proposal which suggested, among other things, a formula for limiting the use of nuclear weapons, such as in the case of individual or collective self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter.³⁷ This memo went a long way toward narrowing differences with the Soviets and provoked an early response from them. Yet the memo also provoked protests from the NATO allies, who believed that the United States had to retain the right to use nuclear weapons to deter Soviet conventional attack. Consequently, Eisenhower repudiated Stassen’s proposal.³⁸ The Soviets rejected a scaled-back Western proposal at the end of August 1957 and blamed the West for bringing the talks to an impasse.³⁹

Efforts to seek a compromise formula on the issue collapsed after Stassen resigned in February 1958 and Eisenhower abolished the White House disarmament office. This led to the disintegration of the disarmament structure in the US government, a situation which lasted until the next administration.⁴⁰ Although the negotiations achieved little in the way of actual disarmament, nevertheless, the notion of limitations on the use of nuclear weapons gained increased legitimacy.

The emerging US reliance on “use”: the effort to conventionalize tactical nuclear weapons

In contrast to the mounting international pressure for nuclear restraint, at the domestic level the US government was moving in the opposite

³⁶ Memorandum, Dulles to Eisenhower, January 22, 1956, in Folder “John Foster Dulles, January 1956,” Box 5, DHS, DDEP, DDEL.

³⁷ *FRUS 1955–57*, 20, pp. 566–73.

³⁸ Stassen made a major diplomatic blunder in showing the proposal to the chief Soviet delegate, Valerian Zorin, before it had been seen by the allies. The British, French, and West German governments were furious. Gerard Smith, *Disarming Diplomat: The Memoirs of Gerard C. Smith, Arms Control Negotiator* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1996), p. 55.

³⁹ Blacker and Duffy, *International Arms Control*, pp. 106–7.

⁴⁰ Lawrence Weiler, “The Evolution of the Concept of No First Use,” unpublished manuscript (NYC Conference: Council for a Livable World, October 24, 1982), pp. 8–9.

direction toward greater institutionalization of “use” in US military planning. This period illustrates how the US government engaged in a process of strategic social construction as it systematically sought to counteract an emerging taboo against first use of nuclear weapons by creating an alternative norm that tactical nuclear weapons should be treated as ordinary weapons.

Following the Korean War, the Eisenhower administration embarked on a deliberate and intensive policy to “conventionalize” nuclear weapons. This development was driven by four factors: the growing availability of tactical or small nuclear weapons, the presumed cost-effectiveness of tactical nuclear weapons over conventional forces, and the need to make the US deterrent more credible. Finally, the need to counter the growing public abhorrence of nuclear weapons also encouraged the conventionalization policy.

First, in the mid-1950s, all manner of small nuclear weapons including warheads, shells, and artillery proliferated with the military services, leaving no service without its nuclear weapons. This abundance made possible the consideration of their use in less than all-out conflict.

A second factor was the presumed cost savings associated with tactical nuclear forces.⁴¹ Eisenhower, interested in controlling defense spending, was particularly interested in relying on tactical nuclear weapons because they were presumed to be cheaper than conventional forces. Fiscal pressures in the United States and NATO countries made cost-benefit arguments compelling. In 1956 and 1957, Lt.-Gen. Gavin defended his recommendation to the Congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy for 151,000 nuclear weapons for the Army for battlefield use on the grounds of cost-effectiveness. In his 1958 book, he continued to maintain that cost savings were just around the corner. “By 1965 the cost of nuclear weapons will be far less than present high-explosive weapons of equivalent yield and effectiveness. Many millions of dollars spent in the manufacture, shipping, storage, and handling of high-explosive projectiles and bombs will be saved through the use of nuclear weapons moved by air to combat areas.”⁴²

⁴¹ Saki Dockrill, *Eisenhower's New-Look National Security Policy, 1953–61* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), pp. 48–71; Andreas Wenger, *Living with Peril: Eisenhower, Kennedy and Nuclear Weapons* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997); and Robert Bowie and Richard Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁴² Gavin, *War and Peace in the Space Age*, p. 265.

Third, Secretary of State Dulles was interested in tactical nuclear weapons as a way to make the administration's policy of "massive retaliation" more credible. In his view, given the US reluctance to build up conventional forces, tactical weapons offered the only response to limited Soviet aggression.⁴³ The crisis over Quemoy and Matsu in 1954–55 exposed the weaknesses of the massive retaliation policy for the deterrence of limited aggression, prompting Eisenhower and Dulles to resort to a threat to use tactical nuclear weapons.⁴⁴

The conventionalization policy consisted of two parts: integrating tactical nuclear weapons more fully into military planning at the operational level, and waging a concerted public relations effort to make use of nuclear weapons politically acceptable. Although Eisenhower retained the decision to use nuclear weapons in the hands of the president, from 1953 to 1960, nuclear weapons were steadily integrated into US military doctrine and all the services with the explicit goal, as stated in NSC 162/2, approved October 29, 1953, of "treating them as conventional" and "as available for use as other munitions."⁴⁵ With this decision, the Eisenhower administration formally adopted what had been a *de facto* policy of first use under Truman. In December 1954, NATO officially embraced the first use of tactical nuclear weapons to counter a Soviet conventional attack. NATO commanders were authorized to base their plans on the prompt use of nuclear weapons whether the aggressor had used them or not. As part of the implementation of this strategy, large numbers of tactical nuclear weapons were transported to Europe.⁴⁶

The normative strategy

The fourth factor prompting the conventionalization strategy was the perceived "moral problem" associated with atomic weapons. Thus at the same time that it was integrating tactical nuclear weapons into military planning, the Eisenhower administration embarked on a concerted public relations effort to make use of such weapons

⁴³ Wenger, *Living with Peril*, p. 142.

⁴⁴ It is unclear how seriously they considered the consequences of following through on this threat had they been forced to do so. Gordon Chang, "To the Brink: Eisenhower, Dulles and the Quemoy-Matsu Crisis," *International Security*, vol. 12, no. 4 (Spring 1988), pp. 96–123.

⁴⁵ NSC 162/2, October 29, 1953, *FRUS 1952–54*, 2, pt. 1, p. 593.

⁴⁶ See Robert Osgood, *NATO: The Entangling Alliance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962), ch. 5.

politically and normatively acceptable. As US leaders discovered during the Korean War, the public regarded nuclear weapons with a certain horror. This posed an obstacle to US leaders' freedom to use them and thus could potentially undermine the US deterrent threat. Eisenhower administration planners had already begun tackling this "moral problem" directly during the war, approaching it as a public relations problem. In May 1953, near the end of the Korean War, an interim report of an NSC Planning Board committee urged, as part of a more open public information policy on atomic matters, that the administration emphasize the moral neutrality of atomic weapons and downplay their uniqueness. "Atomic weapons must be considered part of our total weapons system, so that the question of morality will relate only to the way in which this or any other weapon is used," it stressed. This would provide the United States with "greater freedom of action." A short paragraph on "Morality of Atomic Weapons" in an annex at the end of the report argued that the atomic weapon "differs only in degree from other weapons." This difference was in fact *decreasing* "with the development of varied atomic weapons and with improvements in other types of weapons." Moral objections to the use of atomic weapons thus "should be on the same basis as for other weapons capable of destroying life and inflicting damage."⁴⁷

The State Department supported this view, arguing that one advantage of transferring control of atomic weapons from the Atomic Energy Committee to the Defense Department, a matter long sought by the Pentagon and under consideration in spring 1953, was that it would be consistent with broader efforts to "reduce the moral stigma" associated with atomic weapons in the eyes of the public. Making atomic weapons "a more normal, integral part of our military arsenal," would help "reduce their uniqueness" and thus increase US "freedom of action" with regard to their use.⁴⁸

Thus US political and military leaders explicitly sought to counter an emerging stigma or taboo with an alternative moral interpretation of nuclear weapons, one that emphasized their similarities, rather

⁴⁷ Interim Report by the Ad Hoc Committee of the NSC Planning Board on Armaments and American Policy, May 8, 1953, *FRUS 1952-54*, 2, pt. 2, pp. 1153, 1160.

⁴⁸ Memorandum for the Executive Secretary of the NSC from the Acting Secretary of State, Custody of Atomic Weapons, Appendix 6, Statement by the Department of State, April 22, 1953. White House Office, Office of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, Box 1, DDEL.

than differences, with other kinds of weapons. From 1953 until about 1958, in both internal and public forums, Dulles took the lead in pursuing a campaign to blur the distinction between conventional and nuclear weapons, and to promote the idea that nuclear weapons could be used conventionally.

In a speech in January 1954, Dulles laid out to the Council on Foreign Relations what would become known as the “massive retaliation” policy. This involved a decision “to depend primarily upon a great capacity to retaliate, instantly, by means and at places of our choosing.”⁴⁹ At a NATO meeting in Paris in April, Dulles pressed his case for breaking down the “false distinction” between nuclear and conventional weapons. He claimed that NATO needed nuclear weapons to defend itself against a surprise Soviet attack, and that “it should be our agreed policy, in the case of (either general war or local) war, to use atomic weapons as conventional weapons against the asset of the adversary whenever and wherever it would be of advantage to do so, taking account of all relevant factors.”⁵⁰ At a press conference in December 1954, he stated that current US policies “will gradually include the use of atomic weapons as conventional weapons for tactical purposes.” He suggested that many kinds of weapons could be used for massive destruction and retaliation, giving the example of bombing German cities in World War II. Atomic weapons merely had “greater destructive capacities” than earlier weapons, reflecting a general trend in weapons development.⁵¹

In the spring of 1955, as the president and his advisors debated the possibility of US intervention in defense of Formosa, and whether to use atomic weapons, Dulles again highlighted the problem of public opposition to their use. Military advisors had convinced him that these would be “the only effective weapons . . . against a variety of mainland targets,” and yet “we might wake up one day and discover that we were inhibited in the use of these weapons by a negative public opinion.” He warned the NSC that “urgent steps needed to be taken to create a better public climate for the use

⁴⁹ John Foster Dulles, “The Evolution of Foreign Policy,” January 12, 1954, US Department of State Bulletin, 30, No. 761 (January 25, 1954), pp. 107–10.

⁵⁰ Proposed “Talking Paper” for use in clarifying US Position Regarding Atomic and Hydrogen Weapons at NATO meeting, April 23, 1954. Excerpt. RG 59, 250, 50, Lot 57D 688, Box 342, NA.

⁵¹ State Department press release: Strategic Concept,” December 21, 1954, in folder “Re Deterrent Strategy,” Box 80, JFDP, SGML.

of atomic weapons if the United States found it necessary to intervene."⁵²

The administration thus stepped up its campaign to break down the "false distinction." The president proposed that Dulles include in an upcoming speech about his recent trip to Southeast Asia a paragraph "indicating that we would use atomic weapons as interchangeable with conventional weapons."⁵³ In a radio address on March 8, 1955, Dulles informed his listeners that the United States had "sea and air forces equipped with new and powerful weapons of precision which can utterly destroy military targets without endangering unrelated civilian centers."⁵⁴ Speaking with reporters on March 15, he said that if the United States became involved in a major military activity anywhere in the world, he imagined that nuclear weapons would be used because "they are more and more becoming conventional and replacing what used to be called conventional weapons."⁵⁵ On March 16, Eisenhower offered his famous statement in a news conference that he could see no reason why, in a combat situation where they could be used on strictly military targets, tactical nuclear weapons should not be used "just exactly as you would use a bullet or anything else."⁵⁶ The next day Vice President Richard Nixon, speaking to a packed meeting of executives in Chicago, bluntly warned the Chinese Communists that any new aggression would be met with atomic weapons and that "tactical atomic explosives are now conventional."⁵⁷

Defending the legality of atomic weapons

During this period the US government also issued its first official statement on the legality of the use of nuclear weapons. Since the beginning of the Cold War, the US government had consistently

⁵² Cited in John Lewis Gaddis, "The Origins of Self-Deterrence," in Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries Into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 136–37.

⁵³ Memo of conversation with the president, March 7, 1955, WHMS, "Meetings with the President, 1955 [7]," JFDP, SGML.

⁵⁴ Dulles' press and radio news conference, March 8, 1955, in folder, "RE Quemoy and Matsu," Box 96, JFDP, SGML.

⁵⁵ Dulles' press and radio news conference, 15 March 1955, 11:00 a.m., in folder, "RE Quemoy and Matsu," Box 96, JFDP, SGML.

⁵⁶ *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1955* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1956), p. 332.

⁵⁷ Richard J. H. Johnston, "Nixon Gives Reds Warning on Atom," *New York Times*, March 18, 1955.

reserved the right or freedom to use nuclear weapons, although it had not formalized it. As stated in the Army's 1956 *Law of Land Warfare*, a key manual for training US military personnel in the laws of war, "The use of explosive 'atomic weapons,' whether by air, sea, or land forces, cannot as such be regarded as violative of international law in the absence of any customary rule of international law or international convention restricting their employment."⁵⁸ In other words, in the view of the US government, no conventional or customary rule of law existed specifically prohibiting the use of nuclear weapons and hence their use was presumptively lawful. Such use was certainly subject to the laws of armed conflict, but could not be evaluated in the abstract; rather each particular use had to be examined individually.⁵⁹ Nuclear weapons, for this purpose, were thus indistinguishable from conventional weapons: the legality of their use must be determined on a case by case basis based on the particular circumstances of each possible use. US leaders consistently maintained that they would only use nuclear weapons in self-defense and not for aggressive purposes, but, of course, this was no different from their obligations with respect to conventional weapons.

Thus the US government refused to consider the legality or illegality of nuclear weapons as a class. One historical reason for this was that if nuclear weapons as a class were considered illegal, then the legality of their use at the end of World War II would become open to question. President Truman could be as culpable as Japanese Generals Yamashita and Tojo, who were tried and executed as war criminals immediately after the war.⁶⁰ This would clearly be an untenable position for the United States.

Operational planning for use of nuclear weapons in local wars

At the level of operational planning, the conventionalization policy proceeded more slowly than at the rhetorical level. Following the Korean War, a new group of Joint Chiefs, worried about the precedent of non-use set by Korea, wanted a clearer decision as to whether

⁵⁸ *The Law of Land Warfare*, Department of the Army Field Manual FM 27–10 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, July 18, 1956), <http://faculty.ed.umuc.edu/~nstanton/FM27-10.htm>, ch. 2, sec. 3, no. 35.

⁵⁹ For a detailed review of the US position, see Charles J. Moxley, Jr., *Nuclear Weapons and International Law in the Post-Cold War World* (Lanham, MD: Austin and Winfield, 2000), pp. 105–53.

⁶⁰ For this point, see Alfred P. Rubin, "The Neutron Bomb Again," *Virginia Journal of International Law*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1981), p. 806.

nuclear weapons would be available for use in war.⁶¹ Admiral Arthur W. Radford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, was worried that there was every reason to doubt that the use of the “new weapons” would ever be permitted in any war, yet, in his view, these were the real strength of the United States. At the time the administration adopted its first statement of basic national security policy in October 1953, Eisenhower clarified to the JCS that they could count on making use of nuclear weapons in the event of a general war, but they should not assume that such weapons would automatically be used in a local war.⁶² Thus although tactical warheads were being widely deployed, military leaders felt they lacked a clear directive as to whether they could count on fighting with nuclear weapons in local wars or whether they also had to plan for conventional wars. The JCS continued to push for “a clear, positive policy with respect to the use of atomic weapons,” especially in response to local aggression.⁶³

One reason for the continuing ambiguity in operational guidance was the political liability of using tactical nuclear weapons. The administration’s attempts to develop operational guidance for their use confronted both political difficulties and the problem of escalation. The former, however, appeared the greater obstacle. Although political leaders had asserted publicly the conventional status of nuclear weapons, in internal discussions they acknowledged the political difficulties of actually acting on the basis of this assumption. In an NSC meeting in February 1956, Eisenhower noted the political obstacles to the use of nuclear weapons in small wars, especially if the United States got involved through the United Nations. In such a situation, the use of nuclear weapons “would raise serious political problems in view of the current state of world opinion as to the use of such weapons.”⁶⁴ He was no doubt recalling the Korean War. While he agreed with Radford on the utility of nuclear weapons from a strictly military point of view, “it would be some considerable time before the United States reaches a point where it can adopt any military course of action it regards as appropriate without regard for the political repercussions of such a course of action.” He did not

⁶¹ This was the theme of numerous high-level meetings on nuclear weapons policy throughout this period. See NSC Meeting, October 7, 1953, *FRUS 1952-54*, 2, pt. 1, pp. 532-34, and NSC Meeting, October 13, 1953, *FRUS 1952-54*, 2, pt. 1, pp. 546-47.

⁶² NSC meeting, October 7, 1953, *FRUS 1952-54*, 2, pp. 532-35.

⁶³ Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, p. 184.

⁶⁴ NSC meeting, February 27, 1956, Ann Whitman Files, DDEL.

necessarily agree that world opinion was right in its views about the use of nuclear weapons in small wars, but acknowledged the reality of such constraints on US freedom of action. "We may not always be able to pursue what seems to us the necessary and logical course of military action."⁶⁵ Admiral Radford continued to argue strongly that nuclear weapons must be accorded conventional status, in part because of the cost advantages of having to prepare only for nuclear war.

At the same meeting Eisenhower and his advisors agreed that the United States would not use nuclear weapons if the Soviets imposed a new blockade on Berlin. Dulles argued that automatic employment of nuclear weapons in certain instances "would surely cost us our allies" and that "we'd be finished as far as present-day world opinion was concerned." The allies did not like the prospect of being defended with nuclear weapons. Dulles added a further warning about the "terrible repercussions" the United States would experience if "we had recourse to the use of nuclear weapons against the colored peoples of Asia."⁶⁶

In addition to public opinion constraints, the perceived risk of escalation also posed obstacles to planning for use of tactical nuclear weapons in local wars, but views on this were more mixed. In March 1956, the NSC's revised version of the basic national security policy stated that "nuclear weapons will be used in general war and in military operations short of general war as authorized by the President."⁶⁷ US policy would be to integrate nuclear with conventional weapons, but also to rely on both types of forces to deter local aggression, to avoid broadening hostilities to general war. The statement thus displayed caution about the escalation risks of tactical nuclear warfare.

The initial reluctance to plan for the use of tactical nuclear weapons in local wars changed in 1957, however, when the defense budget estimates grew because of additional costs for missile development programs. Facing a budget crisis, the administration sought a decision on whether to secure a sound economy through redeployment of conventional forces or increased emphasis on tactical nuclear weapons. During NSC discussions in the early months of 1957, differences of opinion surfaced over how dependent the United States

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ NSC 5602/1, "Basic National Security Policy," March 15, 1956, *FRUS 1955–57*, 19, pp. 242–68.

should become on nuclear weapons. Radford had continued to plead for a clear decision that the military could expect to use nuclear weapons in situations short of global war. However, State Department officials were concerned about the escalation risks of such a policy. In February 1957, a draft NSC planning board report suggested that the increasing nuclear capabilities of the United States and the Soviet Union enhanced the risk of local conflict and general nuclear war, including through miscalculation.⁶⁸

Eisenhower and Dulles consistently downplayed the danger of escalation from local wars, however. Eisenhower pointed out that the United States now possessed tactical nuclear weapons that “would create only one-twentieth of the damage wrought on Tokyo by the fire bomb raids of 1945.”⁶⁹ Secretary of the Treasury George Humphrey also argued the case for nuclear weapons. He noted that, in each case in Korea, Dien Bien Phu, and the Taiwan Straits, “when the chips were finally down, the military people came in and said that we could not undertake to fight such a war without the use of nuclear weapons.” These examples, in his view, clearly demonstrated that the United States had “crossed a bridge in the matter of use of nuclear weapons.”⁷⁰

In March and April, the planning board revised its draft of basic national security policy. Radford continued to insist that the current language was ambiguous for planning purposes, forcing the military to plan for two costly strategies, conventional *and* nuclear. In an NSC meeting on April 11, he explained that actual planning in the Defense Department already assumed use of nuclear weapons in any small war. Accordingly, he wanted a clearly written directive that endorsed this. The State Department argued that the United States needed more options for local wars than simply relying on nuclear weapons. Despite objections by some of his NSC staff, Eisenhower ordered the language of the basic national security statement to follow actual planning in the Defense Department. In his view, the United States had now reached a point in time when “our main reliance, though not our sole reliance, should be on nuclear weapons.”⁷¹

In an NSC meeting in late May 1957 to consider the policy shift, Dulles was the only one present to oppose it, not because he personally

⁶⁸ NSC Meeting, February 28, 1957, *FRUS 1955–57*, 19, pp. 425–27.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 432.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 430.

⁷¹ NSC meeting, April 11, 1957, *FRUS 1955–57*, 19, pp. 465–80; Wenger, *Living With Peril*, pp. 130–33.

objected but rather on the grounds that global opinion was not yet ready for it. While he personally believed that it was inevitable that nuclear power would eventually be treated “as conventional,” he saw short-term obstacles. Global opinion would condemn the United States for using nuclear weapons, especially in local conflicts. If the United States resorted to such a war, “we will, in the eyes of the world, be cast as a ruthless military power, as was Germany earlier.” The problem, Dulles explained, was not that the use of nuclear weapons was immoral *per se* but that other nations had yet to understand how these weapons could be used in limited ways. Until the rest of world opinion came around, therefore, it would be best that the limitations on war as set forth in the old policy be retained.⁷²

Eisenhower, who had consistently refused to enlarge conventional forces, settled the issue by deciding in favor of planning for the use of tactical nuclear weapons in local wars. The new basic national security policy, NSC 5707/8, approved on June 3, 1957, emphasized even greater reliance on nuclear weapons. The United States would now “place main, but not sole, reliance on nuclear weapons; to integrate nuclear weapons with other weapons in the arsenal of the United States; to consider them as conventional weapons from a military point of view; and to use them when required to achieve national objectives.”⁷³ In local conflicts in less-developed areas of the world, military planning would still be based on flexible and selective use of force, i.e., conventional forces, while nuclear weapons could be used as authorized by the president.⁷⁴ This new policy effectively removed limited non-nuclear military planning from American general war policy.⁷⁵ It reflected Eisenhower’s belief that there was no such thing as limited war with the Soviet Union; any limited war would escalate to all-out nuclear war. At the same time, it also reflected his belief that use of tactical nuclear weapons in a local war would not necessarily escalate to general war.

In sum, budget crises made arguments about the cost-effectiveness and utility of tactical nuclear weapons highly compelling to the administration, ultimately overriding concerns about escalation risks and political consequences. Numerous top leaders, including the

⁷² NSC Meeting, May 27, 1957, *FRUS 1955–57*, 19, pp. 500–1.

⁷³ NSC 5705/8, “Basic National Security Policy,” June 3, 1957, *ibid.*, pp. 507–24.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Campbell Craig, *Destroying the Village: Eisenhower and Thermonuclear War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 55.

president himself and military advisors, perceived only minimal escalation risks in employing atomic weapons in local wars and on that basis moved forward with the conventionalization campaign. Political costs – not escalation risks or lack of military utility – appeared to pose the greatest constraint on planning for the use of tactical nuclear weapons in local wars.

The conventionalization campaign continues

In order to counter growing doubts about the credibility of the administration's massive retaliation strategy, and to address the problem that the public did not understand how nuclear weapons could be used in limited ways, in an October 1957 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Dulles laid out the case systematically for the view that nuclear weapons could now be regarded as similar to conventional weapons. He argued that "it is now possible to alter the character of nuclear weapons." Their use "need not involve vast destruction and widespread harm to humanity. Recent tests point to the possibility of possessing nuclear weapons the destructiveness and radiation effects of which can be confined substantially to predetermined targets." Such weapons could be useful to prevent invasion with conventional forces. He argued that "it is precisely this evolution" in weaponry, toward smaller weapons with less fall-out, that the Soviet Union wanted to prevent.⁷⁶ He added, "new weapons possibilities are opening up in rapid succession. Political thinking finds it difficult to keep up with that pace." Thus Dulles was arguing that tactical nuclear weapons should no longer be categorized as weapons of mass destruction.

It is sometimes difficult to assess the genuineness of Dulles' views. They contained inconsistencies. At times, he also noted the massive destruction a nuclear war would entail.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, his deep distrust of the Soviet Union kept him from embracing wholeheartedly an arms control program. He worried that growing Soviet nuclear capability would pose a serious threat to the United States in a few years. US strategy based on the bomb might suffer as repugnance to the use of nuclear weapons grew to the point that the NATO allies

⁷⁶ John Foster Dulles, "Challenge and Response in United States Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 36, no. 1 (October 1957), pp. 31, 33.

⁷⁷ Neal Rosendorf, "John Foster Dulles' Nuclear Schizophrenia," in John Lewis Gaddis, Philip H. Gordon, Ernest R. May, and Jonathan Rosenberg, eds., *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy Since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

would retreat from collective defense.⁷⁸ Thus he looked toward small nuclear weapons, which would save the United States from having to spend huge sums on a conventional force substantial enough to deter the Soviet Union. He supported nuclear testing because it might lead to the development of “clean” weapons with less fallout “so they become more distinctly a military weapon than a mass destruction weapon.”⁷⁹ A stockpile of small low-yield weapons would help the NATO alliance convince the Soviet Union that it had the means to effectively counter local aggression. It would also diminish “political difficulties in the US use of nuclear weapons.”⁸⁰

Eisenhower and Dulles received encouragement in this line of thinking from AEC Chairman Lewis Strauss and some influential weapons scientists. Strauss told the NSC in mid-June 1957 that, in light of continuing Soviet propaganda efforts to portray nuclear weapons as indiscriminate, it was “essential that public opinion come to understand that the United States does possess tactical nuclear weapons,” and that they could be used in military operations “without causing indiscriminate devastation.” Several prominent scientists, including Edward Teller and Ernest O. Lawrence, told Eisenhower that “we now believe that we know how to make virtually clean weapons, not only in the megaton range but all the way down to small kiloton weapons.” Teller and Lawrence, along with the AEC, were anxious for the nuclear testing program to continue, and the pursuit of clean technology appeared to provide such a rationale. Dulles agreed that clean weapons would allow the United States to maintain defenses in foreign areas at an affordable cost.⁸¹

*The propaganda war: The United States government
fights back*

It might be argued that Eisenhower’s and Dulles’ public assertions about the conventional status of tactical nuclear weapons were merely

⁷⁸ Memorandum, Dulles to Eisenhower, January 22, 1956, in folder “John Foster Dulles, January 1956,” Box 5, DHS, DDEP, DDEL.

⁷⁹ State Dept. press release: “Strategic Concept,” December 21, 1958. SGML.

⁸⁰ Rosendorf, “Dulles’ Schizophrenia,” p. 81; draft outline of Dulles’ talk, June 14, 1957, SGML.

⁸¹ NSC Meeting, June 13, 1957, Box 9, NSC Series, DDEP, DDEL; also, memorandum from John H. (“Jack”) Morse, US Atomic Energy Commission to Gen. Robert Cutler, the president’s special assistant for national security affairs, “Clean Nuclear Weapons,” March 22, 1958, US Nuclear History, NH 00057, NSA. For a useful overview, see Toshihiro Higuchi, “‘Clean’ Bombs: Nuclear Technology and Nuclear Strategy in the 1950s,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1 (February 2006), pp. 83–116.

a way to strengthen the US deterrent threat, and were aimed mainly at adversaries abroad. Although this was certainly part of the purpose, the evidence is overwhelming that a primary goal was to counter the growing revulsion toward nuclear weapons at home and among allied publics. By the mid-1950s, the US and other western governments viewed the antinuclear movement with alarm and groped to combat growing public antinuclear sentiment. The US government engaged in a major public relations effort to mold public opinion, both at home and abroad, to create a more positive attitude toward nuclear energy, and thereby a more favorable climate for US nuclear weapons policies. This included disseminating pro-nuclear propaganda, some of it knowingly false, and deliberately suppressing information about radiation hazards and testing from the public.⁸² In the late 1950s, the US government attempted to derail meetings of antinuclear groups—including the scientists' Pugwash meetings – kept peace groups under surveillance, and “sought to counter their influence through the management of public opinion.”⁸³ These efforts suggest how sensitive US leaders were to antinuclear public opinion.

A national intelligence estimate in 1955 on the implications of growing nuclear capabilities on public attitudes noted that “there is increased public pressure on governments to find some means of international disarmament, and especially some means of ensuring that nuclear weapons will not be used in war.”⁸⁴ In a discussion in the NSC in February 1956 of whether US forces could use nuclear weapons for defensive as well as offensive purposes, Radford complained that “the idea of some dividing line between use and non-use of these weapons was getting us further and further from the realm of the possible and the actual.”⁸⁵ Radford argued that nuclear weapons should be viewed as purely military weapons. But for Eisenhower, who had earlier asserted such views himself, it was becoming increasingly clear that the political implications of their use were unavoidable.

US leaders were fully aware that objections to the use of nuclear weapons were not simply prudential but moral. In NSC discussions in May 1957 on public opinion obstacles to using nuclear weapons in

⁸² Stephen I. Schwartz, ed., *Atomic Audit: The Costs and Consequences of US Nuclear Weapons Since 1940* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

⁸³ Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb*, p. 116.

⁸⁴ NIE 100-05-55, “Implications of Growing Nuclear Capabilities for the Communist Bloc and the Free World,” June 14, 1955, *FRUS 1955-57*, 19, p. 85.

⁸⁵ NSC meeting, February 27, 1956, NSC Series, Whitman Files, DDEL.

local conflicts, Dulles noted that Konrad Adenauer, chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, “believes, as a result of deep religious feelings, that the use of this type of force and this sort of weapon is wrong.” Dulles added, “For reasons such as this, the United States could not disregard important elements of world opinion.” He “was convinced that world opinion was *not yet ready* to accept the general use of nuclear weapons in local conflicts.”⁸⁶ Even State Department officials preferred “the older concept that ‘force’ would be applied selectively, rather than the new concept that ‘nuclear weapons’ would be applied selectively.”⁸⁷

Efforts to create a more favorable public attitude toward nuclear weapons

To help hasten the moment when world opinion might be ready, the State Department’s Operations Coordinating Board (OCB) oversaw the task of influencing the “overseas climate of public opinion” regarding nuclear weapons. Through Voice of America radio, motion pictures, books, pamphlets, exhibits, press releases and publications distributed at home and around the world, it offered upbeat views of the peaceful, scientific, and medical uses of atomic energy. It worked closely with the US Information Agency (USIA), which disseminated the information overseas, and the US Atomic Energy Commission. AEC commissioners and staff gave technical papers at conferences offering optimistic pronouncements about the peacetime uses of atomic energy. The OCB’s primary mission was to minimize negative perceptions of nuclear weapons and to emphasize the positive side of nuclear energy. It sought especially to minimize the negative impact of nuclear testing on public opinion.⁸⁸ Any public announcements about testing and other weapons developments, it advised in an internal memo, should be coordinated with announcements about the peaceful uses of atomic energy, “in order to reduce attention to the nuclear weapons news item.”⁸⁹

A key public relations tool was the notion of “peaceful nuclear explosions,” an idea hit upon by nuclear energy advocates starting

⁸⁶ NSC Meeting, May 27, 1957, *FRUS 1955–57*, 19, p. 500. Italics added.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 501.

⁸⁸ Progress Report of the OCB and Nuclear Energy Projects and Related Information Programs, December 1, 1954, White House Office, NSC Staff Papers, 1948–61, OCB Central Files, Box 8, DDEL.

⁸⁹ Information Planning on Nuclear Energy Projects for 1955, Working Draft, January 13, 1955. OCB, Central Files, Box 8, DDEL.

in the late 1950s. Enthusiasts envisaged their use for a variety of industrial, economic, and “landscaping” purposes including building harbors and canals, stimulating oil and gas, and creating underground cavities.⁹⁰ The effort in the United States centered on Project Plowshare, a program established at and spurred by Livermore Laboratory in 1957, and especially by Edward Teller, director of Livermore starting in 1958.

Many supporters of peaceful nuclear explosions, or PNEs, genuinely looked forward to beneficial civilian applications of nuclear explosions. As nuclear technology progressed in the 1960s, they pursued seriously several major projects including the possibility of blasting a new Panama Canal and creating a new harbor in western Australia. A second motivation for the Plowshare project, however, was clearly to create a more favorable public opinion for the development of nuclear weapons. In February 1957, the first symposium on the “industrial use of nuclear explosives” was sponsored in secret by Livermore Lab and attended by representatives of the weapons labs, industry, and the AEC. The conference reported enthusiastically on the prospects for PNEs. However, Harold Brown, a deputy director at Livermore and the organizer of the conference, noted in the unclassified version of the proceedings that “there is some kind of public relations problem here.” Apparently mystified by the worldwide apprehension over atmospheric testing, Brown grouched, “In the past 12 years, all kinds of phobic public reactions have been built around nuclear bombs.” Peaceful uses of nuclear explosions “could provide a fine opportunity to gain a *more rational viewpoint*.” He suggested that those in the AEC with public relations responsibilities take note.⁹¹

AEC chairman Strauss was very happy to showcase the sunny side of nuclear energy. After all, he viewed radioactive fallout from nuclear tests as merely a public relations problem.⁹² In a striking revelation, at an AEC meeting in 1958, Strauss acknowledged that Plowshare’s public works value was subordinate to its public relations value. Strauss stated explicitly what Brown had only implied: Plowshare was intended to “highlight the peaceful application of nuclear

⁹⁰ H. Brown and G. W. Johnson, “Non-military Uses of Nuclear Explosions,” University of California Radiation Laboratory, Livermore, CA, June 12, 1958. Contract No. W-7405-eng-48. UCRL-5026. In White House Office, Staff Secretary, 1952–61, Subject Series, Alphabetical Subseries, Box 20, Nevada Trip Folder 3, DDEL.

⁹¹ As quoted in Dan O’Neill, *The Firecracker Boys* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1995), pp. 24–25. Emphasis added.

⁹² Smith, *Disarming Diplomat*, p. 27.

explosive devices and thereby create a climate of world opinion that is more favorable to weapons developments and tests.”⁹³ Well into the 1960s, the AEC continued to promote PNEs as both an economic asset and a public relations tool for making the world comfortable with nuclear explosions.

The failure of conventionalization: The taboo starts to win out

Despite the Eisenhower administration’s efforts, by the late 1950s it was clear that its campaign to persuade Americans and the allies to treat tactical nuclear weapons “as having become ‘conventional’” had failed.⁹⁴ In 1958, Eisenhower noted to Dulles with regard to the administration’s policy of massive retaliation that “as much as two-thirds of the world, and 50 percent of US opinion opposes the course we have been following.”⁹⁵ Dulles admitted “a rising tide of opposition to our strategic concept,” and that the policy was no longer viable because the consequences of putting it into action would become “so appalling.”⁹⁶ Yet the administration lacked an alternative concept. The destructive power of nuclear weapons, the risks of escalation, and public opposition made it difficult for the administration to develop a clear plan for using even tactical nuclear weapons in limited wars. As General Maxwell Taylor noted in April 1958, it was “difficult to find a good use for tactical nuclear weapons since even these involved tremendous battle field destruction.”⁹⁷ Secretary of Defense Neil McElroy even wondered whether, because of their destructive power, nuclear weapons “will in fact be unusable in war, as proved to be the case with chemical weapons.”⁹⁸

Public opinion had clearly shifted against nuclear weapons. After “virtually unanimous” support for Truman’s decision to drop atomic weapons on Japan to end World War II, from 1945 through the

⁹³ Quoted in O’Neill, *The Firecracker Boys*, p. 25.

⁹⁴ Proposed “Talking Paper” for use in clarifying US Position Regarding Atomic and Hydrogen Weapons at NATO meeting April 23, 1954. Excerpt. RG 59, 250, 50, Lot 57D 688, Box 342, NA.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Gaddis, “Origins of Self-Deterrence,” p. 145.

⁹⁶ Memorandum of Conversation, “John Foster Dulles’ Views on the Strategic Concept,” April 7, 1958, US Department of State, Policy Planning Staff, US Nuclear History, NH 00099, pp. 3, 4, NSA.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

mid-1950s the public supported using nuclear weapons under some, but not all, circumstances. Starting in 1954, American public opinion began shifting against initiating the use of nuclear weapons, where it has remained ever since. By the late 1950s, in contrast to attitudes at the height of the Korean War, the public rejected using H-bombs against China and repudiated using atomic weapons to destroy military installations in a war over Quemoy and Matsu. Public opinion also showed support for creating limitations on the use of nuclear weapons. In 1955, 67 percent of those asked supported the United States making an agreement with the Soviet Union that if war broke out the United States would not use atomic or hydrogen bombs if other countries did not.⁹⁹

When a renewed crisis with China over the islands of Quemoy and Matsu heated up in September 1958, the administration faced both public and internal opposition to the use of nuclear weapons there. Abbott Washburn, the deputy director of USIA, the government's polling agency, wrote a lengthy and strongly worded memo to the president opposing the use of nuclear weapons against the Chinese mainland to defend the offshore islands. He was writing in his personal capacity because he was "deeply troubled" by the US Far East policy and felt it would be wrong to remain silent. Use of nuclear weapons could cause the US to "lose the respect of mankind, possibly for all time." A Gallup poll showed that 62 percent of the American public opposed aiding the Nationalist Chinese if it involved the risk of all-out war and the use of atomic weapons. World opinion would experience "revulsion" at any US use of nuclear weapons. This might jeopardize the continued use of US bases overseas such as in Japan and Morocco. If nuclear weapons were used on Chinese airfields, severe civilian casualties would be inevitable. "Another atom-burning by the US of Asian civilians would do incalculable damage to the US in the eyes of Asian and all colored peoples and governments for years to come – perhaps irreparable harm." He added that use of nuclear weapons would also invite possible nuclear retaliation by the Soviet Union, but he devoted little attention to this issue.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Thomas Graham, *American Public Opinion on NATO, Extended Deterrence and the Use of Nuclear Weapons: Future Fission?* CSIA Occasional Paper No. 4 (Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, 1989), p. 70.

¹⁰⁰ Letter from Abbott Washburn to the president, September 9, 1958, Whitman File, Administration Series, Box 29, DDEL.

The US Information Agency's estimates of the "free world" reaction to use of nuclear weapons to defend Quemoy and Matsu found that only the governments of Nationalist China, Korea, South Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines would approve, but there would be mixed feelings among the publics of these countries. In Thailand there would be strong "moral opposition" by the public to any use of nuclear weapons. In the other countries there would be a general public fear of nuclear retaliation. The report concluded that "the governments and the peoples of every other country in the world would condemn and oppose [use of nuclear weapons] in varying degrees of intensity." While most free world governments would approve to varying degrees conventional intervention, the public would generally oppose even conventional intervention.¹⁰¹

The CIA shared these views, reporting in a special national intelligence estimate in July 1958 that a US use of nuclear weapons in the Far East risked Communist retaliation, but also that such use "would be widely condemned by popular opinion, especially in Asia." Adverse reactions would overshadow any favorable effects in most countries. Even if the attack quickly halted the fighting without causing large civilian casualties, "the stigma resulting from US initiation of the use of nuclear weapons would not be removed."¹⁰² While the Communists might employ nuclear weapons in turn themselves, "the US would still incur the odium of having used them first."¹⁰³

Some State Department officials sought to impress upon Dulles the dire humanitarian consequences of a use of tactical nuclear weapons in the conflict. Gerard Smith, director of Policy Planning at the time and personally close to Dulles, recalled later his attempt to disabuse Dulles of the notion that using nuclear weapons on military targets would not cause a large number of civilian deaths on the island. According to Smith, Dulles was "being tempted by an activist group at the Pentagon that wanted to take out the artillery batteries at Amoy that were shelling the islands." Smith asked Dulles if he would sit through a briefing by nuclear weapons experts before any decisions were made on the use of nuclear weapons. Dulles agreed. The briefers

¹⁰¹ Estimate of Free World Reaction, Country by Country, to Three Possible Courses of Action by the US in Quemoy–Matsu, United States Information Agency, September 6, 1958, Whitman File, Administration Series, Box 29, DDEL.

¹⁰² "Sino-Soviet and Free World Reactions to the Use of Nuclear Weapons in Limited Wars in the Far East," Top Secret, Special National Intelligence Estimate, SNIE 100–7–58, July 22, 1958, US Nuclear History, NSA, p. 2.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

estimated that 186,000 Chinese civilian casualties would result from a use of tactical nuclear weapons on the Communist batteries. Said Smith, "I never heard another word about it after that."¹⁰⁴ There is some reason to believe that the briefing dampened Dulles' ardor for the nuclear option. The issue at stake was indiscriminate destruction of civilians – a normative concern – not fear of retaliation or escalation.

By the late 1950s, the administration also faced mounting international opposition to its testing policies. In June 1957, US Information Service chiefs in NATO countries meeting in Geneva regarded the current "genuine and deep seated anxiety over atom weapons and fallout risks" as their "major public opinion problem."¹⁰⁵ Enormously concerned about "winning world public opinion," US and Western leaders cast about for disarmament proposals. The JCS, the AEC, and the weapons labs lobbied hard against a test moratorium, arguing that it would stall US development of "clean" nuclear weapons that would be more politically acceptable. Edward Teller worried that the Soviets would continue testing secretly "while we, having stopped our tests, are left only with dirty weapons which we are inhibited through world opinion from using."¹⁰⁶

After the Soviets adopted a unilateral test moratorium in March 1958, their proposals for a test ban had a great international impact. The United States was under pressure to respond. Eisenhower increasingly expressed his concern about the mounting world sentiment against testing. By August 1958, he was reacting skeptically to enthusiastic reports about recent weapons tests from his pro-testing advisors. "The new thermonuclear weapons are tremendously powerful; however, they are not . . . as powerful as is world opinion today in obliging the United States to follow certain lines of policy."¹⁰⁷ At the end of August he announced that the United States would stop further testing for one year, unless the Soviet Union tested.

After a visit by Dulles to the Nevada test site in October 1958, General A. J. Goodpaster, staff secretary to Eisenhower, recorded in a remarkable memo the impact that global – not just US – antinuclear

¹⁰⁴ Smith, *Disarming Diplomat*, pp. 90–91; interview with Smith in John Newhouse, *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age* (New York: Knopf, 1989), p. 126.

¹⁰⁵ Staff Notes No. 135, June 22, 1957, DDE Diary, Box 25, June 1957, Staff Memos file, DDEL.

¹⁰⁶ Memorandum of a conference with the president, June 24, 1957, DDE Diary, Box 25, June 1957, Staff Memos file, DDEL.

¹⁰⁷ Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb*, p. 182.

sentiment was having on US leaders. He wrote that Dulles “considers that world public opinion regarding testing *has come to such a point that the United States diplomacy cannot be satisfactorily conducted without the suspension of tests*” even though “militarily” the suspension of testing is to the “*considerable disadvantage*” of US security. World opinion in many areas, “particularly those which have undergone heavy aerial bombardment in past wars, attaches the horror of atomic warfare to the testing of nuclear weapons.” He continued, “influential groups in the United States, both inside and outside the Government, are desirous of a test cessation on a variety of grounds, largely represented as moral, humanitarian, etc.,” while influential states desired it as a way of lessening world tensions.¹⁰⁸ Goodpaster interpreted this situation as a defeat for the United States by Soviet propaganda. It was also a reflection of the success of the antinuclear movement, however. It provides strong evidence of normative and political constraints on US nuclear policy.

Thus after years of fruitless disarmament talks, under pressure of mobilized public opinion, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Britain finally adopted a testing moratorium starting on October 31, 1958, and began negotiations that eventually led to an atmospheric test ban in 1963.

As the renewed crisis over Quemoy and Matsu had revealed, the issue of relying on use of tactical nuclear weapons in limited wars became an increasingly divisive issue within the administration. The Defense Department continued to recommend deployment of nuclear weapons of every type, their increasing dispersal, and a wider delegation of authority to use them.¹⁰⁹ But State Department officials were increasingly worried that the United States had a dangerous overreliance on nuclear weapons. During discussions in July 1959, State Department officials argued for removing the reference in the basic national security policy statement (NSC 5801/1) that nuclear

¹⁰⁸ A. J. Goodpaster, Memorandum for the Record regarding Trip to Nevada Atomic Test Site 3–5 October, October 10, 1958. White House Office, Staff Secretary, 1952–61, “Subject Series,” Alphabetical Series, Box 20, Nevada Trip Folder, DDEL. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁹ NSC Meeting, July 9, 1959, Ann Whitman files, DDEL, p. 5. Recently declassified documents have now confirmed that, in 1959, President Eisenhower approved “predelegation” authority to top commanders so that they would have the authority to make a rapid nuclear response if a Soviet attack on Washington killed national command authorities, such as the president. The administration had been working on the guidelines since 1956. See “First Documented Evidence that US Presidents Predelegated Nuclear Weapons Release Authority to the Military,” March 20, 1998, NSA.

weapons would be considered “as conventional weapons from a military point of view.”¹¹⁰ They sought more balanced military forces and were concerned that such language dissuaded investment in conventional weapons. The Defense Department, however, opposed State Department efforts to expand the range of contingencies in which the United States could fight a limited war without using nuclear weapons.¹¹¹

As Gerard Smith recalled later, both he and Robert Bowie, a Policy Planning staffer, had tried to persuade Dulles of the merits of this view.¹¹² They argued that more conventional weapons, not tactical nuclear weapons, were the key to flexibility and political acceptance of the use of force in limited threats. Smith also expressed to Dulles “doubts as to the morality of a retaliation against the Soviet Union which would have serious effects on non-belligerent nations.”¹¹³ They faced serious resistance to their views. Admiral Radford, during a brief return to duty as chairman of the Joint Chiefs, complained to Eisenhower in 1959 about the “State Department’s idea” that the United States could have a conventional force large enough to fight a war without having to use nuclear weapons. Radford felt that all this “whipped up” concern over nuclear weapons was groundless. The real worry was that the United States would not use these weapons if the situation called for it. Radford singled out Smith as the culprit trying to push through this change in US policy. US policy should state that nuclear weapons should be used, Radford argued, “whenever such use is to our military advantage.”¹¹⁴

For his part, Eisenhower continued to think that public concerns about nuclear weapons were exaggerated, and that while such weapons “should not be resorted to carelessly,” if large numbers of American troops were involved “they should have nuclear weapons

¹¹⁰ NSC Meeting, July 9, 1959, Ann Whitman Files, DDEL, and Memorandum of Conversation, State–Defense meeting on “Strategic Concept and Military Paragraphs of NSC 5801/1,” US Department of State, Geneva, May 23, 1959, NSA.

¹¹¹ Letter from Gerard Smith to Secretary of State Herter, “Views on the Use of Nuclear Weapons in Limited War,” July 1, 1959, US Department of State, Policy Planning, US Nuclear History, NH 00119, NSA, and Memorandum for the Record, “State–Defense Meeting on Military Paragraphs of NSC 5906, June 30, 1959,” July 1, 1959, US Department of State, Policy Planning, US Nuclear History, NH 00120, NSA.

¹¹² Smith, *Disarming Diplomat*, pp. 74–75.

¹¹³ Memorandum for the secretary from Gerard Smith, director, Policy Planning, on “Oral Presentation of the Annual Report of the Ned Evaluation Subcommittee,” November 25, 1958, US Department of State, US Nuclear History, NSA, p. 2.

¹¹⁴ State–Defense Meeting, July 1, 1959, p. 3.

handy.”¹¹⁵ Reacting to a comment by Secretary of State Christian Herter, who had replaced Dulles in 1958, noting “how fearful world opinion was of any use of nuclear weapons,” the president responded that “world opinion was wrong.”¹¹⁶ Because of opposing views within the administration on the role of tactical nuclear weapons, the problem remained unresolved during the Eisenhower administration. Smith later reflected that his single most important contribution as director of Policy Planning was to begin the process of moving Dulles away from the massive retaliation strategy.¹¹⁷

It appeared that advocating the use of tactical nuclear weapons in limited wars had become politically controversial even for weapons manufacturers who stood to benefit financially from such a policy. Renowned Princeton physicist John Wheeler, along with Henry Kissinger and others, wrote a long report for the Convair Corporation, a weapons manufacturer, completed in 1959, entitled, “A Doctrine for Limited War.” It advocated the development of low-yield nuclear weapons for battlefield use, and a policy to permit their employment in special circumstances. War might be deterred or minimized if the United States was prepared to use nuclear as well as conventional weapons in war, the authors believed. But, as Wheeler recalled in his memoirs, Convair “developed a case of butterflies in its stomach” once the report was finished in the fall of 1959. Even though it was their business to make weapons, “Convair executives feared the ‘merchant of death’ label that might follow the release of a report on such a volatile subject as the use of tactical nuclear weapons in limited war,” Wheeler recalled the report was never issued. Most of its contents reached the public through Henry Kissinger’s later writings.¹¹⁸

Why the taboo prevailed

By the end of the 1950s the nuclear taboo had prevailed over efforts to conventionalize tactical nuclear weapons. How and why was this so? First, an antinuclear “coalition of the weak” – grassroots citizens’ movements and Third World states – by subjecting the bomb to an onslaught of criticism, helped turn public sentiment against the

¹¹⁵ Memorandum of Conversation, “Military Paragraphs of Basic National Security Policy,” July 2, 1959, US Department of State, Policy Planning Staff, US Nuclear History, NY 00121, p. 3, NSA.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹¹⁷ Smith, *Disarming Diplomat*, pp. 77–78.

¹¹⁸ John Archibald Wheeler with Kenneth Ford, *Geons, Black Holes, and Quantum Foam: A Life in Physics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), pp. 286–87.

weapon and thereby made it politically less acceptable as an instrument of war and diplomacy. The forum provided by the UN elevated their concerns to the level of global diplomacy. The antinuclear weapons movement altered consciousness about nuclear tests and weapons, raised the level of public knowledge, and marked out nuclear weapons as especially horrendous. It promoted principled or moral opposition to nuclear weapons, but also enhanced public understanding by disseminating knowledge about nuclear weapons and their effects. At a time when production of smaller warheads and early experiments in minimizing fall-out from “clean” bombs was intended to make nuclear weapons seem simply an extension of the armory of conventional weapons, the popular protests helped discourage this view and to maintain a categorical distinction between conventional and nuclear weapons.

As democracies, the United States and its allies, for both strategic and legitimacy reasons, could not wholly ignore broad public fear and opprobrium toward nuclear weapons. Soviet antinuclear propaganda contributed to and reinforced the concerns of worried publics and developing nations, while putting Western leaders on the defensive with regard to nuclear policies. Thus the antinuclear movement facilitated both a normative and a cognitive shift in how people understood nuclear weapons.

Second, in addition to the discursive shift, the actual practice of non-use by the superpowers (in contrast to the official nuclear doctrines emphasizing use) in the face of repeated Cold War crises bolstered the formation of a convention on non-use as a total, rather than selective, prohibition on the use of nuclear weapons. Although Eisenhower objected to the taboo and sought to do away with it, he did not use nuclear weapons during his eight years in office. Thus his own behavior contributed to the emerging tradition of non-use. Finally, the taboo, as a *de facto* prohibition on a whole class of weapons, was ultimately more consistent than competing norms with escalation concerns, which it in turn helped to reinforce.

Conclusion

The Eisenhower administration’s response to the public opposition to the bomb that was already building by the end of the Korean War in 1953 was “conventionalization” of tactical nuclear weapons – referring to them as if they were like any other weapon. But well before the end of the 1950s, Eisenhower and Dulles faced strong

resistance to this strategy because of the shifting nuclear balance, but also because of public perceptions that nuclear weapons were different and that anything other than second use was morally repugnant.

It is sometimes argued today that those groups and individuals in the past who advocated the use of nuclear weapons in small wars were outside the political mainstream and never really accepted.¹¹⁹ This is not true. The highest authorities in the government advocated such views and worked to make them politically and morally acceptable to broad numbers of people. During this period, numerous US leaders did not think a taboo on US use of nuclear weapons was in the interest of the United States, and they said so explicitly. They implemented policies to counter it and promote an alternative norm that tactical nuclear weapons were usable.

This was clearly part of a deterrent strategy – US deterrent threats would not be credible without public support – but it required making nuclear weapons normatively acceptable to the US and allied publics. The debate over nuclear weapons was thus inextricably a moral one. Opponents of the bomb, such as the peace movement, the UN and Third World states, and individuals within the US government, invoked moral values centrally in their critiques of nuclear weapons as unacceptable weapons. Eisenhower and Dulles's counter-campaign was also an explicitly moral strategy, however. In trying to make small nuclear weapons politically acceptable, US leaders were compelled to defend them on moral, not simply military or strategic, terms. They had to make the case that nuclear weapons were not only strategically necessary but morally permissible.

The latter was ultimately a tough case to make. Overall, government officials were painfully conscious of – and at times even responsive to – public criticism of nuclear weapons. In sum, by the end of the 1950s, it was clear that nuclear weapons could not be considered “just another weapon.” A taboo against their first use was taking hold. Operational doctrine for the use of tactical nuclear weapons remained unresolved, however. The Vietnam War would soon provide a decisive test for a new set of American leaders.

¹¹⁹ See Paul W. Kahn, “Nuclear Weapons and the Rule of Law,” *NYU Journal of International Law and Politics*, vol. 31, no. 2 (Winter/Spring 1999), pp. 349–415.

6 Nuclear weapons and the Vietnam War¹

Never had the military gap between a superpower and a non-nuclear state been greater; never was it less likely to be invoked.

Henry Kissinger, 1994²

Of all cases of Cold War conflict in which the United States could have used nuclear weapons, the Vietnam War provides one of the strongest “tests” of a nuclear taboo. In Vietnam, the United States chose to lose a humiliating and destructive war against a small, non-nuclear adversary while all its nuclear weapons remained on the shelf. During the ten-year military commitment to South Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, the United States sustained large losses in men, money, and materiel at tremendous political cost. US officials repeatedly declared that the United States could not tolerate the loss of Southeast Asia to Communism, and that the war was vital for US interests, prestige, and security.

As the war escalated, the United States was willing to maintain policies of great destructiveness. Operation Rolling Thunder, begun in March 1965, continued for three years and dropped more bombs on Vietnam than were dropped on all of Europe in World War II.³ Starting in 1969, B-52 raids demolished vast areas in North and South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. US forces employed herbicides and defoliants to obliterate croplands and forests, dropped flame throwers and napalm, and eventually mined Haiphong harbor. It is estimated

¹ This chapter is a revised version of an article first published in the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Volume 29, Issue 4, August 2006, published by Routledge.

² Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), pp. 607–08.

³ Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), p. 174.

that some 3.6 million Vietnamese in both North and South, were killed in the conflict, and 58,000 Americans.⁴

Had US leaders wished to use nuclear weapons in Vietnam, there was no lack of warheads nor any shortage of suitable targets. Ports, landing places, supply lines, bridges, railways, and airfields could all have been hit decisively with relatively low-yield weapons. As McGeorge Bundy, national security advisor to President Kennedy and President Johnson, later observed, such targets could have been hit with nuclear weapons “quite possibly with human losses lower than those of the war that was actually fought.”⁵ Further, fear of nuclear retaliation was not a prominent concern. Bundy recalled, “Very little, if at all, was [the non-use of nuclear weapons] for fear that friends of [North] Vietnam with warheads of their own, Russians or Chinese, would use some of them in reply.”⁶

Additionally, as Daniel Ellsberg recalled, one popular lesson the Army (along with some political leaders) had learned from the Korean stalemate was “never again a land war in Asia,” whose real meaning, administration insiders with access to military planning understood, was “never again a land war against China *without nuclear weapons*.”⁷ Doctrines of limited nuclear war developed in the mid-to-late 1950s and early 1960s elaborated the necessity of being willing and able to employ nuclear weapons in a local or regional conflict, and in something less than an all-out nuclear exchange.⁸

Given this context, one of the remarkable features of the Vietnam War is how little serious thought US leaders gave to the possibility of using nuclear weapons. President John Kennedy and President Lyndon Johnson gave little serious consideration to nuclear options and declined to make any nuclear threats, despite some recommendations

⁴ James Blight, ed., *Missed Opportunities? Revisiting the Decisions of the Vietnam War, 1945–68*. Hanoi Conference, June 20–23, 1997. Transcript, Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, Providence, RI, April 1998, pp. 9–10.

⁵ McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Decisions About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 536.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 536.

⁷ Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: Viking, 2002), p. 63. Emphasis in original. For a discussion of the widely perceived analogy between the Vietnam and Korean Wars, see Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁸ See, for example, Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957); Robert Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); Morton H. Halperin, *Limited War in the Nuclear Age* (New York: Wiley, 1963).

to do so. While President Richard Nixon and his national security advisor Henry Kissinger more actively explored nuclear options, and engaged in vague nuclear threats, in the end they also did not come close to actually using such weapons in the conflict.

Why did US leaders not resort to the use of nuclear weapons? Fear of uncontrolled escalation to war with Russia or China is certainly part of the explanation. However, escalation risks were highly disputed throughout the war, and military and most key political leaders endorsed policies that involved risking war with China if necessary. Given this situation, political and normative constraints on the use of nuclear weapons became particularly salient. Ultimately, while nuclear weapons might have been militarily useful in the war, it was clear that, by the time the war was fought, they were *politically* unusable, and for some officials, even morally unacceptable. The constraining and constitutive effects of a taboo against first use of nuclear weapons operated powerfully for US leaders during the Vietnam War, both for the majority who shared the taboo and for the minority of those who did not.

The Johnson administration and Vietnam

In his magisterial history of nuclear decisionmaking, published in 1989, McGeorge Bundy portrayed nuclear weapons as largely a non-issue in the Vietnam War.⁹ In reality, they were an ongoing subtext of a war that took place in a Cold War context. The issue of nuclear weapons arose under President Johnson in the context of the decision of 1964–65 to intervene militarily in Vietnam, which culminated in the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign and the first major introduction of US troops in March 1965. The Joint Chiefs of Staff then regularly pushed for major expansions of the war, including nuclear options. Both military and political leaders thought that tactical nuclear weapons would be militarily useful, and even necessary, if the conflict expanded to a war against China, and the Johnson administration received recommendations to use or threaten use of nuclear weapons from reputable individuals. The possible use of tactical nuclear weapons in the war was the occasional subject of public rumor and speculation, and emerged as an issue in the presidential campaigns of 1964 and 1968. The Johnson administration's most extensive

⁹ He devoted only 8 out of 735 pages to Vietnam. Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, pp. 535–42.

discussions of nuclear weapons took place during the 1968 siege of Khe Sanh, but even these did not get far. There were two sustained critiques of the use of tactical nuclear weapons in the conflict: Undersecretary of State George Ball's famous October 1964 memo, and a recently declassified study conducted by physicist Freeman Dyson and three other scientists in 1966. Both of these papers came down strongly against the use of nuclear weapons in the war.

Background: US nuclear doctrine

Appalled by the Eisenhower nuclear doctrine of "massive retaliation," President John F. Kennedy and his advisors upon entering office had sought more "flexible" war plans that included multiple options and greater emphasis on conventional weapons.¹⁰ Doctrines of "limited nuclear war" had been elaborated at the end of the 1950s, most notably by Henry Kissinger, but by the early 1960s their shortcomings, especially in the European context, were becoming apparent.¹¹ It was difficult to determine in what sense such wars would actually be "limited." Led by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, the Pentagon began to revise Eisenhower's Basic National Security Policy (BNSP), but the process bogged down in several dilemmas, one of which was the puzzling question of when, if at all, tactical nuclear weapons might be used. Walt Rostow, a defense "hawk" who took over the process of revising the plan when he became head of Policy Planning in the State Department in 1962, found the role of tactical nuclear weapons "a tough nut to crack." It remained an unresolved dilemma because of "differences of view in the Pentagon."¹² Thus a draft of the BNSP was left simply with a statement of the dilemma posed by tactical nuclear weapons: they were extremely important as a deterrent against massive conventional attack in Europe and elsewhere, but their actual use could produce civil and human destruction on a vast scale, in some cases (depending on locale) "tantamount to the strategic use of nuclear weapons."¹³ The draft was never adopted.

Nevertheless, US war plans for limited war continued to emphasize first use of nuclear weapons in a conflict with large Chinese forces in Asia. Pacific Command plans for a major escalation of the Vietnam

¹⁰ William W. Kaufman, *The McNamara Strategy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

¹¹ Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), 2nd edn, ch. 8.

¹² Walt W. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 175.

¹³ *Ibid.*

War included both nuclear and non-nuclear options. Recently declassified Pacific Command histories confirm the existence of these nuclear war plans, first revealed in the *Pentagon Papers*.¹⁴ A US response to Chinese intervention in hostilities would require implementation of CINCPAC OPLAN 39–65 and/or OPLAN 32–64.¹⁵ According to these plans, in the event of Chinese entry into the war, Strategic Air Command (SAC) forces would strike selected targets within China using nuclear and/or non-nuclear weapons, as directed by the JCS.¹⁶

Although no nuclear weapons were deployed in Vietnam, they were on board aircraft carriers and stockpiled in the region, increasing in numbers up through mid-1967.¹⁷ Additionally, when American Marines arrived in Da Nang in March 1965, they brought 8-inch howitzers that were nuclear-capable, though they did not have nuclear warheads.¹⁸ It would thus have been relatively easy for the United States to change the character of the war to a nuclear one.

Initial considerations

The main scenario for resort to nuclear weapons was a major ground war against Chinese and North Vietnamese troops, although other options were occasionally proposed. Both military and political leaders thought that the use of tactical nuclear weapons in such a war would be likely, and possibly even required, to avoid defeat. Although military commanders were at times divided over whether nuclear weapons would be needed in a wider war, the Joint Chiefs did estimate that tactical nuclear weapons would be militarily useful, arguing in a memo in March 1964 that “nuclear attacks would have

¹⁴ CINCPAC *Command Histories* for 1963, 1964, 1966. I am grateful to the Nautilus Institute for providing copies of these. Excerpts available at www.nautilus.org/VietnamFOIA/analyses/bulletin.html#cincpac

¹⁵ OPLAN 39–65, promulgated September 1964, was the contingency plan for Asian Communist aggression. OPLAN 32–64, promulgated September 1962, was “CINCPAC’s principal plan for the defense of mainland Southeast Asia up to the point of Gen. War,” *CINCPAC Command History 1963* (1964), p. 38. OPLANs were mainly non-nuclear, but had a nuclear annex. I thank Hans Kristensen for discussion on this issue.

¹⁶ *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, vol. III (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), Senator Gravel edn, pp. 636, 639.

¹⁷ By the beginning of 1963, US on-shore deployments of nuclear weapons to Guam, Okinawa, the Philippines, and Taiwan grew to about 2,400, a 66 percent increase from 1961 levels. The on-shore stockpile in the Pacific peaked at about 3,200 weapons in mid-1967, 2,600 of which were in Korea and Okinawa, and began to decrease after that. Robert Norris, William Arkin, and William Burr, “Where They Were,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 55, no. 6 (November/December 1999), pp. 30–31.

¹⁸ Ted Gittinger, ed., *The Johnson Years: A Vietnam Roundtable* (Austin, TX: Lyndon Baines Johnson Library: Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, 1993), p. 64.

a far greater probability” of stopping a Chinese attack than responding with conventional weapons.¹⁹ As a JCS working group put it, “Certainly no responsible person proposes to go about such a war [against the North Vietnamese and Chinese], if it should occur, on a basis remotely resembling Korea. ‘Possibly even the use of nuclear weapons at some point’ is of course why we spend billions to have them.”²⁰ The Joint Chiefs assumed essentially that Eisenhower era policies remained in force – that the United States had undertaken to defend many areas on the assumption that nuclear weapons would be used as necessary and that they would be effective.

Military leaders were unsure, for example, whether conventional bombing of Chinese supply lines in North Vietnam would be sufficient and assumed that at least ground forces, and possibly nuclear weapons, would be required. Admiral Harry D. Felt, commander in chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) believed that in the event of a major ground war, there was no possible way to hold off Communist forces on the ground without the use of tactical nuclear weapons, and that it was essential that US commanders be given the freedom to use them as the contingency plans assumed. Chair of the Joint Chiefs General Earle Wheeler opposed using nuclear weapons to interdict supply lines but thought they would be necessary in a major war against China, and should be used only in extreme cases such as to save a force threatened with destruction or to knock out a special target like a nuclear weapons facility.²¹ However, General Maxwell Taylor, who had served as chairman of the Joint Chiefs and for a while as US ambassador to South Vietnam, was more doubtful about the need for nuclear weapons.²²

Top political leaders did not go as far as the Joint Chiefs. But during their deliberations in 1964–65 over whether to intervene in the war, political leaders raised the issue of nuclear weapons, and seemed prepared to accept that they must be ready for their use. The US ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, during meetings in April and May 1964, raised the question of whether nuclear weapons would be needed to defend South Vietnam.²³ In a meeting

¹⁹ Memo from the JCS to the Secretary of Defense, March 2, 1964, JCSM-174-64. *FRUS* 1964-68, 1, p. 115.

²⁰ *PP*, vol. III, p. 623.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 175.

²³ Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, Saigon, May 4, 1964, in *FRUS* 1964-68, 1, p. 286.

on April 27, Secretary of State Dean Rusk questioned whether this would provoke Soviet intervention, and also noted “Chiang Kai-Shek’s strongly expressed opposition to the use of nuclear weapons.” William Bundy, assistant secretary of state for the Far East, suggested that “limited use of such weapons for interdiction, in unpopulated areas might be a different story.” Rusk appeared doubtful that this could be effective, although he allowed that some sort of threats might be useful.²⁴

In Pentagon war games, such as one held in September 1964, to determine whether conventional firepower alone would stop a Chinese intervention in a war in Southeast Asia, the answer the game produced was probably not. However, only a minority of the war game’s American leadership voted to use nuclear weapons to destroy Chinese nuclear production facilities and execute a general nuclear attack on China.²⁵

In November 1964, shortly after Johnson was reelected president, an interagency task force chaired by William Bundy was formed to analyze major courses of action for the United States in Vietnam. In written comments on the draft papers laying out three options, A, B, and C, Bundy asked with regard to Option B, the most aggressive course of action, “At what stage, if ever, might nuclear weapons be required, and on what scale? What would be the implications of such use?” He commented, “This is clearly a sensitive issue. The President may want a more precise answer than appears in the papers.”²⁶

On November 23, the JCS, in a memo to McNamara, criticized option A as inadequate and offered their own versions of options B and C which would include “an advance decision to continue military pressures, if necessary, to the full limits of what military actions can contribute toward US national objectives.”²⁷ In the context, the Chiefs clearly meant nuclear weapons. They had argued earlier, on November 10, that the risk of nuclear conflict should deter Chinese

²⁴ Memo for the Record (W. Bundy), “Discussion of Possible Extended Action in Relation to Vietnam,” April 27, 1964, Executive Secretariat Conference Files, 1949–72, Box 343, Manila (SEATO) Taipei and Saigon, April 20–29, RG 59, NA. I thank William Burr for this document.

²⁵ Thomas Allen, *War Games* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1987), pp. 193–206.

²⁶ Memo from Chairman of the NSC Working Group (W. Bundy) to the Secretary of State, November 24, 1964, *FRUS 1964–68*, 1, p. 941.

²⁷ David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2000), pp. 366–67.

Communist intervention, while expressing a clear willingness to use nuclear weapons should the Chinese intervene.²⁸

During a meeting of the Executive Committee (ExCom) of the NSC on November 24 to discuss the three options, someone asked whether nuclear weapons might be used. McNamara said he “could not imagine a case where they would be considered,” but McGeorge Bundy thought that under certain circumstances there might be political and military pressure to consider their use.²⁹ However, no precise answer was forthcoming, and the *Pentagon Papers* narrative notes after one such inconclusive mention of nuclear weapons that “again, the point was not really followed up.”³⁰ The ExCom eventually chose option C, the Chiefs’ plan, with some modifications. The final December 2 draft of the paper (approved by Johnson on the 7th) incorporated the Chiefs’ call for aggressive countermoves to North Vietnamese escalation, but emphasized troop deployments and omitted the Chiefs’ language committing the United States to the full range of military actions.³¹

Perhaps prompted by these discussions, in late November 1964 Rusk, responding to a study by McNamara on the role of tactical nuclear weapons in NATO strategy, suggested that it was of “vital importance” to conduct a similar study “of the utility and limitation of the potential utilization of tactical nuclear weaponry in other areas of the globe,” particularly “the Far East where we maintain the second largest overseas nuclear arsenal and where . . . the prospect for a major military involvement cannot be overlooked.”³² Rusk approved of McNamara’s emphasis on moving NATO toward greater reliance on conventional defenses and may have sought to encourage a similar shift with respect to US war planning in the Far East.³³ Apparently no such study was undertaken as Rusk renewed his suggestion a year later.³⁴

Several considerations constrained the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam, including the risk of escalation, political and normative considerations, and perceived lack of military utility of nuclear weapons. I consider these in the next several sections.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 360.

²⁹ *PP*, vol. III, p. 238.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. x.

³¹ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 378. Kaiser provides an extended analysis of the decision-making process behind this report.

³² Letter from Rusk to McNamara, November 28, 1964, *FRUS 1964–68*, 10, Document No. 63, electronic version at “a.”

³³ *Ibid.*, at “a” and “b.”

³⁴ Letter from Rusk to McNamara, November 13, 1965, in *ibid.*, Document No. 105.

Disagreement over escalation risks

The most significant material constraint on using nuclear weapons was the risk of a wider war with China. US leaders worried that a US invasion of North Vietnam or the use of tactical nuclear weapons there could bring China into the war. Winning a war against China might itself require the use of nuclear weapons. In a remote but worst-case scenario, this could provoke Soviet entry into the war, although most US officials judged this unlikely. Thus the United States might be forced to use nuclear weapons first, with unpredictable, and possibly disastrous, consequences.

Political and military leaders disagreed strongly about the likelihood and consequences of escalation throughout the war, however. The JCS tended to see the risks of escalation as much lower than did political leaders, and hence were more willing to endorse aggressive policies. The Chiefs, along with commanders in the field, consistently lobbied for expanding the war and removing limitations on the fighting as the only way to achieve victory. On January 22, 1964, they told McNamara that the United States "must be prepared to put aside many of the self-imposed restrictions which now limit our effectiveness, and to undertake bolder actions which may embody greater risks." They advocated a vigorous bombing campaign against North Vietnam and the introduction of US combat forces in both North and South Vietnam. In response, McNamara directed them to plan a campaign of covert actions and air and sea attacks on North Vietnam up to, but not including, nuclear weapons. The JCS then complained that if China entered the war nuclear weapons might be needed, and submitted a plan culminating in a strike at the Chinese atomic production facility that would produce a bomb in October 1964. McNamara took a similar aggressive stance on this initially, but then scaled it back before presenting it to the president.³⁵

Former President Eisenhower, called in for a consultation on Vietnam in February 1965, shortly before the final decision supporting the first major deployment of American troops, found the nuclear option entirely reasonable. He told President Johnson and senior advisors that he thought the Chinese would not enter the war, but if they did

³⁵ Memo from the JCS to McNamara, January 22, 1964, cited in McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 107–110; memo from Secretary of Defense to Taylor, February 21, 1964; memo from the JCS to McNamara, March 2, 1964, and memo from Secretary of Defense to president, March 16, 1964, in *FRUS 1964–68*, 1, pp. 97–99, 112–18, 153–67.

he would use “any weapons required,” including nuclear weapons if necessary. He recommended using carrier-based tactical nuclear weapons for “instant retaliation,” suggesting that they could be used on large troop formations and supply depots. In his view, this would not increase the chances of escalation. Emphasizing the utility of deterrent threats, he recommended threatening China with nuclear weapons.³⁶

Further, as he had done during the Korean War, he explicitly advocated challenging political restraints on the first use of nuclear weapons. The United States, he said, should not be bound by the restrictions of the Korean War, including the “gentleman’s agreement” on not using nuclear weapons. This would keep the Chinese out of the war.³⁷ The former president’s statements suggest that he, like the JCS, perceived few material constraints on the use of nuclear weapons – he believed that nuclear weapons would be useful on the battlefield, saw minimal escalation risks, and demonstrated no evident concern about long-term consequences of their use. The former Allied supreme commander uttered no cautionary words of any kind to Johnson and his advisors. In his view, the main constraint on use of nuclear weapons was a political-normative one – the “gentleman’s agreement” – which he advocated breaking. It might be argued that he was an aging general no longer in the loop, but his statements are entirely consistent with those he made when he was president.³⁸

Eisenhower’s views on the use of nuclear weapons were shared by South Vietnamese leader General Nguyen Khanh, who had told Rusk during the latter’s visit to Southeast Asia in April 1964 that as far as he was concerned the United States could use anything it wanted against China.³⁹ Eager to expand the war to the North, Khanh had no objections to the use of nuclear weapons, noting on another occasion that the decisive use of atomic bombs on Japan had saved not only American but also Japanese lives.⁴⁰

³⁶ Memo of a meeting with President Johnson, Washington, DC, February 17, 1965. *FRUS 1964–68*, 2, p. 305.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, *FRUS 1964–68*, 2, p. 305. In May 1962, Eisenhower had also recommended to Kennedy the use of nuclear weapons in the Laos crisis.

³⁸ See Chapters 4 and 5. David Kaiser argues that Eisenhower showed in the meeting that he had been kept well informed of the administration’s policy and its rationale. Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 403.

³⁹ Memo of conversation between Secretary of State Rusk and Prime Minister Khanh, Saigon, April 18, 1964. *FRUS 1964–68*, 1, p. 244.

⁴⁰ Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Department of State, Honolulu, June 1, 1964. *FRUS 1964–68*, 1, p. 410.

Rusk, for his part, did not share Eisenhower's views on nuclear weapons, but he endorsed the former president's recommendations to institute a "campaign of pressure" against North Vietnam. In a strong personal memo to President Kennedy shortly after the meeting with Eisenhower, he wrote, "Everything possible should be done to throw back the Hanoi-Viet Cong aggression – even at the risk of major escalation."⁴¹ At an NSC meeting in May 1964, Rusk had suggested moving a US division in Korea to Southeast Asia, and making a public declaration that any attack on South Korea would be met by the use of nuclear weapons.⁴² He believed that if escalation brought about a major Chinese attack, it would also involve use of nuclear arms, a risk he was willing to take. But like the military, Rusk thought the escalation risks were low. He thought that the Chinese leaders were "practical men" who would act prudently, in part because of the US nuclear arsenal. As he noted to the Romanian foreign minister in October 1965, "After all, Chinese nuclear capability within the foreseeable future will always be trivial as compared to that of the US."⁴³ Nevertheless, Rusk vigorously opposed bombing near the Chinese border, and, although he clearly found some use for nuclear threats, unlike Eisenhower, he did not actually advocate the use of nuclear weapons.⁴⁴

The military's benign views of the escalation risks were especially alarming to Undersecretary of State George Ball, who worried about a protracted ground war with China, which might produce substantial US casualties. As he wrote in a famous skeptical memo on the US conduct of the war to McNamara, Bundy, and Rusk in October 1964, "At this point, we should certainly expect mounting pressure for the use of at least tactical nuclear weapons. The American people would not again accept the frustrations and anxieties that resulted from our abstention from nuclear combat in Korea." Ball worried that the fact that there was no longer any shortage of suitable nuclear

⁴¹ Dean Rusk to the President, February 23, 1965, "Deployment," vol. II, tabs 61–87, NSCH, Box 40, NSF, LBJL, quoted in McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 173.

⁴² NSC Executive Committee Meeting, Washington, DC, May 24, 1964, *FRUS 1964–68*, 1, p. 371.

⁴³ Memo of conversation, Secretary's Dinner for Rumanian Foreign Minister Manescu, Washington, DC, October 14, 1965, *FRUS 1964–68*, 3, pp. 455–56.

⁴⁴ Rusk's tragic history on the Korea issue undoubtedly influenced these views. He was haunted all his life by the unexpected Chinese attack across the Yalu river in November 1950, which had occurred on his watch as assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs. Because of this, he had a tendency to see all problems of communism in Asia as threats of invasion from the north.

warheads removed an important material constraint on their use. "The rationalization of a departure from the *self-denying ordinance of Korea* would be that we did not have battlefield nuclear weapons in 1950 – yet we do have them today."⁴⁵ Given a situation of nuclear plenitude, and the military's benign assessment of the consequences of a wider war or using nuclear weapons, Ball worried that there were few military or material constraints on the military's analysis of nuclear options.

Ball and others sensitive to escalation risks also worried about the uncertain Soviet reaction to a US use of nuclear weapons. He wrote in his October 1964 memo, "While one cannot be certain, the best judgment is that the Soviet Union could not sit by and let nuclear weapons be used against China."⁴⁶ Similarly, in a lengthy memo to Johnson on the same day as the meeting with Eisenhower, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who opposed the 1965 decision to expand the war, cautioned that if a war with China had been ruled out in 1952–53 when only the United States had a usable nuclear capability, it would be even harder to justify such a war now. "No one really believes the Soviet Union would allow us to destroy Communist China with nuclear weapons, as Russia's status as a world power would be undermined if she did."⁴⁷ At the Honolulu conference on June 2, 1964, Rusk had also noted the risk of provoking a nuclear exchange with the Soviets, "with all that this involved."⁴⁸

Nevertheless, unlike in previous Cold War crises, during the Vietnam conflict US military leaders did not think war with the Soviet Union was imminent, and were not deterred in their conduct of the war by fear of Soviet entry into the hostilities. This was due in part to the Sino-Soviet split and the highly public animosity between the two Communist great powers by the mid-1960s. It was also due to the relative "detente" between the United States and the Soviet Union in the wake of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Official US intelligence estimates consistently stated that it was unlikely either China or the Soviet Union would intervene unless the United States invaded North Vietnam with a massive show of troops, bombed China, or attacked

⁴⁵ George Ball, "How Valid are the Assumptions Underlying our Vietnam Policies?" Memo, October 5, 1964. Reprinted in *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 230, no. 1 (July 1972), pp. 41–42. Emphasis added.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴⁷ Memo from Vice President Humphrey to President Johnson, Washington, DC, February 17, 1965. *FRUS 1964–68*, 2, p. 311. In reality, the Eisenhower administration did not rule out war with China in 1953. See Chapter 4.

⁴⁸ *PP*, vol. III, p. 175.

Soviet supply ships in Haiphong harbor. A Special National Intelligence Estimate of October 9, 1964 stated that "We are almost certain that both Hanoi and Peiping are anxious not to become involved in the kind of war in which the great weight of US weaponry could be brought to bear against them. Even if Hanoi and Peiping estimated that the US would not use nuclear weapons against them, they could not be sure of this ..."⁴⁹

By mid-1965 the administration was convinced that the Soviet Union's commitment to long-term improvement of relations with the West took precedence over its support for North Vietnam. In spring 1965, after operation Rolling Thunder had begun, Chinese leader Zhou Enlai signaled to Washington through the Pakistanis and the British that Chinese forces would not become involved militarily in Vietnam if the United States refrained from invading North Vietnam or China and did not bomb the North's Red River dikes. However, should war break out, even nuclear weapons would not force them to quit, and the war would have no boundaries.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, President Johnson was determined, even obsessed, with keeping the war restrained, a view shared by McNamara and others, who thought that even if the actual risks of a wider war were low, the consequences were unacceptable. Uncontrolled escalation could lead to possibly catastrophic outcomes. Johnson and his advisors, veterans of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, were committed to limiting as much as possible the geographical area of the conflict and the volume of force used. Johnson, in particular, was "haunted by the ceaseless fear" of Soviet and Chinese intervention.⁵¹

Nevertheless, although escalation concerns were a constraining factor, they were far from determining.⁵² In practice, the fear of defeat

⁴⁹ Quoted in memo from Walt Rostow to Secretary of State Rusk, November 23, 1964. *PP*, vol. III, p. 645. See also Special National Intelligence Estimate, SNIE 50-2-64, Washington, May 25, 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-68, 1, p. 380.

⁵⁰ Chen Jian, "China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964-69," *The China Quarterly*, no. 142 (June 1995), pp. 366-67; Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, pp. 439-40.

⁵¹ George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: Wiley, 1996), 2nd edn, pp. 5, 46.

⁵² Both Ball and McNamara later stated that they overestimated the risk of war with China. In his 1982 memoirs, Ball conceded that, in hindsight, he exaggerated the risk of the Chinese threat and possible entry into the war, but that at the time "we knew almost nothing about what was going on in Chinese foreign policy." George W. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs* (New York: Norton, 1982), p. 505, fn. 10. McNamara described later the "totally incorrect appraisal of the 'Chinese threat' to our security" but said it was a widely shared view among top officials. McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 218-19.

in Vietnam repeatedly made significant risks of escalation acceptable. On February 9, 1965, McGeorge Bundy wrote to Senator Mike Mansfield that the administration was willing to run the risk of war with China, and implied a willingness to make a sacrifice at least equal to that of the Korean War.⁵³ Further, US officials were not totally averse to making nuclear threats. In a not-for-attribution briefing to US reporters on April 22, 1965, just after the first deployment of US troops to Vietnam, McNamara defended US strategy there and went on to make a not-so-veiled nuclear threat. The Johnson administration was shifting its focus to a greater effort to win the ground war. As recorded by a *New York Times* reporter, McNamara stated:

We are NOT following a strategy that recognizes any sanctuary or *any weapons restriction*. But we would use nuclear weapons only after fully applying non-nuclear arsenal. In other words, if 100 planes couldn't take out a target, we wouldn't necessarily go to nuclear weapons; we would try 200 planes, and so on. But "inhibitions" on using nuclear weapons are NOT "overwhelming." Conceded it would be a "gigantic step." Quote: "We'd use whatever weapons we felt necessary to achieve our objective, recognizing that one must offset against the price" – and the price includes all psychological, propaganda factors, etc. Also fallout on innocent. "Inconceivable" under current circumstances that nuclear would provide a net gain against the terrific price that would be paid. NOT inconceivable that the price would be paid in some future circumstances McNamara refuses to predict.⁵⁴

Appearing in the newspapers on April 25, these remarks provoked concerns about the possible use of nuclear weapons. McNamara sought to quash speculations the next day.⁵⁵ "There is no military requirement for nuclear weapons" in the present and foreseeable situation, he said, "and no useful purpose can be served by speculation on remote contingencies."⁵⁶ Yet, as David Kaiser notes, McNamara's original threat could not have been accidental.⁵⁷

⁵³ Letter from the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to Senator Mike Mansfield, February 9, 1965, *FRUS 1964-68*, 2, pp. 94, 96.

⁵⁴ "Background Briefing With Secretary McNamara," memorandum, April 22, 1965, US Policy in the Vietnam War, 1954-68, VI01501, Vietnam Conference, June 1997, Box 3, NSA. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁵ Tom Wicker, "President Plans No Major Change in Vietnam Policy," *New York Times*, April 25, 1965, pp. 1, 3.

⁵⁶ Jack Raymonds, "McNamara Calls Hanoi Aggression More Flagrant," *New York Times*, April 25, 1965, p. 1; April 27, 1965, pp. 1, 36.

⁵⁷ Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 432.

Even McGeorge Bundy toyed with the idea of nuclear threats. In a memo to McNamara in June 1965 criticizing a vast increase in US troops that McNamara was planning, Bundy mentioned Eisenhower's nuclear threats in the Korean War and suggested that the United States "should at least consider what realistic threat of larger action is available to us for communication to Hanoi." He added, "A full interdiction of supplies to North Vietnam by air and sea is a possible candidate for such an ultimatum. These are weapons which may be more useful to us if we do not have to use them."⁵⁸ McNamara wrote later that he did not share Bundy's views on nuclear weapons and threatening their use, though he did on everything else – a recollection that is clearly inconsistent with some of his behavior at the time.⁵⁹

The nuclear threat may have been what Bundy suggested – a strategy of communicating seriousness to Hanoi and Moscow. Soviet leaders indeed got word that US officials were entertaining nuclear options, a prospect they viewed with the greatest alarm. According to historian Ilya Gaiduk, drawing on newly available Soviet documents, in summer 1965 Soviet leaders received regular reports that the United States might resort to nuclear weapons to suppress the insurgency in South Vietnam. In June 1965, Soviet intelligence informed the Kremlin that in a conversation with Italian Foreign Minister Amintore Fanfani, Rusk had admitted that the prospect of using tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam was on the agenda of American policymakers.⁶⁰ Although it is unclear how reliable the reporting was, or what exactly "on the agenda" meant, the report apparently spurred Soviet leaders to consider seriously the question of US readiness to wage a nuclear war and the Johnson administration's intentions in this regard.⁶¹

There thus appears to have been some pattern of threatmaking, even if it was a bluff. At times during 1964–65, comments by Bundy, Rusk, and other political leaders showed a willingness to run risks that might have led to nuclear war against China, much as the Chiefs were advocating. On balance, however, as the next sections show, top civilian leaders of the Johnson administration strongly opposed the

⁵⁸ Memo from the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to Secretary of Defense McNamara, June 30, 1965, *FRUS 1964–68*, 3, p. 391.

⁵⁹ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 194.

⁶⁰ Ilya Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), p. 73.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

use of nuclear weapons in the war, not simply because of escalation risks but also because of political and normative considerations.

Political and normative concerns

In the face of uncertainty and disagreement over escalation risks, political and normative concerns about using nuclear weapons may have become particularly salient, if not decisive, for many top officials. As in Korea, US leaders worried that, given world public abhorrence of nuclear weapons – even stronger now than in the 1950s – the use of such weapons against Asians would jeopardize the US moral and leadership position in the eyes of friends and allies. In a memo to President Johnson, Undersecretary Ball wrote: “To use nuclear weapons against the Chinese would obviously raise the most profound political problems. Not only would their use generate probably irresistible pressures for a major Soviet involvement, but the United States would be vulnerable to the charge that it was willing to use nuclear weapons against non-whites only.”⁶²

Indeed, foreign leaders privately and publicly cautioned against use of nuclear weapons. President Chiang Kai Shek, leader of nationalist China, told Rusk in Taiwan during Rusk’s trip to Southeast Asia in April 1964 that he was “opposed in principle” to the use of nuclear weapons, “particularly in settling the China problem.”⁶³ Returning to Washington, Rusk reported to the NSC that he had been impressed by Chiang’s “passionate statement” that “nuclear war in Asia would be wrong.”⁶⁴ Chiang’s opposition to the use of nuclear weapons undoubtedly stemmed from his concern that Taiwan would be the most likely object of a Chinese counterattack, probably an overwhelming one, and Chiang and his regime would be at risk. A month later, in Honolulu, Rusk noted that “many free world leaders would oppose this [use of nuclear weapons].”⁶⁵ When the French ambassador to Washington suggested to Rusk in July 1964 that a nuclear threat might have a “most sobering effect” on the Chinese, Rusk again responded that Asians were strongly opposed to the use of nuclear

⁶² Memo from Acting Secretary of State Ball to President Johnson, February 13, 1965. *FRUS 1964–68*, 2, p. 255.

⁶³ Excerpts from Secretary Rusk’s Conversation with President Chiang Kai-shek, April 16, 1964. At www.seas.gwu.edu/nsarchive/coldwar/documents.

⁶⁴ 528th NSC meeting, April 22, 1964. *FRUS 1964–68*, 1, p. 258; *PP*, vol. III, p. 65.

⁶⁵ Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Department of State, Honolulu, June 1, 1964, *FRUS 1964–68*, 1, p. 410.

weapons in Asia.⁶⁶ Other foreign leaders urging restraint included U Thant, Secretary-General of the UN, Prime Minister Lester Pearson of Canada, and British Prime Minister Harold Wilson.⁶⁷ Mounting public opposition to the war gave US leaders a demoralizing foretaste of the kind of world public outrage that use of nuclear weapons might provoke.

It was not only the concerns and abhorrence of others that played a role, however. A nuclear taboo was taking hold among Johnson and his advisors. President Johnson, especially, was obsessed with limiting the war. Like Truman during the Korean War, he abhorred the thought that he might ever have to consider the use of nuclear weapons. His memoirs make no mention of nuclear weapons being considered in Vietnam.⁶⁸ His senior advisors have testified strongly that by as early as 1964 Johnson was clear in his own mind that he would not order a first use of nuclear weapons except perhaps in the case of overwhelming Soviet aggression in Europe. He never raised with these advisors the question of how far the American people would support a decision to use the bomb in Vietnam.⁶⁹

Johnson had spoken out strongly during the 1964 presidential campaign when Senator Barry Goldwater, campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination in May 1964, suggested in a speech that tactical nuclear weapons should be treated more like conventional weapons, and that they should be used in Vietnam. In a speech in Detroit on Labor Day, 1964, Johnson came out strongly against Goldwater's views. Describing the catastrophe of nuclear war, he said, "Make no mistake. There is no such thing as a conventional nuclear weapon." He continued:

For 19 peril-filled years no nation has loosed the atom against another. To do so now is a political decision of the highest order. And it would lead us down an uncertain path of blows and counterblows whose

⁶⁶ Rusk meeting with Ambassador Alphonse, French Embassy, July 20, 1964, *FRUS 1964-68*, 1, p. 557.

⁶⁷ Memo of conversation between President Johnson and Prime Minister Pearson, Hilton Hotel, NY, May 28, 1964. *FRUS 1964-68*, 1, p. 395; Telegram from the secretary of state to the Department of State, Honolulu, June 1, 1964, *ibid.*, p. 410.

⁶⁸ Lyndon Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984, 1971).

⁶⁹ Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, p. 537; Robert S. McNamara, "The Military Role of Nuclear Weapons: Perceptions and Misperceptions," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 62, no. 1 (Fall 1983), pp. 58-80.

outcome none may know. No President of the United States can divest himself of the responsibility for such a decision.⁷⁰

Johnson's statement is a powerful one and emphasizes both the "tradition of non-use" and the danger of uncontrollable escalation. Bundy wrote later that although there was politics in Johnson's speech, there was "passionate conviction" as well.⁷¹ Two factors appeared to be key in Johnson's thinking: the long-term effect of any use of the bomb "on the survival of man" – a prudential consideration – and the desire not to be the first president in twenty years to use nuclear weapons, that is, to break the powerful "tradition" of non-use that had now developed – a taboo consideration. For Johnson, it appears, the use of the bomb in Vietnam was quite literally "unthinkable."

Many of Johnson's advisors – especially Robert McNamara and Dean Rusk – already possessed a set of strongly held beliefs about nuclear weapons by this time. Cold War crises over Berlin and Laos (1961) and Soviet missiles in Cuba (1962) had already forced them to confront the possibility of using nuclear weapons. Further, in the early 1960s, an emerging debate among the fledgling group of civilian arms control analysts on the merits of a "no-first-use" policy began to challenge the logic of the prevailing US deterrence policy based on the threat to use nuclear weapons first.⁷²

The growing opposition to the policy of use of tactical nuclear weapons significantly reflected McNamara's personal views. From early in his tenure as secretary of defense, McNamara opposed the use of nuclear weapons, viewing them as morally objectionable and lacking in utility, issues he often ran together. He had been horrified by the briefing he received in early February 1961, after only two weeks in office, from General Thomas Power, commander of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), on Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) No. 62, the US plan for nuclear war inherited from the Eisenhower administration. It called for "an all-out preemptive first strike on the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China, involving a

⁷⁰ "Remarks in Cadillac Square," September 7, 1964, in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963–64*, vol. I (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1965).

⁷¹ Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, p. 538.

⁷² See Morton Halperin, "Proposal for a Ban on the Use of Nuclear Weapons," Institute for Defense Analyses, Special Studies Group, Study Memorandum No. 4 (Washington, DC: IDA, 1961); Thornton Read, *A Proposal to Neutralize Nuclear Weapons: Pros and Cons*, Center of International Studies, Policy Memo No. 28 (Princeton, NJ: Woodrow Wilson School, 1961); Robert Tucker, *Proposal for No First Use of Nuclear Weapons* (Princeton, NJ: Woodrow Wilson School, 1963).

million times as much explosive power as used in Hiroshima, in response to an actual or merely impending invasion of Europe by the Soviet Union that involved no nuclear weapons at all. Millions of Chinese would be destroyed for no obvious reason."⁷³ Returning to Washington, McNamara ordered a review of the nuclear stockpile, which eventually resulted in a unilateral 50 percent cut in stockpile megatonnage. He also ordered an increase in non-nuclear capabilities for countering conventional aggression so that the United States would not be forced to rely on tactical nuclear weapons.⁷⁴

McNamara apparently decided very early on that the United States should never strike first with nuclear weapons. This was made clear in policy documents he sent to the JCS chairman shortly after the war plan briefing that so disturbed him.⁷⁵ In later years he stated frequently that he had privately advised both Kennedy and Johnson never to initiate the use of nuclear weapons, and they had agreed.⁷⁶

Daniel Ellsberg, a Pentagon planner who disagreed with McNamara's strong advocacy of bombing North Vietnam, and who later became famous for leaking the *Pentagon Papers* to the press, nevertheless felt that McNamara shared his strong personal abhorrence of nuclear weapons. Recalling a private meeting with McNamara in 1961 in which McNamara spoke with "great passion" about the dangers of nuclear weapons and US nuclear war plans, Ellsberg wrote that "he impressed me strongly and positively that day with his conviction that under no circumstances must there be a first use of US nuclear weapons in Europe." He added, "I've never had a stronger sense in another person of a kindred awareness of this situation and of the intensity of his concern to change it."⁷⁷ After the meeting, McNamara's assistant told Ellsberg that Johnson's thinking on this subject was "not one iota" different from McNamara's.⁷⁸ This meeting took place

⁷³ Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), pp. 270–72. Physicist Herbert York, a weapons consultant for the government who accompanied McNamara on the trip to SAC, recalled that the visitors were "just as impressed, awed, and even stunned" as he had been when he first heard the war plan briefing a year earlier. Herbert York, *Making Weapons, Talking Peace* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), pp. 185, 204.

⁷⁴ York, *Making Weapons*, p. 204. Kaufmann, *The McNamara Strategy*, ch. 2.

⁷⁵ Memo, McNamara to Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Task Force Reports," February 10, 1961, US Nuclear History, 00307, NSA, p. 1. This is discussed at greater length in Chapter 7.

⁷⁶ McNamara, "The Military Role of Nuclear Weapons," and McNamara, *In Retrospect*.

⁷⁷ Ellsberg, *Secrets*, pp. 57, 59. ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 60.

even before the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, an event which drove home to McNamara the dangers of uncontrolled escalation.

Like McNamara, Dean Rusk, secretary of state to both Kennedy and Johnson, found nuclear weapons abhorrent. With a background in international law, he took a strongly principled approach to diplomacy and America's role in the world. George Ball, who disagreed with Rusk's fairly aggressive views on the war, nevertheless described him as a man of "extraordinary integrity and selflessness."⁷⁹ According to Rusk, "we never seriously considered using nuclear weapons in Vietnam." He advocated aggressive uses of force but opposed use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam and elsewhere because of fallout risks, political costs, lack of good targets in Vietnam, adequate conventional alternatives, but especially because of the unacceptable killing of civilians.⁸⁰ It is clear that Rusk had been impressed by the opposition to the use of nuclear weapons he had encountered during his trips to Asia. He noted that many Asians seemed to see an element of racial discrimination in the use of nuclear arms. Was it something the United States would do to Asians but not to Westerners?⁸¹ He wrote later, "Under no circumstances would I have participated in an order to launch a [nuclear] first strike, with the possible exception of a massive [Soviet] conventional attack on West Europe," which he thought unlikely.⁸² "The only rational purpose of nuclear weapons is to ensure that no one else will use them against us."⁸³

These are remarkable admissions from McNamara and Rusk. In effect, top US officials harbored private commitments to "no first use," in part for moral reasons, despite the fact that such views directly contradicted official US deterrence policy relying on a threat to initiate use of nuclear weapons. (These views also contradicted US plans for limited war emphasizing first use of nuclear weapons in a conflict with large Chinese forces in Asia.) McGeorge Bundy wrote later that he believed that McNamara and Rusk would have resigned if President Johnson had asked for a decision to use the bomb in Vietnam, and that Johnson "quietly appreciated this."⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 384.

⁸⁰ Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1990), p. 457.

⁸¹ Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Department of State, Honolulu, June 1, 1964, *FRUS 1964-68*, 1, p. 410.

⁸² Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 248.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 366. ⁸⁴ Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, p. 537.

The 1964 Ball memo: The political costs of using nuclear weapons

The most systematic analysis of the political consequences of using nuclear weapons in Vietnam came from Undersecretary Ball in his October 1964 memo criticizing the war. In a section on "Pressure for Use of Atomic Weapons," more than a dozen paragraphs long, he focused entirely on the political costs for the United States of any use of the bomb. Notably absent was any attention to military consequences – the risks of either nuclear retaliation or escalation to a wider war, with only a one-sentence mention of the danger of Soviet intervention following a US use of nuclear weapons. Nor was Ball concerned with the military utility of nuclear weapons, which he appeared to assume. The political, not military, consequences of a US nuclear attack were the salient issue for him.

In his analysis, Ball noted the lack of meaningful distinction between tactical and strategic weapons in the eyes of the public, and the "profound shock" that would follow any use of nuclear weapons "not merely in Japan but also among the nonwhite nations on every continent." He predicted that "our loss of prestige" in the non-aligned and less-developed countries would be "enormously magnified if we were led to use even one nuclear weapon."⁸⁵

Most significant, however, was an analysis of the consequences of legitimizing use of nuclear weapons. If the United States used such weapons, Ball wrote:

our action would liberate the Soviet Union from the inhibitions that world sentiment has imposed on it. It would upset the fragile balance of terror on which much of the world has come to depend for the maintenance of peace. Whether or not the Soviet Union actually used nuclear weapons against other nations, the very fact that we had provided a justification for their use would create a new wave of fear . . . The Communists would certainly point out that we were the only nation that had ever employed nuclear weapons in anger. And the Soviet Union would emphasize its position of relative virtue in having a nuclear arsenal which it had never used.

The consequences of this could not be overstated, he wrote. The first use of the bomb since August 1945 by the United States would set back all the progress made in superpower relations over the previous

⁸⁵ Ball, "How Valid," p. 42.

few years. It would also generate domestic “resentment against a Government that had gotten America in a position where we had again been forced to use nuclear power to our own world discredit.”⁸⁶

Ball’s concern about the dangerous precedent set by the use of even a single nuclear weapon was not primarily because it would demonstrate that such weapons were militarily useful or that it would invite Soviet retaliation. Rather, it would suggest that nuclear weapons were *legitimate*. If the US resorted to the bomb, the Soviet Union would then feel free to use it “against other nations.” Legitimizing the use of nuclear weapons would undermine a major normative inhibition on resorting to them in war. Such an inhibition was an important factor stabilizing successful nuclear deterrence (“the balance of terror”). In other words, a shared normative expectation of non-use was *an essential element of*, not an alternative to, stable nuclear deterrence. Because of this, Ball wrote, the country that broke the tradition of non-use of nuclear weapons would be stigmatized as a pariah among nations.

Ball’s memo – or at least parts of it – were not well received. Rusk and McNamara entirely rejected his questioning of the administration’s arguments for conventional bombing of North Vietnam. It is likely that they were quite sympathetic to his arguments about nuclear weapons, however, which accorded substantially with their own views.⁸⁷

Challenging the taboo

As in Korea, those who disagreed with official policy thought that normative concerns inhibited policymakers from thinking “rationally” about nuclear options. Senator Barry M. Goldwater’s public attempts during the 1964 presidential campaign to reintroduce the notion of “conventional nuclear weapons” – the same notion that Eisenhower and Dulles had sought unsuccessfully to promote ten years earlier – ran up against the taboo. In May 1964, Goldwater argued publicly that nuclear weapons should have been used at Dien Bien Phu to defoliate trees, and that, in similar fashion, “low-yield atomic weapons” should be used as defoliants along South Vietnam’s borders, along with an expanded conventional bombing campaign of North Vietnam.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁸⁷ The memo as a whole did have an important effect on William Bundy’s drafting of the options papers the following month, where option C more or less followed Ball’s arguments regarding Vietnam strategy. Kaiser, *American Tragedy*.

UN Secretary-General U Thant immediately criticized the idea, while the Pentagon responded to “Goldwater’s folly” by describing technical characteristics of nuclear weapons, arguing that it was absurd to call them conventional weapons.⁸⁸ McNamara wrote later that Goldwater’s statements “implied that he saw no real difference between conventional weapons and nuclear weapons. He went so far as to suggest the president should instruct commanders in Vietnam to use any weapons in our arsenal. I profoundly disagreed and said so.”⁸⁹

Goldwater’s effort, like Eisenhower’s and Dulles’ before him, to blur the distinction between conventional and nuclear weapons represented an attempt to challenge the growing taboo on the use of nuclear weapons. The strong government and public reaction illustrated how anathema his view was to most people. The Johnson administration used the controversy to political advantage, and Goldwater’s pro-nuclear views contributed significantly to his landslide defeat.⁹⁰ By the mid-1960s, advocating use of nuclear weapons in a campaign speech was beyond the bounds of acceptability for most people.

Samuel Cohen, the weapons physicist at the RAND Corporation who had advocated use of tactical nuclear weapons in the Korean War, and who was one of the rare enthusiasts for such an option in the Vietnam War, also ran up against the taboo mindset. As he recalled, “anyone in the Pentagon who was caught thinking seriously of using nuclear weapons in this conflict would find his neck in the wringer in short order.”⁹¹ He nevertheless attempted to interest Washington in the virtues of “discriminate” nuclear weapons in Vietnam. He recalled, “I put my mind to work on how nuclear weapons might be used to thwart the Vietcong.”⁹² His account of his efforts to promote tactical nuclear options during the war, as well as his analysis of policymakers’ and scientists’ resistance to this option, provide a fascinating window into the operation of the taboo.

As he recalled later, during a presentation on tactical nuclear weapons he gave to key planners in the State Department in 1965,

⁸⁸ *New York Times*, May 27, 1964, p. 1; White, *The Making of the President 1964*, pp. 315–16.

⁸⁹ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 150.

⁹⁰ Lawrence Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1954–1970* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 438. Johnson received 61.1 percent of the popular vote and 90 percent of the electoral vote. White, *The Making of the President 1964*, pp. 315–16.

⁹¹ Samuel Cohen, *The Truth About the Neutron Bomb* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1983), pp. 84, 95.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 84.

it quickly became evident that however intrigued his audience was from a technical point of view, they were “adamantly opposed to the development and use of such weapons from a political point of view.” During the talk he described several hypothetical weapon systems in which low-yield nuclear weapons would be used to propel metal projectiles or massive conventional weapons payloads to the battlefield. In one example, the nuclear explosion would take place over the battlefield but would give “only conventional effects on the target.” He expected that there might be some interest in these options, which he argued were more effective and discriminating than standard high explosive attacks. Instead, “the opposition remained unanimous, for the simple reason that it was not really the nature of the effects that counted. Rather, it was the fact that a nuclear explosion was taking place over the area of theater operations.”⁹³

Even if the nuclear explosions took place in the United States, as in another example, his audience remained adamantly opposed. These reactions impressed upon Cohen the depth of official feeling against the military use of nuclear explosives. “By now I realized that as long as a nuclear explosive was used in anger, US policy held the type of explosive and geographical location of detonation to be absolutely irrelevant. The cardinal point was that it was the act of detonating the explosive in anger that was a political taboo.”⁹⁴ Cohen’s fictitious weapons amounted to an explicit – and ingenious – device for exploring the scope and content of the nuclear taboo, a belief which he did not personally share.

It was becoming increasingly clear that, in contrast to the Korean conflict ten years earlier, use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam was indeed increasingly “unthinkable,” with a mounting burden of proof for the use of such weapons. The operation of a nuclear taboo was visible in a variety of ways. Political leaders rebuffed in outrage overt attempts to erode the taboo, such as Goldwater’s effort to promote the notion of “conventional nuclear weapons.” Not only were top officials privately opposed to use of nuclear weapons, but – consistent with taboo thinking – even the mere analysis of such weapons in the *de rigueur* cost-benefit fashion for which the Kennedy administration was famous was essentially taboo. Samuel Cohen’s formerly good relationship with Pentagon officials had plummeted because of his pro-nuclear weapons views. He complained later, “When the Kennedy

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 93–94.

guys came in, my relationship with the Office of the Secretary of Defense dropped off to approximately zero. Those in key positions . . . had no use for my views.”⁹⁵ On December 2, 1965, McNamara referred in a telephone conversation with Johnson to certain “very dangerous alternatives that we can’t even put in writing around here, [and] certainly don’t want to talk to anyone else about.”⁹⁶ One interpretation of McNamara’s phone call is that there was a taboo in the Johnson administration against writing anything down on the issue of nuclear options.

The 1966 Jason Report: Assessing the military utility of tactical nuclear weapons

Throughout 1966 and into 1967, both the Joint Chiefs and General William Westmoreland, the American commander in Vietnam, pressed for a more ambitious bombing program. They lobbied for a major escalation of the war and more troops in 1966, after the much-criticized Christmas 1965 bombing pause. By the early summer of 1966, increasing frustrations over the inability of the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign to interdict the Ho Chi Min Trail led to both public and internal pressure to reevaluate the bombing strategy.

It was in this context that four civilian scientists consulting for the US government conducted the only known systematic study of the military utility of tactical nuclear weapons in the war. They were part of the JASONS – a group of some forty young scientists who had met each summer since 1959 to consider defense-related problems for the Pentagon.⁹⁷ As the war escalated in the spring of 1966, some of the scientists heard a high-ranking Pentagon official with access to President Johnson say, “It might be a good idea to toss in a nuke from time to time, just to keep the other side guessing.”⁹⁸ Physicists Freeman Dyson and Steven Weinberg, along with Robert Gomer and S. Courtenay Wright, both at the University of Chicago at the time, were so appalled by this statement they decided something must be done.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 95, 84.

⁹⁶ LBJ, taped conversations, 1995 release; as quoted in Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, p. 433.

⁹⁷ For more on the JASONS, see Gregg Herken, *Cardinal Choices: Presidential Science Advising from the Atomic Bomb to SDI* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 152–56. The discussion in this section draws on Peter Hayes and Nina Tannenwald, “Nixing Nukes in Vietnam,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 59, no. 3 (2003), pp. 52–59.

⁹⁸ Freeman Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 149.

Worried that nuclear weapons were not “unthinkable” enough, the scientists obtained permission from the Defense Department to carry out a systematic study of the likely consequences of using tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam. They explicitly intended it to put a definitive end to any lingering thoughts that such weapons might be useful in the war. Weinberg wrote later:

I, and I believe others as well, felt that the use of nuclear weapons would make the war even more destructive than it had already become; it would create a terrible precedent for the use of nuclear weapons for something other than deterrence; it wouldn't help much with the war; and it would open up the possibility of nuclear attacks on our own bases in Vietnam. All this was an immediate reaction, not based on any careful analysis. So we decided to do the analysis.⁹⁹

Whereas Ball's 1964 memo had emphasized political consequences, this study focused on the military utility of nuclear weapons in the conflict.

After “three man-months” of work, the authors produced a highly classified study which presented their analysis and conclusions in what Dyson later described as “a deliberate hard-boiled military style.” The study sought to demonstrate “that even from the narrowest military point of view, disregarding all political and ethical considerations, the use of nuclear weapons would be a disastrous mistake.”¹⁰⁰

Recently declassified, the 55-page study makes a strong case against the utility of tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam.¹⁰¹ The analysis focused on whether there would be suitable targets for the tactical use of nuclear weapons and on the effects on enemy ground operations. The report identified numerous targets against which, in principal, tactical nuclear weapons would be useful. Airfields were “ideal targets for TNW [tactical nuclear weapons] and are expensive targets for conventional bombing.” Use of TNW would quickly render the ten remaining operational airfields in North Vietnam inoperable.¹⁰² Other potential targets were bridges, large troop concentrations, missile sites, tunnel systems, and Viet Cong bases in South

⁹⁹ Steven Weinberg, communication with Peter Hayes, December 25, 2002.

¹⁰⁰ Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe*, p. 149.

¹⁰¹ F. Dyson, R. Gomer, S. Weinberg, and S. C. Wright, “Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Southeast Asia,” Study S-266, Jason Division, DAHC 15-67C-0011, Washington, DC, March 1967 (hereafter Dyson report). Declassified December 2002. I am grateful to Peter Hayes of the Nautilus Institute for providing a copy of it, and for his nineteen-year effort to get it declassified.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 12.

Vietnam. "TNW can be very effective if the position of bases are known accurately, especially if attacks can be delivered without warning."

Nevertheless, the analysis highlighted numerous military obstacles to effective use: the difficulty of target acquisition, and the fact that even when good targets existed, the use of tactical nuclear weapons would not substantially affect enemy operations. In some cases, more effective alternatives were available. "So long as the enemy moves men in small groups and uses forest cover, he would offer few suitable troop targets for TNW," the study noted.¹⁰³ Destroying Viet Cong bases in South Vietnam with tactical nuclear strikes, "would require large numbers of weapons and an accurate location of targets by ground patrols."¹⁰⁴ Tactical nuclear strikes could also block roads and trails in forested areas by blowing down trees, but fallen trees could be relatively easily cut through and cleared. Using fallout from groundburst weapons to make trails impassable would require repeated use of nuclear weapons and "would not by itself provide a long-lasting barrier to the movement of men and supplies, without endangering civilian populations at up to a distance of 200 miles."¹⁰⁵ The study estimated that it would take 3,000 tactical nuclear weapons per year to interdict supply routes like the Ho Chi Minh trail. In conducting their analysis, the authors drew in part on findings from RAND and Research Analysis Corporation nuclear war-gaming studies from the late 1950s and early 1960s, as well as the 1965 Oregon Trail studies, which revealed the difficulties of timely troop target acquisition.

More problematically, US forces might become vulnerable to a Soviet-orchestrated counterattack, and first use of tactical nuclear weapons against guerrillas might set a precedent that would lead to the use of similar weapons by guerrillas against more vulnerable US targets.¹⁰⁶ The report came to a strong conclusion: "the use of TNW in Southeast Asia would offer the US no decisive military advantage if the use remained unilateral, and it would have strongly adverse military effects if the enemy were able to use TNW in reply."¹⁰⁷

Although the analysis was intended to be purely technical, in fact it included strong judgments about the political costs and consequences of using nuclear weapons. In a section toward the end, on

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 15.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

“Political Consequences,” the authors outlined escalation scenarios in response to a US use of tactical nuclear weapons, although without estimates of the scenarios’ relative probabilities. “The ultimate outcome is impossible to predict,” the authors noted. “We merely point out that general war could result, even from the least provocative use of NW that either side can devise.”¹⁰⁸

Most significantly, they argued that even if massive retaliation did not result, US first use of tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam would have serious long-range consequences:

The most important of these is probably the crossing of the nuclear threshold. As Herman Kahn points out, abstention from the use of any NW is universally recognized as a political and psychological threshold, however rational or irrational the distinction between “nuclear” and “non-nuclear” may be. Crossing it may greatly weaken the barriers to proliferation and general use of nuclear weapons. This would be to the ultimate disadvantage of the US, even if it did not increase the probability of strategic war.¹⁰⁹

Whether or not the adversary or its external allies countered with the use of nuclear weapons of their own, the authors argued, the effect of a US nuclear first use on world opinion in general and on US allies in particular would be “extremely unfavorable. With the exception of Thailand and Laos, the reaction would almost certainly be condemned even in Asia and might result in the abrogation of treaty obligations by Japan.”¹¹⁰ The effect on public opinion in the United States “would be extremely divisive, no matter how much preparation preceded it.” In sum, the authors concluded, “the political effects of US first use of TNW in Vietnam would be uniformly bad and could be catastrophic.”¹¹¹

In short, even if the target acquisition problem could be solved (and that was not evident), for tactical nuclear weapons to be effective they would have to be used in such large quantities, and with such great frequency, that political costs would outweigh military benefits. When US vulnerability to retaliation was added in, along with the danger of the weapons spreading to guerrilla forces around the world, it amounted to a strong argument against the use of tactical nuclear weapons in the war.

The report is curious in some respects. It focused on scenarios that were already at the time widely regarded as unlikely, such as the use

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

of nuclear weapons against insurgents. The Soviet supply of tactical nuclear weapons (the report mentioned atomic mortars or recoilless rifles) to North Vietnamese forces was also an unlikely scenario, given how tightly the Soviet Union controlled its nuclear weapons. Further, the report paid no attention to what was actually in the US nuclear war plans for Southeast Asia in the mid-1960s. These puzzling features can perhaps be explained by the circumstances which motivated the scientists to undertake the study (and the Defense Department to agree to it), discussed further below.

Also notable is how the four scientists, who personally found nuclear weapons morally objectionable, took pains to couch their argument against the use of nuclear weapons in purely military terms, believing that this would enhance its reception with military planners and decisionmakers in the Pentagon and CIA, its most likely audience. As Robert Gomer explained later, "It was our purpose to show that using nuclear weapons would be immoral folly, and would set an awful precedent but we realized that these arguments would cut little ice with the powers that then were."¹¹² Weinberg, too, thought that using nuclear weapons in Vietnam would be "a terrible idea for a host of ethical and moral, but also possibly political reasons." He also thought it likely that a good case could be made against it on purely military grounds and he participated in the study with an expectation that this would be the case.¹¹³ The authors viewed their report as offering a powerful critique of the utility of nuclear weapons. "That paper gives all the reasons why you wouldn't use nuclear weapons in Vietnam," observed one of its authors in a later interview.¹¹⁴

Did the study have any effect?

The fate of this report, and its role, if any, in influencing the administration's thinking on the role of nuclear weapons in the war, remains vague. The authors handed it to their sponsors in the Defense Department, never to hear of it again.¹¹⁵ However, Seymour Deitchman, at the time at the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), a federally funded research center under contract to the Defense Department,

¹¹² Gomer commentary on Dyson report, December 2002, at www.nautilus.org/VietnamFOIA/report/JASONS.html#gomer.

¹¹³ Author interview, Austin, TX, December 2, 1998.

¹¹⁴ "Jason Division: Division Consultants Who Are Also Professors are Attacked," *Science*, February 2, 1973, p. 461.

¹¹⁵ Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe*, p. 149.

and acknowledged in the report, wrote later that the report went to McNamara's office. IDA provided administrative and technical support for the JASON group. Deitchman recalled briefings on the JASON studies of that summer to three audiences: the JASONS themselves, John McNaughton – then assistant secretary of defense for International Security Affairs, who managed the JASON relationship with McNamara – and McNamara himself.¹¹⁶

Deitchman recalled clearly the nuclear weapons study briefing to the JASONS. "I remember being struck by the main conclusion, that if we started down that route [using nuclear weapons] we risked being hurt much more than the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong . . ." McNamara received briefings on the JASON studies every year, and, according to Deitchman, was likely briefed in late August or early September 1966. This probably included a briefing on the nuclear weapons study, although Deitchman did not remember for sure. According to Deitchman, after the briefings, the report was never circulated.

Since the Defense Department had to sign off on the topics for the JASON studies (which were chosen by the JASONS themselves), why would it agree to a study on tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam? Here we have only faint but intriguing outlines. Deitchman recalled recurring talk around the Pentagon that spring and summer about using tactical nuclear weapons to block passes between North Vietnam and Laos, especially the Mu Gia Pass, a key part of the supply route heading south. The pass was heavily and unsuccessfully bombed by B-52s starting in July 1966, with heavy losses for the United States.¹¹⁷ Thus when the JASONS proposed the nuclear weapons study topic, McNaughton and McNamara might have found it a useful device for showing what a bad idea using nuclear weapons would be.

It thus remains unclear what effect the report had. It is likely that it had little or no influence on McNamara himself because he was already adamantly opposed to the use of nuclear weapons. By this point in time, he was also increasingly skeptical that the war could be won by deploying more troops to South Vietnam and intensifying the bombing of North Vietnam (he offered his resignation to Johnson in November 1967, largely over disillusionment with the war).

¹¹⁶ Seymour Deitchman, commentary on Dyson report, February 25, 2003.

¹¹⁷ See "Targeting Ho Chi Minh Trail," at www.nautilus.org/VietnamFOIA/background/HoChiMinhTrail.html

In a later interview, McNamara did not remember the study or the briefing, but conceded that the briefing could have happened. He said that he himself would have had no need for such a study, since he and his assistant McNaughton were already totally opposed to nuclear weapons, but that did not mean it was not useful.¹¹⁸

It might have, for example, helped him put an end to loose talk about nuclear options. When Deitchman returned to the Pentagon in the fall of 1966, he heard no further talk of using nuclear weapons in Vietnam. "Although I don't know," he recalled, "I think it is reasonable to conclude from that that if consideration had been given to the idea before the study, Mr. McNamara simply dismissed it as something not to think about seriously, and therefore the talk simply went away."¹¹⁹ The acuteness of the conclusions of the study regarding US vulnerabilities, both military and political, may bear some credit for this.

The war escalates

The Joint Chiefs, however, continued to advocate aggressive measures to bring the war to an end. In May 1967 they proposed increased air attacks on North Vietnam, and stated their belief that invasions of North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia might become necessary, involving the deployment of US forces to Thailand, mobilization of reserves, and, quite possibly, the use of nuclear weapons in southern China.¹²⁰ For political leaders, on the other hand, a nuclear option had become largely inconceivable. In a memo on September 12, 1967, to Walt Rostow, who had replaced McGeorge Bundy as national security advisor, Robert Ginsburgh, Rostow's deputy, listed seven military measures to achieve a "more spectacular rate of progress" in the war. The last was "Create wasteland with low yield nuclear weapons in southern part of North Vietnam – virtually unthinkable."¹²¹ McNamara later described how he was "appalled" by the "cavalier" way in which the military recommended aggressive

¹¹⁸ Personal communication with author, March 3, 2003.

¹¹⁹ Seymour Deitchman, commentary on Dyson report, February 25, 2003.

¹²⁰ McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p. 275, citing JCSM-286-67, Memo for the Secretary of Defense, Subject: Operations Against North Vietnam, May 20, 1967; and JCSM-288-67, Memo to the Secretary of Defense, Subject: Worldwide US Military Posture, May 20, 1967, CF, VN, NSF, LBJL.

¹²¹ Memo for Rostow from Robert Ginsburgh, September 12, 1967. Folder: Robert S. McNamara-SEA, NSF, Files of Walt Rostow, Box 3, LBJL, p. 2.

policies, which in his view raised unacceptable risks of war with China including possible US use of nuclear weapons.¹²²

Khe Sanh

The one attempt by the Johnson administration itself to look closely at the military utility of nuclear weapons – to relieve the siege of the Marine garrison at Khe Sanh in early 1968 – aborted quickly in a public relations nightmare. This was perhaps the moment of gravest risk of the kind anticipated by the JASONS. New evidence suggests that top administration officials discussed the topic at several meetings throughout the tense key days of late January and early February 1968, albeit with a tone of the greatest reluctance.¹²³ Johnson made it clear he had no wish to face a decision on the use of nuclear weapons and repeatedly sought assurance from military leaders that they had adequate conventional forces to defend Khe Sanh.

In a memo to General Wheeler on January 31, 1968, Robert Ginsburgh, Walt Rostow's deputy on the National Security Council and its liaison to the JCS, noted that if a desperate situation developed at Khe Sanh, where 6,000 Marines were besieged by 15,000–20,000 North Vietnamese troops, "the issue of TAC NUCS will be raised." Ginsburgh asked Wheeler whether contingency target analysis would be in order. Handwritten on the memo were notations that plans should be "very very very closely held."¹²⁴ Ginsburgh and Rostow had apparently already been discussing the issue for a week or so.¹²⁵

The next day Wheeler solicited the views of General Westmoreland and Admiral Ulysses Sharp, American commanders in Vietnam, on whether nuclear weapons should be used if the situation became desperate. Noting the perceived parallels between Khe Sanh and Dien Bien Phu, he asked whether there were suitable targets for nuclear strikes, whether some contingency planning might be in order, and "what you consider to be some of the more significant pros and cons." He cautioned them to "hold this subject very closely."¹²⁶ Westmoreland and Sharp had apparently already discussed the need

¹²² McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 160–61, 275.

¹²³ Walt Rostow Papers, Tom Johnson Papers, LBJL.

¹²⁴ Memo to General Wheeler from Robert N. Ginsburgh, January 31, 1968, NSF, Walt Rostow Papers, Box 7, LBJL.

¹²⁵ Memo from Walt Rostow to President Johnson, February 3, 1968. NSF, Rostow, Box 7, LBJL.

¹²⁶ General Wheeler to General Westmoreland and Admiral Sharp (JCS 01154), February 1, 1968, NS Files, NSC Histories, "March 31st Speech, Volume 2," Box 47, LBJL.

for some planning on the issue, and had already instituted it “under the strictest need to know basis,” Sharp wrote back the next day.¹²⁷ All three military leaders thought the use of nuclear weapons an unlikely eventuality but felt military prudence alone required some such planning.¹²⁸

As requested, Westmoreland began to convene a secret study group to analyze nuclear options. But almost immediately Washington quashed it, fearing – too late – that it would leak to the press. Johnson’s political advisors reversed course, moving rapidly to forestall any request for a nuclear option from the JCS by making sure Westmoreland had all the conventional forces he needed to defend Khe Sanh. Rostow suggested in a memo to the president on February 2 that Westmoreland be offered an extra reserve division, explaining his “desire to avoid a situation of battlefield crisis in which Westy and the JCS would ask you to release tactical nuclear weapons.” He also urged that General Wheeler be informed that it was his duty to minimize the likelihood that the Chiefs would raise the nuclear issue.¹²⁹

In a memo the next day, General Wheeler sought to reassure the president, writing that “the use of nuclear weapons should not be required in the present situation.” But he did not rule them out. “Should the situation in the DMZ area change dramatically, we should be prepared to introduce weapons of greater effectiveness against massed forces. Under such circumstances I visualize that either tactical nuclear weapons or chemical agents would be active candidates for employment.”¹³⁰ In a memo to Johnson the same day, apparently spurred by suggestions in the press and in other parts of the government that high-level considerations of nuclear weapons were under way, Rostow apologized for his blunder in raising the issue with General Wheeler and the commanders, which inadvertently created the impression that the government was thinking about using nuclear

¹²⁷ Cable from General Sharp to General Wheeler (JCS 01154), February 2, 1968, NSF, NSC Histories, “March 31st Speech, Volume 2,” Box 47, LBJL.

¹²⁸ Handwritten memo to Walt Rostow from Robert Ginsburgh, transmitting copies of Wheeler cable. Undated but sometime before February 10, 1968. Also memo from Walt Rostow to the President, February 10, 1968. Both in NSF, Rostow, Box 7, LBJL.

¹²⁹ Memo to the President from Walt Rostow, February 2, 1968. NSF, Rostow, Box 7, LBJL.

¹³⁰ Memo for the President from General Wheeler, February 3, 1968, CM-2944-68, NSF, NSC History, March 31st speech, vol. 6, Khe Sanh reports, A-S, Box 48, LBJL. John Prados and Ray W. Stubbe, *Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), p. 291.

weapons. He explained that it was never his intent that any “formal staff work” be done on the nuclear issue, adding that “the fault, therefore, is mine.”¹³¹ On February 11, Johnson ordered the termination of contingency planning on the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam.¹³²

In other words, not only should nuclear weapons not be used, nuclear options should not even be studied. No analysis should be permitted, nor even the appearance of it. The taboo qualities emerge sharply here – something that is not done, not said, not analyzed, not thought about. Not even Walt Rostow should be permitted to analyze the issue. Johnson was later furious about the “irresponsibility with respect to our planning to use nuclear weapons.”¹³³

Westmoreland, a consistent advocate of greater force in Vietnam, wrote in his memoirs that he thought consideration of tactical nuclear options at Khe Sanh a prudent idea. The region around Khe Sanh was virtually uninhabited so civilian casualties would be minimal. He saw analogies to the use of atomic bombs in World War II to send a message to Japan, as well as to the role of US nuclear threats to North Korea which many thought had ended the Korean War. He wrote that “use of a few small tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam – or even the threat of them – might have quickly brought the war there to an end.” If Washington officials were so intent on “sending a message” to Hanoi, surely small tactical nuclear weapons would do this effectively. Westmoreland felt at the time and even more strongly later that failure to consider the nuclear alternative was a “mistake.”¹³⁴

Despite the administration’s efforts, rumors that it was contemplating the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam swirled nonetheless, and the resulting popular outcry illustrated the extreme sensitivity of the issue. When Senator Eugene McCarthy, campaigning for president, aired the matter publicly a few days later, the White House and the Pentagon vehemently denied that nuclear weapons were under consideration.¹³⁵ General Wheeler told a Senate

¹³¹ Memo from Walt Rostow to President Johnson, February 3, 1968. NSF, Rostow, Box 7, LBJL.

¹³² Telegram JSC 1690 to CINCPAC, February 11, 1968, in NSC History, March 31st speech, vol. 2, Tabs A-Z and AA-ZZ.

¹³³ David M. Barrett, ed., *Lyndon B. Johnson’s Vietnam Papers* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1997), p. 722.

¹³⁴ William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), p. 338.

¹³⁵ *Washington Post*, February 12, 1968.

subcommittee that he did not think nuclear weapons were needed for Khe Sanh's defense, but if it became evident that they were, the JCS would recommend to President Johnson that they be used.¹³⁶ On February 9, testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Rusk denied the existence of any plans for the use, or of stockpiles, of nuclear weapons in Vietnam, but failed to rule out use entirely. Senator William Fulbright, chairman of the committee, along with Senator Joseph Clark and Senator George Aiken, denounced the possibility of use of nuclear weapons.¹³⁷ Although a few members of Congress called for the use of nuclear weapons if necessary to avoid a "disastrous defeat" at Khe Sanh, they were the exception.¹³⁸ British Prime Minister Harold Wilson, on a visit to Washington during this debate, said bluntly during a television interview that it would be "sheer lunacy" for the United States to use tactical nuclear weapons. It would be not only "disastrous" to America's position, he said, but it would also "run a very, very great risk of escalation for the world."¹³⁹

In a press statement on February 9, and again during a news conference on February 16, President Johnson stated categorically that Rusk, McNamara, and the JCS "at no time had ever considered or made a recommendation in any respect to the deployment of nuclear weapons."¹⁴⁰ He emphasized that any decision to use nuclear weapons rested with the President. Johnson's categorical denial was probably somewhat overstated. It was true that the president had not received any requests for the use of nuclear weapons. However, he had not received definite assurances from the JCS that they would never make such a request. Not were the Joint Chiefs able to give

¹³⁶ "Wheeler Doubts Khe Sanh Will Need Atom Weapons," *New York Times*, February 15, 1968.

¹³⁷ "Fulbright and Rusk Clash on Atom Talk," *Washington Post*, February 17, 1968. The Congressional inquiry was prompted in part by speculations about the reasons for sending four nuclear scientists to Vietnam. The scientists were in fact being sent to study the "McNamara line" – an electronic barrier to prevent North Vietnamese infiltration across the demilitarized zone separating the two Vietnams. "Rumors on Use of Atomic Arms Stirred by 'Experts' Asian Trips," *New York Times*, February 11, 1968.

¹³⁸ Letter to the President from Congressman Charles Bennett, January 31, 1968, and letter to Charles Bennett from Barefoot Sanders, February 1, 1968. NSF, Country File, Vietnam, Box 102, Folder: Vietnam 7F (2)b, 12/67–3/68, Congressional Attitudes and Statements [1 of 2], LBJL.

¹³⁹ "A-Arm Use Called Lunacy by Wilson," *Washington Post*, February 12, 1968.

¹⁴⁰ *Public Papers of the Presidents: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968–69*, book I (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1970), p. 234.

Johnson the categorical assurance that Khe Sanh could be held without nuclear weapons and under bad weather conditions that hindered conventional air support.

Overall, during the Khe Sanh crisis, political leaders displayed much greater concern, and spent much more time dealing with, the public relations dimension of nuclear weapons than their actual utility at Khe Sanh. As a *Washington Post* article put it, "Pentagon weapons experts contended the technical problems [e.g. radioactive fallout] were *almost as large as* the political problems in using nuclear weapons."¹⁴¹ On March 9, the *Washington Post* editorialized that use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam would be a "disaster."¹⁴² When Johnson administration officials met on March 25 with the "Wise Men" – a group of former high officials consulting on US military options in Vietnam – to make decisions on the failing war effort in the wake of the Tet offensive, the nuclear "lesson" of Khe Sanh was likely reflected. Rejecting a new troop request of 200,000, they also concluded, with no evident discussion, that "use of atomic weapons is unthinkable."¹⁴³

The administration did ensure that Westmoreland had sufficient conventional forces to defend Khe Sanh. The battle that took place there was, in Westmoreland's words, "an awesome display of fire-power; given the bomb-delivery capacity of the B-52s, one of the heaviest and most concentrated in the history of warfare."¹⁴⁴ B-52s eventually dropped more than 100,000 tons of explosives on a 5 square mile battlefield.¹⁴⁵ At Westmoreland's request, Johnson did permit the use at Khe Sanh of so-called controlled fragmentation munitions (COFRAM), shells and grenades, some containing submunitions, that exploded with very lethal effects. Information on the existence and use of this weapon was guarded as closely as possible.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ *Washington Post*, February 10, 1968. Emphasis added.

¹⁴² "Use of Nuclear Weapons is an Invitation to Disaster," *Washington Post*, March 9, 1968.

¹⁴³ Summary of notes by M. Bundy concerning Wise Men's meeting, March 26, 1968. Meeting Notes File, Special Advisory Group, Box 2, LBJL.

¹⁴⁴ Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 340.

¹⁴⁵ Herring, *America's Longest War*, p. 205.

¹⁴⁶ Memo to the President from Walt Rostow, February 2, 1968; and memo for the Chairman, JCS, "Movement of Certain Controlled Fragmentation Munitions (COFRAM), into Southeast Asia," both in NSF, NSC History, "March 31 Speech," Box 47, LBJL. Prados and Stubbe, *Valley of Decision*, pp. 293–4.

Public opinion

Public opinion remained opposed to the use of nuclear weapons in the war, even in the face of increasing American casualties in Vietnam. In the first stages of the war (1964–66), only limited support existed for using nuclear weapons – about 15 percent of Americans polled approved taking such a step. As the war continued, support for using nuclear weapons increased to 24 percent and then to 42 percent.¹⁴⁷ But on a question asked both before and after the winter 1968 Tet offensive about the use of “atomic ground weapons,” a Harris poll found the answer the same in both cases: about 25 percent in favor, 55 percent opposed. When the question was worded more aggressively – whether respondents would agree or disagree with the view that “we should go all-out to win a military victory in Vietnam, using atomic bombs and weapons” – some 26 percent approved and, higher than on the Harris “ground weapon” question, about 65 percent disapproved.¹⁴⁸

Thus attitudes in support of using nuclear weapons in Vietnam never reached a plurality or majority. Not only did the public largely reject using nuclear weapons, but toward the end of the war a survey of elite leaders indicated they also rejected it. Further, as Thomas Graham has reported, a more diverse base of survey questions showed that the taboo applied not only to Vietnam, but to other proposed uses of nuclear weapons as well, suggesting the more general nature of the sentiment.¹⁴⁹ This pattern of public attitudes (low support at first, then higher, but only under certain limited conditions) fits the same general pattern found in the Korean War, although the magnitudes differ. The American public was less willing to recommend the use of atomic weapons in Vietnam than in Korea.

It might be argued that Johnson and McNamara were committed to using nuclear weapons if they had to, but that they avoided the dilemma (and many other dilemmas) by consistently arguing that the United States was winning without them, and thus they were

¹⁴⁷ Thomas W. Graham, *American Public Opinion on NATO, Extended Deterrence, and Use of Nuclear Weapons: Future Fission?* CSIA Occasional Paper No. 4 (Cambridge, MA: Center for Science and International Affairs, Kennedy School of Government, 1989), pp. 14–15.

¹⁴⁸ John Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973), p. 105.

¹⁴⁹ Graham, *American Public Opinion*, p. 15.

unnecessary. Or, as at Khe Sahn, US leaders added more conventional forces to make nuclear weapons seem unnecessary. As Thomas Schelling has argued, however, this kind of subtle avoidance behavior – ensuring there will be conventional alternatives – itself is powerful evidence of a taboo.¹⁵⁰

At a retrospective conference on the Vietnam War in 1997, McNamara denied forcefully that world public opinion constrained US use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam. He insisted instead that “it was because it was neither militarily desirable nor morally acceptable . . . It had nothing whatever to do with what the world might have thought about it.” He continued, “Presidents Kennedy and Johnson made clear and concrete, unqualified decisions not to use nuclear weapons – particularly because it was considered morally unacceptable. That was also my recommendation to them. I was with each of them, on separate occasions, when they made these decisions. The use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam was never considered viable.”¹⁵¹

Given the significant role that negative public opinion played in shaping American decisionmaking on the war more generally, McNamara’s strong claim might seem implausible. His statement underscores the degree to which he and others believed that using nuclear weapons was simply “wrong”; namely, that it was not a matter of appeasing other views, rather “*we* thought it was wrong.”

Nixon and Kissinger

In stark contrast, the nuclear taboo operated primarily as an instrumental, rather than internalized, constraint on the top officials of the Nixon administration, who exhibited no such personal reluctance to think about nuclear options. Because Nixon’s papers have yet to be opened, few primary documents are available, and a full understanding of how Nixon thought about the use of nuclear weapons remains for the future. What follows is a suggestive analysis based mostly on memoirs (which must be used with care), accounts by journalists, and a few newly released primary sources.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Schelling, “The Role of Nuclear Weapons,” in L. Benjamin Ederington and Michael J. Mazarr, eds., *Turning Point: The Gulf War and US Military Strategy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 112–13.

¹⁵¹ Blight, *Missed Opportunities?*, p. 88.

President Nixon, the archetypal anti-Communist hawk, dreamed of ending the Vietnam War with a “knockout blow.” He believed approvingly that US nuclear threats had ended the Korean War, and expected to utilize the same principle of the threat of excessive use of force to bring victory in Vietnam. Describing his “madman theory” to longtime aide H. R. Haldeman in fall 1968, he said he would convince North Vietnamese leaders that he was obsessed with winning the war and willing to unleash the most ruthless violence against their country if they did not end it, implying a nuclear threat.¹⁵²

Nixon was a strong advocate of US nuclear superiority and, like Eisenhower, whom he had served as vice president, a believer in the efficacy of nuclear threats. Although he believed a nuclear war with the Soviet Union would be a disaster, he does not appear to have viewed nuclear weapons themselves with any particular moral compunction. In every Cold War crisis, Nixon had urged escalation and greater use of force. As vice president in 1954 under Eisenhower, he had supported the deployment of US troops to replace French losses in Vietnam and the following year had advocated that the United States use atomic weapons to halt Chinese moves into Vietnam.¹⁵³ In 1964 he had urged retaliatory strikes against Laos and North Vietnam. He later opposed the Johnson administration’s efforts to start negotiations with Hanoi as a sign of weakness. During the 1968 presidential campaign, he attacked the Johnson administration for its policy of gradualism in the use of force.¹⁵⁴ He often told aides in the early days of his administration, “I don’t intend to be the first president to lose a war.”¹⁵⁵

Nixon, who prided himself on being tough, stated in an interview with *Time* magazine in 1985 that he had considered the use of nuclear weapons four times during his administration, one of which was to end the Vietnam War. He told *Time* that he had rejected the bombing

¹⁵² H. R. Haldeman with Joseph DiMona, *The Ends of Power* (New York: Times Books, 1978), pp. 82–83. On Nixon’s madman theory, see Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1998), ch. 4.

¹⁵³ In March 1955, the *New York Times* had reported that Nixon had “warned the Chinese Communists in the bluntest terms that they would be met with atomic weapons if they embarked on any new aggression . . . [and] a war breaks out in the Pacific . . . Tactical atomic explosives are now conventional and will be used against the targets of any aggressive force . . .” Richard J. H. Johnston, “Nixon Gives Reds Warning on Atom,” *New York Times*, March 18, 1955.

¹⁵⁴ Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, p. 410.

¹⁵⁵ Roger Morris, *Uncertain Greatness: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 154.

of dikes, “which would have drowned 1 million people, for the same reason that I rejected the nuclear option. Because the targets presented were not military targets.”¹⁵⁶

Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s national security advisor, repudiated publicly Nixon’s claim that he had considered a nuclear option, however. Kissinger reported in an interview that “I can safely say that there was never a concrete occasion or crisis in which the use of nuclear weapons was considered by the government.”¹⁵⁷ He added, “None of these crises reached a point where there was any planning to use nuclear weapons. There was never any decision – even contingent decision – to use nuclear weapons if such a contingency should arise. And there was never any discussion of how far we would be prepared to go in these contingencies.”

These statements, and the record on Nixon’s and Kissinger’s attitudes toward the use of nuclear weapons more generally, are difficult to interpret. Because of Nixon’s penchant for hyperbole and inflated rhetoric, and because key memoir accounts of this period are unusually ideological and selective, the available evidence often appears contradictory. According to Stephen Ambrose, a leading Nixon biographer, in Nixon’s considerations of how to end the war, the use of atomic weapons “on the model of Japan in World War II” was “out of the question.”¹⁵⁸ It does not seem to have been entirely out of the question, and especially not for Kissinger, however, whose denial appears overstated with respect to the case of Vietnam.

During the review process of Vietnam even before his inauguration, Nixon says he considered and – with apparent regret – rejected either bombing dikes or using nuclear weapons, saying he “could not allow my heart to rule my head” – his heart wanting the knockout blow, his head constrained by the public outrage he knew it would provoke. Had he chosen either of these courses of action, he acknowledged, “the resulting domestic and international uproar would have

¹⁵⁶ “What the President Saw: A Nation Coming into its Own,” *Time*, July 29, 1985, 48–53. “Nixon Says He Considered Using Atomic Weapons on 4 Occasions,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1985. The other three occasions were during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the intensification of the Soviet–Chinese border dispute (he made an implied nuclear threat), and the 1971 India–Pakistan War.

¹⁵⁷ “An Interview with Henry A. Kissinger: ‘We Were Never Close to Nuclear War,’” *Washington Post*, August 11, 1985.

¹⁵⁸ Stephen Ambrose, *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician, 1962–1962* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 223.

damaged our foreign policy on all fronts."¹⁵⁹ He also noted it would have hampered improved relations with the Soviet Union and China. His reasoning was largely instrumental, and he never ruled out the use of nuclear weapons in general.

Earlier, during both the 1964 and 1968 presidential campaigns, Nixon had come out against the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam. In August 1964, he had written in a *Readers' Digest* article that "I am firmly opposed to the use of nuclear devices of any sort, not only because of the disastrous effect this would have on world opinion, but because it is wholly unnecessary."¹⁶⁰ In late January 1965 he advocated US naval and air bombardment of North Vietnam, but said that ground forces would not be necessary and that nuclear weapons should not be considered.¹⁶¹ In October 1968, running again for president, Nixon was able to make hay when General Curtis LeMay, former commander of SAC and presidential candidate George Wallace's running mate, said in his first press conference that he would use nuclear weapons immediately in Vietnam. Nixon said he "disagreed completely" and accused Wallace's American Independent Party of irresponsible and excessively hawkish attitudes on foreign affairs.¹⁶² Wallace went down to defeat, with 13.5 percent of the popular vote. Nixon's public opposition during his campaigns to the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam appeared to be dictated largely by the instrumental needs of the campaign, since, according to his own account, once he gained the presidency, the nuclear option was one of the first things he thought about.

Nixon's interest in exploring nuclear options as president was matched, and perhaps even exceeded, by that of his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger. Kissinger, in his former life as an academic, had written a bestselling book, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, which advocated the use of tactical nuclear weapons in limited wars.¹⁶³ Increasingly critical of nuclear strategies based on massive retaliation, he argued that strategies of limited nuclear war would be more useful for both warfighting and diplomacy. Since the publication

¹⁵⁹ Richard M. Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), p. 102; Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), pp. 347–48.

¹⁶⁰ Richard M. Nixon, "Needed in Vietnam: The Will to Win," *Reader's Digest*, August 1964, pp. 37–43.

¹⁶¹ William Bundy, *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), p. 15.

¹⁶² Ambrose, *Nixon*, p. 193. ¹⁶³ Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*.

of the book in 1957, Kissinger had drawn back from aspects of that policy, but he continued to be a strong advocate of the development of limited nuclear options. At his instigation, one of the first goals of the Nixon White House was to revise US nuclear strategy to provide for more limited nuclear options. In 1969, with the Soviet Union approaching parity with the United States in nuclear forces, Kissinger tasked the NSC staff to develop a strategy in which the nuclear options actually seemed usable.¹⁶⁴ Several years later, in a March 1976 interview in *US News and World Report*, Kissinger admitted publicly that, although non-nuclear means of responding to aggression was preferable, he would not exclude the use of nuclear weapons in certain limited situations.¹⁶⁵

Vietnam contingency planning

During this same period, planning began on more aggressive options for Vietnam. On January 27, 1969, Nixon, Kissinger, General Wheeler, and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird met to discuss military options “which might jar the North Vietnamese into being more forthcoming at the Paris talks.” On February 21, Laird forwarded to Kissinger a preliminary JCS report on the matter. The top secret report identified five fairly aggressive scenarios, the last one involving actual or feigned “technical escalation” – the use of atomic, biological, or lethal chemical weapons. As part of the feint, atomic and chemical warfare experts would be conspicuously sent to the Far East. The report’s evaluation of this option cautioned that use of such weapons in Vietnam “would excite very strong public and Congressional reaction,” adding that “the predictable reaction worldwide [to this scenario], particularly in Japan and Okinawa . . . militate against its employment.”¹⁶⁶

Neither Laird, Kissinger, nor Kissinger’s military assistant Alexander Haig were favorably disposed toward the proposals. In transmitting the report to Kissinger, Haig commented that the plans were “more extensive than the type you and the President visualized as acceptable signals of US intent to escalate military options in

¹⁶⁴ Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, p. 117; Terry Terriff, *The Nixon Administration and the Making of US Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 52–53, 54–60, 60–69, and William Burr, “The Nixon Administration, the ‘Horror Strategy,’ and the Search for Limited Nuclear Options, 1969–1972,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* vol. 7, no. 3 (Summer 2005), pp. 34–78.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Secretary Kissinger, *US News and World Report*, March 15, 1976, p. 25.

¹⁶⁶ SM-71–69, Haig Special File, Vietnam Files (January–March 1969), Box 1007, NSC Files, NPMP.

Vietnam."¹⁶⁷ Kissinger found the plans "well conceived" but inappropriate for the "realities" of the current domestic and international environment, and suggested more "subtle" options.¹⁶⁸

Operation Duck Hook

Shortly, however, Kissinger chose to look into the less subtle options. During the same period that the NSC was being tasked to study limited nuclear options, Kissinger was investigating nuclear contingencies with respect to Vietnam. The key case is operation Duck Hook, a plan for a massive use of force against North Vietnam developed in the spring and summer of 1969.¹⁶⁹ The primary source for this account, Seymour Hersh's investigative reporting, based largely on interviews, is suggestive but cannot be considered authoritative. Developed by Kissinger and a few associates, the Duck Hook operation called for massive bombing of Hanoi, Haiphong, and other key-areas in North Vietnam; the mining of harbors and rivers; the bombing of the Red River dike system; a ground invasion of North Vietnam; the blockading of Sihanoukville, the destruction – possibly with nuclear weapons – of the main north-south passes along the Ho Chi Minh trail; and the bombing of North Vietnam's main railroad links with China. A separate, even more secret study dealt with the implications of using tactical nuclear weapons on the rail lines, the main funnel for supplies from the Soviet Union and China.¹⁷⁰ According to Haldeman, Nixon's chief of staff and confidante, Kissinger had lobbied for nuclear options in the spring and fall of 1969.¹⁷¹

In late August, Nixon reviewed "K's contingency plan for Vietnam" but did not make a decision one way or another. In late August and into September, Kissinger feared that Nixon's mental resolve for a

¹⁶⁷ Memo for Kissinger from Haig, March 2, 1969, and memo for Kissinger from Laird, February 21, 1969, Haig Special File, Vietnam Files (January–March 1969), Box 1007, NSC Files, NPMP.

¹⁶⁸ Memo for Laird from Kissinger, March 3, 1969, Haig Special File, Vietnam Files (January–March 1969), Box 1007, NSC Files, NPMP.

¹⁶⁹ For a discussion of what historian Jeffrey Kimball calls Kissinger's "disingenuous chronology" of this plan's evolution in his memoirs, and a careful effort to reconstruct an accurate chronology, see Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, pp. 159–65. Kissinger implies that planning only started in "September and October" (rather than as early as April). His support for the plan appeared to be greater than he revealed in his memoirs.

¹⁷⁰ Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), p. 120.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 128–29. H. R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: G. Putnam's Sons, 1994), pp. 69–70, 83. Again, this source cannot be considered authoritative.

resolute stance on the war was wavering, and he took steps to urge Nixon to approve what was being referred to as the November Option – a “savagely, decisive blow” against North Vietnam to end the war. On September 9, Kissinger met with General Wheeler to “discuss military planning for the Duck Hook operation . . . and to convey to him the president’s personal mandate that planning be held in strictly *military channels*,” which would thereby preclude discussing the plan even with the secretary of defense.¹⁷²

In late August or early September, Kissinger assembled a select group of his staff to undertake a top-secret study “to explore the military side of the coin” – that is, the existing Duck Hook studies.¹⁷³ He described it to them as a “very, very sensitive matter.” In *White House Years*, Kissinger wrote that he told the group that what was needed was a “military plan designed for maximum impact on the enemy’s military capability” in order to “force a rapid conclusion to the war.”¹⁷⁴ These options might include the use of a tactical nuclear weapon in a single, carefully controlled situation.¹⁷⁵ A top secret “Concept of Operations” document of mid-September stated the US resolve “to apply whatever force necessary” to achieve basic US objectives in Southeast Asia. International and domestic pressures, and the possibility of Soviet or Chinese reaction would be important factors “but will not necessarily rule out bold or imaginative actions . . .”¹⁷⁶ The document did note that bombing the dikes would raise “particular problems” in the United States.

Kissinger told the group, “I refuse to believe that a little fourth-rate power like North Vietnam doesn’t have a breaking point. The Johnson administration could never come to grips with this problem. We intend to come to grips.”¹⁷⁷ When one staff member asked about the

¹⁷² William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, “Nixon’s Secret Nuclear Alert: Vietnam War Diplomacy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test, October 1969,” *Cold War History*, vol. 3, no. 2 (January 2003), pp. 113–56.

¹⁷³ “The September Group,” as some called it, included Anthony Lake, Winston Lord, Laurence Lynn, Roger Morris, Peter Rodman, Helmut Sonnenfeldt, William Watts, Col. Alexander Haig, Col. William Lemnitzer, and Captain Rembrandt C. Robinson. Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, pp. 163.

¹⁷⁴ Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 284.

¹⁷⁵ Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, p. 163.

¹⁷⁶ “Vietnam Contingency Planning: Concept of Operations,” September 16, 1969. I thank Jeffrey Kimball for sharing this document.

¹⁷⁷ Tad Szulc, *The Illusion of Peace: Foreign Policy in the Nixon Years* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), p. 150. According to Szulc’s interviews, Kissinger went on to say: “It shall be the assignment of this group to examine the option of a savagely, decisive blow against North Vietnam, militarily. You are to start without any preconceptions at all. You are to

possible use of nuclear weapons, Kissinger replied that it was “the policy of this administration not to use nuclear weapons.” But he did not exclude the use of “a nuclear *device*” to block a key railroad pass to China if that should prove the only way of doing it. One participant recalled later that “I guess we were all in a sort of a mild state of shock.”¹⁷⁸ The emphasis of the scenarios was on delivering savage air blows, to be repeated at intervals. The study was conducted only on the basis of military effectiveness. Few moral or political considerations entered the picture. According to an NSC aide, “The whole exercise struck me as being very cool and amoral, not judging it in terms of the loss of life or in terms of the escalation of the war, but simply in terms of effectiveness.”¹⁷⁹

It remains unclear whether the special group study ever actually considered the use of a nuclear device as an option for blockading North Vietnam. Tad Szulc reports that it did not, and that Kissinger is not known to have alluded to it again.¹⁸⁰ Kissinger aide Roger Morris said that he had been shown nuclear targeting plans, but other aides later told interviewers that they did not recall encountering any evidence that Nixon and Kissinger considered using a nuclear device in the Duck Hook operation.¹⁸¹ Haldeman apparently opposed the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam primarily because it might hurt Nixon’s reelection chances in 1972.¹⁸² This issue clearly awaits clarification when primary sources become available.

Nixon continued his threats of dramatic escalation of the war during September and October 1969. To bolster them, he ordered a secret worldwide nuclear alert, one of the largest secret military operations in US history. It began on October 13 and lasted a month.¹⁸³ However, as massive public protests against the war scheduled for October 15 and November 13–15 in the United States loomed, Nixon cancelled

sit down and map out what would be a savage, decisive blow. You are to examine the option from every angle, you are to examine every detail of how it should be executed militarily, what the political scenario would be.” *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹⁸¹ Hersh, *Price of Power*, p. 98. Winston Lord told Jeffrey Kimball in a 1994 interview that he was incredulous at the idea that nuclear weapons were considered. Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, p. 163.

¹⁸² Hersh, *Price of Power*, p. 129.

¹⁸³ For a full account, see Burr and Kimball, “Nixon’s Secret Nuclear Alert,” and Scott D. Sagan and Jeremy Suri, “The Madman Nuclear Alert: Secrecy, Signaling and Safety in October 1969,” *International Security*, vol. 27, no. 7 (2003), pp. 150–81.

Duck Hook. In his memoirs, he suggests that the worldwide furor over escalation of the war undermined his plans.¹⁸⁴ An NSC staffer remembered it differently, recalling that the attack plans were narrowly defeated mainly because of “Nixon’s uncertainty about military efficiency, not because of any larger doubts rooted in concern for domestic or foreign consequences.”¹⁸⁵ Kissinger had backed away from the plan, persuaded in part by lengthy memos from NSC aides opposing the escalation plans, in particular a scathing and detailed critique of the military operation by Lawrence Lynn, a former Pentagon official then on the NSC staff, arguing that the blockade would not work.¹⁸⁶

Suppose Nixon had been able to *secretly* use tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam along the lines of the secret bombing of Cambodia. There is little reason to think he would not have done so. As it was, Nixon kept the Duck Hook planning secret from even his secretaries of state and defense, William Rogers and Melvin Laird. When they found out about it – only when Nixon himself leaked the plan – they urged against it, emphasizing the mounting public opposition to escalating the war.¹⁸⁷

With the notable exception of the maverick Samuel Cohen, most scientists and civilian defense analysts involved in policy advising opposed use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam, for both military and moral reasons. Daniel Ellsberg, at the time a defense analyst at RAND, directed a comprehensive study of US military options in Vietnam requested by Kissinger in late 1968. Ellsberg adamantly refused to consider tactical nuclear options in the study. “I wouldn’t be party to a paper that suggested in any way that nuclear weapons deserved any consideration in Vietnam,” he recalled later.¹⁸⁸ Two scientists who had been asked to review the Duck Hook nuclear target folders in 1969 were distressed at the nuclear option, one of them worrying that use of nuclear weapons might bring in the Chinese. They urged Paul Doty, a leading Harvard biochemist and a friend of Kissinger’s, to

¹⁸⁴ Nixon, *Memoirs*, pp. 403–05. Nixon and Kissinger later both came to regret that they backed down, holding that they should have begun aggressive bombing operations of North Vietnam much earlier, in February 1969. Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, p. 173.

¹⁸⁵ Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, pp. 165–66. Morris was an NSC staffer who resigned in 1970 over the secret bombing of Cambodia.

¹⁸⁶ Hersh, *Price of Power*, p. 128; Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, p. 165; Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, p. 164.

¹⁸⁷ Ambrose, *Nixon*, p. 301; Bundy, *A Tangled Web*, p. 80.

¹⁸⁸ Ellsberg, *Secrets*, p. 233.

discourage the planning, and conveyed the same views to Haldeman, an old acquaintance of one of the scientists.¹⁸⁹ Even physicist Edward Teller, one of the nation's most hawkish scientists, and a longstanding proponent of nuclear arms, opposed using nuclear weapons in Vietnam on the grounds that they would not be useful against guerrillas. "Only a few idiots – and they were really idiots – suggested using nuclear weapons in Vietnam,"¹⁹⁰ he proclaimed. Kissinger, however, did not have much use for scientists, especially because scientists on the President's Science Advisory Committee did not give him the advice he wanted on ABMs. Scientists appear to have had little impact on his thinking about nuclear weapons.

Spring 1972: In final pursuit of the knock-out blow

In the spring of 1972, Nixon was considering escalation options in North Vietnam that would go "far beyond" an all-out bombing attack. According to newly released White House tapes, on April 25, a few weeks before he ordered a major escalation of the war, Kissinger presented him with a series of escalation options, including attacking North Vietnamese power plants and docks. Nixon said, "I still think we ought to take the dikes out now. Will that drown people?" Kissinger responded, "About 200,000 people." Nixon stated, "No, no, no . . . I'd rather use the nuclear bomb. Have you got that, Henry?" Kissinger replied, "That, I think, would just be too much." Nixon responded, "The nuclear bomb, does that bother you? . . . I just want you to think big, Henry, for Christssake."¹⁹¹

According to Haldeman's diary, Nixon, Kissinger, and Haig again discussed the possible use of nuclear weapons a week later, on May 2, as peace negotiations became intractable. The topic arose during a meeting on the presidential yacht *Sequoia*, shortly after Kissinger's return from the Paris negotiations, in the context of a discussion of military options to end the war. Nixon rejected the nuclear option, as well as an invasion of the North and the bombing of Red River dikes. He favored instead the blockading of North Vietnamese ports and the expansion of bombing north of the 20th parallel, commenting that he wanted "that place bombed to *smithereens*."¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Hersh, *The Price of Power*, p. 129.

¹⁹⁰ Herken, *Counsels of War*, p. 17.

¹⁹¹ White House Tapes, April 25, 1972, EOB Tape 332–25, NPMP.

¹⁹² Haldeman Diary. Quotes from White House Tapes, May 2, 1972, Oval Office conversation, 717–20, NPMP.

On May 4, discussing his decision with Kissinger, Haig, and treasury secretary John Connally, Nixon thumped on his desk as he railed “South Vietnam may lose. But the United States *cannot* lose . . . Whatever happens to South Vietnam, we are going to *cream* North Vietnam . . . For once, we’ve got to use the maximum power of this country . . . against this *shit-ass* little country . . .”¹⁹³ The next day Nixon observed to Kissinger that civilian casualties are a result of all wars. “The only place where you and I disagree . . . is with regard to the bombing. You’re so goddamned concerned about the civilians and I don’t give a damn. I don’t care.” Kissinger responded, “I’m concerned about the civilians because I don’t want the world to be mobilized against you as a butcher. We can do it without killing civilians.”¹⁹⁴

Nixon’s suggestions to use nuclear weapons against North Vietnam, or to implement other drastic measures that would kill a lot of civilians, were clearly reflections of his frustration with the war. But they were not a live option. It was clear by this point in the war – as it had really been clear all along – that use of nuclear weapons was not politically feasible, in terms of either domestic or international public sentiment. Nixon clarified this himself in an NSC meeting on May 8, when he called for a “cold-blooded analysis” of the current situation in Vietnam. After a discussion of mining options, Nixon explained, “Whatever we do we must always avoid saying what we’re not going to do, like nuclear weapons. I referred to them saying that I did not consider them necessary. Obviously, we are not going to use nuclear weapons but we should leave it hanging over them. We should also leave the threat of marines hanging over them . . . we shouldn’t give reassurance to the enemy that we are not going balls out.”¹⁹⁵

Thus Nixon, who clearly harbored few personal inhibitions about violating an array of important democratic norms during his presidency when he thought he could get away with it, was powerfully constrained from using nuclear weapons by the abhorrence and opposition of others. Haig, a hard-liner who had served in Vietnam and later became secretary of state, and who had helped plan Duck Hook, attributed the non-use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam and

¹⁹³ White House Tapes, May 4, 1972, EOB Tape 334-44, NPMP.

¹⁹⁴ White House Tapes, May 5, 1972.

¹⁹⁵ Memo for the President’s files (Top Secret Eyes Only), “National Security Council Meeting,” May 8, 1972, NPMP, NSC Files, Box 998, Haig Memcons (January/December 1972), p. 10.

other Cold War conflicts to normative concerns – of others. He wrote in 1992, “On the American side, the moral argument against the use of such weapons, or even the threat of their use, took on the force of religious belief.”¹⁹⁶ He argued against this moral perspective and worried that such inhibitions would undermine deterrence. “Nevertheless,” he wrote, “the mere existence of our superior power often bailed us out of potential disaster even though we were determined, in the depths of the national soul, never to use it.”¹⁹⁷ Because of such moral inhibitions, he felt that no American president would resort to nuclear weapons except in the extreme case of the defense of Europe.

Referring to something as a religious belief suggests that it is held as a matter of faith and fervor, and is unsusceptible to – or at least distinct from – “rational” argument. This often characterizes a taboo.

Conclusion

The taboo against first use of nuclear weapons held throughout the conflict in Vietnam. During the war, three US administrations progressively upped the level of violence and engaged in tremendously controversial policies. Yet, despite the enormous costs and frustrations of the war, all drew the line at the use of nuclear weapons.

Several considerations motivated non-use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam: the possibility of inadvertent and uncontrolled escalation with the consequences this entailed for US vulnerabilities, preservation of the tradition of non-use, and finally a taboo, a normative belief that using nuclear weapons would be wrong. For many US leaders, nuclear weapons were morally repugnant. To be militarily decisive, such weapons would probably have to have been used in large numbers, and this would have been politically and normatively unacceptable.

It thus appears that the chances that the Johnson administration would have used nuclear weapons in Vietnam were nearly zero, no matter what Generals Westmoreland, Sharp or Wheeler thought. In contrast, for Nixon and Kissinger – as for Eisenhower earlier, less influenced by personal moral convictions – the taboo operated

¹⁹⁶ Alexander M. Haig, Jr., *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World: A Memoir* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), p. 28.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 554.

primarily as an instrumental constraint on resort to nuclear weapons. Although Nixon talked a tough line and sent notes to the North Vietnamese threatening massive uses of force if they did not agree to negotiate, in the end he and Kissinger were repeatedly rolled back from their aspirations for knockout blows by anticipated domestic and world public condemnation. Nixon probably did not personally share a belief in the nuclear taboo – he did not think it was “wrong” to use nuclear weapons – but he was constrained because others, including members of his own bureaucracy, held it. The value of preserving the tradition of non-use also does not appear to have weighed heavily in his thinking.

How much did the taboo matter *vis-à-vis* deterrence in explaining the non-use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam? Soviet and Chinese nuclear forces may have prevented any US military thought of attacking Vietnamese sanctuaries inside China, but they did not prevent the thought of attacking southern China with nuclear weapons in any expanded war. The degree to which the United States could escalate the fighting inside Vietnam was the most open question.¹⁹⁸ Here US leaders worried not so much about an immediate Soviet nuclear response to a US nuclear strike in Vietnam – they thought such a response unlikely – as about long-term escalation concerns and US vulnerability in any large-scale war. Had US leaders held no normative inhibitions about using nuclear weapons, however, it is likely that military plans for their use would have received more serious consideration given the American lives – and conceivably even Vietnamese lives – such use could have saved.¹⁹⁹

It would be a mistake to draw too sharp a dichotomy between the force of the taboo and the force of the escalation risks, however, because they are not entirely independent. The existence of a weapons taboo helps to shape judgments of what constitutes “escalation” on the battlefield. If national leaders had simply viewed tactical nuclear weapons as “just another weapon,” the latter’s escalatory effect would have been judged quite differently, as would the psychological impact

¹⁹⁸ Peter Hayes, *Pacific Powderkeg: American Nuclear Dilemmas in Korea* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1991), p. 42.

¹⁹⁹ Had the United States actually used tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam, it might have made little difference to the outcome of the war. The North Vietnamese leadership testified – long after the fact, however – that they had expected to be attacked with nuclear weapons, and were prepared to persevere in the unification of Vietnam even in the event of millions of casualties. Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight, and Robert K. Brigham, *Argument Without End* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), p. 407.

of their use. The taboo, by helping to define what constituted escalation in the first place, contributed to heightening decisionmakers' perception of such risks during the war.

Ten years after the Korean War, despite the development in the interim of all manner of small, low-yield, more "usable" nuclear weapons, they were less usable than ever. By the time of the Vietnam War, the nuclear taboo was operating with more powerful, widespread effects; it was becoming less tentative, more taken for granted. Further, the taboo itself became more firmly entrenched as a result of the Vietnam War. Any remaining doubts about whether the Korean War had been conducted correctly with respect to nuclear weapons were laid to rest by Vietnam. The war thus further eroded any lingering thoughts that nuclear weapons could be viewed as legitimate weapons of war.

Even Henry Kissinger was forced to confront the normative limitations on material power. Although he had written a book extolling the use of tactical nuclear weapons, once in the White House he found to his regret that nuclear nations "could not necessarily use this power to impose their will. The capacity to destroy proved difficult to translate into a plausible threat even against countries with no capacity for retaliation."²⁰⁰ He attributed this to the awesomeness of the destructive power of nuclear weapons. But as Kissinger knew well, sub-kiloton weapons are not all that awesome. So he was being a little disingenuous. Further, as the willingness of the North Vietnamese to fight the United States illustrated, material power alone does not make deterrence work. One of the major lessons of Vietnam for students and practitioners of international relations has been the normative and political limits on material power. Nowhere was this illustrated more clearly than in the non-use of nuclear weapons during the war.

²⁰⁰ Kissinger, *The White House Years*, pp. 66–67.

7 Institutionalizing the taboo, 1960–1989

Prevailing attitudes toward “first use” of nuclear weapons have changed considerably. The US will probably adopt a virtual “no-first-use” policy – perhaps without making a deliberate decision to do so, and perhaps without even calculating all its results.¹

Herman Kahn (1966)

Starting in the early 1960s, the nuclear taboo, which had heretofore been tentative, began to become institutionalized in arms control agreements and internalized by US leaders. The non-use of nuclear weapons in the Vietnam War helped to further reinforce the taboo and the tradition of non-use. Use of nuclear weapons there, however, in addition to being inconsistent with American political goals in the war, would also have undercut a central US foreign policy endeavor emerging in the 1960s: the renewed and more serious efforts, especially after the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, to pursue nuclear arms control and stabilize the arms race.

As noted in Chapter 3, antinuclear-weaponism had been institutionalized in the UN disarmament machinery from an early date. Now the nuclear taboo began to become institutionalized more broadly in multilateral and bilateral arms control agreements and within the US government itself. This institutionalization was often implicit (as in the 1972 Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty, discussed below), but in some cases was quite explicit (as in nuclear non-use commitments associated with nuclear-weapons-free zones). The shift toward institutionalization was made possible by widespread acceptance by US leaders of the view that nuclear weapons should be for deterrence,

¹ Herman Kahn, “Nuclear Proliferation and the Rules of Retaliation,” *Yale Law Journal*, vol. 76, no. 1 (November 1966), p. 78.

not use. As noted in Chapter 6, this shift in view was reflected in the policies of the incoming Kennedy administration in 1961, which sought to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons and develop more “flexible” conventional alternatives. In contrast to the US position in the 1950s, US leaders now began to indicate a willingness to accept some formal limitations on use of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, they remained resistant to any declared no-first-use policy, revealing the limits of institutionalization of the taboo.

In this chapter, I trace the strengthening of the nuclear taboo from 1960 until 1989, as reflected in the adoption of some formal limitations on nuclear weapons. These included agreements to partially restrict testing, ban ballistic missile defenses, limit numbers of weapons, prevent the spread of nuclear arms to new states, establish nuclear-weapons-“free zones,” and extend informal non-use “assurances” to non-nuclear states. A cumulative effect of these agreements was to gradually circumscribe the sphere of permissible use of nuclear weapons and to stabilize the practice of deterrence between the superpowers.

I begin by reviewing the changing international context that contributed to the shift toward institutionalization. I then examine multilateral and bilateral efforts to formalize constraints on the use of nuclear weapons, as well as the private internalization of the taboo among US officials of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, along with consistent resistance to a formal no-first-use agreement. Two key events were crucial for the consolidation of the taboo later during this period: the demise of the notion of “peaceful nuclear explosions” in the early 1970s, and the uproar over the infamous neutron bomb in the late 1970s. Finally, I analyze nuclear politics in the 1980s: the reemergence of a widespread antinuclear movement in the United States and Europe in response to the Reagan administration’s rejection of arms control, including renewed calls for a no-first-use policy and a prominent public debate on the morality of nuclear deterrence. By 1989, the delegitimization of nuclear weapons had spread to the mainstream.

Institutionalization and consolidation

The shift toward institutionalization: The changing strategic and normative context

Four important structural changes help explain the increasing efforts after 1960 to institutionalize the taboo. First, the advent of mutual

nuclear vulnerability, and later strategic parity, between the United States and the Soviet Union gave the superpowers a strong self-interest in strengthening inhibitions on use. The scare of nuclear war during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis drove home to US and Soviet leaders the dangers of an unchecked arms race and the overwhelming imperative to avoid nuclear war between them. It spurred them to pursue arms control more seriously.² The missile crisis also alarmed other nations, encouraging developing countries to pursue the creation of nuclear-weapons-free zones and non-use assurances.

Second, a new appreciation of the risks and consequences of nuclear proliferation fostered the first real efforts to stem the spread of nuclear weapons to new states. By the early 1960s, the nuclear club was clearly expanding, both in numbers of weapons and in membership. By 1962, the United States had about 3,260 nuclear warheads, the Soviet Union had approximately 480.³ Britain had acquired its nuclear force in secret, testing its first weapon in 1952 and its first thermonuclear weapon in 1957. France tested its first nuclear weapon in 1960. China, India, Brazil and Argentina were suspected to be aspiring nuclear powers. The prospect of a nuclear-armed world spurred an increasing interest on the part of both nuclear and non-nuclear states in finding some means to limit the spread of nuclear weapons.

A third factor contributing to the institutionalization of the taboo was the more central role of developing nations in arms control issues. By the early 1960s decolonization was well under way and the non-aligned states had achieved a voting majority in the UN General Assembly. They took advantage of their new-found strength in numbers to demand progress on nuclear arms control, call for legal prohibitions on use of nuclear weapons, and otherwise put the superpowers and their nuclear policies on the defensive. Negotiations on multilateral treaties such as the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, the success of which depended heavily on the participation of non-nuclear states, made Third World states more central players in arms control issues and gave them more leverage for their demands.

Finally, a fourth factor in the shift toward institutionalization was the broadening of the nuclear policymaking process in the United

² Alexander L. George, "Incentives for US–Soviet Security Cooperation and Mutual Adjustment," in Alexander L. George, Philip Farley, and Alexander Dallin, eds., *US–Soviet Security Cooperation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 641–54.

³ *SIPRI Yearbook 1990: World Armaments and Disarmament* (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 1990).

States. A wider range of domestic actors became involved in nuclear and security policymaking in the 1960s and 1970s, contributing to greater scrutiny, and less unquestioning acceptance, of the nation's nuclear policies. In 1961 the establishment of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency created an institutional voice in favor of arms restraint, providing a counterweight to the pro-nuclear views of the military and the Atomic Energy Commission. Its influence helped to consolidate the taboo as a total ban on nuclear weapons, and to preserve the line between conventional and nuclear arms. By the early 1970s, Congress had become more actively involved in arms control issues.⁴ Outside of government, the grassroots antinuclear movement faded during the 1960s and 1970s as peace activists turned their attention to the Vietnam War instead. But arms control scientists, along with an emerging group of civilian defense analysts, continued to serve as an important lobby in favor of arms restraint.

Thus, during the 1960s and 1970s, strategic imperatives, along with domestic and international structural changes, help account for the more serious interest in codifying and institutionalizing deterrence and in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the advent of a new administration in 1961 with new ideas about nuclear weapons, including an increasing acceptance of the taboo, inclined it to seek to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons and made it more responsive to the changing international context.

Explicit pressure to create limits on the use of nuclear weapons during this period came especially from developing countries at the United Nations, Soviet leaders lobbying for explicit non-use agreements, and domestic pro-arms control analysts and antinuclear activists. Within the US government, current and former officials who harbored private doubts about the reality of the US-NATO policy of flexible response came to believe that the *de facto* policy of the United States was (and should be) "no first use." Although, publicly, the US government and its allies remained the leading resisters of a formal no-first-use agreement, this stance nevertheless went hand in hand with a slide toward what many analysts and policymakers argued was essentially a *de facto* no-first-use position in American policy.

⁴ Eric Mlyn, *The State, Society and Limited Nuclear War* (Albany, NY: State University Press of New York, 1995), pp. 33–34, 44–47.

The multilateralization of arms control: Pressure for a nuclear ban

In recognition of the arrival of the newly independent states on the world scene, in 1961 the Geneva Committee on Disarmament, reporting to the UN General Assembly, was made truly multilateral with the inclusion of eight non-aligned states as members.⁵ It met regularly as the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee (ENDC), with the superpowers as co-chairs. Although the superpowers still retained substantial control over the proceedings, nevertheless the committee became a forum for placing pressure on the nuclear powers to pursue arms control. Prior to this, disarmament negotiations had been conducted in a variety of fora but largely by members of the two Cold War blocs. Within the first month, the eight non-aligned members of the ENDC began pressing for a test ban and holding the three nuclear powers accountable. Their proposal for a verification scheme, using existing observation stations, that was much simpler than the technical overkill system under discussion at the time facilitated the subsequent agreement on a partial test ban in 1963.⁶

The newly independent states also took full advantage of their preponderance in the General Assembly to push their antinuclear weapons agenda. In November 1961, the General Assembly adopted a declaration assailing the use of nuclear weapons as a “crime against civilization and mankind” and a violation UN Charter, and stating that it was therefore illegal.⁷ The vote was 55 to 20, with 26 abstentions. The United States and other NATO countries opposed it while the Soviet Union and its allies (including India, consistently a strong advocate of a ban on nuclear weapons) supported it. The United States maintained its position that in the event of aggression that could not be repulsed by conventional forces, it must be prepared to take whatever action with whatever weapons were necessary.⁸

Like many other General Assembly resolutions, this had little direct effect on US policy, but it provided a baseline of general international attitudes outside the NATO alliance. Subsequent UN resolutions

⁵ It was subsequently expanded to twenty-six states in 1970 and to thirty-one in 1974.

⁶ Alva Myrdal, *The Game of Disarmament: How the United States and Russia Run the Arms Race* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), p. 92.

⁷ UN GA Resolution 1653 (XVI), adopted November 24, 1961.

⁸ Frank Blackaby, Jozef Goldblat, and Sverre Lodgaard, eds., *No First Use*, SIPRI (London: Taylor & Francis, 1984), p. 9.

reaffirmed this basic attitude.⁹ The 1961 resolution also required the UN secretary-general to poll states on the holding of a conference to draft an international ban on use of nuclear weapons. In rejecting this, Secretary of State Dean Rusk presented the traditional US view – that the UN Charter distinguished between aggression and defense, not between one weapon and another, and that the United States would not use any weapon with aggressive intent.¹⁰ On signing the Limited Test Ban Treaty, which banned peacetime nuclear explosions in the atmosphere, in 1963, President John F. Kennedy emphasized that it did not prohibit use of nuclear weapons in defense. In other words, wartime nuclear explosions remained legal.¹¹

The accumulating General Assembly resolutions on this issue raised in increasingly explicit fashion the question of what, and who, constituted an authoritative source for the creation of international legal norms. Some legal scholars on the left held that the 1961 resolution was “tantamount to an insistence upon a no-first-use policy.”¹² In the face of global majority opinion in favor of a rule of no-first-use, they argued, the United States and NATO appeared to pose the main obstacle to its formal creation.

In 1964, China accompanied its first nuclear test with the announcement that “under no circumstances” would it be the first to use nuclear weapons.¹³ This was an unconditional declaration not to use or threaten nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states and in nuclear-free zones. China also proposed a world summit conference to discuss nuclear disarmament, the first step of which should be a non-use agreement.¹⁴ In spite of Sino-Soviet acrimony, the Soviet Union accepted the proposal. Other nuclear powers did not. The Soviet Union then introduced a resolution in the UN Disarmament Commission at the end of May 1965 calling for a world conference to agree on a

⁹ GA Resolution 2936 (XXVII), adopted in 1972; GA Resolution 36/100 adopted in 1981, GA Resolution 38/75, adopted in 1983, and a Draft Convention on the Prohibition of the Use of Nuclear Weapons, approved in 1983.

¹⁰ Secretary Rusk, June 30, 1962, in *Documents on Disarmament, 1962* (Washington, DC: GPO), vol. I, pp. 629–31.

¹¹ George Bunn, “Evolution of the Issue of No First Use of Nuclear Weapons,” unpublished manuscript, April 1982, p. 5.

¹² Richard Falk, *Legal Order in a Violent World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 426–27.

¹³ The implications of this are discussed in Mason Willrich, “No First Use of Nuclear Weapons: An Assessment,” *Orbis*, vol. 9, no. 2 (Summer 1965), pp. 299–315.

¹⁴ Lawrence Weiler, “The Evolution of the Concept of No First Use,” unpublished manuscript, Council for a Livable World, NYC Conference (October 24, 1982), p. 10.

prohibition on use of nuclear weapons and inviting the nuclear powers, pending conclusion of a convention, to declare that they would not be the first to use such weapons. This resolution was not pressed to a vote, however, and the United States continued to rebuff ongoing Soviet pressures for a non-use agreement.¹⁵ In 1966, the Chinese defended their nuclear testing program as a necessary response to US rejection of the idea of no-first-use.¹⁶

The Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and the pressure for non-use assurances

Once negotiations on a nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) got under way in the mid-1960s, discussions of possible non-use commitments by the nuclear powers shifted to this context. During the negotiations, the non-aligned states put pressure on the nuclear powers for non-use “assurances.” If the non-nuclear states were being asked to forswear nuclear weapons, the non-aligned argued, the least the nuclear states could do was to agree not to use or threaten use of nuclear arms against non-nuclear states. India first suggested such a pledge in 1965 as one of five measures included in an “integrated proposal” to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons.¹⁷ In late October 1966, the non-aligned sought such assurances in a draft resolution to the General Assembly’s First Committee, sponsored by thirty-two Latin American, Asian and African states.¹⁸

US negotiators acknowledged the growing pressure and effectiveness of the non-aligned states. William Foster, director of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), reported back to Washington after the 1965 session of the UN Disarmament Commission on the “growing resistance” of non-aligned states to non-proliferation arrangements “that do not impose any obligations on the nuclear powers to limit their arms.” He also noted the growing

¹⁵ Willrich, “No First Use,” p. 299. DC/219, May 27, 1965; text in *Documents on Disarmament, 1965* (Washington, DC: GPO), pp. 207–08; Memorandum of Conversation, May 19, 1965, *FRUS 1964–68*, 11, p. 203.

¹⁶ Memo for Dr. Kissinger from Gerard Smith, “Summary of Restrictions on the Use of Nuclear Weapons,” March 3, 1971, ACDA, NSA, p. 13. The White House authorized the US ambassador in Warsaw to ask the Chinese if they would accept a test ban if it were linked to a no-first-use agreement. The exchanges were terminated when their existence was leaked to the press.

¹⁷ Willrich, “No First Use,” p. 314.

¹⁸ UN Doc. A/C.1/L.371, October 27, 1966.

sentiment that “the deadlock between the great powers should be broken by mobilizing the voices of the world at large.”¹⁹

The United States and the Soviet Union seriously, but unsuccessfully, sought a common formula on what came to be called “negative security assurances” – non-use pledges to non-nuclear states.²⁰ Both the United States and the Soviet Union were caught in the realities of their European alliance commitments and deployments, however. In the “Kosygin formula,” the Soviets proposed non-use with respect to non-nuclear parties to the NPT that did not have nuclear weapons on their territories. Several important non-aligned states supported this initiative but the United States rejected it as discriminatory against non-nuclear members of NATO, and because it might increase domestic pressure on allied governments to seek removal of US nuclear weapons.²¹ The Joint Chiefs were leery of these discussions, seeing the Kosygin proposal or any variation thereof as a slippery slope toward the total prohibition of nuclear weapons. At minimum, such proposals could “alter the current military balance to the detriment of the US” and might undermine the US deterrent threat.²²

ACDA officials, however, thought that a positive US response to the “growing pressure” from the non-aligned states for non-use assurances would help encourage wider accession to the NPT. In a memo at the end of October 1966, Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach advised President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of State Rusk that the non-aligned resolution was an opportunity for the United States to state publicly “conditions, as formulated by the United States, under which [the] United States would limit use of nuclear weapons,” especially against non-nuclear countries. At the same time, it would give the United States grounds for resisting proposals for other “disadvantageous limitations” on use of nuclear weapons. The United States would propose a formula involving an assurance of non-use against non-nuclear parties to the NPT not engaged in an armed attack assisted by a nuclear weapon state.²³

¹⁹ Report by the director of ADCA (Foster), Summary of Session of UN Disarmament Commission, June 18, 1965, *FRUS 1964–68*, 11, p. 215.

²⁰ Memo of Conversation, Rusk and Gromyko, June 23, 1967, *ibid.*, pp. 481–86.

²¹ Memo for Dr. Kissinger from Gerard Smith, “Summary of Restrictions on the Use of Nuclear Weapons,” March 3, 1971, ACDA, NSA, p. 6.

²² Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea (drafted by Alan Neidle and Lawrence Weiler, ACDA), October 31, 1966, *FRUS 1964–68*, 11, pp. 399–400.

²³ *Ibid.*

Clearly, in contrast to their position in the 1950s, US leaders were now indicating a willingness to accept some formal limitations on use of nuclear weapons. Because of unease among the allies, however, who were unhappy with the whole NPT effort, the United States soon ended further discussions and focused instead on “positive security assurances” – promises to come to the aid of a non-nuclear state threatened by a nuclear attack.²⁴ These were a politically easier commitment since they appeared to expand on, rather than curtail, US deterrent threats. In early March 1968, the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union submitted to the ENDC, and later to the Security Council, a draft text on positive security assurances along with a statement of associated declarations they would make, and the Security Council approved it in June.²⁵ The Soviets attempted to follow up the issue of non-use assurances after the signing of the NPT in July, but the Johnson administration did not pursue the matter, in part because the issue did not develop much support from non-nuclear states following conclusion of the NPT.²⁶ Instead, nuclear-weapons-free zones had become the vehicle for securing the first legal non-use commitments from nuclear powers.

The first legal limitations on use: The creation of the Latin American nuclear-weapons-free zone

The first legal limitations on use of nuclear weapons were embodied in nuclear-weapons-free zones, which limited possession, testing, deployment, and use of nuclear weapons on a geographic basis. Starting with the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, which prohibited the deployment or testing of nuclear weapons in the Antarctic, several treaties created nuclear-free areas – regions of the earth that were reserved for peaceful activity only and could not be used as nuclear battlefields.²⁷ The impetus for creation of these zones came largely from the regional non-nuclear states as a way to keep Cold War rivalry out of their

²⁴ Telegram from Mission in Geneva to the Department of State, December 15, 1967; Telegram 74017 to the Mission to NATO, November 23, 1967, *ibid.*, p. 545.

²⁵ Tripartite Security Assurances Proposal submitted to ENDC, March 7, 1968 (ENDC/222), *Documents on Disarmament, 1968* (Washington, DC: GPO), pp. 156–58; Weiler, “Evolution of No First Use,” pp. 13–15.

²⁶ Memo for Dr. Kissinger from Gerard Smith, “Summary of Restrictions,” pp. 8–13.

²⁷ These eventually included, in addition to the Latin American zone (1967), similar regions in the South Pacific (1985), Southeast Asia (1995), and Africa (1996) as well as in outer space (1967), on the seabed (1971), and on the moon (1972).

territories. The cumulative effect, however, was to put much of the planet off-limits to the use of nuclear weapons.

A nuclear-weapons-free zone in Latin America, the first such zone in a populated area, became the first ever non-use agreement, as well as the first adhered to by the United States. In mid-1962, the Brazilian representative to the UN proposed making Latin America a nuclear-free zone. In 1963, Adolfo Lopez Mateos, the president of Mexico, alarmed by the Cuban missile crisis, initiated a proposal on a multilateral treaty. Through the concerted efforts of Latin American states, the Treaty of Tlatelolco, establishing such a zone, was finally concluded in February 1967.²⁸ Each Latin American state party to the treaty renounced the right to acquire nuclear weapons and agreed to place its peaceful nuclear facilities under monitoring. US adherence to the treaty through Protocol II legally bound the United States not to station nuclear weapons in Latin America and not to use them against any of the Latin American parties to the treaty.

The treaty was mainly the work of Alfonso Garcia Robles, at the time a diplomat in the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs and later Mexican ambassador to the UN, and a fervent advocate of disarmament. Along with a small group of Latin American diplomats, he tirelessly and skillfully conducted the negotiations and drafting of the treaty, earning in 1982 the Nobel Peace Prize for his work. William Epstein, a Canadian diplomat and director of the disarmament division of the UN Secretariat who was involved in the treaty drafting, later described Garcia Robles as “the most morally committed to disarmament” of all the people with whom Epstein had ever worked.²⁹ Garcia Robles saw great hope in the emerging mosaic of nuclear-free regions. In his view, these regions would spread globally to the point where “the powers that still possess these terrible weapons of mass destruction will be something like contaminated islets subject to quarantine.”³⁰

The treaty thus marked the first time the United States accepted any legal restriction on its right to use nuclear weapons. Why did US

²⁸ Harald Müller, David Fischer, and Wolfgang Kotter, *Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Global Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 19, and Monica Serrano, “Latin America – The Treaty of Tlatelolco,” in Ramesh Thakur, ed., *Nuclear Weapons-Free Zones* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998), pp. 35–43.

²⁹ William Epstein, “Tlatelolco and a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World,” in Pericles Gasparini Alves and Daiana Belinda Cipollone, eds., *Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zones in the 21st Century* (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 1997), p. 24.

³⁰ Quoted in Gordon C. Bennett, *The New Abolitionists: The Story of Nuclear Free Zones* (Elgin, IL: Brethen, 1987), p. 115.

leaders agree to this? Such an outcome was not certain. US leaders had opposed earlier proposals for denuclearized zones in Europe on the grounds that they would undermine NATO's reliance on nuclear deterrence.³¹ According to Epstein, senior diplomats of the nuclear states told him at the time that a treaty would never be achieved. Even after it was signed, they insisted that the nuclear states would never sign the crucial Protocol II.³² Nevertheless, US leaders were generally supportive of the treaty effort and eventually did sign, primarily because it was seen as a necessary quid pro quo to secure the non-nuclear states' support for non-proliferation efforts.³³ US leaders also saw its value in prohibiting the type of nuclear weapons deployments that had provoked the Cuban missile crisis.

Incorporating the first legally binding negative security assurances, the Latin American nuclear-free zone was, in essence, the first nuclear non-use treaty. As a multilateral treaty encompassing Latin American states, it also represented the transmission and institutionalization of the non-use norm in the developing world. Three other nuclear-weapons-free zones in populated areas subsequently followed in the 1980s and 1990s.³⁴

Internalizing the taboo in the US government

The new US interest in constraints reflected the strong belief of top civilian officials in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in the need to control the nuclear arms race and to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons, especially tactical weapons. Motivated by what it saw as the overwhelming imperative to avoid nuclear war, the Kennedy administration sought arms control agreements, supported a significant build-up in conventional arms as an alternative to reliance on nuclear weapons and a massive retaliation policy, and pursued shifts in NATO policy away from early reliance on nuclear weapons.³⁵ Under President Johnson, the administration also began to embrace non-proliferation norms.

³¹ Telegram from Department of State to NATO Mission, "US Response to Rapacki Plan," January 21, 1958, *FRUS 1958–60*, 10, part 1, Eastern Europe, Soviet Union, Cyprus (Sec. 2, electronic version).

³² Epstein, "Tlatelolco and a Nuclear-Weapon-Free World," p. 24.

³³ Commander Mark E. Rosen, "Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones," *Naval War College Review*, vol. 49, no. 4 (Autumn 1996), pp. 41–61.

³⁴ See Chapter 9.

³⁵ "The Role of Tactical Nuclear Forces in NATO Strategy," Defense Background Brief, NATO Ministerial Meeting, December 1964, at www.isn.ethz.ch/php/documents/collection_7/docs/nbb34.pdf

Immediately upon taking office in 1961, the Kennedy administration grappled with two issues relevant to the internalization of a nuclear taboo: the policy of first use of nuclear weapons, and the feasibility of limited war with the Soviet Union using tactical nuclear weapons. At the time, NATO policy was to respond immediately with nuclear weapons to any Soviet conventional attack in Europe.

Early rejection of first use of strategic weapons

As noted in Chapter 6, as early as 1961 Defense Secretary Robert McNamara rejected first use of nuclear weapons. In a directive to the Joint Chiefs about strategic force requirements in February 1961, a month after entering office, he stated that the first assumption shaping requirements was that “we will not strike first with such weapons.” He did nevertheless recognize that “we must have sufficient forces on hand to survive a surprise attack” and that this force must be “sufficient to destroy.”³⁶ McNamara’s directive was undoubtedly partly an effort to stem Air Force demands for a first strike capability and the vast procurement of weaponry it would require. But the directive also repudiated the extended deterrent doctrine that the United States would respond to a Soviet conventional attack on Europe with nuclear weapons. It clearly rejected as well the Eisenhower administration’s policy that nuclear weapons were “like other munitions.”³⁷

As William Burr has noted, it is unclear from McNamara’s statement whether he intended the no-first-use policy to apply to all nuclear weapons or only to a strategic first strike (because of the high risk of retaliation).³⁸ Although McNamara occasionally expressed support for use of nuclear weapons in some circumstances, on balance substantial evidence exists of his strong reluctance to use nuclear weapons first, a view he later said he counseled President Kennedy. This reluctance appeared to extend even beyond strategic weapons to include tactical weapons.

This view was quickly put to the test during the summer and fall of 1961, when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev was threatening to take over Berlin. Some of Kennedy’s advisors perceived a window of

³⁶ Memo, McNamara to Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Task Force Reports,” February 10, 1961, US Nuclear History, 00307, NSA, p. 1.

³⁷ William Burr, “US Nuclear History: Nuclear Arms and Politics in the Missile Age 1955–1968,” Digital National Security Archive at http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/collections/nh_essay.jsp, pp. 27–28.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

opportunity for a limited nuclear first strike against the small Soviet ICBM force in the event that hostilities erupted over Berlin, and they developed a set of first-strike plans. Newly available documents reveal that Kennedy considered these proposals but also that he sought ways to avoid use of nuclear weapons. Despite White House planners' efforts to develop more limited nuclear options than were currently available in the SIOP-62 war plan, deliberations over the Berlin first-strike plan left unresolved whether nuclear weapons could be used in a limited way without escalating to all-out war.³⁹

A year later, the Cuban missile crisis, the most serious crisis of the nuclear era, was an important turning point in the development of the taboo. For thirteen days in October 1962, the superpowers appeared to be on the brink of nuclear war. The vast evidence now available on the crisis makes clear that it was extremely unlikely US leaders would deliberately have gone to war over the Soviet missiles in Cuba.⁴⁰ Kennedy and his advisors were overwhelmed by the sense of nuclear danger. As Under Secretary of State George Ball wrote later, "At no time during the agonizing fortnight . . . did the president consider the possibility of launching a nuclear attack."⁴¹

It is clear that nuclear deterrence operated strongly for both sides, which might suggest little need to consider the role of a nuclear taboo. The transcripts from the discussions of Kennedy's Executive Committee make clear that the overwhelming imperative was to avoid the risk of Soviet nuclear retaliation or an inadvertent nuclear exchange.⁴² Kennedy and his advisors chose the least provocative course of action as a way out – the declaration of a naval quarantine – and also indicated privately to the Soviets that they intended to withdraw US missiles from Turkey. Yet the crisis appears to have reinforced the idea

³⁹ Fred Kaplan, "JFK's First Strike Plan," vol. 288, no. 3, *The Atlantic Monthly* (October 2001), pp. 81–86. See the collection of documents in William Burr, ed., "First Strike Options and the Berlin Crisis, September 1961," Electronic Briefing Book, no. 56, September 2001, NSA.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Sheldon Stern, *Averting the 'Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, & Kennedy, 1958–1964* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997); Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We All Lost the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); and James G. Blight, *The Shattered Crystal Ball: Fear and Learning in the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990).

⁴¹ George Ball, "The Cosmic Bluff," *New York Review of Books*, July 1983, pp. 37–38.

⁴² Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1997).

that nuclear weapons of any kind were unusable. Kennedy observed at the end of the crisis that “everybody sort of figures that, in extremis, everybody would use nuclear weapons,” but then went on to say that “the decision to use any kind of a nuclear weapon, even the tactical ones, presents such a risk of getting out of control so quickly, that there’s . . .”⁴³ Kennedy did not finish his statement, but the train of thought suggests a recognition that nuclear weapons were essentially unusable because of the danger of uncontrollable escalation.

In the wake of the missile crisis, Kennedy and Soviet leader Khrushchev quickly agreed on the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963, which banned nuclear testing in the atmosphere. The two sides also negotiated agreements establishing some norms and rules of crisis management – the US–Soviet “hotline” (a direct communication link), crisis management centers, and decisionmaking procedures for crisis behavior.⁴⁴ These agreements reflected a perceptual shift in the early 1960s in the major focus of concern – from fear of *intentional* use of nuclear weapons to fear of inadvertent or *unintentional* use.

US officials’ promotion of permissive action links, or PALs, at this time provides additional evidence of a *de facto* shift away from a first-use policy. PALs are electronic devices that prevent nuclear weapons from being fired without presidential authorization. They are widely regarded today as an important element of stable nuclear command and control. During the early 1960s, when McNamara first sought to have PALs installed on US nuclear weapons to prevent unauthorized or inadvertent launch, the Joint Chiefs objected, concerned that PALS would slow US launch capability.⁴⁵ Secretary of State Dean Rusk was unsympathetic to their position. As he recalled, “Since I always believed we are committed to a second strike, actually to absorb nuclear destruction on our territory before counterattacking, slowing our launch capability didn’t bother me in the slightest.”⁴⁶ It did not bother McNamara either, since he also favored a position of “no second-strike until” Soviet attack on the United States was confirmed.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 659.

⁴⁴ Alexander L. George, “US–Soviet Efforts to Cooperation in Crisis Management and Crisis Avoidance,” in George *et al.*, *US–Soviet Security Cooperation*, pp. 581–99.

⁴⁵ NSAM 160, June 6, 1962, “Permissive Links for Nuclear Weapons in NATO,” JFKL, at www.jfklibrary.org/nsam.htm. For the history of PALS, see Peter Stein and Peter Feaver, *Assuring Control of Nuclear Weapons: The Evolution of Permissive Action Links* (Cambridge, MA: Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, 1987).

⁴⁶ Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 252.

Thus the Chiefs lost the PALs issue, overruled by civilian authorities who acted not on the basis of official doctrine but on private beliefs that the United States should not use nuclear weapons first (and therefore did not need a quick launch capability). Both Rusk and McNamara were fully aware that because of the requirements of flexible response in Europe, the United States could not forswear a first-use position. The United States went on to leak PALs technology to the Soviet Union.⁴⁷

A discussion in May 1963 has raised doubts about the degree to which Kennedy and McNamara had really embraced a policy against first use, but newly released tapes of the meeting paint an even more inconclusive picture than do the written records. At one point during an NSC meeting on May 9 on how to defend India against a possible attack by China, McNamara cautioned that before any substantial commitment was given to India, the United States should recognize that it would have to use nuclear weapons. "Any large Chinese Communist attack on any part of that area would require the use of nuclear weapons by the US, and this is to be preferred over the introduction of large numbers of US soldiers." A few minutes later, Kennedy responded that "We should defend India, and therefore we will defend India."⁴⁸ It is unclear from the tapes whether Kennedy intended the defense to be with nuclear or conventional means. His advisors were quite cautionary. Rusk counseled that the use of nuclear weapons would require the support of US allies such as Britain, Australia, and Canada, while Under Secretary George Ball warned that a shift to a strategy of use of nuclear weapons in Asia might provoke negative reaction there. "We are going to inject into this whole world opinion the old bugaboo of being willing to use nuclear weapons against Asians," he warned.⁴⁹ According to the written minutes, Kennedy later responded that "if we were overrun in Korea, in Formosa or in Western Europe we would obviously use nuclear weapons."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Telegram from President's Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson, Texas, April 15, 1967, *FRUS 1964–68*, 11, pp. 475–76.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Anand Giridharadas, " '63 Tapes Reveal Kennedy and Aides Discussed Using Nuclear Arms in a China–India Clash," *New York Times*, August 26, 2005. The written minutes of this meeting imply that McNamara himself favored nuclear use (as opposed to the more ambiguous "it is to be preferred" phrasing). See NSC meeting, May 9, 1963, *FRUS 1961–63*, 19, p. 588. Doc 293 (electronic version).

⁴⁹ Giridharadas, " '63 Tapes." For an interesting comparison, the minutes record Rusk's phrasing as: "that we are prepared to use nuclear weapons against yellow people but are not prepared to use them against white people in Europe." *FRUS 1961–63*, 19, p. 588.

⁵⁰ *FRUS 1961–63*, 19, p. 588.

One interpretation is that, given the political context of the time, Kennedy's advisors, who were much less pro-India than he was, may have been motivated by the desire to keep the United States from getting involved in India. They therefore raised the stakes as high as possible by mentioning "nuclear" to eliminate the defense of India as a live option.⁵¹ Kennedy himself may not yet have fully shared the taboo, or, alternatively, he may have been motivated by a need to look tough in policy discussions with his advisors.⁵² On balance, the weight of the evidence points to a strong reluctance to use nuclear weapons first. Alain Enthoven, McNamara's deputy, echoing similar recollections by Rusk and McNamara, wrote later that Kennedy and his advisors believed that the United States "must limit the role of nuclear weapons in its overall strategy to that of retaliation for a nuclear attack on it or its allies. Because of political sensitivities in this country and Europe, and because our conventional forces were inadequate, we had to be very careful how we said this."⁵³

Indeed, in the early-to-mid 1960s, after McNamara abandoned his brief flirtation with a strategic war-fighting doctrine, there was a very real acceptance in most responsible circles in the United States of a *de facto* policy of no-first-use of strategic weapons. Documents from the time confirm this. In a State Department analysis in 1964 of policy measures for countering nuclear proliferation, one option was "Formal US announcement of a no first use policy." The paper commented, "*Though this might merely confirm present de facto US policy, the announcement would be a direct attack on U.K., French, and FRG strategies for the defense of Europe . . .*"⁵⁴ As I discuss later in this chapter, this policy became implicitly codified in the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, essentially a *de facto* no-first-use-of-strategic-nuclear-weapons treaty.

Scholarly thinking on no-first-use

The administration's thinking was clearly influenced by the first wave of systematic scholarly analyses of the no-first-use issue, which

⁵¹ Stephen P. Cohen, quoted in Giridharadas, " '63 Tapes."

⁵² Burr, "US Nuclear History," p. 28.

⁵³ Alain C. Enthoven, "1963 Nuclear Strategy Revisited," in Henry P. Ford and Francis X. Winters, SJ, eds., *Ethics and Nuclear Strategy?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977) p. 74.

⁵⁴ R. Murray, "Problems of Nuclear Proliferation Outside Europe (Problem 2), December 7, 1964. NSF, Committee on Non-Proliferation, box 5, LBJL. Emphasis added.

appeared in the early 1960s as part of the first wave of serious arms control literature. Morton Halperin, a Harvard professor and consultant for RAND, who later became deputy assistant secretary of defense for arms control in 1966, authored a proposal in 1961 to ban use of nuclear weapons. The proposal, part of a consulting project for the Institute for Defense Analyses under contract to the State Department, focused on reducing the likelihood of nuclear weapons use by reinforcing the “present disposition” not to use nuclear weapons in any war, and especially in a local war. His proposal dealt solely with “dispositions,” not capabilities. “There now exists a powerful informal rule against the use of nuclear weapons,” he wrote, and it would be advantageous to the United States to transform this tacit understanding into a formal agreement.⁵⁵ In addition to reducing the likelihood of nuclear use, it might also help to slow proliferation.

Other analysts also highlighted the non-proliferation benefits of a no-first-use strategy, while additionally emphasizing the role of moral sentiment in inhibiting nuclear use. Thornton Read, an analyst at Princeton and member of the Mathematics Research Department at Bell Telephone Laboratories, argued in a December 1960 working paper that any agreement to prevent nuclear proliferation could only be viable if it included an agreement that “all use of nuclear weapons is forbidden except for reprisal against prior use.”⁵⁶ The most important part of such an agreement, he argued, would be “strengthening the moral revulsion against nuclear weapons.” This should be “acknowledged in formal agreements, by putting the authority of the United Nations behind it, by acting as though we took it seriously.”⁵⁷ Moral revulsion must play a central role as part of a “rational” policy of no-first-use, a revulsion which could, and should, be encouraged:

There is little point in arguing whether the revulsion against nuclear weapons is valid. The fact is that it exists. We cannot ignore it. We can only decide whether to encourage it as a basis for agreement or to break it down as an inconvenience. The question is not whether a

⁵⁵ Morton Halperin, “Proposal for a Ban on the Use of Nuclear Weapons,” Institute for Defense Analyses, Special Studies Group, Study Memorandum No. 4 (Washington, DC: IDA, 1961), p. 12, iv.

⁵⁶ Thornton Read, *A Proposal to Neutralize Nuclear Weapons*, Center of International Studies, Policy Memo No. 22 (Princeton, NJ: Woodrow Wilson School, 1961), p. 8. Emphasis in original. See also Robert C. Tucker, Klaus Knorr, Richard A. Falk, and Hedley Bull, *Proposal for No First Use of Nuclear Weapons: Pros and Cons*, Center of International Studies, Policy Memo No. 28 (Princeton, NJ: Woodrow Wilson School, 1963).

⁵⁷ Read, *Proposal to Neutralize Nuclear Weapons*, p. 10.

sophisticated analysis would support such revulsion on the basis of weapon effects, but whether an even more sophisticated analysis would support it as a practical necessity. There is no basis for deciding whether nuclear weapons are “really” immoral or illegal. The question is rather whether we want to make them illegal by accepting and advertising an agreement that they *are* illegal and are to be used only to punish prior use . . . *What is needed is not a choice between rational analysis and moral revulsion, but a rational analysis of the role of moral revulsion as an essential element in a viable policy.*⁵⁸

Citing the non-use of chemical weapons in World War II, he advocated putting nuclear weapons “in the illegitimate category, where we have already put poison gas and bacteriological weapons,” which can be possessed only as a threat of reprisal for their use.⁵⁹ He rejected arguments by advocates of limited nuclear war that moral stigma should be reserved only for large, high-yield nuclear weapons. Even though small, low-yield tactical nuclear weapons were no more destructive than the largest high-explosive conventional bombs, “their use takes one down a road on which there is no obvious or natural stopping place.”⁶⁰ A distinction between large and small nuclear weapons would also fail to provide a basis for limiting membership in the nuclear club.⁶¹ Elsewhere he argued that “we should try to build up a rule against nuclear attacks against non-nuclear forces.”⁶² Read’s exhortations to foster moral revulsion as part of a “rational” nuclear policy of no-first-use provide illuminating evidence of recognition of both the intimate link between morality and rationality with regard to nuclear arms and the constructed nature of moral categories and values. His studies were cited favorably by State Department analysts (see below).

Tactical nuclear weapons and the feasibility of limited nuclear war

With widespread acceptance of the unusability of strategic weapons, the real no-first-use issue after the mid-1960s was the tactical use of nuclear weapons, primarily in Europe. If presidents and top civilian advisors were beginning to internalize the taboo, the military continued to tout the usability of the weapons in tactical nuclear warfare.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11. Emphasis added.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶² Thornton Read, “Limited Strategic War and Tactical Nuclear War,” in Klaus Knorr and Thornton Read, eds., *Limited Strategic War* (New York: Praeger, 1962), pp. 115–16.

Military commanders stationed in Europe made clear that they assumed the United States would have to strike first and early with nuclear weapons to win. In briefings with them in Europe in May 1964, State Department officials questioned such assumptions, however, pointing to “the understandable reluctance of responsible officials to . . . agree to a general release of nuclear weapons.”⁶³ As they noted, a decision to use nuclear weapons “would be one of the most crucial ones any President could make” and would not likely be made “quickly or easily.”⁶⁴ The feasibility of limited war with the Soviet Union thus remained an unresolved issue. The Joint Chiefs felt that the Soviet Union was unlikely to use tactical nuclear weapons in a limited war, while State Department officials sought to maintain sufficient conventional forces to reassure the Europeans of the ability to repulse a Soviet attack without resort to nuclear arms.⁶⁵

State Department critiques of military studies of tactical nuclear warfare under way in spring 1964 illuminated clearly the sharp divergence of views between political and military leaders on the feasibility of limited nuclear war. Military analyses emphasized rapid employment of tactical nuclear weapons and argued that “escalation should be welcomed and utilized by the US,” while calling for “pre-designation” of authority to launch a nuclear strike.⁶⁶ The military’s Advanced Tactics Study was leaning toward a force equipped solely with nuclear weapons.⁶⁷

The State Department criticized these studies for treating tactical nuclear weapons as a “positive military device” and minimizing the uncertainty of nuclear weapons use.⁶⁸ In a long memo to Ambassador-at-Large Lewellyn Thompson, Seymour Weiss, an influential political-military analyst, emphasized the difficulty of finding limits to tactical nuclear warfare and criticized the military studies for focusing narrowly on “the relative logistic advantage of tactical nuclear weapons over conventional weapons” while failing to take into account

⁶³ “USAFE,” May 26, 1964, Johnson-European Trip, May 1964, Records of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Politico-Military Affairs, Subject Files, 1961–63, Box 3, RG 59, NSA, p. 1.

⁶⁴ Memo from Johnson to Rusk, “Meetings in Paris with Bohlen, Finletter, Lemnitzer and McConnell,” May 27, 1964, US Department of State, Deputy Under Secretary for Political Affairs, US Nuclear History, NH00993, NSA, p. 8.

⁶⁵ “Joint Strategic Objectives Plan for FY 1970–1974 (JSOP-70) (U), July–August 1964, *FRUS 1964–68*, 10, National Security Policy [Doc. 43, electronic version], Sec. 4 (c).

⁶⁶ Memo from Seymour Weiss to Llewellyn E. Thompson, “Tactical Nuclear Warfare Studies,” Top Secret, July 10, 1964, US Nuclear History, NH 00094, NSA, Tab I, p. 4.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Tab I, pp. 2, 3. ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

“broader political circumstances surrounding such use.”⁶⁹ Weiss emphasized that McNamara and Alain Enthoven, McNamara’s main assistant on the tactical nuclear weapons issue, were “extremely dubious about the utility of tactical nuclear weaponry as a means for meeting US national objectives.”⁷⁰ The military underemphasized both the problem of civilian casualties and the politico-psychological effects of using nuclear weapons, another study by his office argued. “Once the first use of tactical nuclear weapons is made by either or both sides,” it asserted, “we would be enveloped in such an entirely different psychological framework that *a priori* judgments about governmental reactions (and those of civilian populations as well) may well be out the window.”⁷¹

These memos clearly acknowledged both the role of precedent and the importance of preserving the distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons. Once nuclear weapons were used, the State Department analysts noted, “the fact that ‘barriers’ to the use of nuclear weapons had been breached would be viewed as a precedent making it more likely that they would be used again in the future.”⁷² They concluded, “We find nothing in the AIAS [Army’s Institute of Advanced Studies] . . . study that is half as persuasive as Thornton Read’s comments that there are a number of reasons ‘for setting limits on limited war at the conventional-nuclear distinction’ and that there is at this point ‘a clear, unambiguous, verifiable discontinuity in the physical phenomena’ which is not available at other points on the scale of limited war.”⁷³

For his part, McNamara thought use of tactical nuclear weapons would lead to rapid escalation to general nuclear war. His argument during this period in favor of a “flexible response” policy for NATO had an implicit no-first-use theme. McNamara initiated the move to flexible response in 1962, but it was not until 1967 that the NATO alliance, after much negotiation, adopted the new concept. Flexible

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, Tab I, p. 2. Weiss was head of the Combined Policy Office of Politico-Military Affairs in the State Department.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4, and Tab I, p. 6.

⁷¹ “Comments on AIAS Study: Political and Military Feasibility of Limitations in Tactical Nuclear Weapons,” Seymour Weiss to General Lipscomb, March 13, 1964, Top Secret, US Nuclear History, NH 00094, NSA, pp. 17–18, 22.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 31. They are quoting Read, “Limited Strategic War and Tactical Nuclear War,” p. 72. In this article, Read analyzed various strategies for limiting war, including distinctions based on geography, territorial boundaries, weapons yield, and the conventional–nuclear distinction. He concluded that only the latter was viable.

response, as McNamara first articulated it to the allies in Athens in May 1962, was conceived as an attempt to shift the burden of nuclear response to the adversary by beefing up conventional forces. But in the final compromise over the policy, this theme was rejected; the allies failed to (or preferred not to) clarify the circumstances in which use of nuclear weapons would take place.⁷⁴ However, it could be argued that with flexible response the United States had moved unilaterally toward a policy of “no immediate use.” This was very much along the lines of the limited use restriction formula presented by Harold Stassen, Eisenhower’s arms control negotiator, in 1957.⁷⁵ As the flexible response plan gained widespread acceptance, it subsumed, though did not solve, the inconclusive debate over limited war.

The shift to non-proliferation norms

The Kennedy and Johnson administrations’ shift away from “use” was also reflected in the gradual transition in US policy in the early 1960s from norms of NATO sharing to global non-proliferation norms.⁷⁶ In the 1950s, Eisenhower had promoted sharing nuclear defense capabilities with the NATO allies, even at the expense of encouraging national atomic programs. But under Kennedy, and even more so under Johnson, US officials increasingly identified the global spread of nuclear weapons as an important security problem. In the protracted and complex negotiations between the United States, the Soviet Union, and US allies over the NPT, the latter finally won out over the Multilateral Force, which would have extended US nuclear weapons to a European nuclear condominium.

In 1965, the Gilpatric report, the first systematic statement of US interests with regard to nuclear proliferation, recommended that, to minimize incentives for others to acquire nuclear weapons, the

⁷⁴ David N. Schwartz, “A Historical Perspective,” in John D. Steinbruner and Leon V. Sigal, eds., *Alliance Security: NATO and the No-First-Use Question* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1983), pp. 11–16. On the Kennedy and Johnson administration’s efforts to advance the flexible response strategy, see Jane Stromseth, *The Origins of Flexible Response: NATO’s Debate Over Strategy in the 1960s* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1988).

⁷⁵ Weiler, “Evolution of No First Use,” p. 11.

⁷⁶ Peter Clausen, *Non-Proliferation and the National Interest: America’s Response to the Spread of Nuclear Weapons* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993); Joseph Nye, “US–Soviet Cooperation in a Non-Proliferation Regime,” in George *et al.*, *US–Soviet Security Cooperation*, pp. 336–52.

United States should avoid giving an exaggerated impression of their importance and utility, and should stress the current and future important role of conventional armaments. Named after its chair, Undersecretary of State Roswell Gilpatric, it endorsed the revisions of NATO strategy being proposed by the secretary of defense and the Joint Chiefs, placing greater stress on non-nuclear options and relying less upon tactical nuclear weapons, while still retaining a tactical nuclear capability “for deterrence, credibility and flexibility.”⁷⁷ Although under McNamara and his successor Clark Clifford, the number of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe increased from 2,500 to 7,200, this was primarily because of bureaucratic momentum and previous alliance commitments.⁷⁸ Thus the interest in moving away from reliance on nuclear weapons was not driven simply by the prospect of retaliation, but also by a more generalized fear that *other* countries might acquire and use nuclear weapons.

The codification of deterrence: US–Soviet arms control

Like Kennedy and Johnson before them, President Richard Nixon and his national security advisor Henry Kissinger also wrestled unsuccessfully with the limited nuclear war option. In reviewing NATO policy in November 1970, their second year in office, Kissinger observed during an NSC meeting that a study of NATO strategy revealed that the US government “could not develop a clear picture of the use of nuclear weapons.” Nixon nevertheless felt that tactical nuclear weapons were essential to deterrence, but said “We will never use the tactical nuclears, but we let the USSR see them there.”⁷⁹ Nixon and Kissinger likely did not internalize the taboo (as discussed in Chapter 6), but their eventual pursuit of US–Soviet arms control agreements, driven by strategic self-interest, nevertheless contributed to codification of a non-use norm.

⁷⁷ A Report to the President by the Committee on Nuclear Proliferation [Gilpatric Committee], January 21, 1965. *FRUS 1964–68*, 11, pp. 181–82.

⁷⁸ Blackaby *et al.*, *No First Use*, p. 14.

⁷⁹ NSC Meeting, “NATO and MBFR,” November 19, 1970, White House, Top Secret/XGDS, *The Kissinger Transcripts*, Electronic Briefing Book, No. 172 (May 2006), Document 7, NSA. On the unsuccessful search for limited nuclear options, see William Burr, “The Nixon Administration, the ‘Horror Strategy’, and the Search for Limited Nuclear Options, 1969–1972,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3 (Summer 2005), pp. 34–78.

The 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty

Among the array of US–Soviet strategic arms control agreements reached during this period, the most important for the issue of non-use was the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty. This treaty, the centerpiece of the US–Soviet arms control regime, was the clearest and most important institutionalized and formalized expression of a non-use presumption between the nuclear powers. Its achievement depended on both sides agreeing that deterrence – i.e. non-use – was the preferred role for nuclear weapons. In the treaty, the two countries agreed that they would not deploy anti-ballistic-missile systems to defend their territories against a nuclear attack, and would instead (with limited exceptions) leave themselves vulnerable and undefended. Survival thus depended on a mutual expectation that neither side intended to initiate use of nuclear weapons. In codifying this understanding, the treaty essentially amounted to a *de facto* strategic no-first-use agreement, and one with “teeth” in it because each side could monitor the other’s territory with satellite surveillance.⁸⁰

Thus while the *regulative* effect of the agreement was to ban ABMs, its *constitutive* effect was to codify and legitimize deterrence – rather than use – as the appropriate role for superpower nuclear weapons. The US goal during the negotiations was to reach an agreement that would “maintain a stable US–Soviet strategic deterrent relationship.”⁸¹ According to Philip Farley, the deputy US negotiator, a consensus existed on the American side that “the primary goal of national security policy in the nuclear age had to be the avoidance of nuclear war . . . negotiation and agreement on strategic arms might contribute to security in ways that strategic arms alone could not.”⁸² In defending the ABM agreement, President Nixon stated:

[a] major effect of the ABM treaty was to make permanent the concept of deterrence through ‘mutual terror:’ by giving up missile defenses, each side was leaving its population and territory hostage to a strategic missile attack. Each side therefore had ultimate interest in preventing war that could only be mutually destructive.⁸³

⁸⁰ Weiler, “Evolution of No First Use,” p. 12.

⁸¹ Memo from Bohlen to Rusk, April 5, 1968, *FRUS* 1964–68, 11, p. 565.

⁸² Philip Farley, “Strategic Arms Control, 1967–87,” in George *et al.*, *US–Soviet Security Cooperation*, pp. 220, 224–27.

⁸³ Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), pp. 617–18.

Kissinger also embraced the doctrine of mutual deterrence, acknowledging that the effort to limit strategic arms competition was “perhaps the single most important component of our policy toward the Soviet Union” in a situation in which “each side has the capacity to destroy civilization as we know it.”⁸⁴

In addition to the ABM Treaty, the broader process of the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT) in the early 1970s was important not simply for its regulative effects (arms limitations) but also because it codified mutual recognition of the situation of approaching parity and mutual deterrence. Such codification was an important step in documenting acceptance of three tacitly shared principles central to the US–Soviet nuclear relationship: mutual deterrence, strategic parity (rather than the pursuit of superiority), and strategic stability, or acceptance of the link between offense and defense with regard to nuclear weapons.⁸⁵ Additional technical agreements to guard against unauthorized or accidental use, improve crisis communications, and facilitate consultation reflected and reinforced the presumption against nuclear use.⁸⁶ In briefing Congress on the agreements in 1972, Kissinger said that the SALT treaty on arms limitations did not stand alone but rather was “linked organically to a chain of agreements and to a broad understanding about international conduct appropriate to the dangers of the nuclear age.” For their part, the Soviets saw the SALT treaty as one of the “practical results” of their principle of peaceful coexistence.

Together with the ABM Treaty, these measures helped to stabilize the practice of deterrence by reinforcing the expectation that the intent was not to use nuclear weapons, and that, if they were nevertheless used, it would be inadvertent or accidental. They also helped to embed this expectation more centrally in the US national security planning process.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Quoted in Raymond Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American–Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994), rev. edn, p. 216.

⁸⁵ Condoleezza Rice, “SALT and the Search for a Security Regime,” in George *et al.*, *US–Soviet Security Cooperation*, pp. 293–306.

⁸⁶ For example, the “Agreement on Measures to Reduce the Outbreak of Nuclear War,” signed in September 1971. These agreements were negotiated during the SALT process in 1970–71 and signed by Secretary of State William P. Rogers and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 197–98, 395–96.

⁸⁷ Rice, “SALT and the Search for a Security Regime,” and Richard Burt, “Defense and Arms Control: Defining the Problem,” in Bernard F. Halloran, ed., *Essays on Arms Control and National Security* (US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Washington, DC, 1986), pp. 187–210.

Normative power politics: The 1973 Agreement on Preventing Nuclear War

Only a year after concluding the ABM Treaty, however, US leaders rejected Soviet efforts to conclude an explicit no-first-use agreement, negotiating instead the watered-down 1973 Agreement on Preventing Nuclear War (PNW). Consistent with realist predictions, the Soviet position on non-use had, in fact, shifted over time in line with the Soviets' own strengthening nuclear capability and perception of threats, including from China. From 1946 to 1954, for example, coincident with the period of effective US nuclear monopoly, Soviet leaders advocated complete destruction of atomic weapons. From 1955 to 1959, when they possessed nuclear weapons but lacked a real first-strike capability, they advocated banning any use of the bomb. From about 1960 onward, once they had achieved a mutual assured destruction capability, they advocated banning only first use of the bomb, a position no doubt facilitated by the fact that they relied less on a threat of first use than did the United States and its allies, which were weaker in conventional forces.⁸⁸

In March and April 1969, the Soviets gave US delegates to the ENDC a draft declaration on the non-use of nuclear weapons and raised the issue in the ENDC, but the US delegation privately made clear that the United States would not pursue it. The Soviets then made a significant push on the issue before and after the first US–Soviet summit in May 1972. In April 1972, when Kissinger was in Moscow preparing for the summit, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev privately proposed to Kissinger a bilateral “understanding” between the two powers not to use nuclear weapons against one another, which he said would be a step of “immense significance.” Kissinger turned down the idea. The Soviets continued to raise the idea with Nixon and Kissinger in summits and back channel meetings throughout 1972.⁸⁹

Nixon and Kissinger rejected the Soviet formulations as implying a Soviet–American condominium but sought to keep open discussion on the topic as a vehicle for getting the Soviets to discuss other issues that

⁸⁸ “Soviet Positions on Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons,” Unclassified Report No. 162, October 18, 1975, Item No. SE 00490, Soviet Estimate, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, US Department of State, NSA.

⁸⁹ Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 377–78. Garthoff provides the most authoritative and comprehensive account of the PNW agreement. This discussion draws substantially on his.

were of greater interest to the United States.⁹⁰ By spring of 1973, however, with a second summit looming, Nixon and Kissinger decided to enter into an agreement but to shift the emphasis from the non-use of nuclear weapons to the non-use of force more generally. The risk of nuclear war would not be tied only to the initial use of nuclear weapons. The agreement finally signed in June 1973 removed from the Soviet draft anything that singled out non-use of nuclear weapons as contrasted with the non-use of force.⁹¹ In the treaty, the two countries agreed on the shared goal “to remove the danger of nuclear war and of the use of nuclear weapons.”⁹²

The importance of the PNW agreement was ambiguous. In the communiqué on the summit, Nixon and Brezhnev joined in stating that the agreement “constitutes a historical landmark in Soviet–American relations and substantially strengthens the foundations of international security as a whole.”⁹³ Although Kissinger also lauded the agreement at the time as “a significant step toward the prevention of nuclear war,” in his 1979 memoir he made clear his view of the marginal American interest in the agreement. As he described it, “we eventually agreed in June 1973 on a bland set of principles that had been systematically stripped of all implications harmful to our interests.”⁹⁴ He doubted it was worth the effort because of the difficulties it created with the allies and China.

The Soviets, in contrast, viewed it as building on the 1972 Basic Principles Agreement and accorded it substantially more importance, especially in reducing still further the acceptability of resort to military means and especially to nuclear weapons.⁹⁵ Brezhnev subsequently

⁹⁰ Henry A. Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1992), pp. 276–77. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 378.

⁹¹ Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 378–79. Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 276–84. Nixon and Kissinger suspected that Soviet leaders’ main interest in the agreement was their fear that the United States might conclude a military agreement with China – fears Nixon termed “unfounded.” *Ibid.*, p. 378.

⁹² Article I, Agreement Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Prevention of Nuclear War, June 22, 1973.

⁹³ *The Washington Summit: General Secretary Brezhnev’s Visit to the United States, June 18–25, 1973*, Publication 8733 (Washington, DC: US Department of State, GPO, 1973), p. 50.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32; and Kissinger, *The White House Years*, p. 1152.

⁹⁵ The Basic Principles Agreement, signed by Nixon and Brezhnev at their first summit meeting in May 1972 along with the ABM treaty, included general principles that committed the two countries to avoid dangerous crises and the outbreak of nuclear war. However, these principles were extremely abstract and ambiguous, and both sides tended to view them as a vehicle for imposing constraints on the foreign policy of the other and not on its own. George, “Crisis Management and Crisis Avoidance,” pp. 588–90.

publicly interpreted the PNW agreement as meaning that “in effect, the United States assumed the obligation not to use nuclear weapons and force in general against the Soviet Union, its allies and other countries.”⁹⁶ The United States accorded the agreement little importance and reaffirmed its own opposing interpretation to its allies and to the Soviets. In explaining the agreement to the NATO allies later, Kissinger stressed that no distinction would be made in time of war between nuclear weapons or other weapons on the basis of the agreement.⁹⁷

In the end, the PNW agreement appeared to be more a political step in detente rather than a technical step to prevent nuclear war. US leaders did not expect it would affect Soviet behavior – nor their own. It certainly could not appear to affect US commitments to defend the allies with nuclear weapons. The ABM Treaty, with its real constraints, was much more significant than the PNW agreement. US leaders’ resistance to a stronger PNW agreement revealed clearly the political limits to further clarification and institutionalization of an explicit non-use principle.

Nevertheless, even within such limits, on balance the US–Soviet arms control process, by helping to codify the practice of strategic deterrence between the superpowers, contributed to stabilizing and legitimizing deterrence, thereby reinforcing non-use. Two additional developments in the 1970s contributed to the consolidation of the taboo: the demise of the notion of “peaceful nuclear explosions” and the political defeat of the neutron bomb.

The consolidation of the taboo

The decline into illegitimacy by the early 1970s of the once wildly popular idea of “peaceful nuclear explosions,” and the furor over the “killer” neutron bomb in the late 1970s, can only be understood in terms of a taboo and its discursive effects. Both of these notions were, for a long time, dear to the hearts of the weapons labs, the military and the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), which advocated them as rational, hard-nosed policy for the United States. Both were nearly adopted. But after highly contested political battles, the US government finally abandoned them as too controversial and, in the view of many, as unacceptably blurring the distinction between conventional

⁹⁶ Quoted in Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 383.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 383.

and nuclear war. These two cases provide illuminating windows into the operation of the taboo, showing how the line between conventional and nuclear weapons was challenged and then preserved. The defeat of these two notions helped to consolidate the taboo around a total, as opposed to selective, prohibition on use of nuclear weapons and dealt a death blow to competing norms of “use.”

The demise of “peaceful nuclear explosions”

While the notion of “peaceful nuclear explosions” (PNEs) seems ludicrous, if not scandalous, today, it was for about a decade a mainstream idea and a respectable goal of national nuclear programs. Begun in 1957, at its height in 1968 Project Plowshare, the US peaceful nuclear explosions program, employed 290 people and spent \$18 million annually to recast the bomb as a peacetime tool.⁹⁸ Its supporters, the AEC and the weapons labs, aggressively promoted the use of nuclear explosions for a variety of industrial, economic and “landscaping” purposes including building harbors and canals, stimulating oil and gas, and creating underground cavities. Between 1961 and 1973, twenty-five nuclear tests were conducted specifically for Plowshare, and numerous others involved Plowshare participation or contributions to Plowshare technology.⁹⁹ Despite its powerful supporters, however – Edward Teller had the ear of the powerful congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy and others – Plowshare gradually lost political and economic support. When the AEC was folded into the new Department of Energy in 1974, Plowshare died.

The decline of Plowshare was due to several factors: the obstacle it posed to arms control, negative environmental consequences, and uncertain benefits. A key issue from the perspective of the taboo, however, is the debate it engendered over how to define nuclear explosions: it represented an attempt to construct a category of “peaceful nuclear explosions,” an effort that was ultimately rejected.

Plowshare first began to confront obstacles once arms control got under way seriously in the early 1960s. After the establishment of ACDA in 1961, a long-running dispute ensued between the AEC

⁹⁸ Dan O’Neill, *The Firecracker Boys* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1995), p. 25; Ralph Sanders, “Nuclear Dynamite: A New Dimension in Foreign Policy,” *Orbis*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1960), pp. 307–22.

⁹⁹ Trevor Findlay, *Nuclear Dynamite: The Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Fiasco* (Sydney: Brassey’s Australia, 1990), pp. 293–94. In total it conducted 41 Plowshare explosions. Glenn T. Seaborg, with Benjamin Loeb, *Stemming the Tide: Arms Control in the Johnson Years* (Lexington Books, 1987), p. 350.

and ACDA over the survival of Plowshare. Attempts to preserve Plowshare significantly complicated test ban negotiations, threatening to scuttle achievement of the Partial Test Ban Treaty of 1963 and later the integrity of the NPT and the Latin American nuclear-weapons-free zone. The AEC and Livermore lab attempted to preserve a right to use nuclear explosions for peaceful purposes and wanted exceptions made to any test ban treaty for PNEs. ACDA opposed this on the grounds that there was little distinction between nuclear explosions for military and peaceful purposes, and that allowing special provisions for tests for “peaceful” purposes would undermine the aims of the treaties. It was difficult to prevent the military benefits associated with PNEs. At a government meeting on June 15, 1963, called to discuss the US position on the test ban, the AEC’s position received little support. Glenn Seaborg, director of the AEC, noted, “It was becoming evident that the AEC’s enthusiasm for Plowshare was not widely shared, whereas there was considerable concern about the adverse diplomatic consequences that would arise if PNEs seem to violate a test ban treaty.”¹⁰⁰

For a time, however, PNEs were seen to offer important diplomatic benefits. US leaders saw them as a nuclear goodie that could be offered to the non-nuclear states in exchange for the latter’s willingness to forgo the option of acquiring nuclear weapons under the emerging non-proliferation regime. In May 1964, in a memo to national security advisor McGeorge Bundy, Deputy Under Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson emphasized the need to “stimulate international interest and cooperation in the nuclear excavation program to the maximum extent possible.” Through international participation in Plowshare symposia, observation of cratering shots or experiments, and perhaps exchange of test data, the administration could demonstrate “the economic development potential of nuclear excavation, the absence of hazard to human life and the safeguards that could be provided to prevent evasion of the [test ban] Treaty for weapons development purposes.”¹⁰¹

Only a year later, however, the administration was having second thoughts about the wisdom of promoting interest in nuclear explosions. In January 1965, the Gilpatric committee declared that “the spread of nuclear weapons poses an increasingly grave threat to the

¹⁰⁰ Seaborg, *Stemming the Tide*, p. 316.

¹⁰¹ Memo from Johnson to Bundy, “International Approval of Nuclear Explosions for Peaceful Applications,” May 7, 1964, *FRUS 1964–68*, 11, p. 57.

security of the United States,” and specifically that the PNE program conflicted with US non-proliferation and arms control interests. Even though it might have “long-term economic importance,” the program should not “be allowed to jeopardize a comprehensive test ban treaty or to encourage interest in nuclear weapons.” It added that “undue emphasis” on such programs tended to make nuclear explosives appear “desirable, necessary and acceptable” to countries contemplating such programs. The United States “should not, therefore, actively seek to interest other countries in such programs” until their relationship to the comprehensive test ban and the general nuclear proliferation problem was better understood.¹⁰²

The AEC, however, continued its efforts to stimulate international interest and enthusiasm in PNEs as a way of countering domestic opposition to Plowshare, and hoped to amend the 1963 test ban to permit PNEs in the atmosphere so that it could pursue its cratering projects, their most likely use. It saw the advantages of promoting PNEs to developing countries, especially in Latin America, and did so through international conferences, touring exhibitions and training, in apparent disregard of the increasing difficulties being encountered by Plowshare at home. One effect of the NPT negotiations was to encourage non-nuclear states to consider the role of nuclear energy in promoting development, and to expect cooperation from the nuclear states in providing this.¹⁰³ In the mid-1960s developing countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Egypt displayed an enthusiastic interest in the benefits of nuclear energy for economic development, and pressed this issue hard during negotiations on the NPT. The result was Article V of the NPT, which stated that nuclear states would make the benefits of peaceful nuclear uses available to non-nuclear states.¹⁰⁴

At a conference of non-nuclear states following the successful conclusion of the NPT in spring 1968, Theo Ginsburg, a professor at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, described Plowshare excavation experiments as “meaningful” and the use of PNEs in mining processes as “very attractive from an economic point of view.”

¹⁰² A Report to the President by the Committee on Nuclear Proliferation (Gilpatrick Committee), January 21, 1965. *FRUS 1964-68*, 11, pp. 181-82.

¹⁰³ Findlay, *Nuclear Dynamite*, p. 116.

¹⁰⁴ Edwin Brown Firmage, “The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” *American Journal of International Law*, vol. 63, no. 4 (October 1969), pp. 729-32.

Ginsburg concluded his paper with the reassurance that “no new technology becoming available to man has ever been rejected.”¹⁰⁵

Yet the program had already begun to lose support. Mexico and most of the rest of the Latin American states opposed PNEs. Negotiations to finalize the treaty on the Latin American nuclear-weapons-free zone got held up over, as Rusk put it, “the alleged distinction between a nuclear explosion and nuclear weapons.”¹⁰⁶ It took some time before US leaders finally settled on the position that they would make no distinctions among types of nuclear explosions. At the time it signed on to this treaty in 1968, the United States emphasized its view that “the technology of making nuclear explosive devices for peaceful purposes is indistinguishable from the technology of making nuclear weapons,” and that it understood the definition contained in Article V of the treaty as “necessarily encompassing all nuclear explosions.”¹⁰⁷

In the United States, Plowshare tests were increasingly postponed or cancelled because they complicated ongoing arms control negotiations. State Department and ACDA officials worried that if a test unintentionally vented radiation into the atmosphere, it opened the United States to charges that it was violating the atmospheric test ban. In October 1967, the State Department legal advisor, agreeing with ACDA, recommended yet another postponement of the Cabriole test requested by the AEC, originally scheduled for February 1967. “It is difficult to imagine a more unfortunate time for the conduct of Cabriole,” the analyst wrote. “The situation at the [UN] General Assembly seems virtually certain to ensure that there will be well-publicized charges of treaty violation, with the US being taxed for shaving its own obligations at the same time it was asking the non-nuclears to engage in a further round of self-denial. The domestic political repercussions could be substantial.”¹⁰⁸ The Cabriole shot, an essential test for the feasibility of a grand plan to blast a new

¹⁰⁵ T. Ginsburg, *The Question of Peaceful Explosions for the Benefit of Non-Nuclear Weapons States*, Document A/CONF.35/DOC.2, Conference of Non-Nuclear Weapons States, Geneva, July 1968, pp. 6, 19, 20.

¹⁰⁶ Memorandum of Conversation, Rusk and Gromyko, June 23, 1967, *FRUS 1964–68*, 11, p. 485.

¹⁰⁷ Draft Statement to Accompany Signature to Protocol II, January 14, 1968, *ibid.* p. 555.

¹⁰⁸ *FRUS 1964–68*, 11, p. 519; Seaborg, *Stemming the Tide*, p. 335; D. R. Inglis and C. L. Sandler, “A Special Report on Plowshare: Problems and Prospects: The Non-Military Use of Nuclear Explosives,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 23, no. 10 (1967), pp. 46–53.

Panama canal, was eventually delayed by a year, which ultimately proved fatal for the canal project.¹⁰⁹

Environmental concerns and declining support from industry also increasingly played a role in undermining political support for PNEs. After passage of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, environmental impact statements required for all Plowshare projects forced the release of more information on the risks associated with the detonations. Environmental groups used the act effectively to call attention to the environmental hazards of nuclear excavations. After its passage Plowshare could no longer proceed as elite or concealed policymaking. The Panama Canal plan, as well as an ambitious plan to blast a new harbor in western Australia, were eventually derailed by growing funding difficulties, fears of severe ecological damage, especially the problem of radioactivity, and government officials with declining enthusiasm for the projects and increasing concern for arms control.¹¹⁰

The last US nuclear cratering test took place in March 1968, and the remaining underground PNE uses for gas stimulation eventually fell victim to the fatal combination of budgetary, environmental and political pressures and lack of support from industry.¹¹¹ The final PNE blast took place in May 1973. The Nixon administration cut back the AEC's requests for funding starting in 1970 until Plowshare was effectively killed in 1974. Neither the administration nor Congress, despite the JCAE's influence, responded to AEC demands for extra funds.¹¹²

Even after the Plowshare program was dead, the notion of PNEs hung on a little longer. The Soviet Union, after initially criticizing the Plowshare program in the 1950s as a ruse to continue work on weapons, eventually began its own program in the mid-1960s. The Soviet program was much larger than that of the United States, and by the early 1980s probably more than half the annual Soviet nuclear tests were PNEs.¹¹³ Ratification of the 1974 Threshold Test Ban Treaty, which set a modest 150 kiloton limit for nuclear tests, was delayed because the two sides disagreed over provisions of a separate PNE

¹⁰⁹ Notes of the President's Meeting on Project Cabriole, November 28, 1967, in *FRUS 1964-68*, 11, doc. 217, electronic version.

¹¹⁰ Findlay, *Nuclear Dynamite*, ch. 6; Memo from Philip Farley to Secretary of State William P. Rogers, "Plowshare Program and the Limited Test Ban Treaty," NSSM 25 Related, February 12, 1969, Presidential Directives II, PR 00378, NSA, p. 6.

¹¹¹ Findlay, *Nuclear Dynamite*, p. 182.

¹¹² *Ibid.* p. 169. ¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-90.

treaty, which would specify definitions and limits for PNEs. The United States was now eager to constrain PNEs (because its program was winding down anyway), while the Soviet Union, in a complete reversal of its position of the early 1960s, was the most interested in pursuing a PNE program. US leaders were concerned that no weapons-related benefits could be obtained from PNEs and sought to make the PNE treaty provisions burdensome and onerous. Arms controllers were sharply critical of the treaty, charging that near-nuclear states such as Brazil and India could view it as legitimizing nuclear weapons (the Indian nuclear test in 1974, claimed to be a “peaceful nuclear explosion,” drove home the problem). They recommended, to no avail, that efforts to negotiate a separate PNE treaty be abandoned.¹¹⁴ President Jimmy Carter, beset with grave doubts about the worth of the two treaties overall, sent them to the Senate for ratification in 1977 but then withdrew them when some senators threatened to add more verification provisions. Though the Senate eventually ratified both treaties in 1990 and they entered into force that year, they were of dubious value, overtaken by events and changing sentiment. The notion of PNEs was only fully put to rest with the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty of 1996, which banned all nuclear explosions.

The furor over the neutron bomb

The controversy that erupted in 1977 over the neutron bomb is another puzzling phenomenon that is inexplicable without reference to a strengthening taboo and its discursive effects. As political scientist Stanley Hoffmann observed in 1981, the neutron bomb is a weapon “against which a great deal of indignation has been arrayed but which, strangely enough, fits all the canons of traditional just-war doctrine.”¹¹⁵ The neutron bomb, or enhanced radiation weapon, is a tactical nuclear weapon with diminished blast, heat and radioactive fallout but with increased radiation effects. It would cause less damage to the physical environment and much less radioactive dust than earlier “dirty” nuclear weapons. Thus it would kill fewer non-combatants (if aimed only at troops), it would not destroy property, and it would have diffuse radioactive effects. Advocates argued that it would be especially

¹¹⁴ “The Right to Conduct Nuclear Explosions: Political Aspects and Policy Proposals,” Stockholm Paper No. 6 (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 1975).

¹¹⁵ Stanley Hoffman, *Duties Beyond Borders* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981), pp. 75–76.

useful for the European battlefield, where radioactive fallout from regular nuclear weapons could turn the continent into a wasteland for decades. This would not be the case if neutron bombs were used, they argued.¹¹⁶

Nevertheless, the neutron bomb provoked an uproar. Some critics charged that it was a uniquely inhumane weapon that preserved property while destroying people. Others charged that, by making nuclear weapons less destructive, it made nuclear war easier to wage. After fierce moral and political debates in 1977–78 over whether to build and deploy it, on April 7, 1978 President Carter made a surprise announcement abruptly deferring production on it – in effect, cancelling it. The NATO allies, on the verge of accepting deployment in response to US pressure, were stunned by the decision, as was Congress, which had already appropriated funds. The case is generally portrayed as a bungled case of alliance decisionmaking and bureaucratic politics, in which a minor weapons-modernization program got blown out of proportion by the inept alliance politics and indecisiveness of President Carter.¹¹⁷ But why had a less powerful weapon created such a furor? NATO's existing nuclear weapons, deployed in Europe since the 1950s, all had greater destructive capability than the neutron bomb.

The turmoil over the neutron bomb can only be understood in terms of the competing moral interpretations of nuclear weapons, including the taboo. This is evident in the weapon's tortuous history. Right from the beginning, research on what was referred to as "radiological warfare" got off to a shaky start. An early effort by the RAND Corporation in spring 1948 to investigate its potential was killed when David Lilienthal, first chairman of the AEC, met with the group and expressed his dismay with the work. Physicist Samuel Cohen, who had worked on the Manhattan project and was at the time a member of the RAND group, recounted later Lilienthal's impromptu speech:

He told us that he had come essentially against his will but, for reasons of protocol, felt that he had to put in an appearance. He found the subject at hand to be extremely distasteful; he was appalled that such activities were going on; his view, as chairman of the AEC,

¹¹⁶ For a balanced assessment of its advantages and drawbacks for NATO strategy, see Alton Frye, "Slow Fuse on the Neutron Bomb," *Foreign Policy*, no. 31 (Summer 1978), pp. 95–103.

¹¹⁷ See Vincent A. Auger, *The Dynamics of Foreign Policy Analysis: The Carter Administration and the Neutron Bomb* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

was that he preferred to preside over the control and peaceful applications of the Atom, and he certainly had no desire to attend meetings such as this one. Then, having gotten his feelings off his chest, he left the room. We were shattered.¹¹⁸

Since at the time the prospects for radiological warfare were still highly uncertain, this meeting, and Lilienthal's speech, discouraged most further work on, or interest in, this topic.

Cohen, however, remained interested. It was not until the late 1950s that Cohen, aided by breakthroughs in fusion technology in 1957, performed the study that led in 1958 to the formulation of the concept of enhanced radiation. The term "neutron bomb" was apparently coined by the scientific community when the enhanced radiation concept was in its early stages of development. An early use of the term appeared in the press in May 1960 when *US News and World Report* reported on the neutron "death ray" bomb which would kill man with "streams of poison radiation, while leaving machines and buildings undamaged."¹¹⁹

Numerous attempts after that to incorporate it into a weapons system failed owing to controversy over its military utility, lack of interest by politicians and high-level civilian and military officials, and interservice rivalries. The Air Force, for example, dominated by the Strategic Air Command, had no interest in low-yield nuclear weapons that would detract from its mission of inflicting massive retaliation on the Soviet Union. It was the Navy, in search of a nuclear mission and groping for a way to justify the role of the aircraft carrier, which rapidly embraced the enhanced radiation concept as a means of proving that its carrier-based aircraft could provide a credible and effective tactical nuclear capability. A Navy captain became Sam Cohen's sponsor in efforts to sell the neutron bomb concept to the Eisenhower administration.¹²⁰

In the early 1960s, promoters of the neutron bomb, including the AEC, the Joint Chiefs, the congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy (JCAE), and the weapons labs, used it as a focal point for their efforts to defeat the moratorium on nuclear weapons testing that Eisenhower had mandated in 1958. The weapons labs and their

¹¹⁸ Samuel Cohen, *The Truth About the Neutron Bomb* (William Morrow & Co., 1983), p. 26.

¹¹⁹ "Most Terrible Bomb of All," *US News and World Report*, May 30, 1960, p. 56.

¹²⁰ Sherri L. Wasserman, *The Neutron Bomb Controversy: A Study in Alliance Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1983), p. 23.

spokesman, Edward Teller, urged development of the “clean” tactical nuclear weapons on Eisenhower. But when Cohen briefed George Kistiakowsky, Eisenhower’s science advisor, on the merits of the neutron bomb and its potential for military use in Asia, Kistiakowsky found its technical aspects intriguing but objected to it on political grounds. “Were we to use neutron bombs in Asia,” Kistiakowsky told Cohen, “the Asian condemnation of this act would result in political disaster for the US.”¹²¹

Thomas Murray, the former AEC commissioner under Truman and Eisenhower who was extremely concerned with the moral aspects of nuclear weapons, began to lobby hard for the neutron bomb. He argued that targeting cities was immoral and the United States therefore needed discriminate tactical nuclear weapons. In fall of 1960, Murray went public with his lobbying. He wrote an open letter to presidential candidates Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy arguing for development of the neutron bomb and for termination of the existing test moratorium, giving both strategic and moral reasons.¹²² About this time Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev launched an anti-neutron bomb campaign, portraying it as the weapon of monsters and a reflection of the United States’ lack of humanity.¹²³ After the Soviet Union broke the test moratorium on September 1, 1961, the Livermore weapons lab tested the first neutron device in 1962.

In the mid-1960s, the Joint Chiefs sought to interest the Defense Department in acquiring the neutron warhead for the Sprint missile, a component of the army’s Sentinel anti-ballistic missile system.¹²⁴ However, Defense Secretary McNamara rejected it after a study by the Office of Systems Analysis, headed by Alain Enthoven, was skeptical as to its value.¹²⁵ McNamara’s reasoning in rejecting the neutron bomb reflected taboo considerations. He felt that a clear distinction existed between conventional and nuclear warfare, but that no clear “firebreak” existed beyond that. Once this line was crossed, there was no point on the “escalation ladder” where both sides were likely to agree that further use of nuclear weapons was beyond the pale. McNamara sought to enhance the firebreak by opposing the

¹²¹ Cohen, *The Truth About the Neutron Bomb*, p. 60.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹²⁴ Michael A. Aquino, “The Neutron Bomb,” Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1980, p. 38.

¹²⁵ Cohen, *The Truth About the Neutron Bomb*, p. 84.

development and deployment of small nuclear weapons, even though they might be militarily useful. “While we may find very low yield weapons and enhanced radiation warheads *to be of military utility, we should not acquire them simply for the purpose of breaking down the distinction between non-nuclear and nuclear warfare.*”¹²⁶ The JCS did not contest the Enthoven study, whose conclusions were allowed to stand.

Nevertheless, proponents of the neutron bomb tried again in the early 1970s, continuing to argue the moral and military advantages of having a more discriminating weapon. In 1973, Harold Agnew, director of the Los Alamos weapons lab, told the JCAE, “We at Los Alamos are working very aggressively, trying to influence the DoD to consider using these [deleted] weapons which could be very decisive on a battlefield, yet would limit collateral damage that is usually associated with nuclear weapons.”¹²⁷ By the mid-1970s, plans to modernize US tactical nuclear weapons assigned to NATO created a window of opportunity to put neutron warheads on the battlefield. James Schlesinger, who became secretary of defense in 1973, sought the ability to conduct limited nuclear warfare “so that if deterrence were to fail . . . the use of nuclear weapons would not result in [an] orgy of destruction.” This might be possible through the use of “a sufficient accuracy-yield combination to destroy only the intended target and to avoid widespread collateral damage.”¹²⁸

From June 1977 to April 1978, a heated and highly publicized debate took place over the production and deployment of the neutron bomb. The media played a key role in bringing public attention to an otherwise top secret weapons development and provoked a highly emotional response. On June 6, the *Washington Post* published an article with the dramatic headline “Neutron Killer Warhead Buried in ERDA Budget.” The article described the weapon as “specifically designed to kill people through the release of neutrons rather than to destroy military installations through heat and blast.”¹²⁹ The army was requesting neutron warheads for its Lance short-to-medium-range tactical missile and its 8-inch and 155 mm artillery pieces.

¹²⁶ Robert McNamara, Draft Presidential Memorandum, “The Role of Tactical Nuclear Forces in NATO Strategy” (January 15, 1965), pp. 35–37. Emphasis added.

¹²⁷ Quoted in Wasserman, *The Neutron Bomb Controversy*, p. 28.

¹²⁸ Quoted in Auger, *The Dynamics of Foreign Policy Analysis*, p. 22.

¹²⁹ Walter Pincus, “Neutron Killer Warhead Buried in ERDA Budget,” *Washington Post*, June 6, 1977. ERDA refers to the Energy Research and Development Administration, a unit of the Department of Energy, which replaced the Atomic Energy Commission in 1975.

A few days later, the *Post* lead editorial, entitled “A New Warhead We Don’t Need” lashed out at the neutron bomb as in the same camp with chemical and biological weapons.¹³⁰ In Congress, Senator Mark Hatfield (R-OR) seized on the issue and raised its visibility. Motivated by personal moral qualms – he had visited Hiroshima shortly after the bombing in 1945 – on June 8 Hatfield announced he would introduce an amendment to prohibit production of the neutron warhead for the Lance missile.¹³¹ On July 1, in a close vote, Congress voted to delay funds for the neutron bomb until an arms control impact statement could be filed (legislation passed in 1975 required such statements on a new weapon). In mid-July, journalist Bernard Weinraub observed in *The New York Times*, “What seems to have emerged out of the confusion and emotive rhetoric surrounding the neutron bomb – some reports have referred to the neutron weapon as a ‘killer warhead’ as if there were some other kind – is a tense debate about nuclear war itself and the use of nuclear weapons.”¹³²

The disarmament movement revives

The neutron bomb revitalized the antinuclear movement, which had been in decline since the mid-1960s, while the movement, in turn, played a key role in demonizing the neutron bomb. News of the neutron warhead had “set off an explosive political and public reaction,” Carter’s Secretary of State Cyrus Vance recalled, led by “antinuclear groups.”¹³³ Arms control groups, such as the Center for Defense Information, played an active role in criticizing the bomb. A Campaign Against the Neutron Bomb was formally launched in Norway in January 1978, while public protests spread throughout Europe. In Britain, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) launched a major effort against the neutron bomb, elevating it to a prominent issue. Attacking plans for the new weapon, CND produced thousands of leaflets and posters, held meetings and demonstrations, and circulated a petition that drew 161,000 signatures. In May 1978, a poll

¹³⁰ “A New Warhead We Don’t Need,” *Washington Post*, June 8, 1977.

¹³¹ Auger, *Dynamics*, p. 41; Robert A. Strong, *Working in the World: Jimmy Carter and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2000), pp. 130–31.

¹³² Bernard Weinraub, “What Role for the Neutron Bomb?” *The New York Times*, July 17, 1977.

¹³³ Cyrus R. Vance, *Hard Choices: Four Critical Years in America’s Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), p. 68.

found that of Britons who had heard of the neutron bomb, 72 percent opposed deployment in their country.¹³⁴

In West Germany, where the neutron bomb would be deployed, the *Washington Post* article received extensive press coverage. Conservative German newspapers and their defense commentators supported the weapon while the left assailed it as a “supercapitalist” weapon that preserved property while killing people. On July 18, Egon Bahr, executive secretary of the ruling Social Democratic Party, denounced the “twisted values” associated with the neutron bomb as a “symbol of mental perversity.” This provoked a national debate that contributed significantly to public opposition to deploying the bomb and to the German government’s equivocating position.¹³⁵

Soviet leaders had a field day, criticizing the neutron bomb as a “diabolical toy” inconsistent with Carter’s professed interest in human rights (a sore point with the Soviets at the time), and the enhanced radiation aspect as similar to chemical weapons.¹³⁶ They asked the UN to outlaw plans for neutron weapons, though, as US officials were quick to observe, the Soviets did not renounce the weapon themselves “nor did they appear ready to pay a political price to stop the US program.”¹³⁷ In Europe, the Soviet propaganda campaign against the neutron bomb outdid even the Western media. From June 1977 until the end of the year, *Pravda* carried a regular column on its foreign policy page with the title “No to the Neutron Bomb,” a slogan that many West European peace groups adopted.¹³⁸ A turning point came in March 1978 when the Dutch parliament voted firmly against deploying the weapon. The governing parties in Europe were under strong pressure by the Council of Churches not to introduce neutron weapons in Europe, and public opinion was predominantly negative.¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Lawrence S. Wittner, *Toward Nuclear Abolition: A History of the World Disarmament Movement, 1971 to the Present*, vol. III of *The Struggle Against the Bomb* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 22–23.

¹³⁵ Wasserman, *The Neutron Bomb Controversy*.

¹³⁶ Augur, *Dynamics*, p. 59; Malcolm Browne, “US Neutron Bomb Criticized in Soviet Union,” *The New York Times*, June 20, 1977; Wittner, *Toward Nuclear Abolition*, p. 38.

¹³⁷ Briefing Memo from Harold H. Saunders to the Secretary of State, “MBFR: Soviet Reaction to a Neutron Bomb Proposal,” September 21, 1977, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, US Department of State, Soviet Estimate, #SE00507, NSA.

¹³⁸ Clive Rose, *Campaigns Against Western Defense: NATO’s Adversaries and Critics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1985), pp. 108–10; Aquino, *The Neutron Bomb*, ch. 8.

¹³⁹ Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Public Opinion Online, “neutron bomb,” 1977–78; Connie de Boer, “The Polls: Our Commitment to WWII,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 1 (Spring 1981), p. 133.

After much seeming indecisiveness and mixed signals, on April 7 Carter abruptly announced that he would defer production of the neutron warhead. In doing so, he went against the advice of his secretaries of defense and state and his national security advisor. According to *The New York Times*, Carter's decision was reportedly due to his belief that development of the bomb would harm "prospects for disarmament."¹⁴⁰ The upcoming UN special session on disarmament, scheduled for May, may have influenced him. According to one administration official, "Carter may have had a hard time thinking of himself up there talking about disarmament and being the President who ordered production of a new type of nuclear weapon."¹⁴¹ Some of Carter's aides testified later that Carter felt morally uncomfortable with the weapon.¹⁴² A devout Southern Baptist, Carter had come to the presidency with an idealistic outlook on the world, and was seriously committed to human rights and arms control and disarmament as central goals of his foreign policy. Having once served as an officer on a nuclear submarine, he knew more about the technology of nuclear weapons than any of his predecessors in office.¹⁴³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national security advisor, recalled in his memoirs that the president "did not wish the world to think of him as an ogre."¹⁴⁴ Another official stated in an interview that while legislative and public opposition had all played some part in the decision, "it was at base Carter's own personal dislike for nuclear weapons in general and the 'inhuman' connotations of this one in particular. He just doesn't like it, and so he would rather it did not exist. It is to a great extent as simple as that."¹⁴⁵

While moral inhibitions clearly played a role, Carter's decision to scrap the project was also clearly based on strong political pressures against it in Western Europe – what the State Department, in its secret explanation for the decision, termed "the political problem that ERW [enhanced radiation weapon] has created in most allied countries."¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁰ *The New York Times*, April 4, 1978, p. 1.

¹⁴¹ Quoted in Aquino, *The Neutron Bomb*, p. 52.

¹⁴² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977–1981* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1983), pp. 304–05; Auger, *Dynamics*, p. 109; Strong, *Working in the World*, p. 148.

¹⁴³ Nonetheless, neither Carter nor his defense secretary, Harold Brown, had known anything about the weapon until it was announced in the *Washington Post*. Aquino, *The Neutron Bomb*, p. 39.

¹⁴⁴ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, p. 302.

¹⁴⁵ Interview in Aquino, *The Neutron Bomb*, p. 56.

¹⁴⁶ Quoted in Wittner, *Toward Nuclear Abolition*, p. 49.

Carter had been willing to build the weapon but wanted European governments to share some of the responsibility for this unpopular decision.¹⁴⁷ Facing substantial popular pressure, and often divisions within their own parties, European governments were unwilling to do so. The decision could thus be seen as a significant victory for the disarmament movement – and for the Soviet Union.¹⁴⁸

A fundamental question is why the neutron bomb was viewed as more morally abhorrent than other tactical or strategic nuclear weapons. For the strategists and other supporters, of course, it was *more* morally acceptable than other nuclear arms. In early February 1978, European leaders explicitly argued that the neutron bomb was *not* a weapon of mass destruction but rather had less widespread radiation effects than NATO's inventory of nuclear weapons and the Soviet Union's latest armaments.¹⁴⁹ Supporters held that because it reduced collateral damage, it could be used in a more selective fashion than other nuclear weapons, thereby providing a clear "advantage for the military defender as well as for the nearby non-combatant."¹⁵⁰ Most importantly, it would shore up deterrence by offering a more credible war-fighting option.

Making nuclear weapons easier to use was precisely what critics worried about. In their view, neutron bombs, by allowing NATO to think it could use tactical nuclear weapons without provoking escalation to the strategic level, would unacceptably blur the distinction between conventional and nuclear warfare. Other critics vehemently objected to the supposed inhumane, and therefore illegal, nature of the weapons. The crucial feature of neutron bombs that touched moral conscience appeared to be that they killed with radiation (even if they also killed with reduced heat and blast). Just as US Manhattan Project officials had worried decades earlier with regard to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki blasts, this feature allowed opponents to stigmatize neutron bombs by associating them with historically opprobrious weapons. As Senator John Heinz asserted, "death by neutron radiation smacks of the sort of chemical and biological warfare which had historically

¹⁴⁷ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam, 1982), pp. 225–29; Strong, *Working in the World*, pp. 133–34.

¹⁴⁸ Wittner, *Toward Nuclear Abolition*, p. 50.

¹⁴⁹ Michael Hornsby, "NATO Anger at Brezhnev Letter on Neutron Bomb," *The Times* (London), February 2, 1978.

¹⁵⁰ Harold Agnew, "A Plan to Lessen Suspicions," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 33, no. 3 (March 1977), p. 7.

outraged civilized nations and which the US has at times strongly condemned.”¹⁵¹

In 1981, three years after Carter had cancelled the neutron warhead, the Reagan administration announced a decision to produce it, but it was never deployed, too controversial an issue to reopen with the Europeans. The political failure of the neutron bomb, following the demise of PNEs a few years earlier, contributed to the consolidation of the taboo. This was reflected in the negotiations concluding the 1981 “Inhumane” Weapons Convention. The conference was limited by its terms of reference to “conventional weapons” and did not discuss nuclear weapons. This 1981 distinction implied – and thereby reaffirmed – that nuclear weapons were not simply conventional weapons with potentially greater effects, but rather were in a different category entirely.¹⁵²

The renewed debate over no-first-use

The fight over the neutron bomb contributed significantly to raising public awareness of the issue of nuclear deterrence, especially the problem of extended deterrence in Europe. In the face of ongoing Soviet modernization of Warsaw Pact forces, NATO’s policy of relying on nuclear weapons to deter or respond to a Soviet conventional attack became increasingly implausible for many. By the late 1970s, the failure of the SALT II agreement and renewed Cold War tensions led to increased public anxieties about nuclear war, giving rise to a renewed and more widespread debate over the policy of first use.

As late as 1977, when the United States signed Protocol I of the 1949 Geneva Conventions on humanitarian law, it made clear that in its view the rules established by this protocol dealing with the means and methods of warfare did not regulate or prohibit the use of nuclear weapons. The following year, however, at the first UN Special Session on Disarmament in 1978, the Soviet Union unilaterally declared that it would never use nuclear weapons against states that had renounced the production and acquisition of nuclear weapons and that did not have such weapons deployed on their territories. The United States and Britain followed suit with unilateral negative assurance pledges of

¹⁵¹ Quoted in Wasserman, *The Neutron Bomb Controversy*, p. 50.

¹⁵² Alfred Rubin, “Nuclear Weapons and International Law,” unpublished manuscript, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, June 1983, p. 15.

their own, though with reservations restricting it to parties to the NPT who were not assisted in an armed attack by a nuclear state. US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance formally announced the US pledge at the special session, more than ten years after the non-aligned states had first sought such assurances.¹⁵³

By the early 1980s, the doctrine of first use, as a doctrine of deliberate action in a policy of extended deterrence, was in disrepute around the world.¹⁵⁴ In 1979, several retired chiefs of the British defense staff had indicated that under no circumstances would they recommend that NATO initiate use of nuclear weapons.¹⁵⁵ In 1982, the Soviet Union formally pledged not to be first to use nuclear weapons but added that in the formulation of its policy it would take into account whether other powers followed its example.¹⁵⁶ In June 1982, at the Second UN Special Session on Disarmament, the Soviet Union offered a draft treaty calling for a no-first-use pledge. NATO members, including the United States, rejected it and any idea of a change of policy.¹⁵⁷

That same year, however, four prominent former US officials, including former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, issued a public call for a no-first-use policy, provoking a public debate on the matter.¹⁵⁸ Their suggestion that NATO get rid of first use stirred wide controversy in Europe. A year later McNamara argued that NATO should get rid of nuclear weapons altogether. He repudiated first use and said he had recommended that the president never initiate the use of nuclear weapons.¹⁵⁹ In October 1982, former Kennedy national security advisor McGeorge Bundy criticized “flexible response” for becoming a fixed view which had acquired overwhelming inertial

¹⁵³ Cyrus Vance, “US Assurance on Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons” (statement, UN General Assembly’s First Special Session on Disarmament, New York, June 12, 1978), in *Documents on Disarmament, 1978* (Washington, DC: GPO).

¹⁵⁴ Richard H. Ullman, “No First Use of Nuclear Weapons,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 50, no. 4 (July 1972), pp. 669–83; Fred Charles Ikle, “NATO’s First Nuclear Use: A Deepening Trap?” *Strategic Review*, vol. 8 (Winter 1980), pp. 18–38.

¹⁵⁵ Blackaby *et al.*, *No First Use*, p. 17.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁵⁷ Bunn, “Evolution of the Issue of No First Use,” p. 2.

¹⁵⁸ McGeorge Bundy, Robert S. McNamara, Gerard Smith, and George Kennan, “Nuclear Weapons and the Atlantic Alliance,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 4 (Spring 1982), pp. 753–58. For critical responses, see Theodore Draper, “How Not to Think About Nuclear War,” *New York Review of Books*, vol. 29 (July 15, 1982), Maxwell D. Taylor, “The Trouble with ‘No First Use,’” *Washington Post*, April 18, 1982; and Herman Kahn, “Thinking About Nuclear Morality,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 13, 1982.

¹⁵⁹ “McNamara Calls on NATO to Renounce Nuclear Arms,” *The New York Times*, September 15, 1983.

power in NATO capitals. Arguing that the United States already had a tradition, "one of the most important we have," of non-use of strategic weapons, he doubted that most Americans would want their president to be the one to begin a nuclear war, no matter what the crisis in Europe.¹⁶⁰ Many commentators and analysts echoed the call for NATO to reconsider its first-use policy and to abandon especially its battlefield nuclear weapons, which, if used, would destroy precisely the West European populations their use was supposed to protect.¹⁶¹

*Reagan and arms control: The taboo survives the
Reagan agenda*

During this period, the largest antinuclear movement in postwar history arose in the United States and Western Europe. Unlike earlier protest movements, this was not a response to any specific weapons system or crisis but rather to the perceived repudiation of nuclear arms control by the US administration.¹⁶² After the SALT II debacle, President Ronald Reagan had determined to put arms control on the shelf for an indeterminate period, arguing that the United States needed to concentrate on building up its strategic forces. In 1979 NATO had announced its "dual track" decision – negotiations on reducing Soviet intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe but NATO deployment of its own such forces in 1983 if talks failed. According to one long-time observer, "no conflict has torn at NATO's social fabric as fiercely its 1979 decision."¹⁶³

Reagan's references to "prevailing" in and "winning" a nuclear war created fear in Europe and provoked dismayed and outraged responses by both the public and a large segment of national security elites that he was retreating from mutual understandings about

¹⁶⁰ Tom Wicker, "No First Use of Nuclear Weapons: Policy in Paralysis," *The New York Times*, October 19, 1982.

¹⁶¹ Tom Wicker, "NATO's Useless Nukes," *The New York Times*, September 16, 1983. Scholarly analyses of the issue include Steinbruner and Sigal, eds., *Alliance Security: NATO and the No-First-Use Question*; Union of Concerned Scientists, *No First Use* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Blackaby et al., eds., *No First Use*; Kurt Gottfried, Henry W. Kendall, and John M. Lee, "'No First Use' of Nuclear Weapons," *Scientific American*, vol. 250, no. 3 (March 1984), pp. 33–38.

¹⁶² John Lofland, *Polite Protesters: The American Peace Movement of the 1980s* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993); Robert Kleidman, *Organizing for Peace: Neutrality, the Test Ban, and the Freeze* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993), ch. 6.

¹⁶³ Joseph Joffe, "Peace and Populism: Why the European Anti-Nuclear Movement Failed," *International Security*, vol. XI, no. 4 (Spring 1987), p. 3.

nuclear weapons and deterrence.¹⁶⁴ In the early 1980s millions of demonstrators took to the streets in major European capitals to block the deployments and protest the apparent lack of seriousness about arms control. European political leaders had to overcome vigorous internal opposition and protest in order to go ahead with INF deployments; several governments feared deployment might be politically impossible unless negotiations were undertaken at the same time. In the view of some observers, the government of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt in West Germany fell because of internal opposition to nuclear weapons.¹⁶⁵

In the United States the nuclear freeze movement swept the country in the absence of arms control. Large numbers of members of Congress, responding to public sentiment, voted for nuclear freeze resolutions in 1982 and 1983. Congress also proposed various other measures, such as ceilings on nuclear weapons and reintroduction of SALT II, as alternatives to the Reagan administration's arms control and security policy, which many felt was either progressing too slowly or going in the wrong direction.¹⁶⁶ The number of organizations concerned with nuclear issues increased dramatically in the early 1980s, giving rise to a permanent "peace" community of church groups, medical and scientific professionals, academics, and activists, who led the way in opposing US nuclear weapons policy.¹⁶⁷ These groups expressed their opposition to the increasing counterforce nature of strategic arsenals, the new emphasis on war-fighting strategies, and the perceived ineffectiveness of earlier arms control agreements in preventing such developments. These pro-arms control pressures played a major part in the decision to resume US–Soviet arms control negotiations in Geneva in 1982.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ Robert Scheer, *With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush and Nuclear War* (New York: Random House, 1982). For criticisms of the Reagan administration's nuclear strategy see Robert Jervis, *The Illlogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

¹⁶⁵ Joffe, "Peace and Populism," p. 3.

¹⁶⁶ Douglas C. Waller, *Congress and the Nuclear Freeze: An Inside Look at the Politics of a Mass Movement* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1987); Thomas R. Rochon and David Meyer, eds., *Coalitions and Political Movements: The Lessons of the Nuclear Freeze* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1997); David Cortwright, *Peace Works: The Citizens' Role in Ending the Cold War* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993).

¹⁶⁷ Kleidman, *Organizing for Peace*, pp. 135–82.

¹⁶⁸ Thomas Risse-Kappen, *The Zero Option: INF, West Germany and Arms Control* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1988); and Lawrence Wittner, "How the Nuclear Freeze Movement Forced Reagan to Make Progress on Arms Control," *Boston Review* (April/May 2000), at <http://bostonreview.mit.edu>.

The UN special sessions on disarmament in 1978 and 1982 provided a focus around which these citizens' groups could rally. Organized by the General Assembly, they were an effort to focus the attention of the nuclear powers on international concerns about the arms race. Although the sessions had little concrete effect on the nuclear states' policies, they helped to mobilize antinuclear public sentiment around the globe.¹⁶⁹ The sessions attracted not only delegations from many members states' capitals but also more press attention than the usual disarmament debates in the GA. The first session, in 1978, was held when progress on arms control issues between the United States and the Soviet Union allowed successful conclusion of a detailed final document. Subsequent special sessions ended in deadlock, without issuing a final statement, because of firm opposition by the US government. Nonetheless, the special sessions were a powerful rallying point for citizens' groups, who in turn put pressure on their governments.

The moral challenge to deterrence

The dissatisfaction over deterrence policy and the arms race was expressed not only in strategic arguments but in the return of a widespread public moral and ethical debate over nuclear weapons and deterrence. It was launched in October 1982 when the National Conference of Catholic Bishops released the draft of a pastoral letter opposing first use of nuclear weapons even to repel invasion. The letter argued that strategic doctrine was "morally flawed" in that it depended on the threatened use of nuclear weapons, but that "use of nuclear weapons by any of the nuclear powers would be an even greater evil."¹⁷⁰ The letter, which the Reagan administration had anxiously sought to influence, concluded that attacking first with nuclear weapons even to repulse a conventional attack was so abhorrent that the United States had a moral obligation to establish conventional strategies sufficient to respond to non-nuclear attack.

¹⁶⁹ David C. Atwood, "Mobilizing Around the United Nations Special Sessions on Disarmament," in Jackie Smith, Charles Chatfield, and Ron Pugnucio, eds., *Transnational Social Movements and Global Politics: Solidarity Beyond the State* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), pp. 141-58.

¹⁷⁰ *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, A Pastoral Letter on War and Peace, May 3, 1983, National Conference of Catholic Bishops (United States Catholic Conference, Washington, DC, 1983). The letter was apparently unaffected by dissents from the Reagan administration. Its release just before Congressional elections and a presidential decision on MX missile basing raised concern in Washington that it could fuel the antinuclear movement. "Bishops Assail Underpinnings of Deterrence," *New York Times*, October 31, 1982.

It was a remarkable letter from a group often regarded as cautious and politically rather conservative.¹⁷¹ By referring to deterrence as “a step on the way toward progressive disarmament” – the only conditions under which the bishops judged deterrence to be morally acceptable – it significantly contributed to delegitimizing nuclear weapons not only as instruments of war-fighting, but also for deterrence.¹⁷² Calling for major changes in thought and policy, the letter thus represented a fundamental challenge to US nuclear deterrence policy.

The letter provoked a widespread public debate on the morality of nuclear deterrence and the merits of a no-first-use policy, with the growing peace movement and the churches, as well as liberal arms control supporters, playing an active role. For the first time since the 1950s, an explicit moral discourse about nuclear weapons had returned, engaging wide segments of society, but it was more penetrating and critical than before. Scholars held conferences and produced volumes bringing together academics, religious leaders and strategic analysts to analyze both ethical and strategic aspects of nuclear deterrence.¹⁷³ Peace and arms control groups, such as the Union of Concerned Scientists, held convocations on the issue.¹⁷⁴ International lawyers argued that the legal groundwork for a no-first-use deterrence system had already been put in place.¹⁷⁵ In their view, the combination of

¹⁷¹ For an extended analysis see L. Bruce van Voorst, “The Churches and Nuclear Deterrence,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 61, no. 4 (1983), pp. 827–52.

¹⁷² Bruce Russett, “Ethical Dilemmas of Nuclear Deterrence,” *International Security*, vol. 8, no. 4 (Spring 1984), pp. 36–54.

¹⁷³ See, for example, Richard H. Ullman, “Denuclearizing International Politics,” *Ethics* (April 1985), pp. 567–88; Raymond English, ed., *Ethics and Nuclear Arms: European and American Perspectives* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1985); Russell Hardin, Robert E. Goodin, John Mearsheimer, Gerald Dworkin, eds., *Nuclear Deterrence: Ethics and Strategy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1985); James P. Doherty, ed., *Ethics, Deterrence and National Security* (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey’s), 1985; Avner Cohen and Steven Lee, eds., *Nuclear Weapons and the Future of Humanity* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1986); and Henry Shue, ed., *Nuclear Deterrence and Moral Restraint* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹⁷⁴ “Convocation: November 11, 1982: No-First-Use,” Union of Concerned Scientists, Cambridge, MA.

¹⁷⁵ Larry A. Rosenthal, “No First Use: A Codification of Deterrence,” unpublished manuscript (Madison, WI: December 1982); George Bunn, “No First Use of Nuclear Weapons: Codifying Nuclear Deterrence?” paper presented at the 42nd Annual Pugwash Symposium on the Arms Race and International Law; Alfred Rubin, “Law Could Restrain Nuclear Weapons Issue,” *The Boston Herald*, July 8, 1983; John H. E. Fried, “First Use of Nuclear Weapons: Existing Prohibitions in International Law,” *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, vol. 1 (1981); Carl H. Builder and Morlie H. Graubard, *The International Law of Armed Conflict: Implications for the Concept of Assured Destruction* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1982).

various treaties, principles of civilized nations, and customary rules of international law created a burden of proof upon the first nuclear weapons user. That state would have to show that its employment of nuclear weapons somehow evaded these numerous prohibitions and limitations.¹⁷⁶ In 1981 and 1983, the UN GA once again adopted resolutions declaring nuclear weapons illegal and calling for a ban on their use. It also adopted a draft convention to prohibit the use of nuclear weapons, approved in 1983 over the objections of the United States and its allies.¹⁷⁷

Public opinion strongly supported a no-first-use position. A Harris poll in the fall of 1983 showed that only 14 percent of Americans felt that the United States should use nuclear weapons in response to an attack with conventional arms, while a mere 2–8 percent of Europeans supported first use; 66 percent of Americans supported a nuclear response to a nuclear attack while 14 percent stated that nuclear weapons must never be used, even if attacked with nuclear arms (the highest figures recorded on this question were in Spain and Japan, where 61 percent and 58 percent, respectively, felt nuclear weapons use was not acceptable under any circumstances).¹⁷⁸

Public figures explicitly connected the issue of no-first-use to a nuclear taboo. Former Under Secretary of State George Ball spoke out forcefully against NATO's policy of first use while emphasizing the importance of a nuclear taboo. In a 1983 article in the *New York Review of Books*, he publicly castigated the extended deterrent threat as a "cosmic bluff." A sense of revulsion, not limited to Americans, he argued, "has enveloped nuclear weapons in a rigid taboo." Any nation which "first broke the taboo by using the H-bomb" would "suffer universal condemnation." No president would make the nuclear decision in a vacuum; he would be sensitive to public opinion "that is now imposing a more powerful constraint." Ball criticized strategists for pursuing fine but illusory distinctions. Even if the president used only a few tactical nuclear weapons to produce only "local devastation," the shock would be "much the same as if he had authorized massive megaton missiles." Ball added, "Our breaking the nuclear taboo would produce a far greater trauma for Americans than anything imagined by the nuclear priesthood, for the effect would be

¹⁷⁶ Rosenthal, "No First Use," p. 15.

¹⁷⁷ GA Resolution 36/100 adopted in 1981, GA Resolution 38/75, adopted in 1983.

¹⁷⁸ Connie de Boer, "The Polls: The European Peace Movement and the Deployment of Nuclear Missiles," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 1 (Spring 1985), p. 125.

multiplied by a corrosive sense of guilt, as though we had, by once again unleashing the nuclear monster, branded ourselves with the mark of Cain.” He called instead for upgrading NATO’s conventional strength.¹⁷⁹

Arms control advocates, peace groups and religious leaders explicitly linked morality and interests. In their view, planning for massive use of nuclear weapons was immoral not only because it violated basic principles of humanity but because it so flagrantly contradicted any possible conception of interests. It was both immoral and irrational to rely on a system of “security” that, if used, could obliterate human life and values on a massive scale. Morally based arguments were a way of drawing attention to the interests at stake (which, despite their stunning obviousness, defense policymakers had seemingly managed to ignore). The dictates of morality required development of a more “rational” nuclear policy, protesters argued. Thus moral reasoning and interest-based reasoning were intertwined. Moral opprobrium expressed a more powerful condemnation than simply a claim that “it’s not in our interest” to use nuclear weapons.

The return of arms control and the further delegitimization of deterrence

After the INF deployment in 1983 and the resumption of START talks, continued public support for progress on arms control in the United States was expressed more through Congress than in popular movements. With the worst fears apparently allayed by the resumption of arms negotiations, protests in Europe diminished and the US nuclear freeze campaign dwindled. The disarmament movement continued to exert influence well into the latter part of the decade, however.¹⁸⁰ Much of the public and many in Congress remained critical of the direction of Reagan defense policies, and Congress made clear its reluctance to fund budget-busting military projects such as the Strategic Defense Initiative without a demonstration of serious commitment to arms control. The Democratic-controlled House passed sense-of-the-Congress resolutions in support of SALT offensive and defensive limitations, negotiations to ban chemical weapons and nuclear tests, and a moratorium and eventual agreement on anti-satellite testing.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Ball, “The Cosmic Bluff,” pp. 37–38.

¹⁸⁰ Cortwright, *Peace Works*.

¹⁸¹ Waller, *Congress and the Nuclear Freeze*, pp. 187–92.

President Reagan never faced an occasion in which he had to seriously consider the use of nuclear weapons. Kenneth Adelman, assistant to the secretary of defense in 1976–77 and later director of ACDA in the Reagan years, wrote later that, “In all my government years, I never heard anyone broach the topic of using nuclear weapons. Ever. In any setting, in any way.”¹⁸² Ironically, despite his military build-up, Reagan’s own commitment to making nuclear weapons “obsolete” may have reinforced declining public support for them. His 1983 “Star Wars” proposal for an anti-missile “peace shield” coopted the antinuclear movement’s rhetoric of peace and nuclear abolition. Although the proposal undercut the momentum of the nuclear freeze movement, it also contributed to the growing public sense of the illegitimacy of nuclear weapons.¹⁸³ After experiencing a conversion in his hard-line views of the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s, Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev seriously discussed complete elimination of nuclear weapons at their summit meeting in Reykjavik in October 1986, leaving their defense establishments apoplectic.¹⁸⁴

The discrediting of nuclear first use snowballed. By the mid-1980s, much restiveness existed within NATO over its nuclear-based strategy. In an April 29, 1987 article in *The New York Times*, former West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt observed that the armed forces of the Federal Republic could be counted on to fight valiantly in a conventional war but that their efforts would end if nuclear warheads began exploding in their homelands.¹⁸⁵ In a subsequent speech he said, “I deeply believe that nuclear weapons in our hands – the West’s hands – have one purpose only; to put the onus of nuclear first use on the opposite side of the Iron Curtain.”¹⁸⁶ In accepting the Albert Einstein Peace Prize in Washington, DC in November 1988, physicist

¹⁸² Kenneth L. Adelman, *The Great Universal Embrace: Arms Summitry – A Skeptic’s Account* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 167.

¹⁸³ Frances FitzGerald, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); and Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Make Nuclear Weapons Obsolete* (New York: Random House, 2006).

¹⁸⁴ Jack R. Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador’s Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1995), pp. 93–98.

¹⁸⁵ Helmut Schmidt, “If the Missiles Go, Peace May Stay,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1987.

¹⁸⁶ *International Herald Tribune*, December 17–18, 1988, quoted in Paul Warnke, “Now More than Ever: No First Use,” in Charles W. Kegley, eds., *After the Cold War: Questioning the Morality of Nuclear Deterrence* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), p. 61.

and peace activist Andrei Sakharov called on NATO nations to abandon the first-use policy, calling it an “incalculable risk for mankind” and emphasizing the infeasibility of preventing escalation from tactical use to all-out exchange.¹⁸⁷ In April 1989, a NATO military exercise came to an abrupt end when the West German and Turkish participants objected to an American proposal for the hypothetical use of battlefield nuclear weapons against an enemy on German and Turkish territory. This was the first ever such interruption in a routine annual exercise.¹⁸⁸

How the taboo helped to stabilize, not undermine, deterrence

Although US leaders resisted a formal no-first-use policy, the evidence presented in this chapter suggests that they embraced a *de facto* no-first-use norm, and that this was essential to stabilizing the practice of deterrence between the superpowers. Post-1962 history shows that neither US nor Soviet leaders felt comfortable relying purely on the operation of the balance of terror alone. Rather, they sought to codify shared understandings about the nature of nuclear security in arms control agreements, institutions and practices as a way to stabilize their relationship. These arrangements, based on mutual expectations that neither side intended to initiate a nuclear attack, brought some predictability to the US–Soviet relationship and also legitimized the concept and practice of deterrence as the appropriate form of superpower political competition. Deterrence was thus stabilized by embedding it in an array of agreements – including the ABM, SALT, and non-proliferation treaties, and nuclear-weapons-free zones and their associated non-use commitments – and practices such as crisis management consultation procedures and the installation of permissive action links. Without this institutional and normative context, deterrence might still have operated but it would not have been stable.

Thus deterrence – seen as a stable practice of non-use – became the acceptable role for nuclear weapons. Indeed, after the SALT agreements, a norm of deterrence became so ritualized and institutionalized that all military objectives came to be justified in terms of it.¹⁸⁹ Deterrence became synonymous with whatever military objectives of any sort were pursued. Supporters of both “minimum deterrence” and

¹⁸⁷ Warnke, “Now More than Ever,” p. 62.

¹⁸⁸ Bernard E. Trainor, “Disquiet in NATO: A Familiar Strategy is at Risk,” *New York Times*, May 1, 1989.

¹⁸⁹ Steinbruner and Sigal, *NATO and the No-First-Use Question*, p. 35.

counterforce forms of nuclear strategy justified their positions by arguing that their approaches would strengthen deterrence. Invoking “deterrence” legitimized otherwise debatable practices, because it was supposedly to sustain the non-use, not use, of nuclear weapons.

By the late 1980s, however, in the face of widespread opposition to the Reagan administration’s policies, some observers began to question whether even nuclear deterrence itself would be delegitimized. Was the public opposing all nuclear deterrence, or just the Reagan administration’s particularly aggressive version of it, which seemed to depart excessively from “deterrence” in the direction of “use”?¹⁹⁰

Conclusion

By the late 1980s, it was clear that a process of *de facto* denuclearization was well under way. Nuclear strategies that had once appeared plausible and realistic in the 1950s now seemed, in the sensibilities of the 1980s, patently absurd. Although US reliance on nuclear arms to deter a nuclear attack on the homeland still enjoyed support, the threat to launch a nuclear strike in response to conventional attacks against allies around the world, including in Europe, the core alliance commitment of the United States, appeared increasingly dubious. Seemingly benign uses of nuclear energy, such as peaceful nuclear explosions, or presumably welcome efforts to make nuclear arms more discriminating, such as the neutron warhead, were discredited because they appeared to undermine inhibitions on nuclear explosions and arms.

Efforts to institutionalize the taboo during this period were driven by both strategic and normative concerns. Three mechanisms of norm strengthening were evident. First was US–Soviet strategic self-interest in avoiding a nuclear exchange and in stabilizing deterrence – a purely rationalist mechanism – manifested in the pursuit of arms control and security cooperation agreements that helped to institutionalize a non-use norm. A second mechanism, more normative, was on-going delegitimation politics, reflected in the antinuclear movement’s efforts in

¹⁹⁰ David S. Yost, “The Delegitimation of Nuclear Deterrence?” *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 16, no. 4 (Summer 1990), pp. 487–508; Robert Tucker, “The Nuclear Future: Political and Social Considerations,” CNSS Papers, No. 11, Center for National Security Studies, Los Alamos National Laboratory (June 1988); Edward Luttwak, “An Emerging Post-Nuclear Era?” *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 1 (Winter 1988), pp. 5–15.

the late 1970s and 1980s to maintain the stigma on nuclear weapons and even to extend it to deterrence itself. Soviet normative power politics, reflected in Soviet calls for a no-first-use agreement and propaganda efforts to demonize the neutron bomb, also contributed to further delegitimizing nuclear weapons. Finally, the third mechanism was the preservation of a clear dividing line between conventional and nuclear arms (a categorization process), reflected in the discrediting of peaceful nuclear explosions and the neutron bomb. This helped preserve the categorization of nuclear weapons as weapons of mass destruction and prevent their normalization.

Whereas in the 1950s the United States government had claimed there were few restrictions on its freedom to use nuclear weapons, by the 1960s and 1970s US leaders themselves both acknowledged the need for, and pursued, some constraints. The relationship of stable nuclear deterrence that eventually emerged between the superpowers would not have been possible without an implicit expectation of non-use and its codification in formal agreements. The drumbeat of pressure for arms limitations and prohibitions maintained by the non-aligned states in the UN and by the antinuclear movement in the early 1980s kept the nuclear powers on the defensive and engaged in arms control.

In sum, by the end of the 1980s, significant public ambivalence existed with regard to nuclear deterrence. On one hand, the public rejected the highly aggressive form of deterrence advocated by the Reagan administration, which seemed to depart from shared understandings about the primary goal of non-use. On the other hand, the public displayed little support for total nuclear disarmament.¹⁹¹ The debate over the morality of nuclear deterrence and a first-use policy nevertheless reaffirmed and upheld the non-use tradition. It also contributed to the increasing perception of the declining utility and legitimacy of nuclear weapons as instruments of war. Many welcomed the end of the Cold War in 1989 as a significant opportunity to explicitly reduce reliance on nuclear weapons in national security policies and to further delegitimize them.

¹⁹¹ Yost, "The Delegitimization of Nuclear Deterrence?," pp. 487–508.

8 The 1991 Gulf War

[T]he Gulf War has preserved the most hopeful single inheritance that we have from the first half-century of nuclear fission – the tradition of the non-use of these weapons since 1945. The Gulf War has in fact reinforced that tradition . . . McGeorge Bundy, 1991¹

Iraq's surprise invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 raised once again the issue of use of nuclear weapons. Iraq's extensive conventional capabilities, past history of chemical-arms use, known interest in acquiring nuclear weapons, and revisionist ambitions, made it a textbook case of a post-Cold War Third World adversary. The United States ultimately deployed 500,000 troops to Kuwait in the fastest, farthest, and largest military deployment in the country's history, fought a 35-day air war and a 4-day ground war to defeat Iraq.² US leaders ruled out using nuclear weapons even though Iraq was a non-nuclear adversary.

It might be argued that the Gulf War does not offer a good test of the nuclear taboo because the kind of dire circumstances that would call up consideration of a nuclear option never really emerged for the United States and its coalition allies. Nevertheless, this case is significant. It represents the first major conflict of the post-Cold War world, when the threat of nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union had largely evaporated. At the time, Iraq wielded the world's

¹ McGeorge Bundy, "Nuclear Weapons and The Gulf," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 70, no. 4 (Fall 1991), p. 83.

² Major accounts of the Gulf War include Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor, *The General's War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co., 1995); Rick Atkinson, *Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1993); Jeffrey Record, *Hollow Victory: A Contrary View of the Gulf War* (New York: Brassey's (US), 1993); and Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990–91* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

fourth largest conventional army. Prior to the outbreak of the war, military and civilian experts worried about the high level of casualties that US troops might sustain, especially if Iraq resorted to use of chemical or biological weapons. Military planners spent much of the war searching for the best options for defense and response in such a contingency. It was only after the coalition's tremendously lopsided victory that Americans congratulated themselves on how easy victory had been and how well the new generation of high-tech conventional weapons had performed.

A widespread misimpression of the Gulf War is that nuclear weapons played little part in it.³ In reality, far from being a non-issue, they were an important part of both the context and the dynamics of the war. The war was legitimized in part by the goal of destroying Iraq's nuclear capabilities. Further, over the course of the conflict, US officials made vague and not-so-vague nuclear threats, made concrete by the presence of nearly 1,000 nuclear weapons aboard US and allied ships in the Persian Gulf.

This chapter examines the role of the nuclear taboo in the Gulf War and, in turn, the impact of the war on the taboo. With the end of the Cold War, a central question is whether normative constraints on the use of nuclear weapons built up since 1945 will persist in a world in which nuclear deterrence is less central than it was during the Cold War. Would the end of the Cold War, combined with the development of increasingly lethal conventional arms, permit small nuclear weapons to be viewed more or less as an extension of conventional weapons (as some argued during the Gulf War)? Or alternatively, would the relevance and value of the taboo continue to be upheld (as others argued), regardless of the perceived military utility of small nuclear weapons under some circumstances?

The nuclear taboo did indeed hold during the Gulf War, and the non-use of nuclear weapons in the war reinforced both the taboo and the tradition of non-use. The public debate showed how far public opinion had shifted against nuclear weapons and suggested the vastly reduced circumstances in which a use of nuclear weapons would be acceptable.

³ See, for example, Robert S. McNamara, Carl Kaysen, and George W. Rathjens, "Nuclear Weapons After the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 70, no. 4 (Fall 1991), pp. 95-111.

At the same time, the war also made clear that the taboo was not yet fully robust. Although US leaders privately ruled out nuclear options, they did not do so publicly and they remained willing to employ nuclear threats. They also conducted policies of enormous destructiveness against Iraq using conventional weapons. Although an accurate counting will probably never be known, the war against Iraq ultimately resulted in large numbers of civilian Iraqi deaths due in part to the breakdown of health and infrastructure systems in the aftermath of the war. This raises important questions about the nature of the boundaries between conventional and nuclear weapons, and highlights “permissive” effects of the nuclear taboo. It also poses challenges for the application of just-war theory.

Nuclear weapons in the Gulf War

The Gulf crisis can be divided into two periods: the run-up to war, August 2, 1990 to January 16, 1991, and then the war itself, January 16, 1991 to March 3, 1991. The key decisions about nuclear weapons and deployments were made early on in the crisis, well before the war broke out. Decisionmaking centered in a group consisting of President George H. W. Bush and a small circle of his closest advisors. Much of the policymaking centered in the Deputies Committee, particularly within a subcommittee of six people known as the Small Group.⁴ This group was responsible for much of the administration’s policy before and during the war. One of the main threats which preoccupied planners throughout the Gulf conflict was how best to deter Iraqi use of chemical or biological weapons, or how to respond in the event Iraq launched such an attack. This, or a very bloody ground war, would have constituted the main provocations for consideration of nuclear options.⁵

⁴ This was chaired by deputy National Security Advisor Robert Gates and consisted of Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz; Robert M. Kimmitt from the State Department; Admiral David Jeremiah, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs; Richard J. Kerr, deputy CIA director; and Richard Haass, the Middle East expert on the National Security Council who also served as the group’s scribe. Atkinson, *Crusade*, p. 297.

⁵ If chemical weapons caused significant US ground casualties, “there is going to be an enormous clamor for the use of nuclear weapons on our part,” predicted Jim Glassman, editor of the congressional newspaper, *Roll Call*. Lee Michael Katz and Richard Latture, “Nuke Threat Always Implied,” *USA Today*, February 8, 1991.

A desert scenario such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait actually presents very favorable conditions for the militarily effective use of small nuclear weapons. A low-yield tactical nuclear weapon could have been used against massed Iraqi troops or a discrete military complex with minimal damage to civilians.⁶ Additionally, nuclear weapons could have destroyed the many underground Iraqi targets more easily than conventional weapons. Some reports during the Gulf crisis even suggested that under certain circumstances using nuclear weapons would have resulted in fewer deaths in the coalition *and* on the Iraqi side than using the conventional weapons needed to assure victory.⁷ Prior to the fighting, many thought a war to eject Iraq from Kuwait would be costly and bloody. Some of the sharpest criticism of Bush's decision to mount a major military response came from the defense establishment, including from Admiral William Crowe, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and from former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who stated "it's going to be bloody! There are going to be thousands and thousands and thousands of casualties!"⁸

Nevertheless, in contrast to earlier crises in Korea and Vietnam, there was hardly any consideration of the use of nuclear weapons by top US officials in the Gulf War. Although military planners and several government nuclear agencies examined tactical nuclear options for retaliation against Iraqi use of chemical and biological weapons, as well as a few more far-fetched scenarios, such options were never deliberated at the political level.⁹ Said one White House

⁶ Bill Gertz, "US Can Do Battle With 'Tactical Nukes,'" *The Washington Times*, January 29, 1991, p. B9.

⁷ John Barry, "The Nuclear Option: Thinking the Unthinkable," *Newsweek*, January 14, 1991, p. 17. Congressman Dan Burton on "Crossfire," January 28, 1991; Physicist Lawrence Cranberg, "Tactical Nukes in Iraq: An Option that Could Ultimately Save Lives," *New York City Tribune*, November 20, 1990.

⁸ Quoted on Frontline, *The Gulf War, Part A*, transcript, January 9, 1996, at www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/gulf. For a variety of dire predictions, see James F. Dunnigan and Austin Bay, *From Shield to Storm: High-Tech Weapons, Military Strategy and Coalition Warfare in the Persian Gulf* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1992), pp. 140–41. Former Texas governor and navy secretary under President Kennedy, John B. Connally, warned that war with Iraq would be "disastrous," inflicting US casualties, "probably in excess of 50,000." *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, November 5, 1990, p. 19. Pentagon computers predicted 10,000 casualties. Frontline, above, *ibid*.

⁹ Colin L. Powell, with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 486; "Nuclear Options Against Iraq Considered," *Washington Post*, October 16, 1990, p. D1; William M. Arkin, "Calculated Ambiguity: Nuclear Weapons and the Gulf War," *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1996), pp. 3–18.

official, "the issue of our nuclear weapons use never came up to my knowledge during the entire crisis." He described it as "so far-fetched" that it was never considered.¹⁰ A Pentagon civilian official reported that nuclear weapons "were not part of our mindset." The assumption was simply that conventional forces would be used.¹¹

Memoir accounts of top officials confirm that Bush decided at Camp David in December 1990 that the United States would not retaliate with nuclear or chemical weapons even if the Iraqis attacked with chemical weapons. According to National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, "No one advanced the notion of using nuclear weapons," even in retaliation for chemical or biological weapons attacks.¹² Nuclear options were not written into the war plans for US Central Command, which covers the Gulf region. And, in accordance with longstanding US policy, field commander General Norman Schwarzkopf had no independent authority to fire them.¹³

Why were nuclear weapons hardly even discussed, let alone seriously considered? There was no lack of targets, no shortage of warheads, and little risk of escalation. A realist would argue that the United States had other alternatives and did not need to use nuclear weapons. This is, of course, true. Given the conventional capabilities the coalition possessed, military and political leaders believed that nuclear weapons were not needed. While many worried about high American casualties, others were tremendously confident that the US conventional arsenal would be "absolutely devastating" and even that it would "have many of the same effects" as tactical nuclear weapons.¹⁴ But this begs the question of why nuclear weapons are not just another weapon of war, and implies a hierarchy in which nuclear weapons are already stigmatized as an extreme and unacceptable form of weaponry. The availability of adequate conventional alternatives in the Gulf War was itself in part a function of this historical process of stigmatization.

¹⁰ Author interview, National Security Council, Washington, DC, March 6, 1992.

¹¹ Author interview, Defense Department official, Stanford, CA, January 29, 1992.

¹² George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Knopf, 1998), p. 463; James A. Baker III with Thomas M. DeFrank, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989–1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), p. 359.

¹³ "Gulf Nuclear Threat," AP, May 17, 1991.

¹⁴ John M. Broder, "US Forces Have No Nuclear Arms in Gulf States, No Plans to Use Them," *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1990; author interview, Policy Planning, State Department, Washington, DC, August 17, 1994.

Taboo effects: The taboo itself becomes an "interest"

Although the uncertain long-term military consequences of the use of nuclear weapons were the chief material constraining factor, this was increasingly difficult to separate out from taboo issues in the debates. The Gulf War showed that the taboo had become more embedded, more internalized, and more taken for granted since the Vietnam War. Both official and civilian analysts made numerous explicit references to a nuclear taboo during the Gulf conflict. In contrast to the tentative nature of the norm during the Korean War, however, this time officials themselves were leading articulators of the importance of the taboo and of the disastrous military, political, and moral consequences that would attend any violation of the, by now, long tradition of non-use. In January 1991, prior to the outbreak of the air war, CIA director William Webster said that a US decision to breach the 45-year-old taboo against nuclear weapons use would be seen as so "appalling" that it should not be considered in the crisis.¹⁵ Even military leaders, after much debate, concluded that, in practical terms, nuclear weapons were "taboo" and therefore "fundamentally unusable."¹⁶ Important constraints were the political costs and moral opprobrium that would be incurred by "rattling the nuclear saber." This could shatter the fragile coalition arrayed against Iraq. "You lose the moral high ground if you use one of those stupid things," said a senior army planner privy to the discussions of the Joint Chiefs.¹⁷

Top leaders displayed a taboo-like reluctance to discuss nuclear options even privately. In his memoirs, General Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, reported that in mid-October 1990, when asked by Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney about nuclear options, he responded, "Let's not even think about nukes. You know we're not going to let that genie loose."¹⁸ Cheney had agreed but

¹⁵ "US Rules Out Gulf Use of Nuclear, Chemical Arms," *Washington Post*, January 7, 1991.

¹⁶ Broder, "US Forces Have No Nuclear Arms in Gulf States." According to a military planner from the Joint Staff, planners working on possible scenarios for the use of nuclear weapons in post-Cold War contingencies could find no scenario in which such use would be advantageous for the United States. The planner seemed more antinuclear than his audience of academic security experts. Presentation, General Jerome Jones, Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard, February 27, 1991.

¹⁷ Broder, "US Forces Have No Nuclear Arms in Gulf States," p. A6.

¹⁸ Powell, *My American Journey*, p. 486.

suggested that such options should be analyzed “to be thorough and just out of curiosity.” During ongoing debate in fall 1990 on how best to deter or respond to an Iraqi biological weapons attack, some military officers had noted that exploding nuclear warheads would be one way to create the high temperatures needed to kill biological weapons spores. Brigadier General Buster Glosson, chief of the strategic bombing campaign, said to Powell at one point, “we both know there’s one sure way to get the temperature hot enough,” alluding to nuclear explosions. Use of one weapon of mass destruction in response to another might even be considered legitimate. Powell acknowledged this but added, “but we don’t want to talk about that.”¹⁹

The reluctance to consider nuclear options was consistent with an antinuclear tone which pervaded the Pentagon more generally, set at the top by Secretary of Defense Cheney and especially by General Powell.²⁰ By fall of 1990, with the emergence of the “new world order” well under way, these two top military leaders appeared very much in accord on diminishing the role of nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War world. In their view, the United States possessed sufficient conventional capabilities to deal with any emerging threats. General Powell, an extremely powerful JCS chief, subscribed to a doctrine of decisive military force and minimal American casualties. Yet he was probably one of the most antinuclear of the Pentagon leaders, having become increasingly convinced that battlefield nuclear weapons were of questionable value, especially with the advent of the new “smart” conventional weapons. In fall 1990 he circulated a proposal to get rid of all artillery-launched nuclear weapons. It was roundly rejected by hardline Pentagon military and policy staff, holdovers from the Reagan administration, as well as by the other Joint Chiefs and Secretary Cheney. Powell conceded defeat but made clear to Cheney that he was not going to let the issue go away.²¹

Following Cheney’s request to at least look at nuclear contingencies, Powell ordered the Joint Staff operations officer to gather a handful of people in the most secure room to work out nuclear strike options. According to Powell, the results “unnerved” him, further reinforcing

¹⁹ Atkinson, *Crusade*, p. 89.

²⁰ A Pentagon nuclear weapons expert on leave from Livermore Laboratory found the atmosphere at the Pentagon in the fall of 1990 “anti-nuclear,” author interview, Pentagon, March 5, 1992.

²¹ Powell, *My American Journey*, pp. 540–41. In September 1991, after the Gulf War, the United States adopted unilaterally an even more far-reaching proposal eliminating all short-range nuclear weapons.

his view that tactical nuclear weapons had little practicality on the battlefield. To do serious damage on the battlefield would require a considerable number of small, tactical nuclear weapons. To him and others involved it was clear that the cost in lives and in moral costs was strongly disproportionate to any military gains. He showed the analysis to Cheney and then had it destroyed.²² We can take seriously his moral concerns because later he also urged ending the bombing campaign against fleeing Iraqi troops on the so-called “highway of death” at the end of the war, saying that it was turning into a massacre and that “to continue it beyond a certain point would be un-American” and possibly even “unchivalrous.”²³

Cheney also exhibited little enthusiasm for considering nuclear options, even when nuclear weapons could be militarily useful. In December 1990, during a Pentagon briefing on theater nuclear forces, Cheney was presented with the scenario of a superhardened bunker which a conventional 640 pound bomb could not destroy. This was an ideal case for an earth-penetrating, low-yield nuclear weapon. Cheney responded, “I’d use rangers [commandos].”²⁴ In Cheney’s world, there was little need or occasion for nuclear weapons.

Field commanders interviewed after the war offered mostly political and normative reasons for the lack of consideration of nuclear options. General Glosson, the head of the coalition bombing campaign, said later that “the dumbest thing that the coalition could have done would have been to *even contemplate the use* of any kind of nuclear weapon for any purpose.”²⁵ He emphasized both the unpredictable consequences of nuclear use and his own personal abhorrence. Using nuclear weapons would be “absolutely so repulsive” to him that it would “change him as a person.” He would never agree to do anything that would compromise so greatly his identity or his “moral values of life.”²⁶ He asserted that he would not even have taken part in any nuclear contingency planning, and that he was never asked to do so.

General Charles Horner, commander of the US 9th Air Force in Iraq, also emphasized the lack of normative acceptability of a use

²² Powell, *My American Journey*, pp. 452, 486.

²³ Frontline transcript, *The Gulf War*, Part B, February 4, 1997, at www.pbs.org/wgbh/gulf.

²⁴ Author interview, Pentagon, March 5, 1992.

²⁵ Frontline, *The Gulf War*, oral history interview, Gen. Buster Glosson (1995) www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/gulf (hereafter, Frontline oral history interview). Emphasis added.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

of nuclear weapons. Even though Iraqi troops would make good targets, "I don't think the American people are going to stand for two/three hundred nuclear weapons going off in the desert," he said. In his view, nuclear weapons were only useful against cities and civilian populations (but such use would be morally unacceptable). When pressed as to why nuclear weapons would not be useful for attacking Scud missile sites out in the empty desert, Horner struggled to find a good answer. "Because they would just blow a big hole in the ground," he said. He added, "Nukes are useless, I mean you can get rid of all of 'em, zero nukes." In his view, one of the major lessons of the Gulf War was "how useless nuclear weapons are except to people who have no conscience."²⁷

But why should anyone care about holes in the Iraqi desert? Although Horner was clearly trying to make an argument about the lack of military utility of nuclear weapons, his reasoning is largely normative: regardless of their utility, nuclear weapons are useless because Americans would not accept massive nuclear explosions either on cities, on populations, or even in uninhabited wastelands.

General Norman Schwarzkopf, the field commander of coalition forces in the Gulf War, reknowned for a fierce loyalty to protecting the lives of his soldiers, may have been the most willing of the top leaders to contemplate nuclear options, although he said later that he never would have recommended such an option. In August 1990, when Iraq closed the borders of Iraq and Kuwait, trapping thousands of Westerners and other foreigners, Schwarzkopf had only the lightly armed and vulnerable 82nd Airborne.²⁸ Had the Iraqis started executing US embassy employees and had the president wanted to retaliate against Baghdad, Schwarzkopf's forces "had little to offer short of a nuclear strike on Baghdad," he reported in his memoirs. "I would never have recommended such a course of action, and even if I had, I am certain the President would never have approved it."²⁹ Schwarzkopf may have requested a contingency plan to knock out all Iraqi electronic equipment through exploding a nuclear device high over Iraq and may also have endorsed making a nuclear

²⁷ Frontline oral history interview, General Charles Horner.

²⁸ US News and World Report, *Triumph Without Victory: The Unreported History of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Times Books/Random House, 1992), p. 101. The large M1A1 tanks did not arrive until September 3.

²⁹ General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, with Peter Petre, *It Doesn't Take a Hero* (New York: Bantam, 1992), p. 313. Bob Davis, "Should US Utilize Chemical, Nuclear Bombs Against Iraq?" *The Wall Street Journal*, August 24, 1990, p. A3.

threat.³⁰ The seriousness of such propositions and contingency plans is always difficult to assess, however. Because it is the military's job to prepare for numerous contingencies, it may explore options that seem implausible at best and dangerous or hare-brained at worst to outside observers. It is likely that nuclear contingency plans existed during the war.³¹ But the fact that contingency plans might be made for the use of nuclear weapons does not necessarily mean that whoever requested the plan – such as Cheney or Powell, for example – was in favor of it. Plans could also be ordered to show how absurd they were.³²

Thus the taboo had clear constraining effects. But deeper constitutive effects were also evident in arguments that using nuclear weapons would violate the United States' conception of itself as a moral, civilized nation. Upholding the taboo was essential to validating this identity. The taboo was no longer simply a "constraint" but had itself become a foreign policy goal for a "civilized" state. The actual use of nuclear weapons appeared to many top political leaders as largely "unthinkable." White House Chief of Staff John Sununu, known for his conservative views, when asked about the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons, reportedly said, "We just don't do things like that."³³ A former high-ranking but dovish military officer stated that there was nothing Saddam Hussein could do that would provoke the use of tactical nuclear weapons by the United States. "It is simply beyond the pale. It would be a political, military and economic disaster if we used tactical nukes. We would no longer be accepted among the community of nations . . . we would certainly end whatever influence we now have in the Persian Gulf."³⁴ Commentators

³⁰ A single, high-altitude detonation of a nuclear bomb would shower the land below with an electronically destructive wave known as an electromagnetic pulse, or EMP. This could shut down electronic equipment including communications, missile-launch systems, tanks, and planes. See Jack Anderson and Dale Van Atta, "Nuclear Option Against Iraq Considered," *Washington Post*, October 16, 1990; Robert Kearns, "Nuclear Threat Hangs Over Gulf, Deliberately," *Reuter*, January 13, 1991; and John Barry, "The Nuclear Option: Thinking the Unthinkable," *Newsweek*, January 14, 1991.

³¹ A Swedish officer based in Saudi Arabia said that official guidelines on the use of nuclear and chemical weapons permitted a warship without chemical weapons to defend itself, as a last resort, with nuclear weapons against chemical attack. Richard Norton-Taylor, "Gulf War Allies Had Nuclear Option, Claims Officer," *The Guardian*, September 28, 1991.

³² Author interview, Policy Planning, March 6, 1992.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Retired Rear Admiral Eugene Carroll, deputy director of the Center for Defense Information. Quoted in Robert Mackay, "Tactical Nuclear Weapons Not Likely Against Iraq," *UPI*, Washington, DC, September 12, 1990.

suggested that the United States would place itself outside the bounds of civilization if it used nuclear weapons; doing so would be a "barbaric act," and it would make the United States "the pariah of nations." Said one analyst, "I think we'd rather lose this war than go nuclear."³⁵ French president François Mitterrand publicly rejected any use of nuclear weapons during the war as a recourse to "barbarian methods."³⁶

These kinds of convictions, which go well beyond arguments from utility to those of identity and community, invoke a deeper discourse of "civilization." They illustrate the constitutive effects of the taboo, showing how the taboo works in deeper, more fundamental ways. By the time of the Gulf War, in contrast to 1945, Americans had come to see use of nuclear weapons as contrary to their perceptions of themselves.

A few scattered voices, mostly from the conservative fringe, called for the use of tactical nuclear weapons if necessary to shorten the war and save American lives.³⁷ The most outspoken exhortations came from Congressman Dan Burton of Indiana, and from Samuel Cohen, infamous "father" of the neutron bomb. Burton's opinion pieces and appearance on the television program *Crossfire* in January 1991 drew international media attention. He argued that if the alternative was bloody ground warfare, tactical nuclear weapons should be used to save American lives. Burton asked, "How much is the political issue worth? Is it worth 5000 American lives? 10,000?"³⁸ Samuel Cohen, the maverick physicist who had earlier promoted the use of tactical nuclear weapons in both the Korean and Vietnam Wars, urged the

³⁵ Loren Thompson, deputy director of Georgetown's National Security Studies Program. Quoted in James R. Carroll, "US Won't Use Nuclear Bomb, Analysts Say," *Miami Herald*, January 28, 1991.

³⁶ "Land War to Start Soon, Mitterrand Says," *Washington Post*, February 8, 1991.

³⁷ Robert S. Greenberger and John Fialka, "Calls by Some on GOP Right to Consider a Nuclear Strike Spark Heated Debate," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 13, 1991; Fred Reed, "Rethinking Nuclear Restraint," *Army Times*, October 15, 1990; Reed Irvine, "Nuclear Threat Option," *The Washington Times*, September 14, 1990, p. F4; Cal Thomas, "Tactical Nuclear Option," *Washington Times*, February 7, 1991, and "Time to Think Nuclear," *Boston Globe*, February 7, 1991; Editorial, the *Manchester Union Leader*, November 27, 1990; The Heritage Foundation, "Backgrounder," August 24, 1990; Lawrence Cranberg, "Tactical Nukes in Iraq: An Option that Could Ultimately Save Lives," *New York City Tribune*, November 20, 1990; Brigadier General James D. Hittle, "Nuclear Weapons Should be Used to Save US Troops," *Navy Times*, January 21, 1991.

³⁸ Press release, office of Congressman Dan Burton (R-IN), Washington, DC, January 28, 1991; Dan Burton, "Tactical Nuclear Weapons Could Save Lives," *USA Today*, February 13, 1991, p. 10.

use of neutron artillery shells to attack Iraqi armored columns. He endorsed nuclear weapons as a more discriminating and effective weapon.³⁹ In his view, neutron shells could be expected to be extremely effective militarily and only a few would have been needed. For these supporters of nuclear options, nuclear weapons were no more inhumane than any other form of warfare – assuming they were not used against civilians. Unlike in Japan, where the atomic bombs were dropped on civilians, in southern Kuwait nuclear weapons would kill only soldiers.

Such calls were widely rejected, including by other conservatives. Newt Gingrich, Republican whip from Georgia, argued forcefully against the use of nuclear weapons. If the United States should “establish a pattern out there that it is legitimate to use those kinds of weapons,” he argued, “our children and grandchildren are going to rue the day.” He added, “We would not want to live in a world in which we had sent a signal to every country on the planet to get nuclear weapons as fast as we can.”⁴⁰ Gingrich’s arguments emphasized the negative consequences of demonstrating both the utility and the legitimacy of nuclear weapons – both materialist and normative concerns. In numerous opinion pieces, former government officials, military and civilian defense analysts and columnists echoed this view, arguing that the nuclear option was “still unthinkable” and implying that those advocating such use were beyond the pale.⁴¹

Public opinion

The small amount of public opinion polling on the use of nuclear weapons in the Gulf War showed somewhat greater support for it than in past conflicts, but this appeared to be linked to the issue of possible use of weapons of mass destruction by Iraq. At the beginning

³⁹ Sam Cohen, “Use Neutron Bomb on the Iraqis?” *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 1990.

⁴⁰ Cited in Bundy, “Nuclear Weapons and the Gulf,” pp. 85–86.

⁴¹ See, for example, McGeorge Bundy, “Keep Our Powder Dry,” *New York Times*, October 12, 1990; Leslie Gelb, “Gas, Germs and Nukes,” *New York Times*, January 30, 1991; Victor W. Sidel and H. Jack Geiger, “Trip Wire of Armageddon,” *New York Times*, February 5, 1991; “Nuclear Option Still Unthinkable,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 5, 1991, p. 20; John Dillin, “Nuclear Arms: Would Use Save Lives – or Backfire?” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 13, 1991, p. 9; Frances Farenthold, “US Nuclear Weapons Carry Too High a Cost,” *USA Today*, February 13, 1991, p. 10; Mary McGrory, “Chilling Talk of Using Nukes,” *The Washington Post*, February 14, 1991, p. A2; Ellen Goodman, “The Nuke-em Brigade,” *Boston Globe*, February 14, 1991, p. 31; “No Nukes,” *Washington Times*, February 11, 1991, p. D2.

of the crisis little public support existed for using nuclear weapons, but, consistent with earlier patterns, it gradually increased as the crisis became more serious. In interviews conducted in late September 1990, only 19 percent of respondents said the United States should use nuclear weapons in the event of a protracted stalemate with Iraq, a statistic relatively consistent with polls going back three decades. In early January 1991, before the air war began, this figure increased somewhat to about 25 percent according to a Gallup poll (about 72 percent were opposed).⁴² Three weeks later, however, soon after the war started, nearly twice as many (45 percent) supported the use of nuclear weapons "if it might save the lives of American troops."⁴³ This statistic is similar to the highest levels of public support for the use of nuclear weapons recorded during the Vietnam War.⁴⁴

The public displayed its greatest support for using nuclear weapons in retaliation for an Iraqi use of weapons of mass destruction. In late November 1990, as polls showed public support for a war against Iraq slipping, the Bush administration began highlighting the Iraqi nuclear threat.⁴⁵ A CNN poll taken at that time reported that 60 percent of respondents said using nuclear weapons would be justified in response to Iraqi use of nuclear weapons against American troops; 49 percent of respondents felt that the use of nuclear weapons was justified in response to Iraqi chemical use, 48 percent that it was justified in response to Iraqi use of biological weapons, while 24 percent felt it was justified if the United States became bogged down in a stalemate with Iraq.⁴⁶ A CNN poll conducted in Europe during the second week of February 1991 found that nearly one-third of the respondents supported the use of nuclear weapons by the coalition in response to an Iraqi chemical attack.⁴⁷

⁴² "Nuclear Notebook," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 47, no. 1 (January/February 1991), p. 48. A *Newsweek* poll produced similar results: 24 percent favored using nuclear weapons if this would save American lives, 74 percent opposed.

⁴³ Robert C. Toth, "American Support Grows for Use of Nuclear Arms," *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 1991, p. 1. Gallup Poll News Service, January 27, 1991.

⁴⁴ See Chapter 6.

⁴⁵ Michael Gordon, "US Aides Press Iraqi Nuclear Threat," *The New York Times*, November 26, 1990; Gayle Young, "Bush Warns of Possible Iraqi Nuclear Threat," UPI, November 23, 1990; Len Ackland, "Gulf Macho," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 47, no. 1 (January/February 1991), p. 2.

⁴⁶ "Opinion Outlook," *National Journal*, January 12, 1991, p. 98.

⁴⁷ "One in Three Europeans Favors Nuclear Response to Chemical Attack, Poll Says," Inter Press Service International News, February 15, 1991. The poll was conducted jointly by CNN and *The European* and surveyed people in seven of Europe's largest cities.

Thus although a majority (60 percent) of Americans would have supported a nuclear response to a nuclear attack, and nearly a majority would support a nuclear response to an attack with chemical or biological weapons, there was never majority support for the first use of nuclear weapons in response to a conventional attack. The public's greater willingness to use nuclear weapons in the Gulf War than in the Vietnam War was clearly linked to a threat of use of weapons of mass destruction by the adversary, an issue not prominent in the Vietnam War but one played up by the Bush administration and even by Saddam Hussein himself in the Gulf War.⁴⁸

Because the polling data on public attitudes toward use of nuclear weapons in the Gulf War are incomplete, any conclusions must remain tentative.⁴⁹ The evidence suggests, however, that while the public may have supported the use of nuclear weapons in response to a use of weapons of mass destruction, it remained opposed to first use of nuclear weapons in response to an attack with conventional weapons. To the extent that stated willingness to use nuclear weapons was also linked to the goal of saving American lives, it underscored the declining tolerance of the American public for casualties on the battlefield, a trend the lopsided US victory in the Gulf War did much to reinforce.

The overall picture is thus one of no serious consideration of nuclear options by top leaders. Privately, US officials effectively ruled out use of nuclear or chemical weapons in the Gulf War, concluding that it was ultimately more important that the Pandora's box of nuclear use remain closed. According to one senior military official, the consequences of using nuclear weapons – some of which were unpredictable – “outweigh their military utility.”⁵⁰ To attack Iraq with weapons of mass destruction, even if Iraq used them first, would

⁴⁸ In late January 1991, Saddam Hussein warned in an interview with CNN that Iraq's modified Scud missiles had nuclear, chemical, and biological capabilities, and threatened to use such weapons. “US Has Military Means to Meet, Match Iraqi Nuclear, Chemical Attacks,” AFP, Washington, DC, January 29, 1991.

⁴⁹ For an overview of public opinion during the Gulf War, see John Mueller, “American Public Opinion and the Gulf War,” in Stanley A. Renshon, ed., *The Political Psychology of the Gulf War: Leaders, Publics, and the Conflict Process* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), pp. 199–226, and John Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Neither of these discusses attitudes toward use of nuclear weapons.

⁵⁰ R. Jeffrey Smith and Rick Atkinson, “US Rules Out Gulf Use of Nuclear, Chemical Arms,” *Washington Post*, January 7, 1991. See also Rowan Scarborough and Bill Gertz, “The Nuclear Question: Answer Likely To Be No,” *Washington Times*, January 2, 1991.

legitimize their use by other nations. It would set a terrible precedent. Instead, US officials considered a variety of other options for responding to an Iraqi chemical attack including a “visible” acceleration of conventional warfare, a more concerted and overt attempt to kill Saddam Hussein and his top advisors, pressing for war crimes trials for Iraqi commanders implicated in such a chemical attack, and even flooding Baghdad by knocking out dams on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Many of these alternatives came with their own ethical difficulties, as US officials were well aware.⁵¹

Calculated ambiguity: The role of nuclear threats

Although US officials ruled out any actual use of nuclear weapons during the Gulf War, they did employ a variety of veiled nuclear threats against Iraq, a policy Secretary of State James Baker described as “calculated ambiguity.”⁵² According to a State Department official, “No one in their heart of hearts believed we would ever use nukes, but we were not above preserving a certain ambiguity regarding nuclear use in [Saddam] Hussein’s eyes.”⁵³ General Powell said in a later interview that “there was always the implicit threat of nuclear weapons. I don’t think we ever would have used them, but nevertheless, the Iraqis didn’t know that. And we could have if the provocation was serious enough.”⁵⁴

The policy of calculated ambiguity was conducted both through deployments and through public and diplomatic statements. After considerable debate, the Joint Chiefs decided early in the crisis against deploying ground-based nuclear weapons with US troops on the territory of Saudi Arabia. The Saudis would likely be reluctant to be complicit to preparations for a nuclear attack on a fellow Arab state, and the weapons themselves would be vulnerable to terrorism or capture in battle. This decision was apparently never discussed at

⁵¹ R. Jeffrey Smith, “Iraq’s Chemical Weapons Still a Threat to Ground Troops, US Says,” *Washington Post*, February 19, 1991; Frontline interview with Robert Gates. Powell later noted that in a dam attack “the loss of civilian life would have been terrible” and the Pentagon had not fully analyzed the destructive effect downstream. “It was a bluff intended only to strike fear into him, an action our lawyers would veto,” he added. But “it would have been a good one to threaten the Iraqis with.” Powell, *My American Journey*, p. 506.

⁵² Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, p. 359.

⁵³ Author interview, Policy Planning, March 6, 1992.

⁵⁴ Frontline transcript, The Gulf War, Part B, February 4, 1997, at www.pbs.org/wgbh/gulf.

the political level.⁵⁵ There were plenty of nuclear weapons in the theater of operations, however, on ships offshore. US navy ships in the region were routinely equipped with nuclear bombs and cruise missiles, and their presence could plausibly be presented as routine naval deployment and not any special threat.⁵⁶ Yet some ships were specifically dispatched to the region and the Pentagon made the decision to leave the nuclear weapons on them. Independent nuclear analysts estimated that by mid-January 1991 the United States had about 700 tactical nuclear weapons on 39 ships in the Gulf region and 300 weapons at bases in Turkey.⁵⁷ Nuclear weapons were also available in abundance in Europe or could have been dropped from B-52 bombers based in Diego Garcia, an island in the Indian Ocean.

The mere presence of the nuclear weapons raised questions about the implied threat. Why were the nuclear weapons there? Officially, the US government maintained its longstanding policy of neither confirming nor denying their presence. But the deployments at sea, along with US ability to deliver nuclear weapons by air, were sufficiently ambiguous that they could plant seeds of doubt in the Iraqi leader's mind. Contradictory public statements by top administration officials reinforced this ambiguity. On August 14, 1990, barely two weeks after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Defense Secretary Cheney stated that "[i]t should be clear to Saddam Hussein that we have a wide range of military capabilities that will let us respond with overwhelming force and extract a very high price should he be foolish enough to use chemical weapons on United States forces."⁵⁸ Unusually frank US government comments repudiating a nuclear option, however, came in the wake of press reports from Britain on September 30, 1990 that Britain was prepared to use nuclear arms in response to an Iraqi chemical attack. Hawkish Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher promptly denied the report.⁵⁹ US military officials announced the next day that the United States had placed no nuclear weapons in

⁵⁵ John M. Broder, "US Forces Have No Nuclear Arms in Gulf States, No Plans to Use Them," *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1990.

⁵⁶ Naval forces in the Middle East consisted of six aircraft carrier battle groups, and two battleship battle groups, together with numerous escorts and support vessels. This was the largest deployment of American warships since World War II.

⁵⁷ William Arkin, Joshua Handler, and Damian Durrant, *US Nuclear Weapons in the Persian Gulf Crisis* (Washington, DC: Greenpeace, 1991).

⁵⁸ William Arkin, "US Nukes in the Gulf," *The Nation*, vol. 251, no. 23, December 31, 1990, p. 834.

⁵⁹ Adam Raphael, "UK Will Go Nuclear if Forces Gassed, Claims Army Man," *Observer*, September 30, 1991; Reuter report, October 1, 1990; *Washington Times*, October 2, 1990.

Saudi Arabia or surrounding countries and had no plans to use them even in response to an Iraqi attack with chemical or biological weapons.⁶⁰

This public position soon shifted once again, however. Secretary of State Baker and Defense Secretary Cheney were at the forefront of the administration's campaign to deter Iraq from using chemical weapons by threatening "the severest possible" political and military consequences, while evading direct answers as to whether or not the coalition would consider, or use, tactical nuclear weapons. In a speech to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council in late October 1990, Baker said that Saddam Hussein must realize that "should he use chemical or biological weapons, there will be the most severe consequences."⁶¹ In a press conference on December 23, Cheney stated in response to a question about possible Iraqi use of weapons of mass destruction that Saddam "needs to be aware that the president will have available the full spectrum of capabilities. And were Saddam Hussein foolish enough to use weapons of mass destruction, the US response would be absolutely overwhelming and it would be devastating."⁶² In an interview with the BBC on the eve of the ground war, Cheney again refused to be drawn into a discussion of how the United States would respond to Iraqi chemical or biological attacks, and refused to rule out the use of nuclear weapons. Pressed on the nuclear question, Cheney responded, "Obviously, if we have to, we have significant ability to respond."⁶³

The strongest implied nuclear threat came in a letter from President Bush to the Iraqi leader on January 5, 1991, the administration's final attempt to persuade Iraq to withdraw peacefully from Kuwait before the coalition's January 15 deadline for the start of war. Baker delivered the letter to Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz at a meeting in Geneva on January 9. In it Bush said that in response to "unconscionable acts," "the American people would demand the strongest possible response," and "you and your country will pay a terrible price."⁶⁴

⁶⁰ John M. Broder, "US Forces Have No Nuclear Arms in Gulf States, No Plans to Use Them," *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1990.

⁶¹ Reuter Library Report, October 29, 1990.

⁶² Transcript of press conference with the secretary of defense and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, December 23, 1990.

⁶³ "Cheney Will Not Say if US Considering Nuclear Reply in Gulf," Reuter, London, January 14, 1991.

⁶⁴ Formally, the Iraqis rejected the letter and handed it back. The contents were published at once in the American press. "The Letter to Saddam," January 9, 1991, reprinted

Baker told Aziz that if Iraq used weapons of mass destruction, the United States would adopt as its goal the overthrow of the Iraqi regime, not simply the liberation of Kuwait. Even though Bush had earlier ruled out retaliating with chemical or nuclear weapons if the Iraqis attacked with chemical munitions, "there was obviously no reason to inform the Iraqis of this," Baker wrote later in his memoirs. In his meeting with Aziz, he "purposely left the impression that the use of chemical or biological agents by Iraq could invite tactical nuclear retaliation."⁶⁵

Indeed, Bush clarified his purpose at a press conference shortly thereafter on February 5, 1991. He was asked whether in the event Iraq used chemical weapons, the United States might "in turn use weapons of mass destruction." Avoiding a direct answer, he said, "I think it's better never to say what you may be considering." He added that he was leaving the matter there because he wanted Saddam to "think very carefully" about launching a chemical attack and "because I would like to have every possible chance that he decides not to do this." But he did not specifically rule out US retaliation with chemical or tactical nuclear weapons, saying he wanted to leave Hussein with a "fuzzy interpretation."⁶⁶ Appearing on CNN three days earlier, Vice President Dan Quayle had also refused to rule out US use of nuclear weapons. He said he couldn't imagine President Bush making the decision to use them "under any circumstances," but when asked about their possible use, he responded, "The use of nuclear weapons is always an option, an option you are not going to rule out."⁶⁷

Additionally, the Bush administration did little to calm Arab fears about Israel's ability to launch a nuclear strike if Iraq attacked Israel with chemically armed missiles. During a CNN interview in early February 1991, Cheney raised eyebrows by publicly confirming the existence of Israel's officially unmentionable nuclear capability and

in Micah L. Sifry and Christopher Cerf, eds., *The Gulf War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions* (New York: Times Books, 1991), pp. 178–79.

⁶⁵ Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy*, p. 359. Also, interview with Baker, Frontline, at www.pbs.org/wgpb/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/decisionmakers.html.

⁶⁶ David Zuchino, "US is Evasive on a Response to Chemical Attack," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 6, 1991. McGeorge Bundy has argued that this was the only use, in any sense, of nuclear weapons during the Gulf War. Bundy, in my view, underplays the extent to which the administration made use of the nuclear threat during the Gulf War. See Bundy, "Nuclear Weapons and the Gulf."

⁶⁷ William Tuohy, "Quayle Refuses to Rule Out US Nuclear Attack," *Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 1991. Transcript, "Newsmaker Saturday," CNN, February 2, 1991.

opened the issue of its possible use. If Iraq used chemical weapons, he said, "the Israelis are liable to retaliate with non-conventional weapons."⁶⁸ Cheney also stated in a TV interview in early February that the United States had been correct to launch the World War II atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁶⁹ Such comments were clearly intended as deterrent threats to Iraq: what the United States had done in 1945 to Japan it could do again, to Iraq.

Japanese leaders quickly protested this perceived attempt to legitimize nuclear weapons and spoke out against their possible use.⁷⁰ Other leaders also expressed their strong dismay that US officials were unwilling to categorically rule out use of nuclear arms. Indian President Rajiv Gandhi urged a worldwide effort to arouse governmental and public opinion against use of nuclear weapons. "Ever since August 1945, the world has survived the nuclear age because there has been a taboo operating against such dreadful weapons of mass destruction," he wrote in a public letter to the Indian prime minister. He called for a commitment that multilateral forces in the Gulf War would not resort to nuclear arms.⁷¹

During the same period, however, other US government officials – and sometimes even the same ones – sent signals suggesting that US leaders would not use nuclear and chemical weapons in a response to an Iraqi chemical attack.⁷² Some senior military and civilian officials at the Pentagon were irritated by a television interview in late January 1991 in which White House Chief of Staff John Sununu, while discussing chemical weapons, seemed to rule out the use of tactical nuclear weapons. Sununu stated, "There's been no one, even from the military, that has suggested" resorting to nuclear weapons if Iraq used chemical weapons in the war.⁷³ When asked in early February 1991 whether use of nuclear weapons in the war could be justified by the ultimate preservation of American lives, Cheney

⁶⁸ Doug Struck, "Cheney Statements Focus Uneasy Attention on Israel's Nuclear Capability," *Baltimore Sun*, February 18, 1991.

⁶⁹ Cheney interview with ABC news, February 3, 1991, reported in "Cheney Says US Made Right Decision to Bomb Hiroshima," *Kyodo (Japan)*, February 3, 1991.

⁷⁰ "Japan Urges Ban on Nuclear Warfare in Gulf," *Kyodo*, February 5, 1991.

⁷¹ Letter from President Rajiv Gandhi to Prime Minister Shri Chandra Shekhar, February 9, 1991.

⁷² R. Jeffrey Smith, "Iraq's Chemical Weapons Still a Threat to Ground Troops, US Says," *Washington Post*, February 19, 1991.

⁷³ Greenberger and Fialka, "Some on GOP Right Consider Nuclear Strike"; Fred Kaplan, "US Officials See Atomic Arms Use as Very Unlikely," *Boston Globe*, February 5, 1991.

replied, "I would not at this point advocate use of nuclear weapons, certainly."⁷⁴ Vice President Quayle, in his February interview on CNN, in which he refused to rule out use of nuclear weapons, also explained its implausibility based on "political cost, moral cost and the fact that you have the conventional superiority and the conventional capability to do the job."⁷⁵ British and Israeli leaders, while making clear that they would respond severely to any Iraqi chemical attack, likewise hinted that they were not intending to use nuclear weapons. The Israeli government reaffirmed its long-standing position that it would not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East.⁷⁶

Other states and antinuclear groups protested at the veiled threats of use. In addition to Japan, in October 1990 members of the Canadian parliament debated whether coalition forces should promise not to use nuclear weapons if war broke out and whether the UN should call upon the superpowers to remove their nuclear weapons from the region.⁷⁷ The environmental organization Greenpeace and other peace groups called on President Bush to state publicly that none of the 1,000 nuclear weapons in the region would be used.⁷⁸ They argued that the policy of nuclear ambiguity was excessively dangerous and counterproductive, in that it created the potential for accidents or misuse in the "fog of war." Panic could ensue if Iraq used chemical weapons, leading to a series of miscalculations and errors that could result in a nuclear detonation. Critics argued that if nuclear weapons were not in the Gulf as a deterrent, then it was foolish to have them in the area in the first place.⁷⁹

For their part, US planners worried about the other side of the coin: if Iraq thought that the United States was prepared to use chemical or

⁷⁴ Rick Atkinson and Barton Gellman, "US Confirms 'Friendly Fire' Killed 7 Marines," *Washington Post*, February 4, 1991.

⁷⁵ Transcript, "Newsmaker Saturday," CNN, February 2, 1991.

⁷⁶ The Israeli ambassador to Belgium reiterated this pledge to Belgium television. He said Israel had other ways to respond to a chemical attack, January 20, 1991, Xinhua English Language News Service.

⁷⁷ Ross Howard, "Clark Pressed on Nuclear Ban in Gulf," *Toronto Globe and Mail*, October 23, 1990.

⁷⁸ Kearns, Reuter, January 13, 1991; Arkin, Handler, and Durrant, *US Nuclear Weapons in the Persian Gulf Crisis*.

⁷⁹ William Arkin, "US Nukes in the Gulf," *The Nation*, December 31, 1990. For Russian criticism of US failure to rule out the use of nuclear weapons, see Vladislav Kozyakov, "Possible Use of Nuclear Weapons in Gulf Viewed," Moscow World Service in English, February 13, 1991.

nuclear weapons, it would have no reason for restraint. Iraq could misinterpret or misunderstand the unclear and unstated policy of the United States, leading it to launch otherwise un contemplated preemptive military action or a chemical weapons attack. Staffers in Policy Planning were particularly worried that the Iraqi leader had an exaggerated sense of US willingness to use chemical or biological weapons and so wanted to make sure that US policy did not provoke him, giving him an excuse to use such weapons himself. They therefore attempted to make it clear that the United States would under no circumstances retaliate with chemical or biological weapons. This policy did not apply to nuclear weapons, however.⁸⁰

This stance of “calculated ambiguity” was consistent with the long-standing US policy of maintaining a deliberate ambiguity over whether or not US leaders would ever actually use nuclear weapons, and of neither confirming nor denying the weapons’ presence. The Policy Planning staff explicitly advocated continuation of these policies during the Gulf War, constituting a kind of existential threat.⁸¹ US leaders’ refusal to disavow the nuclear option in the Gulf War against a non-nuclear adversary, however, contradicted US declaratory policy since 1978 that the US would not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear signatories of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which included Iraq. The fact that Sununu was rebuked for his perceived indiscretions on nuclear weapons suggested that, for many in the Defense Department and in the White House, nuclear weapons should still have some political utility in the post-Cold War world.

Richard Betts, in his comprehensive analysis of US nuclear threats during the Cold War, concluded that US officials often made such threats in a semi-cavalier fashion with only the vaguest idea of what they would actually do if the threat failed.⁸² The use of nuclear threats in the Gulf conflict departed from this pattern in that US leaders appeared quite clear in their own minds that their veiled nuclear allusions were a bluff and that they had no intention of actually using

⁸⁰ Author interview, Policy Planning, March 6, 1992.

⁸¹ Policy Planning staff wrote several substantial analyses for Dennis Ross, head of Policy Planning, during the course of the conflict on how to deter Iraq from using chemical weapons. One of these, which included a tab on nuclear ambiguity, went to Secretary Baker. Author interview, Policy Planning, March 6, 1992.

⁸² Richard K. Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1987).

such weapons. In part, devastating conventional capabilities made this possible.

Beyond this, however, the administration's actions reflected substantial uncertainty about what political use, if any, should be made of the nation's nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War world. The result was a situation of mixed messages in which top leaders at times appeared to want to make use of a nuclear deterrent threat and at other times to reassure the world that the United States was not thinking in nuclear terms (and therefore no one else should either). With no real intention of use behind it, the US nuclear threat became instead a way of underscoring US seriousness of purpose in the Gulf and sending a message to Iraq that "we mean business." In sum, while nuclear threats appeared to take an ever more subtle form in the Gulf War, neither they nor the search for the political utility of nuclear weapons were abandoned in the conflict.

Were the nuclear threats effective?

Were the nuclear threats effective? We do not really know. Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and several colleagues argued that US nuclear weapons were "incredible as a deterrent" in the Gulf War – because they failed to deter Iraq's conventional attacks – "and therefore irrelevant."⁸³ It must be asked *why* nuclear weapons were incredible as a deterrent. Did Saddam Hussein believe that US leaders would be constrained by normative considerations? We can only speculate. Sweden's ambassador, Rolf Ekeus, who served as chairman of UNSCOM, the organization charged with disarming Iraq, contended that Saddam Hussein completely dismissed nuclear threats from Washington (though not from Tel Aviv), assuming that there was no condition under which a US president would kill millions of Iraqi civilians.⁸⁴ General Horner, the air war commander, observed after the war that the great lengths to which the United States went in the Gulf War to avoid non-combatant casualties would lead any "rational actor" to conclude that "it will be very difficult for any American president to use nuclear weapons. Therefore, the

⁸³ McNamara, Kaysen, and Rathjens, "Nuclear Weapons After the Cold War," p. 102.

⁸⁴ Jonathan B. Tucker, Brad Roberts, and Elisa Harris, "Chemical and Biological Weapons," in Joseph Cirincione, ed., *Repairing the Regime: Preventing the Spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 226.

rational actor will not be deterred by our threats to use nuclear weapons.”⁸⁵

Although the US nuclear arsenal clearly did not deter Iraq’s use of conventional weapons, numerous analysts have argued that the US nuclear threat did deter Saddam from using chemical weapons.⁸⁶ There is little good evidence for this claim, however. Some Iraqi military officers who were captured or defected after the war told US and UN officials that Saddam Hussein did not launch a chemical attack because he thought the United States (or Israel) might retaliate with nuclear weapons.⁸⁷ Even Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz implied this in a later interview.⁸⁸ Some analysts have criticized these claims as *ex post facto* and politically motivated, however.⁸⁹ They have identified other explanations for Iraqi restraint including operational problems such as technical and logistics constraints, lack of readiness for chemical warfare, and even overly rosy (mis)information about how the war was going fed to Saddam Hussein by his top generals.⁹⁰ Even these explanations, however, have been criticized on empirical grounds.⁹¹ Richard Price has offered a strategic “reversed deterrence” interpretation holding that Iraq intentionally sought to link chemical weapons to nuclear weapons as weapons of mass destruction, and to use the threat of use of chemical weapons to deter nuclear attack by the United States.⁹² There is probably more evidence to support the case that Saddam was deterred from attacking Israel with chemical or biological weapons for fear of Israeli nuclear retaliation. Even the evidence here, however, is incomplete.⁹³

⁸⁵ Gen. Charles A. Horner, “Policy Considerations in Using Nuclear Weapons,” *Duke Journal of International and Comparative Law*, vol. 8, no. 7 (1997), p. 18.

⁸⁶ See, for example, John Pike, “Nuclear Threats During the Gulf War,” February 19, 1998 at www.fas.org/irp/eprint/ds-threats.htm.

⁸⁷ “Iraq’s Non-use of Chemical Weapons,” Central Intelligence Agency, August 1995, at www.fas.org/irp/gulf/cia/960702/74531_01.htm.

⁸⁸ Frontline oral history interview, Tariq Aziz, January 10, 1996.

⁸⁹ Avigdor Haselkorn, *The Continuing Storm: Iraq, Poisonous Weapons, and Deterrence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 59–71.

⁹⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 55–59, and Leonard A. Cole, *The Eleventh Plague: The Politics of Biological and Chemical Warfare* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1997), pp. 126–27.

⁹¹ Richard M. Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 145–52.

⁹² *Ibid.* See also Haselkorn, *The Continuing Storm*, for a similar if less elegant “strategic deterrence” argument. On August 18, 1990, the Iraqi foreign minister said it would only use chemical weapons if attacked by US nuclear warheads. Reuter Report, August 27, 1990.

⁹³ Kenneth M. Pollack, “He’s Too Unreasonable for Deterrence,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2002.

It will be impossible to know the truth until reliable accounts of the Iraqi side of the Gulf conflict become available, and this may take some time. However, it is useful to contrast Saddam's willingness to engage in reckless provocations with conventional weapons – his refusal to withdraw from Kuwait in the face of threats from the world's superpower, his attacks on the troops and territories of nuclear powers (the United States and Israel, respectively) – with his non-use of chemical weapons during the war. This contrast, while not illuminating the reasons for his non-use of chemical weapons, suggests that, at minimum, Saddam felt he could use conventional weapons against US and Israeli targets without worrying unduly about a nuclear response. It provides suggestive evidence that the taboo against first use of nuclear weapons in response to a *conventional* attack is fairly robust and is *widely believed to be so*. Iraq could be confident that it would constrain US leaders. If this observation is true, the dividing line between conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction remained strong.

The nuclear taboo, conventional weapons, and just-war theory

The Gulf War provides an especially clear example of the “permissive” or shadow effects of the taboo – the legitimization of other forms of destruction. Permissive effects tend to be associated with more highly developed norms and thus have not figured in the discussion so far. In this case, they derive from the categories actors use to understand weapons. Even though nuclear weapons were ruled out, the United States was nevertheless willing to contemplate policies of great destructiveness in Iraq. This was reflected both in the lethality of weapons used and in targeting policies that inflicted great damage to Iraqi society and led indirectly to large numbers of civilian deaths. Such facts raise the question of how weapons are categorized and socially interpreted, why some kinds of destruction are more acceptable than others, and the role of norms in defining socially acceptable and unacceptable forms of destruction.

Retrospective analysis of the performance of the US military in the Gulf War and of the damage caused suggested that precision-guided munitions did much less than was claimed for them. Additionally, the levels of force used were much higher, and destruction more

extensive, than the “surgical” war one was led to believe took place.⁹⁴ A Pentagon physicist calculated during the war that the conventional ordnance dropped on Iraq averaged the equivalent of a 1-kiloton nuclear bomb per week, making the Gulf War “the most firepower intensive conflict since World War II.”⁹⁵ In the first three days of the air war, the coalition forces dropped more conventional weapons on Iraq than during the entire Christmas bombing of North Vietnam in 1972. In contrast to 1972, however, there was no public outcry at this action.⁹⁶

This outcome raises the issue of the convergence in destructive power of small nuclear weapons and advanced conventional weapons. With this trend, the traditional threshold between nuclear and conventional technology may become increasingly blurred. One distinctive feature of the Gulf War was the use – sometimes on an experimental basis – of a new generation of highly lethal conventional weapons that began to duplicate the destructive effects of tactical nuclear weapons. Among the most potent of these were fuel-air explosives, which possess near-nuclear explosive force though without the radiation and fallout.⁹⁷ During the Gulf War, coalition military

⁹⁴ Michael Gordon, “Pentagon Study Cites Problems with Gulf Effort,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1992; Barton Gellman, “Allied Air War Struck Broadly in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, June 23, 1991; Michael T. Klare, “High-Death Weapons of the Gulf War,” *The Nation*, vol. 252, no. 21 (June 3, 1991), pp. 721–42; “Gulf Weapons’ Accuracy Downgraded,” *Washington Post*, April 19, 1992. Less than 10 percent of bombs were precision guided (7,400 out of a total of 88,500). However, these were nevertheless crucial to limiting civilian bombing casualties. Ashton Carter, seminar, Center for Science and International Affairs, Kennedy School of Government, May 20, 1991.

⁹⁵ Author interview, Pentagon, March 5, 1992. Klare, “High Death Weapons,” p. 737. About 250,000 tons of conventional bombs were dropped in forty-three days in the Gulf War, an average of 5,800 tons per day. Thomas A. Keany and Elliot A. Cohen, *Gulf War Air Power Survey* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1993), p. 103.

⁹⁶ Author interview, Policy Planning, August 1994. Over twelve days in December 1972, the United States unleashed the most intensive and devastating attacks of the Vietnam War, dropping more than 36,000 tons of bombs. This exceeded the tonnage during the entire period from 1969 to 1971. The bombing evoked cries of outrage around the world and Nixon’s popular approval rating plummeted overnight. See George Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (New York: Wiley, 1979), pp. 247–49.

⁹⁷ Others include penetration bombs and wide-area cluster bombs. About one-third of the bombs dropped in the Gulf War were cluster bombs, which can wipe out large troop concentrations over an extensive area. Klare, “High-Death Weapons,” provides a detailed discussion of the high-tech weaponry used in the Gulf War. Fuel-air explosives (FAEs) are a kind of gas bomb involving two detonations. Fuel dispersed in the air is ignited and detonates, creating a huge fireball and an invisible shock wave often described as similar to a tactical nuclear weapon. It spreads rapidly across a wide area, and is capable of flattening buildings, destroying aircraft, knocking down oil rigs, and

leaders worried about Iraq's possible use of fuel-air explosives and then used such weapons themselves at the end of the war against Iraqi forces. Military officials described them as capable of delivering a devastating blast similar to a small nuclear explosion over an area several miles wide. Unlike chemical and biological weapons, fuel-air explosives are blast-effect weapons and there is no ready defense against them. They became a preferred weapon for attacking dug-in troops and heavy fortifications (new versions were used in US wars in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003).⁹⁸ Official and private statements about why the United States would not need to resort to tactical nuclear weapons in the Gulf War generally echoed the theme that the coalition could create equivalent damage with conventional forces without the moral "downside" of using nuclear weapons. The destructiveness of nuclear weapons *per se* was not a prominent feature of the reasoning. That is, the reasoning was not "nuclear weapons are too destructive" but rather "we now have weapons that are as destructive as nuclear weapons."⁹⁹

In 1983, British military historian John Keegan observed of the new NATO strategy based on such high-tech weapons that "a high-intensity conventional war and a low-intensity nuclear war might inflict very much the same level of damage on any given piece of inhabited

killing troops. According to Pentagon estimates, at peak efficiency, FAEs have destructive effects ten times more powerful than conventional explosives of the same size. Douglas Frantz and Melissa Healy, "Iraqi Bomb Gives Nuke-type Blast, Pentagon says," *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 1990, p. 18; Klare, "High-death Weapons," p. 740.

⁹⁸ The United States used thermobaric bombs, a type of fuel-air explosive, to attack Osama bin Laden's suspected cave hideouts in Afghanistan. "Pentagon to Use New Bomb on Afghan Caves," CNN, December 23, 2001, <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/12/22/ret.new.weapon/> and "BLU-118/B Thermobaric Bomb," <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/munitions/blu-118.htm>. US forces employed a new thermobaric Hellfire missile in the 2003 Iraq war. "US Used New Missile in Iraq: Rumsfeld," Associated Press, May 15, 2003.

⁹⁹ According to one commentator, the use of nuclear weapons by the United States would be highly unlikely because "It has conventional weapons equivalent to very small nuclear weapons." Juan J. White, "US Forces Probably Have 500 N-Arms in Gulf," *USA Today*, November 30, 1990, p. 10. An analyst who studied nuclear warfare for the Air Force said, "Today we've got conventional weapons that approach the effectiveness of the old nuclear stuff. We can dig out those Iraqi bunkers more effectively with guided 2000-pound bombs than with tactical nuclear weapons – and without moral downside." David Wood, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, February 10, 1991, p. 15. According to Lawrence Korb, a former assistant secretary of defense, "Militarily you don't need them in terms of the damage you want to inflict on Iraq." Quoted in Lee Michael Katz and Richard Latture, "Nuke Threat Always Implied," *USA Today*, February 8, 1991.

landscape."¹⁰⁰ Iraq sought to make a similar point in mid-February 1991 when the Iraqi envoy to the United Nations told the UN Security Council that if massive high altitude bombing of his country continued, then these bombs would be considered weapons of mass destruction and Iraq would be justified in using chemical weapons.¹⁰¹ Although Iraq's attempt to expand the category of weapons of mass destruction received little support from other countries, privately US planners worried about the political appeal of just this sort of claim, however illegitimate they might have perceived it to be.¹⁰²

The strength of the nuclear taboo and the odium attached to nuclear weapons as weapons of mass destruction renders illegitimate most uses of them, even though certain types or uses of nuclear weapons could, from a just-war perspective, conceivably be justified. Traditional objections to nuclear weapons have been that they violate principles of discrimination and proportionality. The feature of nuclear weapons at the core of the taboo – their disproportionate nature – may change with advancing technology, however. As scattered proponents of use of tactical nuclear weapons during the Gulf War argued, in some circumstances the use of very small, accurate nuclear weapons with low yields could minimize disproportionate destruction and avoid killing non-combatants. After the war, some analysts argued that geopolitical changes in the world had created conditions more propitious for the use of "discriminate" nuclear weapons. Since battlefield use of nuclear weapons by the United States was now very unlikely to escalate to general nuclear exchange, and because conflicts in the Third World were unlikely to put US territory at risk, they argued, the American people would now be more likely to accept the use of nuclear weapons. Because of the "political unacceptability of using higher-yield nuclear weapons against a Third World nation in the absence of nuclear first-use by the enemy," however, the United States should seek to develop very small "micronukes" or "tinynukes" with very low yields which would minimize disproportionate

¹⁰⁰ John Keegan, "The Specter of Conventional War: There are Worse Things than a Small Nuclear Bomb," *Harper's*, July 1983, p. 8. Keegan calculated that the destructive capacity of a cluster-bomb loaded F-4 Phantom, a main NATO ground attack plane, "actually exceeds the calculated destructive capacity of a low-yield tactical nuclear missile." *Ibid.*, p. 11. Of course, cluster bombs do not release radiation or cause contamination by fallout. But there is a residue of contamination nevertheless, since some bomb-lets fail to detonate, creating a lethal hazard where they lie.

¹⁰¹ "Iraq Threatens to Use Chemicals," *Boston Globe*, February 17, 1991.

¹⁰² Author interview, Policy Planning, March 6, 1992.

destruction and the killing of non-combatants. Such weapons, the authors argued, could provide an “effective response for countering the enemy in such a crisis, while not violating the principle of proportionality.”¹⁰³

Such a capability must be juxtaposed against the coalition’s destruction of the Iraqi electric and water infrastructure during the Gulf War, which caused vast numbers of civilian deaths due to infectious diseases, and lack of food, water, and medical care.¹⁰⁴ US defense leaders claimed that their military strategy in the war uniformly spared civilians and that it was “the most discriminate air campaign in history.”¹⁰⁵ *Post hoc* analyses and reviews of the coalition’s military campaign indeed confirm that air war planning was clearly strongly shaped by the aim of avoiding *bombing* non-combatants.¹⁰⁶ And despite somewhat less success for precision bombing than was claimed, the number of civilian bombing deaths was relatively low.¹⁰⁷

To the extent that high-precision bombing was successful, however, it achieved precisely the aim that was intended: destruction of electrical and water facilities. In contrast to the Pentagon’s report on the Gulf War, which claimed that the coalition had attacked only military targets and “left most of the basic economic infrastructure intact,” it became clear in retrospect that Air Force plans for the air war focused heavily on the strategic bombardment of Iraq.¹⁰⁸ Targets included not only military facilities but also Iraq’s economic

¹⁰³ Thomas W. Dowler and Joseph S. Howard, II, “Countering the Threat of the Well-Armed Tyrant: A Modest Proposal for Small Nuclear Weapons,” *Strategic Review*, vol. 19, no. 4 (Fall 1991), p. 39. See also Thomas F. Ramos, “The Future of Theater Nuclear Forces,” in the same issue, pp. 41–47.

¹⁰⁴ Patrick Tyler, “Health Crisis Said to Grip Iraq in Wake of War’s Destruction,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1991.

¹⁰⁵ US Department of Defense, *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: April 1992), p. 612. President Bush said in May 1991, “Our air strikes were the most effective, yet humane, in the history of warfare.” *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁰⁶ Almost all accounts of the Gulf War confirm this. See, for example, Atkinson, *Crusade*, pp. 147–48, and Michael W. Lewis, “The Law of Aerial Bombardment in the 1991 Gulf War,” *American Journal of International Law*, vol. 97, no. 3 (July 2003).

¹⁰⁷ Of 167 laser-guided bombs dropped during the first five nights of combat by F-117s – considered the most accurate aircraft system in the coalition arsenal – 76 missed their targets because of pilot error, mechanical or electronic malfunctions, or poor weather. Atkinson, *Crusade*, p. 160.

¹⁰⁸ *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War*, p. 5. Barton Gellman, “Allied Air War Struck Broadly in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, June 23, 1991; Record, *Hollow Victory*, p. 109. Alexander Cockburn, “Will There Be Anything Left to Nuke? The US is Flattening Every ‘Strategic’ Target in Iraq, but Talk of Nuclear Options Persists,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 1991. Air Force General Michael J. Dugan was fired when he declared that the United States had planned a massive bombing campaign “whose cutting edge would be in downtown

infrastructure. There was virtually total destruction of Iraq's electrical power grid and transmission capacity, and almost complete destruction of communications networks (telephone, telegraph, microwave, and civilian broadcast capacity). There was also selective bombing and destruction of fuel refining, storage and distribution capacity, and widespread damage to highways and bridges.¹⁰⁹ The aim was apparently to make Iraqi civilian life difficult and, through this, to secure desired postwar leverage over Iraq.¹¹⁰

Thus it was not sloppy bombing but rather target selection that indirectly doomed the Iraqi civilian population. The first UN observer team to visit Iraq described a country whose industrial base had been deliberately decimated.¹¹¹ Other study teams concluded that this resulted in large numbers of civilian deaths well beyond the end of the war. Epidemiological reports suggested that excess mortality was due to infectious diseases and to lack of medical care, food, and water created by the wartime destruction of vital infrastructure.¹¹² In the immediate postwar period, the one Iraqi institution with adequate food, fuel, mobility, power, and supplies was the army. In effect, if not in intent, some argued, the war against Iraq was a war against civilians, with effects far more serious than the same tactics would have produced in a less developed country, less dependent on sophisticated infrastructure.¹¹³

Baghdad." But neither Secretary of Defense Cheney nor any other top leader disputed the accuracy of what he said.

¹⁰⁹ The pattern of destruction was selective, however. Key buildings, such as the telecommunications building in Baghdad, were destroyed, while nearby buildings were undamaged. Only a small percentage of homes was destroyed (the UN estimated 9,000 homes were destroyed or seriously damaged). See H. Jack Geiger, "Bomb Now, Die Later: The Consequences of Infrastructure Destruction for Iraqi Civilians in the Gulf War," in John O'Loughlin, Tom Meyer, Edward Greenberg, eds., *War and its Consequences: Lessons from the Persian Gulf Conflict* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), pp. 52–53.

¹¹⁰ Record, *Hollow Victory*, pp. 110–11; Gellman, "Allied Air War," p. A16.

¹¹¹ A special UN report on the immediate postwar situation in Iraq stated that the conflict had wrought "near-apocalyptic results upon the economic infrastructure . . . Iraq has been relegated to a pre-industrial age." *Report to the Secretary-General on Humanitarian Needs in Kuwait and Iraq in the Immediate Post-Crisis Environment*, UN Security Council Document S/22366 (March 1991).

¹¹² One epidemiological report estimated more than 46,900 excess deaths among children between January and August 1991. See Alberto Ascherio *et al.*, "The Effects of the Gulf War on Infant and Child Mortality in Iraq," *New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 327, no. 13 (1992), pp. 931–36. For summaries of other studies, see O'Loughlin *et al.*, *War and its Consequences*, p. 70.

¹¹³ Geiger, "Bomb Now, Die Later," p. 57.

The Bush administration sought to suppress discussion of Iraqi casualties, which would raise the unpleasant issue of civilian deaths. A Census Bureau demographer who reported Iraqi casualties was removed from the Iraqi project and her files disappeared from her desk.¹¹⁴ Greenpeace, which made the most sustained analysis of Iraqi casualty figures, later estimated that a total of between 177,500 and 243,000 Iraqis were killed during the air war, the ground war, and the aftermath. Some 70,000–115,000 of these were in the military while between 72,500 and 93,000 were civilians. According to Greenpeace, only 3,000 of the civilian deaths occurred during the air war. The rest were a consequence of the damage inflicted upon the civilian infrastructure of Iraq.¹¹⁵

Wrecked economies impose levels of human suffering and deprivation that, in conflicts short of total war, erode the moral claims against killing non-combatants, which are the traditional basis for objection to nuclear weapons. Thus, the nuclear taboo may have “permissive” or “shadow” effects, permitting other weapons and practices that, though they avoid the stigma of nuclear means, accomplish equally destructive ends.

The point of this discussion is not to condemn Gulf War military policy or to suggest that nuclear weapons should be more usable. It is rather to note that norms have multiple effects and may be applied in contradictory ways. One effect of the nuclear taboo has been to divert attention from, and in fact legitimize, other practices – such as developments in conventional warfare – that are quite terrifying in themselves.¹¹⁶ Hence we are less likely to question them. This dynamic was reflected in what David Campbell has referred to as a “discourse of moral certitude” that helped ratify the Gulf War, a discourse in

¹¹⁴ Barton Gellman, “Census Worker Who Calculated ‘91 Iraqi Death Toll Is Told She Will Be Fired,” *Washington Post*, March 6, 1992, p. A6. According to otherwise sympathetic biographers, Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf displayed an “obstinate refusal to provide any figures on Iraqi casualties.” Roger Cohen and Claudio Gatti, *In the Eye of the Storm: The Life of General H. Norman Schwarzkopf* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991), p. 270. The military’s reluctance to provide a death count was said to result from a desire not to repeat a practice which had undermined support for the Vietnam War.

¹¹⁵ Greenpeace, *Iraqi Deaths From the Gulf War as of December 1991* (Greenpeace, 1991). In general, assessments of Iraqi casualties were wildly varying. For more extensive analysis see John G. Heidenrich, “The Gulf War: How Many Iraqis Died?” *Foreign Policy*, no. 90 (Spring 1993), pp. 108–25, and David Campbell, *Politics Without Principle: Sovereignty, Ethics and The Narratives of the Gulf War* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1993), pp. 68–71.

¹¹⁶ Keegan makes a similar point in “The Spectre of Conventional War,” p. 10.

which a high level of ethical talk and motivation was coupled with a seeming blindness to the actual consequences of policies.¹¹⁷

A further difficulty lies with just-war theory itself. As just-war theorists have observed, one challenge to the doctrine of proportionality is the reality that the overwhelming application of force works and shortens wars. Incrementalism can lead to longer, more drawn-out wars, as in Vietnam. If, as Prussian General Helmuth Karl von Moltke said in 1880, “the greatest kindness in war is to bring it to a speedy conclusion,” then, according to just-war theorist Michael Walzer, whatever strategies and tactics that will do this would be justified, excluding those that are “absolutely objectionable.”¹¹⁸ Such reasoning, used to defend the use of atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, was also used by nuclear weapons advocates during the Gulf War. As one conservative columnist argued, “tactical nuclear weapons are not objectionable when they are used only against combatants and their equipment. They merely speed up the achievement of the objective. They do not alter it.”¹¹⁹ Recapitulating debates from earlier decades, such arguments implied that the moral issue concerned not the nature of the weapon used but rather the target against which it was directed. The Iraqi battalions dug in in the Kuwaiti desert presented acceptable (i.e., military) targets. Such arguments directly challenged the classification of nuclear weapons as inherently weapons of mass destruction.

By the end of February 1991, the debate over nuclear weapons had faded away, put to rest by the successful employment of high-tech conventional weapons with “near-nuclear” effects and fewer moral difficulties, and which seemed to give the impression that modern war could be both lethal and humane.

Conclusion

Despite the availability of smaller, more accurate warheads, better battlefield conditions, and virtually no risk of escalation, use of nuclear weapons in the Gulf War was even less thinkable and more taboo

¹¹⁷ Campbell, *Politics Without Principle*, pp. 4, 25–26.

¹¹⁸ Michael Walzer and Paul Fussell, “An Exchange on Hiroshima,” *The New Republic*, September 23, 1981, pp. 13–14. See also Michael Walzer, “Justice and Injustice in the Gulf War,” in David E. Decosse, ed., *But Was it Just? Reflections on the Morality of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 1–17.

¹¹⁹ Cal Thomas, “Tactical Nuclear Option,” *Washington Times*, February 7, 1991.

than twenty-five years earlier. Although the military and technical conditions for the discriminate use of tactical nuclear weapons in battle approached an all-time ideal, never was their use less likely. US leaders in the Gulf War did not use, or even consider seriously the use of, nuclear weapons both because they did not need to and because they did not want to. The nuclear taboo affected outcomes in several ways. As in Korea, it operated instrumentally, as when policy-makers calculated that violating it would result in political costs and moral opprobrium for the United States. In contrast to Korea, however, the taboo also operated in a more substantive or taken-for-granted fashion, as when using nuclear weapons – violating the taboo – simply seemed wrong and “not what we do.” The taboo was no longer equated simply with public opinion – the views of others – but it was linked to “who we are.” As a senior White House official commented after the war, “What’s interesting is how irrelevant it [the issue of using nuclear weapons] really was in a crisis.” He added, “It’s the dog that didn’t bark.”¹²⁰

Advanced military capabilities certainly contributed to upholding the taboo. The devastating effectiveness of US conventional capabilities convinced many officials in the Pentagon Joint Staff of the decreasing US need for nuclear weapons. “Desert Storm was a great elixir,” said one Pentagon analyst.¹²¹ Military planners and leaders could now be confident that the United States could rely on conventional weapons to defend against a major conventional assault. Consequently, the United States could limit the role of its nuclear forces to deterrence of nuclear attack.¹²²

Although the employment of a subtle nuclear threat provided a telling reminder that US leaders still saw some utility in the political weight of the bomb, it did continue the trend toward vaguer and subtler nuclear threats. Unlike during the Cold War, US leaders were clear in their own minds that they were bluffing and had no intention of actually using such weapons. There was no tangible preparation for such use. The fact that the few individuals who publicly advocated the use of nuclear weapons were branded as kooks or crazies indicates how substantial the burden of proof had become, and – though

¹²⁰ Author interview, National Security Council, March 6, 1992.

¹²¹ Author interview, Pentagon, March 5, 1992.

¹²² For a defense of the effectiveness of high-tech weapons in the Gulf War, see William J. Perry, “Desert Storm and Deterrence,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 70, no. 4 (Fall 1991), pp. 66–82.

the taboo was not yet fully robust – the increasingly taken-for-granted nature of assumptions of non-use. Further, the discourse legitimizing the war against Saddam Hussein on the basis of an Iraqi nuclear threat implied that only the “barbaric” would use weapons of mass destruction. This reconceptualization of identities in relation to the bomb, a shift in thinking over time, shows the growing effect of an antinuclear taboo that did not exist in 1945.

9 The taboo in the post-Cold War world

In every corner of the planet, the tide of public sentiment is now running strongly in favor of diminishing the role of nuclear weapons. Indeed, I am convinced that most publics are well out in front of their governments in shaking off the grip of the Cold War and reaching for opportunities that emerge in its wake.

General George Lee Butler, former commander
of the US strategic nuclear arsenal, 1998¹

Nuclear weapons play a critical role in the defense capabilities of the United States, its allies and friends. They provide credible military options to deter a wide range of threats, including WMD and large-scale conventional military force . . . Nuclear weapons could be employed against targets able to withstand non-nuclear attack (for example, deep underground bunkers or bio-weapon facilities).

US Nuclear Posture Review, January 8, 2002

With the end of the Cold War, nuclear proliferation replaced superpower conflict as the major threat to the tradition of nuclear non-use. The actual and potential spread of nuclear weapons to new states, mostly in the developing world and in areas of regional tensions, combined with the diminished threat of superpower nuclear use, altered the context which had shaped the nuclear taboo since 1945. With the disappearance of the East–West conflict, the politics of nuclear non-use now became predominantly a North–South issue.

This chapter analyzes nuclear trends since the Gulf War, and the links between taboo and nuclear non-proliferation regime. With the end of the Cold War, efforts to strengthen the taboo centered on North–South politics over asymmetrical obligations imposed by the

¹ General George Lee Butler, “The Risks of Nuclear Deterrence: From Superpowers to Rogue Leaders,” speech to the National Press Club, February 2, 1998.

non-proliferation regime. The taboo on the use of nuclear weapons is one of a set of antinuclear norms that includes prohibitions on possession, acquisition, transfer, and testing of nuclear weapons. Not all of these norms apply equally to states, however, giving rise to a selective and incomplete delegitimization of nuclear weapons. The taboo thus helps to structure a hierarchical, but increasingly contested, global nuclear order. For the international community after the Cold War, world order issues were at the core of the proliferation and non-use agenda.²

This chapter focuses on three key developments in the 1990s: the initially impressive but ultimately limited denuclearization after the end of the Cold War, the effort to strengthen and extend the nuclear non-proliferation regime, and the revival of efforts by civil society and non-nuclear states to abolish nuclear weapons. Although the nuclear powers cut back their arsenals in terms of numbers, doctrines for the use of nuclear weapons changed little. Instead, efforts to strengthen the taboo came primarily from coalitions of non-nuclear states and NGO activists. In the 1990s, the antinuclear weapons campaigns took the form of dialogue with governments rather than street protests. While public protest declined markedly, antinuclear weapons groups increased their engagement in international disarmament arenas such as the United Nations and the Conference on Disarmament, particularly through building alliances with non-nuclear governments. At the same time, non-nuclear states increasingly contested the fact that non-use was achieved through a “system of deterrence” and a taboo on use for some, but a “system of abstinence” for others.³

Nuclear developments in the 1990s

The context: decreasing numbers

With the end of the Cold War, many observers expected that nuclear weapons could now play a much less central role in security policies. During the first half of the 1990s, both the United States and Russia made significant reductions in both tactical and strategic nuclear arsenals, accelerating a trend that had been under way since the late

² John Simpson and Darryl Howlett, “The NPT Renewal Conference: Stumbling Toward 1995,” *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 41–71.

³ These phrases are from William Walker, “Nuclear Order and Disorder,” *International Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 4 (2000), pp. 703–24.

1980s. In September 1991, following the overwhelming US victory in the Gulf War, President George H. W. Bush announced a surprise unilateral withdrawal of all ground-launched and sea-based tactical nuclear weapons.⁴ The Soviet Union shortly followed suit. It was the most radical move to date to reverse the arms race. It was also a dramatic move away from “warfighting” nuclear postures and the deployment of nuclear weapons in the theater of operation in support of the US–NATO deterrence policy.

The announcement did not come entirely out of the blue, however. The US military had seen a decreasing need for tactical nuclear weapons over the years, and the pace of retirements had accelerated in the mid and late 1980s. Between 1987 and 1990, the US military and NATO had retired several tactical weapons systems and canceled planned replacements for others.⁵ The result was that, by the early 1990s, almost all US nuclear modernization programs were terminated. The Army and Marines completely gave up their nuclear roles, the Navy no longer deployed tactical nuclear weapons, and the Air Force had dramatically cut its tactical nuclear stockpile.⁶ This quiet revolution in military affairs was all the more remarkable in view of the way the superpowers’ military services had long fallen all over themselves in their eagerness to field nuclear variants of virtually every weapon imaginable – from torpedoes to ocean mines to air-to-air missiles. The trend was unmistakable: from a reliance on tactical nuclear weapons in the Eisenhower era as essentially conventional weapons to their virtual (though not total) irrelevance in the 1990s.

These dramatic moves on tactical nuclear weapons were complemented by sharp cuts at the strategic levels, spurred on by the START I (1991) and START II (1993) agreements between the United

⁴ Tactical nuclear weapons would remain on aircraft, based mostly in Europe, at less than 10 percent of their Cold War level. George Lewis, “The Future of US Nonstrategic Nuclear Forces,” in Michelle Flournoy, ed., *Nuclear Weapons After the Cold War: Guidelines for US Policy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 104–40.

⁵ In 1987 the Navy retired 1,050 nuclear warheads for its ASROC and SUBROC anti-submarine missiles and Terrier anti-aircraft missiles. In 1989 it dropped plans to deploy nuclear replacements for these weapons. The number of nuclear-armed surface ships shrank from 187 to 49 between 1980 and 1989. In 1988 the Army junked its atomic demolition munitions (“backpack nukes”) and nuclear Nike-Hercules anti-aircraft missiles. In 1990 NATO scrapped a planned replacement for the short-range nuclear Lance missile and the 155-mm atomic artillery shell. See Lewis, “Nonstrategic Forces,” pp. 105–07.

⁶ William M. Arkin, “Flying Solo,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 54, no. 6 (November–December 1998), p. 72.

States and Russia. The number of US deployed strategic weapons declined by about half between September 1990 and September 2000 (from 12,646 to 6,000).⁷ The nuclear powers also agreed to stop targeting their missiles at each other.⁸ This was more symbolic than real, since the missiles could be retargeted quickly, but it was a gesture in the right direction. The US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) of September 1994 explicitly eliminated the option of deploying nuclear weapons on aircraft carriers or other surface ships.⁹ The NPR also called for further reducing alert rates and recommended upgrading permissive action links and other coded control locking devices on missiles, bombers, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles to prevent unauthorized launch. Additionally, for the first time since the beginning of the nuclear age, the United States would not have strategic bombers on alert.

In the area of non-proliferation, there was, after the end of the Cold War, a small stampede to join the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). Most importantly, China and France, two of the five declared nuclear powers, joined in 1992. South Africa, in a remarkable rollback move, dismantled its secret nuclear arsenal and acceded to the NPT in July 1991.¹⁰ All the states of the former Soviet Union joined the NPT. Argentina and Brazil formally renounced the manufacture of nuclear weapons in 1990 and joined the NPT in 1995 and 1998, respectively.¹¹ After holding out for more than twenty-five years, in August 1994 even Cuba announced its intention to join the Treaty of Tlatelolco, the

⁷ Robert Norris and William M. Arkin, "US Nuclear Stockpile, July 1997," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 53, no. 4 (1997), pp. 62–63.

⁸ Press release on Nuclear Posture Review (Washington, DC: Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense), September 22, 1994, p. 2; "News Briefs," *Arms Control Today*, vol. 24, no. 8 (October 1994) p. 24.

⁹ It did not eliminate the option of deploying Tomahawk cruise missiles on attack submarines. Press release on Nuclear Posture Review (Office of Assistant Secretary of Defense, September 22, 1994), p. 2; Dunbar Lockwood, "Nuclear Posture Review Shows Little Change in Policies," *Arms Control Today*, vol. 24, no. 9 (1994), p. 32.

¹⁰ South African President F. W. de Klerk announced in March 1993 that South Africa had secretly developed a small nuclear arsenal – seven fission weapons – and then dismantled it. He ordered a halt to the program shortly after he became president in 1989. See David Albright, "South Africa and the Affordable Bomb," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 50, no. 4 (1994), pp. 37–47.

¹¹ Democratic rule returned to Brazil and Argentina in the 1990s, and with it growing public opposition to the secret, unsafeguarded nuclear programs that had been accelerated under military dictatorships. See David Albright and Kevin O'Neill, "Non-Proliferation: Jury-Rigged but Working," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 51, no. 1 (January/February 1995), pp. 22–23, and John R. Redick, "Latin America's Emerging Non-Proliferation Consensus," *Arms Control Today*, vol. 24, no. 2 (March 1994), pp. 3–9.

nuclear-weapons-free zone in Latin America and the Caribbean.¹² The NPT was extended indefinitely in April 1995, and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty was finally adopted in 1996, after more than thirty years of negotiations. At the time of the April 2000 NPT review conference, only four states were not members: India, Pakistan, Israel, and Cuba.

No retreat from use

On one hand, by any historical standard of disarmament, the pace of denuclearization in the first half of the 1990s was rather remarkable. On the other hand, US policy for the use of nuclear weapons changed little with the end of the Cold War. The NPR, the US Defense Department's long-awaited review of nuclear policy, announced in late September 1994, contained no fundamental change in doctrine on the use of nuclear weapons, although it did contain some shifts in strategy and targets.¹³ It maintained the option of using nuclear weapons "as a last resort" in response to a non-nuclear attack on US forces.¹⁴ President Bill Clinton confirmed this policy in November 1997 when he signed a top secret presidential directive.¹⁵ Although it directed the military to cease preparing to wage a long nuclear war, it also allowed use of nuclear weapons in response to an attack with chemical or biological weapons.¹⁶ This was the first formal adjustment of targeting policy in sixteen years.

While many expected that the end of the Cold War might be an opportunity to dramatically reduce the role of nuclear weapons in defense policies, for military planners the feared proliferation of chemical and biological weapons became a rationale for keeping large numbers

¹² "News Briefs," *Arms Control Today* (October 1994), p. 24.

¹³ *Nuclear Posture Review: VU-Graphs* (Washington, DC: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Defense, International Security Policy, September 22, 1994).

¹⁴ Lockwood, "New Nuclear Posture Review Shows Little Change in Policies," p. 27. The "weapons of last resort" policy has been the proclaimed nuclear doctrine for the United States. NATO also reaffirmed it in two statements in 1991.

¹⁵ PDD-60, Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy Guidance, November 1997. This document remains classified.

¹⁶ R. Jeffrey Smith, "Clinton Directive Changes Strategy on Nuclear Arms," *Washington Post*, December 7, 1997, p. A1. The Defense Department argued that "nuclear weapons now play a smaller role in our nuclear security strategy than at any point during the nuclear era." The emphasis in this PDD was on "detering nuclear wars or the use of nuclear weapons at any level, not fighting [with] them." Quoted in *ibid.* Many analysts argued that the change in the doctrine was superficial, however. For a detailed analysis, see Hans M. Kristensen, *US Nuclear Strategy Reform in the 1990s*, Nautilus Institute Working Paper (March 2000).

of nuclear weapons and even giving them new roles. The Pentagon assigned nuclear weapons a prominent role in its “counterproliferation” scenarios.¹⁷ “Measured ambiguity” became the Pentagon’s preferred policy. Deputy Secretary of Defense John Deutch told reporters that a country considering chemical weapons use, for example, would have to “take into account” the possibility that US nuclear-armed missiles might be used in response. “That’s how we contribute to deterrence,” he said.¹⁸ In the early 1990s, the Pentagon drew up targeting plans for “rogue states.”¹⁹ By 1996, this had been extended to “non-state actors,” making terrorists legitimate targets for nuclear weapons.²⁰ The expansion of the nuclear role was probably also aided by the US decision to eliminate its own stockpiles of biological and chemical weapons.

The new policy contradicted US assurances, first made in 1978, that the United States would not use nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear state party to the NPT and not allied with a nuclear state in an attack, regardless of whether it possessed chemical or biological weapons. The United States, along with Britain, China, Russia, and France, reaffirmed this pledge in 1995 at the time of the NPT extension conference. US policy was now ambiguous on the role of nuclear weapons in dealing with non-nuclear threats.²¹ Although the administration insisted that there was no change or contradiction in the policy, critics, including former government officials and prominent groups such as the National Academy of Sciences, charged that it signaled to the rest of the world that the United States viewed nuclear weapons as useful against non-nuclear adversaries and thus lowered an important barrier against their use.²² Arms control supporters subsequently

¹⁷ Kristensen, *US Nuclear Strategy Reform in the 1990s*, pp. 14–16.

¹⁸ Press Conference with Secretary of Defense William Perry, General John Shalikashvili, Deputy Secretary of Defense John Deutch, and Kenneth H. Bacon (OASD, Washington, DC, September 22, 1994), p. 16. The secretary of defense’s *Annual Report to the President and the Congress* (Washington, DC, January 1994) stated that “consideration must be given as to whether and how US nuclear weapons and nuclear posture can play a role in deterring the acquisition or use of nuclear weapons by other nations” or terrorist groups. Since the United States had “foresworn” chemical and biological weapons, “the role of US nuclear forces in deterring or responding to such non-nuclear threats must be considered,” p. 61.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ “Doctrine for Joint Theater Nuclear Operations,” Joint Pub 3–12.1. February 9, 1996, at www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/new_pubs/jp3_12_1.pdf.

²¹ William M. Arkin, “Inarticulating Nuclear Policy,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 51, no. 1 (January/February 1995), p. 72.

²² Craig Cerniello, “Clinton Issues New Guidelines on US Nuclear Weapons Doctrine,” *Arms Control Today*, vol. 27, no. 8 (November/December 1997), p. 23.

termed the NPR a “disaster.” Clinton, much more interested in economic than security issues, did not undertake any further efforts to fundamentally rethink nuclear policy.

As for Russia, in November 1993, when announcing its new military doctrine, it explicitly failed to reaffirm the 1982 pledge by then Party General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev that the Soviet Union would not be the first to use nuclear weapons under any circumstances.²³ With Russia no longer interested in delegitimizing nuclear weapons through pursuit of mutual no-first-use agreements, normative power politics as a mechanism of taboo creation became less prominent. The nuclear doctrines of the other three declared nuclear states remained ambiguous and unclear. Britain and France now defined their nuclear arsenals as weapons of last resort. They were lukewarm about a ban on testing, however, and some French analysts – like some of their American counterparts – argued for the need to create “mini-nukes” more appropriate for dealing with new regional nuclear weapons states.²⁴ China continued to characterize its forces as “purely defensive” and to reaffirm its unqualified no-first-use declaration.²⁵

The unwillingness of the nuclear powers to go further in delegitimizing nuclear weapons sat uncomfortably with their more intent pursuit of the non-proliferation agenda after the Gulf War. A highly intrusive nuclear inspection regime for Iraq, intense diplomatic pressure on North Korea to denuclearize, and a general tightening of supplier side regimes helped to strengthen the nuclear non-proliferation regime. These goals were widely held to be laudable. By retaining first use policies, however, nuclear states sent mixed and inconsistent signals about the legitimacy of nuclear weapons as instruments of national power. Critics charged that such policies ultimately constituted an open-ended prescription for nuclear proliferation.²⁶ As discussed in the

²³ Remarks by Russian Minister of Defense Pavel Grachev, November 3, 1993. Dunbar Lockwood, “The Status of US, Russian and Chinese Nuclear Forces in Northeast Asia,” *Arms Control Today*, vol. 24, no. 9 (November 1994), p. 22.

²⁴ Wolfgang Panofsky and George Bunn, “The Doctrine of the Nuclear Weapons States and the Future of Non-Proliferation,” *Arms Control Today*, vol. 24, no. 7 (July/August 1994), p. 6.

²⁵ Dingli Shen, “Toward a Nuclear Weapon-Free World: A Chinese Perspective,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 50, no. 2 (March/April 1994), pp. 51–54.

²⁶ Panofsky and Bunn, “Nuclear Doctrine,” p. 8.

next section, these contradictory policies suggested little willingness on the part of the nuclear powers to abandon the currently existing hierarchical nuclear order, an order which the nuclear taboo helps to legitimize.

The taboo and the nuclear non-proliferation regime

The links between the nuclear taboo and the non-proliferation regime might be approached through two questions at the core of global debates over nuclear weapons: which states contribute most to the dangers posed by such weapons? Is it the existing nuclear powers (with their sizeable nuclear arsenals) or future nuclear powers? And how should the burden of, and responsibility for, reducing the risks posed by nuclear weapons be distributed among states?

Historically, the nuclear taboo and the non-proliferation norm have been mutually reinforcing. Initially, the difficulty of mastering nuclear technology helped prevent nuclear weapons from spreading quickly in the immediate Cold War period, which in turn bought time for a normative opprobrium regarding such arms to take hold.²⁷ The fact that nuclear weapons remained in the hands of a very small number of states in the 1950s and early 1960s, combined with an emerging taboo, helped prevent the “normalization” of nuclear arms. The stigmatization of nuclear weapons, in turn, facilitated the creation of a non-proliferation regime by the mid-1960s. This regime further inhibited the spread of such weapons through normative, legal, and institutional barriers. By restricting their spread and inhibiting their normalization, the regime reduced the chances that they might be used.

Thus while the non-proliferation regime supports the taboo, the taboo, in turn, is fundamental to the success of the non-proliferation regime. A prohibition regime cannot be sustained over the long haul by sheer force or coercion, or physical denial; it requires an internalized belief among its participants that the prohibited item is illegitimate and abhorrent. It also requires that the prohibition apply to all.

²⁷ On the obstacles to the spread of nuclear know-how, see Donald MacKenzie and Graham Spinardi, “Tacit Knowledge, Weapons Design, and the Uninvention of Nuclear Weapons,” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 101, no. 1 (July 1995), pp. 44–99.

The mutually supportive link between the taboo and the non-proliferation regime also reveals a less obvious, constitutive effect of the taboo: its role in helping to structure collective identities of “civilized” and “uncivilized” states. The non-proliferation regime is ultimately a disarmament regime, but, at least for the medium term, one with asymmetrical behavioral prescriptions for different categories of states. By helping to legitimize mutual nuclear deterrence, the nuclear taboo legitimizes a practice that, under the NPT, is denied to most states. The taboo has thus come to play a role in the selective but ultimately incomplete delegitimization of nuclear weapons.

At the core of the debate over non-proliferation are issues of hierarchy and equality with respect to nuclear weapons. While a major push for the non-proliferation treaty came from the United States and the Soviet Union, which discovered a common interest in preventing the emergence of other nuclear states, non-nuclear states also played a critical role in its origins and achievement. Nevertheless, the non-proliferation treaty, concluded in 1968, was based on a hierarchical concept of nuclear order.²⁸ The NPT conferred a privileged status upon those states that possessed nuclear weapons on January 1, 1967. No other states could possess or acquire such weapons. The Treaty thus consolidated the monopoly of nuclear weapons states’ power, elevating “the factual predominance of nuclear weapon States to a rule of law.”²⁹ In short, the NPT constituted *de jure* recognition of *de facto* inequalities. In doing so, it reflected the view that the major threat to peace was horizontal nuclear proliferation: the more states that possessed nuclear weapons, the greater the likelihood that such weapons would be used.

This special status extended to the military aspects of nuclear power only, however. With regard to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, the formal order of this system was still officially based on the formal equality of states: the NPT stated that all parties to the treaty had an

²⁸ The history of the non-proliferation treaty is recounted in Peter Clausen, *Non-proliferation and the National Interest: America’s Response to the Spread of Nuclear Weapons* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 74–99; Gary T. Gardner, *Nuclear Non-Proliferation: A Primer* (Boulder, CO: Lynn Rienner, 1994), ch. 4, pp. 37–52; Harald Mueller, Wolfgang Kotter and David Fischer, *Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Global Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 15–30; and George Bunn, *Arms Control By Committee: Managing Negotiations With the Russians* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

²⁹ Wolfgang Graf Vitzthum, “The World Nuclear Order and the Equality of States,” *Law and State*, vol. 25 (1982), p. 26.

“inalienable right” to develop their own civil use of nuclear energy and to support other states in doing the same.³⁰

This asymmetrical order is sustained by a political bargain at the core of the NPT, reflected in Article VI, which calls for the nuclear states to pursue nuclear disarmament in exchange for the non-nuclear states relinquishing their right to acquire nuclear weapons.³¹ The principal *legal* obligations of the treaty, however, relate to not seeking or assisting in the acquisition of nuclear weapons. In short, the overall effect of the NPT was to set up a system that legalized the factual nuclear supremacy of the nuclear states while establishing the unequal status of states with regard to the acquisition and manufacture of nuclear arms. In legalizing inequality, it departed in explicit fashion from the notion of juridical equality of all states enshrined in the UN Charter.

Subsequent developments further reinforced these status differentials. In 1974, a turning point in international nuclear policy, the Federal Republic of Germany finally ratified the NPT, and, most importantly, India exploded a “peaceful” nuclear device. In response to the latter, the United States began to focus more intently on nuclear export policy. It sought to prevent the development of national nuclear weapons capabilities through unilateral and bilateral measures to restrict the flow of sensitive technology to the Third World. Such measures as the 1977 London suppliers’ guidelines, which developed policy guidelines for nuclear supplies to non-nuclear countries, and the US Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act of 1978, reinforced the special status of the nuclear powers.³² This attempt to curtail Third World access to nuclear technology alienated many less-developed countries, which perceived it as a neocolonial suppression of the “have-not” countries’ development aspirations.

Early on, advocates of international control of atomic energy, and some critics, believed that a hard-line non-proliferation policy that

³⁰ Article IV of the NPT. Reprinted in *The United Nations and Nuclear Non-Proliferation* (New York: United Nations, 1995), pp. 60–63.

³¹ Article VI of the 1968 NPT reads: “Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.” *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³² There were originally fifteen adherents to the London Guidelines. There are now thirty-nine members. For discussion of these measures see Clausen, *Non-Proliferation*, pp. 127–38.

demanded that all except the nuclear states renounce nuclear weapons would not be politically viable. As Secretary of State Dulles observed in 1956, "It would be difficult for nations to forego permanently their right to make nuclear weapons while the US, USSR, and U.K. continued to make them."³³ Just such a system was created. Despite its patent inequality, the system was tolerated, even widely supported, in the special circumstances of the Cold War, among both non-nuclear and nuclear states alike. It was premised, however, on the assumption that this inequality was temporary, pending pursuit of disarmament by the declared nuclear powers. In the mid-1990s, the long-run legitimacy and viability of the asymmetrical regime began to be called into question.

The nuclear taboo and the standard of civilization

The links between the taboo and non-proliferation are best understood in terms of the differing, and sometimes tenuous, degrees of legitimacy the international community appears to attach to different aspects of nuclear weapons – use, acquisition, possession, and deterrence – and the ambivalence toward nuclear weapons that this ultimately reflects.³⁴ These various prohibitions apply unequally to states – only the great powers may legitimately possess nuclear weapons, for example. These prohibitions also provide mechanisms for the international community to differentiate between the status and legitimacy of different states. Compliance with the appropriate nuclear norms reinforces the identity of states and their status as a legitimate member of the international community and/or as a certain kind of state (responsible or civilized, for example).

Thus South Africa's transformation from the ultimate pariah to a legitimate member of the international community by abandoning apartheid was reinforced by its renouncement of nuclear weapons and adherence to the NPT in 1991. Its return to the fold of "civilization" resulted in an astounding reversal of roles at the April 1995 NPT extension conference. Not only were the kind of political attacks that used to be commonplace features of its political life completely

³³ Memorandum of conversation, February 3, 1956 (Secret) *FRUS*, 1955–57, 20, p. 309.

³⁴ An eloquent discussion of the role of legitimacy in the international community is Thomas Franck, *The Power of Legitimacy Among Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

absent, but, in a remarkable departure from its former pariah status, it played a crucial leadership role in negotiations at the conference.³⁵

William Walker has described the global nuclear order as composed of two pillars: a “system of deterrence” and a “system of abstinence.”³⁶ These are two cooperative, mutually supportive approaches to managing the danger posed by nuclear weapons. The taboo, by helping to stabilize the practice of mutual nuclear deterrence, legitimizes the system of deterrence. Yet, nuclear deterrence is a practice reserved for the great powers (the legitimate possession of nuclear weapons and permanent membership in the UN Security Council remain identical, for example), while it is stigmatized for others, who must participate in the system of abstinence. The secret suspicion of many developing states is that the West believes that Third World states cannot be trusted with nuclear weapons.³⁷ That is, Third World states cannot be relied on not to use them, in violation of the taboo. Thus the NPT sets up a binary opposition between those that can be trusted with nuclear weapons and those that cannot.³⁸

Within this system of implicit identities, the taboo helps to justify the illegitimacy of the acquisition of nuclear weapons by the majority of the world. The linkage between non-use of nuclear weapons and “non-acquisition,” for example, is explicitly expressed in the non-use pledges the nuclear powers have extended to the non-nuclear parties to the NPT – the so-called negative security assurances. In short, the NPT is not merely a non-proliferation regime. It is ultimately a global non-use regime, with the goal of non-use achieved through stable deterrence for some and abstinence for others.

Just as the “barbarian” states of the nineteenth century were identified in large part by their inability to comply with Western standards of warfare of the day, so pariah status today is coterminous with the illegitimate desire to acquire weapons of mass destruction, particularly

³⁵ Barbara Crossette, “Atom Pact Finds Advocate in South Africa,” *New York Times*, April 23, 1995; Tom Zamora Collina, “South Africa Bridges the Gap,” *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 51, no. 5 (July/August 1995), pp. 30–31.

³⁶ Walker, “Nuclear Order and Disorder.”

³⁷ Hugh Gusterson, “Nuclear Weapons and the Other in the Western Imagination,” *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1999), pp. 111–43. Based on analysis of Western discourse, Gusterson argues that the operating Western assumptions are that deterrence will be unstable in the Third World, Third World governments lack the technical maturity to handle nuclear weapons, and Third World regimes lack the political maturity to be trusted with nuclear weapons.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

nuclear weapons. Iraq, Iran, India, Pakistan, Libya, and North Korea, for example, have all been identified by, and associated with, their illegitimate pursuit of nuclear capabilities.³⁹ The 1991 Gulf War was legitimized in part by a discourse that portrayed Iraq as a “barbarian” state willing to use nuclear weapons if it had them (even though it was the United States that had 1,000 nuclear weapons in the region). In Iraq’s case, it had joined the NPT but was widely suspected of illicit nuclear weapons activities. In other cases, the refusal of Israel, India, Pakistan, and, until the 1990s, Argentina, Brazil, and South Africa, to join the NPT gradually stigmatized them and became the basis for other nations to deny them sensitive exports and to take other punitive measures.⁴⁰

The stigmatization processes are both built into the NPT and also extend beyond it. The NPT safeguards themselves are applied asymmetrically, since they bring under international purview essentially all nuclear material in most non-nuclear weapons states, but not in the nuclear weapons states.⁴¹ This reinforces a notion that the nuclear powers are “responsible” while others are not. In the 1970s, the United States decided to stigmatize civilian plutonium separation programs as too dangerous even though they were permitted under the NPT. It thwarted efforts by Taiwan, South Korea, and Pakistan to obtain commercial reprocessing plants. These were ostensibly for civilian use, but they masked weapons intentions.⁴² Today, civil separation of plutonium is tolerated in the industrialized nations of the North, but actively prevented as too risky in the developing nations of the South. A major success of the US–North Korean agreement of 1994 was that it froze and then stopped North Korea’s civil plutonium separation program – but it ignored plutonium separation activities in nearby Japan.⁴³

³⁹ For a survey of the nuclear programs of potential proliferators see Frank Barnaby, *How Nuclear Weapons Spread: Nuclear-Weapons Proliferation in the 1990s* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁴⁰ Albright and O’Neill, “Non-Proliferation: Jury-Rigged but Working,” p. 22. For US policy toward these countries see Clausen, *Non-Proliferation*, pp. 127–83.

⁴¹ Lawrence Scheinman, “The Non-Proliferation Treaty: On the Road to 1995,” *IAEA Bulletin*, vol. 34, no. 1 (1992), p. 35.

⁴² Leonard Spector, *The Undeclared Bomb* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1988), pp. 346–47; Clausen, *Non-Proliferation*, pp. 129–30.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 26. On the North Korean agreement see Peter Grier, “North Korea Pact Points up Limits of Containment,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 21, 1994. The Reagan administration dropped earlier US restrictive policies toward reprocessing plants in Japan and European allies in favor of a more liberal approach. Clausen, *Non-Proliferation*, pp. 159–63.

After the Gulf War, significant support developed for a more “coercive” non-proliferation regime. On April 3, 1991, UN Security Council Resolution 687 authorized the IAEA to eliminate Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction and missile systems, and authorized a much more intrusive system of inspection and monitoring of Iraqi facilities than had previously existed. This resolution effectively asserted UN Security Council sovereignty over Iraq’s economic and defense decisions.⁴⁴ Iraq, in effect, came under the discipline of the international community for flouting the latter’s norms.⁴⁵

While the non-nuclear states resented the double standard, the discourse of “civilization” is nevertheless a powerful one, and the incentives to be a member of the international community are strong. Complying with the community’s norms is what a state owes to the community in return for that community’s validation of a nation’s statehood.⁴⁶ Thus those who argued that Ukraine should keep the nuclear weapons on its territory clearly got it wrong, as Ukraine, in November 1994, defied realist arguments about order based on self-help: it abjured nuclear weapons and chose “community” instead. After delaying for several years, it voted on November 16 to join the NPT as a non-nuclear state by an overwhelming 301 to 8 vote.⁴⁷ The president of Ukraine, Leonid Kuchma, successfully persuaded the nationalistic Ukrainian parliament to give up its nuclear weapons by telling them that keeping them would make Ukraine a “rogue nation.”⁴⁸ Ukraine had held out for security and economic assurances, but the final end to the emotional two-year debate came with Kuchma’s stirring speech to parliament. A nuclear Ukraine would be a pariah, and no future necessary partners would be willing to provide such a state with economic assistance, political acceptance, or security assurances.

⁴⁴ Eric Chauvistre, *The Implications of IAEA Inspections under Security Council Resolution 687* (New York: United Nations, 1992).

⁴⁵ Antonia Handler Chayes and Abram Chayes, “Non-proliferation Regimes in the Aftermath of the Gulf War,” in Joseph Nye and Roger Smith, eds., *After the Storm: Lessons From the Gulf War*, The Aspen Institute (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1992), pp. 49–80. For the notion of disciplinary power, see James F. Keeley, “Toward a Foucauldian Analysis of International Regimes,” *International Organization*, vol. 44, no. 1 (Winter 1989/90), pp. 83–105.

⁴⁶ Franck argues that the notion of obligation is uniquely rooted in the notion of community. Franck, *The Power of Legitimacy among Nations*, p. 196.

⁴⁷ Steven Greenhouse, “Ukraine Votes to Become a Nuclear-Free Country,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 1994.

⁴⁸ Jane Perlez, “Treaty to Cut A-Weapons Now in Effect,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 1994, p. A4; and Jane Perlez, “US and Ukraine Cooperate to Destroy Nuclear Arsenal,” *The New York Times*, December 9, 1994, pp. A1, A11.

Kuchma suggested that he hoped that joining the NPT would lead to Ukraine's enhanced international stature.⁴⁹ Arguments that retaining nuclear weapons would deprive the owners of the benefits associated with full-fledged membership in the international community were also compelling for Belarus and Kazakhstan.⁵⁰ Providing further evidence for the non-realist nature of Ukraine's action, Ukraine did not get much for its bargaining.⁵¹

The challenge from the South

From the perspective of non-nuclear powers, the nuclear states' interest in the non-proliferation regime reflects a double standard and inconsistencies. In the view of some of them, the uncivilized are portrayed as "rogue" states whose only objective in obtaining nuclear weapons is to wage war on the nuclear powers.⁵² As one Third World analyst wrote, "It is fashionable in Western propaganda to distinguish between the five 'responsible' nuclear powers and the 'irresponsible' others." At worst, he said, this is "racist nonsense." At best, it displays "massive ignorance."⁵³

It may be argued that the creation and operation of the NPT merely reflects the asymmetrical international constellation of power – a straightforward realist explanation. This is clearly true at a general level. The nuclear powers have been able to design and promote a regime that allows them to possess nuclear weapons while forbidding

⁴⁹ The Ukrainian Rada made its approval conditional on two things: written security assurances from the nuclear weapons states, and recognition of Ukraine's "ownership" of the fissile material of the nuclear weapons still on its territory and "administrative control" of these weapons. See Dunbar Lockwood, "Ukraine Accedes (Finally) to NPT: Opens Way to START Reductions," *Arms Control Today*, vol. 24, no. 10 (December 1994), p. 17. For the evolution of Ukraine's nuclear policy, see Victor Zaborosky, "Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation: The Evolution of the Ukrainian Case." CSIA Discussion Paper 94-05, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, June 1994. It should be noted that, even though insisting on "owning" its nuclear weapons until their complete elimination, former president Leonid Kravchuk did not take the risk of declaring Ukraine a nuclear state, even though it was – with 1,800 warheads after the break-up of the Soviet Union – *de facto* the world's third largest nuclear power.

⁵⁰ As the extensive interviews conducted by William Potter suggest. See William C. Potter, "The Politics of Nuclear Renunciation: The Cases of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine," Occasional Paper No. 22, The Henry L. Stimson Center, Washington, DC (April 1995).

⁵¹ See Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security*, vol. 21, no. 3 (Winter 1996), pp. 54–86.

⁵² See "Nuclear Club: No 'Rogues' Allowed," in *Saudi Gazette*, Jiddah, Saudia Arabia, reprinted in *Boulder Daily Camera*, June 6, 1994.

⁵³ Ashok Kapur, "Non-proliferation: Western Biases," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 51, no. 1 (January/February 1995), p. 38.

them to others. But the realist account fails to capture important dynamics of the NPT. The contention between the nuclear and non-nuclear states over the nuclear regime and its asymmetry is not fundamentally a dispute about security (as realism would suggest) but about identity. The debate pits the status and identity implications of the regime against objective "self-interest" in it. Despite the objective security interests the regime clearly promotes, the non-nuclear states find the status inequality galling to the point that some of them appeared willing to risk abandoning the regime altogether.⁵⁴

Thus the non-proliferation regime cannot be explained simply in terms of power and interests, because issues of identity complicate the calculations of "interest" for many non-nuclear states. While the regime may indeed promote their security interests, it also denies their identity and status as equals with respect to nuclear weapons, a situation uncomfortable for many states. Nevertheless, today the South provides the primary source of political pressure for further strengthening the nuclear taboo and delegitimizing nuclear weapons. It is the nuclear states that are resistant.

The South has both accepted and contested the regime. It has not explicitly challenged the taboo itself, which it has long and widely supported and which is also an important part of its security.⁵⁵ But it has challenged the asymmetrical nuclear world order that the nuclear taboo has helped to legitimize. In particular, the South has sought to adjust the system by equalizing the currently unequal application of the various nuclear prohibitions. It has sought to eliminate the selective delegitimization of nuclear weapons in favor of total delegitimization.

The NPT has been perceived by many developing country adherents as "serving primarily the interests of the superpowers in avoiding the problems that a proliferated world would have brought to their global competition" and not a first step toward a transformed world order.⁵⁶ Indeed, despite significant progress in arms reductions in the 1990s, none of the five original nuclear weapons states showed the

⁵⁴ In meetings in numerous countries to seek support for the treaty in the months prior to the 1995 extension conference, a US negotiator repeatedly found himself confronted with Third World diplomats who seemed more concerned with the equality issue than with discussing the security benefits of the regime. Author interview, senior official of US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, March 3, 1995.

⁵⁵ It is unlikely, however, that this prohibition is equally robust in all states, for example in Israel, India, or Pakistan.

⁵⁶ Scheinman, "On the Road to 1995," pp. 33-34.

slightest willingness to give up its nuclear arsenal, or even to discuss disarmament seriously.

After the Gulf War, non-nuclear states put increasing pressure on the nuclear states to strengthen their negative security assurances, first extracted from the nuclear states in 1978. Although the nuclear states have repeatedly confirmed these commitments over the years, they were basically unilateral statements.⁵⁷ The non-nuclear states had sought to strengthen the assurances and make them more uniform, unconditional, more multilateral, and legally binding, that is, to embed them more deeply in the web of normative and legal relations on nuclear weapons. Nigeria and Egypt both advocated improved formulations at the 1990 NPT Review Conference. In response, France, a nuclear power, offered another formulation at the 1992 session of the Conference on Disarmament.⁵⁸ In sum, it was the South which most actively sought to strengthen the normative expectation of “non-use” by codifying it and making it more explicit.

More broadly, the South used the review conferences of the NPT and other conferences as forums for putting pressure on the North to reduce the inequality of the NPT and to equalize – in effect, broaden – the commitments entailed by a robust nuclear taboo. At the heart of the international discussion about equality and discrimination was the comprehensive test ban. Since 1963, achieving such a ban had been at the top of the agenda of most of the non-nuclear states. By the 1990s, technical and strategic trends since 1968 somewhat diminished the importance of the test ban as a technical barrier to proliferation, but its political and symbolic importance increased.⁵⁹ The extent of progress

⁵⁷ The United States ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva reaffirmed this assurance in a March 13, 1990 plenary statement, adding “we stand by this assurance as a firm and reliable statement of US policy.” It was also reiterated by the US representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governors meetings in February and June 1990, and by Ronald F. Lehman, director of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, in the principal US address to the fourth NPT review conference on August 21, 1990. Lehman wrote, “I agree that the periodic reaffirmation of US policies related to the non-use of nuclear and chemical weapons are supportive of overall US efforts to prevent the further proliferation of these weapons of mass destruction.” Letter from Ronald Lehman to Jeremy Stone, director, Federation of American Scientists, August 28, 1990.

⁵⁸ On the proposals see Jozef Goldblat, “Issues Facing the 1995 NPT Extension Conference,” *Security Dialogue*, vol. 23, no. 4 (1992), pp. 29–30.

⁵⁹ This is because much of the “progress” that has taken place in nuclear arsenals has been in the area of delivery systems. Also, it has become increasingly clear that a state can manufacture first-generation nuclear weapons – fission weapons – without testing. Muller, Kotter, and Fischer, *Nuclear Non-Proliferation*, p. 10.

toward a comprehensive ban became the principal standard by which most parties judged how well the nuclear powers were fulfilling their obligations under Article VI of the NPT.

The 1995 NPT extension conference

These issues came to a head at the extension conference of the NPT, held in April and May 1995, twenty-five years after the treaty entered into force. It was the largest arms control conference ever held, with 175 of the 178 signatories of the treaty attending. The conference was to determine whether, and under what conditions, the treaty would be extended into the future. It offered increased leverage for the South to bargain for reducing asymmetries in the regime in exchange for its support for renewing the treaty. The South used the nuclear states' interest in continuing the regime to press its demands for a comprehensive test ban, greater disarmament by the nuclear powers, and strengthened commitments of non-use.⁶⁰ The institutionalization of the normative presumption against nuclear weapons had empowered new actors, who invoked the obligations of the nuclear taboo against the nuclear powers themselves.

Substantial concern existed before the conference that the South might block the indefinite and unconditional extension of the treaty, the preferred outcome of the United States, Russia, Britain, and France.⁶¹ A core group of non-aligned states, led by Indonesia, wanted the treaty extended for a series of rolling fixed periods of twenty-five years, subject to reaching certain goals during each time period.⁶² This would allow the South to keep the pressure on the nuclear states to meet their disarmament obligations under the NPT. Many non-aligned states argued that an indefinite extension would legitimize the existence of

⁶⁰ George Moffett, "Nations Tussle over Bottling Nuclear Genie," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 17, 1995; Rebecca Johnson, "The Speeches Begin," NPT Update No. 3, ACRONYM Consortium, April 19, 1995.

⁶¹ Barbara Crossette, "Atom Arms Pact Runs into a Snag," *The New York Times*, January 26, 1995, pp. A1, A14; Peter Grier, "Why Nations May Balk at Renewing Nuclear Pact," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 1, 1995, pp. 1, 8. Barbara Crossette, "Battle Looms for Treaty to Halt Spread of Nuclear Weapons," *The New York Times*, March 3, 1995; Simpson and Howlett, "Stumbling Toward 1995," pp. 41–71; Lewis A. Dunn, "Global Nuclear Order in an Era of Proliferation," in Rose Gottemueller, ed., *Strategic Arms Control in the Post-START Era*, IISS (London: Brassey's, 1992), pp. 131–48.

⁶² "Document on Substantive Issues Submitted by Indonesia on Behalf of the Group of Non-aligned and Other States," NPT/CONF.1995/14, April 6, 1995.

nuclear weapons states.⁶³ There was also a small but worrisome chance that the conference would deadlock in rancorous disagreement and the treaty would not be extended at all.

Thus the crucial question was whether the nuclear powers would make enough concessions to the non-nuclear states to build consensus for indefinite extension.⁶⁴ In the end, as a result of intensive lobbying and negotiating by key states, including Mexico and South Africa, a compromise was reached: the treaty was extended indefinitely, though not entirely unconditionally. The indefinite extension was also achieved as a result of intensive lobbying by the United States and the fact that the Western nations were well organized while the non-aligned were not.⁶⁵ However, the non-nuclear states were able to extract a set of commitments from the nuclear powers that were considered politically if not legally binding. Texts adopted at the conference at least implied some degree of conditionality as well as greater accountability by the nuclear powers. These included a set of twenty "principles" including reaffirmations of the goal of nuclear disarmament, and commitments to achieve a comprehensive test ban in 1996, legally binding negative and positive security assurances, and "universality" and "non-discrimination" in the regime.⁶⁶

After the conference, a substantial number of non-aligned states expressed public dissatisfaction with its outcome, regretting that the statement of principles did not contain stronger commitments and language, and did not set more target dates and deadlines. India – one of the few non-signatories of the NPT – denounced the extension as "perpetuating nuclear discrimination." Indian leaders argued that

⁶³ "Summary Record of the 7th Meeting," NPT/CONF.1995/SR.7, April 20, 1995; "Summary Record of the 9th Meeting," NPT/CONF.1995/SR.9, April 21, 1995. Barbara Crossette, "Egypt Against Indefinite Extension of Pact on Spread of Atom Arms," *New York Times*, April 21, 1995.

⁶⁴ Barbara Crossette, "Discord Over Renewing Pact on Spread of Nuclear Arms," *New York Times*, April 17, 1995, pp. A1, A4. A detailed account of the conference is Jayantha Dhanapala with Randy Rydell, *Multilateral Diplomacy and the NPT: An Insider's Account* (United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, Geneva, Switzerland, 2005).

⁶⁵ George Moffett, "US Scrambles to Find Signers for Nuclear Ban," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 15, 1995, p. 1; "Developing Nations Split on Nuke Treaty," Associated Press, April 30, 1995. Observers argued that, due to disorganization at the conference, the non-aligned lost some of the leverage they had been developing throughout the year and at earlier preparatory conferences. Author interviews at NPT conference, May 8–9, 1995.

⁶⁶ Dhanapala, *Multilateral Diplomacy and the NPT*, pp. 38, 41–59; William Epstein, "NPT Wrap-Up: Indefinite Extension – With Increased Accountability," *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 51, no. 4 (July/August 1995), pp. 27–30. The twenty principles are reprinted on p. 29.

the indefinite extension meant that “the international community has accepted the institutionalization of the nuclear double standard” and was “conferring legitimacy” on it.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the creation of principles and the strengthened review process were seen by the nuclear powers as a significant concession.⁶⁸ The new process required the parties to meet almost annually to review progress under the treaty, as opposed to the earlier meetings held every five years. As part of the bargain for making the NPT permanent, this gave the non-nuclear states greater ability and opportunity to address concerns about progress by the nuclear states toward disarmament. Thus the enhanced NPT review process contributed toward the multilateralization of arms control by adding nearly annual oversight of treaty-related issues by a conference of what eventually became 186 nations, 181 of which were non-nuclear states.⁶⁹

Despite the discrimination inherent in the non-proliferation regime, its existence was widely held to be a global good – as the final number of sponsors of the indefinite extension proposal suggested.⁷⁰ It became clear that many non-nuclear states ultimately supported the indefinite extension as in their security interests. Yet the inequality of the regime was held to be intolerable for many states. Ironically, if nuclear weapons were removed entirely, inequality would undoubtedly persist. As the Gulf War demonstrated, it is sophisticated, lethal conventional arsenals – which are more usable – that establish “usable” inequality.⁷¹ Nuclear weapons, however, are a symbol of inequality. Their political meaning, beyond simply their “objective” effects, packs a powerful punch.

⁶⁷ Sanjoy Hazarika, “India Assails Pact to Curb Atomic Arms,” *The New York Times*, May 16, 1995.

⁶⁸ Epstein, “NPT Wrap-Up,” p. 28.

⁶⁹ Thomas Graham, “Strengthening Arms Control,” *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 2 (Spring 2000), pp. 183–96.

⁷⁰ There were 111 sponsors of the proposal to indefinitely extend the treaty – more than the majority needed to pass it – but no actual vote on it. Through an unusual procedure, the president of the conference passed the proposal while avoiding putting the issue to a vote. This allowed those who were opposed – including some key non-aligned states – to avoid having to vote against it. See Epstein, “NPT Wrap-Up,” p. 28.

⁷¹ In the Gulf War, the United States demonstrated that high-tech conventional weapons could be symbols of power and also effective instruments of power, and possibly enhanced the effect of conventional deterrence: few other countries would want the “Iraqi treatment” or what some have referred to as a policy of “punitive containment.” See Robert Tucker and David Hendrickson, *The Imperial Temptation: The New World Order and America’s Purpose* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1992).

Coalitions of the weak

The 1995 NPT review conference represented the high point of the decade in terms of efforts to reduce nuclear dangers. Following the conference, in the second half of the 1990s, three developments in particular were significant for the taboo: the steady expansion of nuclear-weapons-free zones, a renewed global movement for abolition of nuclear weapons, and the 1996 World Court advisory opinion on the legality of use of nuclear weapons. These developments were driven primarily by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in collaboration with non-nuclear states, often over the objections of the nuclear powers. These efforts largely failed to produce fundamental changes in states' nuclear policies. They did, however, effectively put the nuclear powers on the defensive, while creating the conditions for the non-nuclear states to extract more explicit commitments to disarmament at the 2000 NPT review conference.

The geographical spread of non-use: nuclear-weapons-free zones

Following the successful creation of a nuclear-weapons-free zone in Latin America in 1967, the idea had spread to other regions. In 1986, the states of the South Pacific agreed at Rarotonga to establish a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the South Pacific. The treaty was the culmination of a series of regional nuclear-free-zone proposals dating back to the early 1960s, which were a direct result of the region's harsh experience with nuclear testing in the Pacific.⁷² At the time the treaty was concluded, a US administration spokesman denounced the effort as likely to "encourage other areas to adopt similar or more strict nuclear-free zones." He complained that "it would encourage people to sort of take sections of the Western world and opt out."⁷³ US leaders applied intense pressure on Australia and New Zealand not to join the treaty and not to ban nuclear-armed US warships from docking in their ports. Both governments rebuffed the United States.

⁷² Makurita Baaro, "The South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone Treaty," in Pericles Gasparini Alves and Daiana Belinda Cipollone, eds., *Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones in the 21st Century* (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 1997), p. 49.

⁷³ Quoted in Jonathan Dean and Jeffrey Laurenti, "Options and Opportunities: Arms Control and Disarmament for the 21st Century" (New York: United Nations Association, 1997), p. 22.

In December 1994, with the Cold War over, the United States finally agreed to honor New Zealand's ban on US ships and aircraft carrying nuclear weapons onto its territory, thus abandoning, at least in this case, its longstanding "neither confirm nor deny" policy regarding the presence of nuclear weapons.⁷⁴ When France resumed nuclear testing in the South Pacific in 1995, antinuclear movements organized a boycott of French wine and other goods, stunning French leaders and the defense establishments of the nuclear states by the strong public outcry and forcing France to curtail the testing program.⁷⁵ In 1996, under international pressure to make progress on disarmament, and following the international and regional condemnation of French testing, the United States, along with Britain and France, finally signed the protocols to the Rarotonga treaty extending non-use assurances to the treaty parties.

The US official's predictions about the popularity of nuclear-free zones proved correct. In the mid-1990s, two other regions also put themselves off limits to nuclear arms. The new African nuclear-free zone, signed at Pelindaba – where the old South Africa apartheid regime had concentrated its nuclear weapons program – was joined by forty-three of Africa's fifty-three countries. The denuclearization of Africa had first been proposed in 1964 at the inaugural meeting of the Organization of African Unity. It grew out of the strident reaction to French nuclear testing in the Western Sahara in November 1961. The end of the Cold War and South Africa's accession to the NPT in 1991 spurred a renewed effort, and a treaty was finally signed in 1996.⁷⁶ It was a landmark, since a former nuclear weapons state was part of the zone. All five declared nuclear states extended non-use assurances in conjunction with the treaty.

⁷⁴ "US, New Zealand Mend Ties," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 15, 1994. The United States formally broke off ties with New Zealand in 1987 because of the latter's policy of barring US Navy vessels and military aircraft unless they declared they were not carrying nuclear weapons. This would have required the United States to abandon its "neither confirm nor deny" policy regarding the presence of nuclear weapons. Stuart MacMillan, *Neither Confirm nor Deny: The Nuclear Ships Dispute Between New Zealand and the United States* (New York: Praeger, 1987).

⁷⁵ "Firestorm of Protest Radiates From Pacific," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 11, 1995; "Pacific Critics Use a Megaphone Against Chirac: Amplified Denunciations May Finally Get France to Stop its Nuclear Testing," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 7, 1995.

⁷⁶ Isaac E. Ayewah, "The Treaty on the Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Africa (The Pelindaba Treaty)," in Alves and Cipollone, eds., *Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones in the 21st*, p. 56.

The nuclear states were less happy with the 1995 Southeast Asian nuclear-weapons-free zone. Its strict provisions barred the passage of nuclear-armed ships through the region and their right to make ports of call. The treaty built on a 1971 declaration made in Kuala Lumpur to establish South East Asia as a “zone of peace, freedom and neutrality.”⁷⁷ To date, the nuclear states have not ratified its protocols extending non-use assurances to the regional states.

Taken together, the nuclear-free-zone treaties, along with the 1959 Antarctic treaty, effectively banned nuclear weapons from most of the land area of the Southern Hemisphere, putting about half the planet off limits to nuclear weapons. By the end of 1996, more than 110 nations had signed such agreements. Other nuclear-free zones were under discussion, including among the Central Asian states formerly part of the Soviet Union. The proliferation of nuclear-free zones reflected strong public rejection of nuclear weapons in these areas and reinforced the hardening international taboo against them.

The return of the abolition movement

In the mid-1990s, amid growing sentiment in several quarters that the time had come for more radical changes in nuclear policy, a renewed movement for the abolition of nuclear weapons arose. It was led by an unusual but attention-drawing coalition of prominent former military officers and political leaders, peace groups, international organizations, and like-minded states. For the first time since the 1940s and 1950s, abolition of nuclear weapons became a subject of serious discussion. Significantly, even friends and allies of the US began to split with the United States over nuclear weapons. Lacking the power to physically force the nuclear states to get rid of their nuclear arms, these abolition efforts focused on delegitimizing the weapons along with the concepts, such as deterrence, that the nuclear states used to justify their continued possession of nuclear arsenals. A distinctive feature of these efforts was that they tended to be high level, involving advocacy and *démarches* by former heads of state, generals, prominent scientists, defense intellectuals, and former diplomats and officials, rather than street protests.

⁷⁷ Arumugam Ganapathy, “The Treaty on the South-East Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone,” in Alves and Cipollone, eds., *Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones in the 21st Century*, p. 59; and Adam Shapiro, “Nuclear Weapons Free Zones: The Solution to Nuclear Disarmament?” in *UN Chronicle*, vol. 41, no. 3 (2004), at www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2004/webArticles/081204_nwzf.asp

The first call to eliminate nuclear weapons came from an unlikely source. In an op-ed in the *Washington Post* in January 1994, Paul Nitze, a near legendary figure in US nuclear arms control history, and one of the founders of the hawkish Reagan-era Committee on the Present Danger, argued that the United States should reexamine its reliance on nuclear deterrence. He argued that the threat of nuclear retaliation would be unlikely to deter aggression by regional powers, and that US leaders would be unwilling to use nuclear weapons in response to such a move. He recommended converting the nuclear strategic deterrent to precision-guided munitions, which the United States would be more likely to actually use.⁷⁸

In late 1995, the Australian government formed the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, with a list of distinguished experienced participants including former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and former French Prime Minister Michel Rocard. The commission's report, issued in August 1996, called on the nuclear powers to commit themselves to elimination of all nuclear weapons. It rejected the argument that nuclear weapons deter war, and the notion that the nuclear states could keep their arsenals indefinitely without the possibility of nuclear weapons being used someday. In its view, the only way to prevent nuclear war would be to abolish nuclear weapons. The commission called for a series of immediate measures to cut back nuclear dangers including an agreement by the nuclear powers not to be the first to use nuclear weapons, nor to use them against non-nuclear states.⁷⁹

In the wake of these moves, an increasing number of arms control advocates, scientists and defense intellectuals, public figures, and retired military officers began to call publicly for the elimination of nuclear weapons and for declared no-first-use doctrines.⁸⁰ General George Lee Butler, former head of the US strategic nuclear arsenal, startled much of the defense establishment with a speech in December 1996 before the National Press Club calling for the elimination of all nuclear weapons. Given his intimate contact with nuclear doctrine and weapons throughout his military career, his conversion was certainly striking. It was not, however, unique. In the wake of Butler's speech,

⁷⁸ Paul Nitze, "Is it Time to Junk Our Nukes?" *Washington Post*, January 16, 1994.

⁷⁹ Report of the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons (www.wagingpeace.org/butlerspeech.html).

⁸⁰ John Steinbruner, "Renovating Arms Control Through Reassurance," *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 2 (Spring 2000), pp. 197–206.

sixty-one generals and admirals from seventeen countries, including General Chuck Horner, a commander in the Gulf War, and General Andrew Goodpaster, a highly-regarded assistant to former President Eisenhower, issued a joint statement calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons. Goodpaster went on to lead a study group under the sponsorship of the Henry L. Stimson Center. The group's March 1997 report called for the president to unequivocally commit himself to the elimination of weapons of mass destruction.⁸¹ Numerous groups endorsed this goal including the fairly mainstream Atlantic Council and the scientists' Pugwash organization. In 1997, a report of the National Academy of Sciences urged prohibition of all existing nuclear weapons with destruction of existing stocks. In February 1998, 120 former civilian leaders from 48 countries, including former president Jimmy Carter, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, former West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt, and former Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau, released a statement supporting the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons. At the grassroots level, Abolition 2000, a global network of over 1,400 peace and antinuclear weapons groups, was formed in 1995, calling for negotiations on a convention to abolish nuclear weapons by the year 2000.⁸²

Global societal pressure takes nuclear weapons to court: The 1996 World Court Advisory Opinion

The highpoint of the abolition movement was the effort by antinuclear weapons groups, working with client states and international organizations, to obtain an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ), or World Court, on the legality of use of nuclear weapons. Consistent with the development pattern of prohibitory norms, these "moral entrepreneurs" increasingly moved toward criminalizing the use of nuclear weapons.⁸³ Forty-five nations presented written or oral testimony before the Court, by far the largest number ever for an ICJ case. Japan brought the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to testify. More than two-thirds of the states argued that nuclear weapons

⁸¹ "An American Legacy: Building a Nuclear Weapon Free World," Final Report, Project on Eliminating Weapons of Mass Destruction (Washington, DC: Henry L. Stimson Center, March 1997).

⁸² Cathleen Fisher, *Reformation and Resistance: Nongovernmental Organizations and the Future of Nuclear Weapons*, Report No. 29 (Washington, DC: Henry Stimson Center, May 1999).

⁸³ Ethan Nadelmann, "Global Prohibition Regimes: The Evolution of Norms in International Society," *International Organization*, vol. 44, no. 4 (Autumn 1990), pp. 479-26.

were illegal, and only Germany and Italy testified in support of the NATO nuclear weapons states and Russia.⁸⁴

Particularly significant was the role of non-governmental organizations in the process. There is little doubt that without NGO activism and the legal assistance that NGOs provided to states, the case would never have made it to the Court. While the idea of an ICJ case against nuclear weapons had been discussed in academic and activist circles since the 1950s, it did not appear to be a possibility until peace activists started building alliances with non-nuclear states, such as those in the Non-Aligned Movement, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and thus generated sufficient official support within the United Nations to take the case to the Court.⁸⁵

The antinuclear activists decided to pursue a two-track approach, one through the World Health Organization (WHO) and one through the UN General Assembly. In 1993, the WHO requested from the court an advisory opinion on whether, given the health and environmental consequences of a use of nuclear weapons, such a use would be a breach of international law and the WHO constitution. In 1994 the General Assembly also voted to request an advisory opinion on the legality of use of nuclear weapons.

Behind these requests were several years, even decades, of work by NGOs. The key NGO was the World Court Project, formed in 1992, which brought together several groups of activist lawyers and physicians who had been engaged in advocacy work on the illegality of nuclear weapons since the early 1980s. These included the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, the International Peace Bureau, and the International Association of Lawyers Against Nuclear Arms (IALANA). The Lawyers' Committee on Nuclear Policy (LCNP), the American branch of the IALANA, was formed in the United States in 1982 following publication of a report calling on individuals and NGOs with "moral concern" to take action to prohibit the development, deployment and planned use of nuclear weapons.⁸⁶ The idea of

⁸⁴ Kate Dewes and Robert Green, "The World Court Project: History and Consequences," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Fall 1999).

⁸⁵ Alyn Ware, "NGO and Government Cooperation in Setting the Disarmament Agenda: The Impact of the 1996 International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion," in Kenneth Rutherford, Stefan Brem, and Richard A. Matthew, eds., *Reframing the Agenda: The Impact of NGO and Middle Power Cooperation in International Security* (Westport, Co: Praeger, 2003), pp. 113-41.

⁸⁶ Richard Falk, Elliot Meyrowitz, and Jack Sanderson, *Nuclear Weapons and International Law*, Occasional Paper No. 10 (Center of International Studies, Princeton University, 1981).

seeking an advisory opinion from the World Court was an integral part of the work of the Lawyers' Committee from its inception but it was not considered ripe for action until the end of the Cold War.⁸⁷

Leading figures in the World Court Project were Sean McBride, Irish statesman and Nobel laureate, Richard Falk, a professor of international law at Princeton, and Harold Evans, a retired judge in Christchurch, New Zealand. Since 1981, the International Peace Bureau, under McBride's leadership, had held conferences around the world on the illegality of nuclear weapons. In 1987, Evans had written letters to the prime ministers of Australia and New Zealand, which enshrined nuclear-free status in their constitutions, urging them to take the steps necessary to bring the issue before the ICJ. He eventually secured the support of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), which proposed that the matter be brought to the Court through the WHO, a specialized UN agency entitled to seek opinions of the Court under the UN Charter. In 1988, at the Third UN Special Session on Disarmament, peace groups publicized the issue and called for states to support it.⁸⁸

With the end of the Cold War, the moment seemed more propitious. Through a series of conferences around the world, the newly formed World Court Project drew attention to the issue, wrote letters to governments, and launched a campaign to gather "Declarations of Public Conscience" from citizens around the world.⁸⁹ It worked to establish a worldwide network of sympathetic states to introduce the issue in the UN General Assembly and the WHO. IPPNW activists lobbied heavily member states of the WHO, where many of them had personal contacts. On May 14, 1993, over the strong objections of the United States, which argued that the issue was outside the responsibility of the WHO, the latter approved a resolution 73:40 requesting the advisory opinion.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Ved Nanda and David Krieger, *Nuclear Weapons and the World Court* (Ardsley, NY: Transnational Publishers, 1999), pp. 71–72. The only other ICJ case on nuclear weapons was in 1973, when New Zealand and Australia challenged the legality of French nuclear testing in the South Pacific.

⁸⁸ Dewes and Green, "The World Court Project," p. 4.

⁸⁹ These stated "It is my deeply held belief that nuclear weapons are morally wrong. I wish my Declaration of Conscience to be brought to the attention of the World Court." This effort invoked the Martens clause from the 1907 Hague Convention, which required the World Court to take account of the "dictates of public conscience" when deciding any legal question. Nanda and Krieger, *Nuclear Weapons and the World Court*, p. 79.

⁹⁰ Michael N. Schmitt, "The International Court of Justice and the Use of Nuclear Weapons," *Naval War College Review*, vol. 51, no. 2 (Spring 1998), p. 4.

In December 1994, the General Assembly approved a similar resolution introduced by the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) over the vociferous objections of the United States, Britain, and France, which had already delayed the vote by a year.⁹¹ Zimbabwe, backed by a determined group of South Pacific states, and assisted by a World Court Project team, had lobbied hard in favor of a resolution, which eventually gained the sponsorship of 110 members of the NAM. Peggy Mason, Canada's disarmament ambassador, described the reaction to the proposed non-aligned resolution: "Hysteria is not too strong a word to describe the nuclear weapons states' point of view here."⁹² The United States, Britain, and France sent delegations to many non-aligned capitals, including Zimbabwe, Chile, the Philippines, Morocco, and Colombia, to discourage the non-aligned states from forcing the measure to a vote in the General Assembly after it was introduced in the First Committee.⁹³ In vain, the nuclear powers threatened to withdraw trade and aid if the resolution was not withdrawn.

In accepting jurisdiction in the case, the Court acted in face of the opposition of all permanent members of the Security Council except China. Two of the NGOs, IALANA and IPPNW, drafted model submissions which some states used in the preparation of their cases.⁹⁴ In its opinion delivered on July 8, 1996, the World Court found that the use or threat of nuclear weapons is "generally" unlawful, but said it could not "definitively" conclude whether it would be unlawful in extreme circumstances of self-defense if the survival of the state were at stake. Additionally, it found there are scenarios in which use of nuclear weapons would not necessarily violate the laws of war, for example, on warships at sea or on troops in an isolated location.⁹⁵

⁹¹ The vote in the UN General Assembly was seventy-eight in favor with forty-three against and thirty-eight abstentions. UN Doc. A/RES/49/75K, adopted December 15, 1994. Non-aligned states voted in favor. The conservative-led New Zealand, government, under intense pressure from the peace movement, voted in favor, despite strong counter-pressure from the United States and Britain. The United States and most NATO allies voted against. China did not vote, Canada and Norway abstained, thus breaking ranks with NATO. Japan, Australia, Ireland, Sweden, and Austria also abstained, thus breaking ranks with the United States. Nanda and Krieger, *Nuclear Weapons and the World Court*, p. 83.

⁹² Mark Schapiro, "Mutiny on the Nuclear Bounty: Non-aligned versus the Bomb," *The Nation*, vol. 227, no. 22, December 27, 1993, pp. 798-800.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Dewes and Green, "The World Court Project," p. 8.

⁹⁵ For discussion, see Nanda and David Krieger, *Nuclear Weapons and the World Court*; Schmitt, "The International Court of Justice," and Richard Falk, "Nuclear Weapons,

Despite the Court's uncertainty over whether all uses of nuclear weapons were illegal, its unanimous statement that the nuclear powers had an obligation to pursue nuclear disarmament contributed to further delegitimizing deterrence and provided a boost to the anti-nuclear weapons coalition.⁹⁶ Although the Court's opinion had no binding effect, and may be dismissed as merely rhetorical, the great effort exerted by the nuclear powers to justify their position, and their strenuous attempts to block the advisory opinion from going forward, suggested how seriously they viewed such actions. Coming from the world's most senior jurists, the opinion was a powerful symbol. It was yet another incremental step in the "agenda politics" of nuclear delegitimization.

After the Court's decision, resolutions in the UN General Assembly calling for serious negotiations on disarmament gained increasing numbers of votes each year. The nuclear weapons states other than China opposed these. They also blocked any attempts to start such negotiations in the Geneva negotiating forum.⁹⁷ Defense decision-makers did not treat the General Assembly's exhortations seriously. Nevertheless, the increasing trend line of votes in favor of disarmament was a warning signal of the erosion of international support for the nuclear powers' position.

Public opinion

In making their case, the abolitionists argued that public opinion strongly supported their position. By the second half of the 1990s, public attitudes indeed reflected strong support for measures to eliminate nuclear dangers and reduce the role of nuclear weapons, including their abolition. In a poll taken in 1997, over one third of Americans polled (36 percent) supported total elimination of nuclear weapons, and 80 percent favored eliminating all nuclear weapons from all countries in the world through a verifiable enforceable international agreement; 77 percent believed the world would be safer without any nuclear weapons. Only 14 percent favored a goal of building new or better nuclear weapons and only 13 percent favored maintaining current US stockpiles. Americans continued to support an international

International Law and the World Court: A Historic Encounter," *American Journal of International Law*, vol. 91, no. 64 (1997), pp. 64-75.

⁹⁶ Falk, "Nuclear Weapons," p. 66; Dewes and Green, "The World Court Project."

⁹⁷ Alyn Ware, "The World Court and Nuclear Weapons: Who Is Listening?" *UN Chronicle*, vol. 36, no. 4 (1999), pp. 49-50.

treaty banning nuclear tests, with 70 percent doing so, up from about 64 percent during the Cold War.⁹⁸

The polling results also help explain why no mass antinuclear movement emerged during this period, however. Respondents continued to see some benefits of a small nuclear arsenal; 51 percent believed nuclear weapons “prevented attack on the United States” during the Cold War; 48 percent believed that they enabled the United States to obtain superpower status, and 46 percent believed that they deterred the Soviets; 56 percent believed that nuclear weapons improved US security (although, at the same time, 50 percent of respondents believed that nuclear weapons also created an arms race). According to another poll conducted at intervals across 1993–97, public support for sustaining the US nuclear arsenal actually grew since the end of the Cold War.⁹⁹ Further, according to polling data over close to a twenty-year period, the number of British respondents who named “disarmament” or “nuclear weapons” as “the most important issue facing Britain today” declined from a peak of 41 percent in the late winter of 1983 to only 1–2 percent in the late 1990s.¹⁰⁰

Only a few questions asked specifically about the use of nuclear weapons. A majority of the respondents to the interval poll in 1993 and 1995 supported nuclear retaliation against the use of chemical and biological weapons.¹⁰¹ Another poll in December 2002 found that 60 percent of Americans favored using nuclear weapons against Iraq in response to an attack on US military forces with chemical or biological weapons, while 37 percent were opposed.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ “Public Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons: An Opportunity for Leadership,” The Henry L. Stimson Center, Washington, DC (1998), pp. 18, 21, 23, 26. This poll was based on responses to 85 questions in phone interviews with 800 random registered voters, conducted in September 1997. This poll did not ask any questions about whether or under what circumstances the United States should use nuclear weapons, or what US policy on use should be (or even was). Indeed, the thrust of the questions seemed to assume this issue away, as if it were taken for granted that use of nuclear weapons would come about only at the hands of terrorists, rogue states, or by accident.

⁹⁹ Dennis M. Gormley and Thomas G. Mahnken, “Facing Nuclear and Conventional Reality,” *Orbis*, vol. 44, no. 1 (Winter 2000), pp. 109–25.

¹⁰⁰ Cited in Colin S. Gray, “An International ‘Norm’ Against Nuclear Weapons? The British Case,” *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 20 (July 2001), p. 237.

¹⁰¹ Kerry G. Herron and Hank C. Jenkins-Smith, *Public Perspectives on Nuclear Security: US National Security Surveys, 1993–1997* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Institute for Public Policy, 1998), pp. 78, 94–95.

¹⁰² Richard Morin, “Nuclear Retaliation Against Iraq Supported,” *Washington Post*, December 17, 2002.

These polling data help explain why no broad outcry against nuclear weapons emerged in the 1990s. While the American public strongly supported the elimination of nuclear weapons under international agreement, and believed a nuclear-free world would be desirable, in the meantime it also believed that nuclear weapons provided security.

Footdragging on disarmament

The rising calls in the international community for greater progress on nuclear reductions reflected a growing impatience among non-nuclear states with the nuclear powers' footdragging on disarmament. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty was finally signed in 1996, after more than thirty years of negotiation, but in 1999 the US Senate failed to ratify it. In the April 1997 preparatory session for the five-year review of the NPT, the non-nuclear states made clear their determination to press on for elimination of the five nuclear powers' weapons. A growing number of states were prepared to break with the nuclear powers. Former UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar urged them to do so, telling US NATO and Asian allies in a speech in 1997 to take the lead in pushing the nuclear states toward disarmament. "With the nuclear weapons powers frozen in a time warp, perhaps their great non-nuclear allies must now take the initiative for a nuclear weapons free world," he told a Japanese audience. "The countries can now brand the concept of a 'nuclear umbrella' obsolete. *They* can insist that alliance military doctrine should now have no plans for nuclear war-fighting. *They* can insist on pledges of no first use. And they can exercise their sovereignty to bar their allies from storing nuclear weapons on their territory or bringing them into their ports."¹⁰³

In May 1998, India stunned the world by testing five nuclear weapons, and Pakistan followed quickly by testing six of its own, ending decades of secrecy and suspicion about their nuclear projects. The former director of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, K. Subrahmanyam, said at the time of the blasts, "India was compelled to join the nuclear club because the international community legitimized nuclear weapons when they indefinitely extended the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Quoted in Dean and Laurenti, "Arms Control in the 21st Century," p. 40.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Darren C. Zook, "A Culture of Deterrence: Nuclear Myths and Cultural Chauvinism in South Asia," *World Policy Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1 (Spring 2000), p. 41.

In June 1998, in the wake of the Indian and Pakistani tests, the foreign ministers of eight “middle powers” – Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Slovenia, South Africa, and Sweden – labeling themselves the New Agenda Coalition, signed a joint declaration calling for a new agenda for nuclear disarmament. They called on Israel, India, and Pakistan to adhere to the NPT and the comprehensive test ban, and on the declared nuclear powers to adhere to their commitment in the NPT to eliminate their nuclear arsenals. In November 1998, this group minus Slovenia submitted to the UN General Assembly a resolution calling for such an approach. Britain, France, and the United States launched a concerted effort to persuade their nuclear umbrella allies, NATO and those Eastern European countries seeking admission to the European Union or NATO, to vote against the coalition resolution. Despite these efforts, twelve of sixteen NATO members abstained from the voting, indicating their displeasure at current US and NATO policies. On a similar resolution the following year, all but two non-nuclear NATO members, including Turkey, abstained.¹⁰⁵

Following the 1998 vote, the political debates in many countries over the UN resolution prompted non-nuclear states Germany and Canada to push harder for a reexamination of NATO strategies, in particular the policy of first use of nuclear weapons.¹⁰⁶ At the NATO 50th anniversary summit in Washington, DC, in April 1999, held during NATO’s war in Kosovo, NATO members opened the door to a review of its first-use policy. When the nuclear weapons states of NATO tried to exclude it from review, Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy, who was leading the campaign to review the issue, noted, “it’s just absolute insanity that we would not focus on this matter. I find it very disturbing.”¹⁰⁷ The United States completely rejected a review of the issue. In his dismissal, US Defense Secretary William Cohen emphasized the value of “ambiguity” in deterring “rogue” states armed with chemical and biological weapons.¹⁰⁸

Under significant international pressure, at the 2000 review conference of the NPT, the nuclear states agreed explicitly to eliminate their nuclear arsenals, giving a political underpinning to the World Court

¹⁰⁵ Graham, “Strengthening Arms Control,” p. 189.

¹⁰⁶ “Germany Raises No-First-Use Issue at NATO Meeting,” *Arms Control Today*, vol. 28, no. 8 (November/December 1998), p. 24.

¹⁰⁷ Graham, “Strengthening Arms Control,” p. 189.

¹⁰⁸ Kristensen, *US Nuclear Strategy Reform in the 1990s*, p. 17.

opinion.¹⁰⁹ The final document of the conference also identified thirteen practical steps for achieving disarmament. The outcome was a political victory for the New Agenda Coalition. Nevertheless, despite the efforts of antinuclear states and activists, the prospects for serious revisions in nuclear policy looked bleak. Although President Clinton and his top advisors had little interest in nuclear weapons – Clinton does not mention PDD-60 in his 1,000-page memoirs¹¹⁰ – the continuing refusal of the nuclear powers, and especially the United States, to rule out first-use scenarios suggested the limits to the formalization of the taboo in the face of power.

Conclusion

In the 1990s, the push for strengthening the taboo came primarily from the South and committed antinuclear activists, often working together in international forums to push for abolition of nuclear weapons and strengthened assurances of no-first-use. These efforts represented an intensified attempt to formalize, that is, to legalize, prohibitions against nuclear weapons, crystallized in the effort to obtain an advisory opinion from the World Court on the legality of nuclear weapons' use. The nuclear powers, largely on the defensive, were resistant. They were willing to cut numbers of warheads but resisted anything that would undermine the legitimacy of deterrence.

The politics of abolition and non-proliferation also reflected several effects of the taboo. Despite the asymmetry and discrimination inherent in the nuclear non-proliferation regime, the institutionalization of the normative presumption against nuclear weapons empowered the South. It sought to invoke the obligations of the regime against the nuclear powers themselves. The South sought to reduce the selective delegitimization of nuclear weapons, and to have antinuclear norms applied equally and uniformly within the society of states. While the taboo itself is not contested, the asymmetrical application of nuclear legitimacy – which it helps justify – is. The South will likely continue to seek to preserve the taboo while contesting the “system of deterrence” that it helps to legitimize.

¹⁰⁹ Rebecca Johnson, “The 2000 NPT Review Conference: A Delicate, Hard-won Compromise,” *Disarmament Diplomacy*, no. 46 (May 2000).

¹¹⁰ Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Knopf, 2004).

This last observation points to deeper constitutive effects of the taboo: its role in defining “civilized” states. The non-proliferation regime, through its normative, behavioral prescriptions, imposes a hierarchy of collective identities on states, distinguishing between the “responsible” ones who will not use nuclear weapons (and therefore may possess them) and the irresponsible who cannot be trusted to uphold the nuclear taboo (and therefore must be denied such weapons). These identities directly challenge deeply embedded norms of sovereign equality. The conflict between the goal of equality and the pursuit of security interests which the non-proliferation regime creates for non-nuclear states suggest the powerful pull of the notion of equality, and the often conflicting interests at stake. It also suggests how collective identities are created, reproduced, and institutionalized at the global level, and the role of a nuclear taboo in such a process.

10 Conclusion: the prospects for the nuclear taboo

[Regarding the 2002 India–Pakistan crisis:] The whole world would condemn whoever [uses a nuclear weapon] and I think that is a sobering reality that both understand . . . It is not just another weapon in a toolbox of weapons. It crosses a line that the world does not want to see crossed in 2002. And the condemnation that would go against whichever country did it would be worldwide and it would be immediate . . .

Secretary of State Colin Powell, 2002¹

. . . we went through the Korean War, we went through the Vietnam War, we've gone through the war on terror and we've not used nuclear weapons. That ought to say something about the threshold with respect to nuclear weapons.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, 2003²

The nuclear taboo has been a powerful force inhibiting US resort to use of nuclear weapons since World War II. No taboo existed in 1945, but from the Korean War, when an emerging taboo entered deliberations mostly as an instrumental consideration, to the 1991 Gulf War, when it had become more embedded and internalized, it has restrained use of nuclear weapons, both by appearing as a “constraint” to actors and by engendering more constitutive processes of stigmatization and categorization. Despite cases where nuclear weapons were perceived to have military utility, US leaders have ruled out their use for political and normative reasons. Ultimately, in delegitimizing nuclear weapons, the nuclear taboo has constrained the practice of “self-help”

¹ Transcript, Interview of Secretary of State Colin W. Powell with BBC News, May 31, 2002, US State Department Press Release, at <http://usembassy.state.gov/tokyo/wwwhse1406.html>.

² Donald Rumsfeld, “Defense Department Budget for Fiscal Year 2004 and Posture of the US Armed Forces,” testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee,” February 13, 2003.

in the international system. States are not free to resort to nuclear weapons without incurring moral opprobrium or political costs. National leaders are forced to seek alternatives for use in war or defense or else risk being classified as outside the bounds of “civilized” international society. If there had been no normative opprobrium, that is, if the “rules” had been different, we probably would have seen resort to such weapons at some point since the start of the Cold War.

In this final chapter, I consider some challenges to, and extensions of, my argument, and implications for both theory and policy. I consider the robustness and future prospects of the taboo, the types of policies or activities that may support or undermine it, how it might unravel, and what institutional arrangements support or weaken it. I also consider alternative normative routes to non-use, and the relationship between the taboo and changing normative attitudes toward war more generally.

The historical development of the taboo

The development and persistence of the nuclear taboo, given the historical circumstances in which it arose, must be viewed as a significant accomplishment. As Richard Falk has noted, the most relevant and powerful cultural norms of war, which “associate security with military prowess and virtue with victory,” go in the opposite direction.³ Indeed, in 1945 the US use of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was not morally problematic for most US political and military leaders. In the context of the strategic bombing of World War II, it seemed simply an extension of the armory of conventional weapons. Most leaders viewed the atomic bomb as a perfectly legitimate weapon, and the American public was widely supportive of its use to end the war against Japan. In the years immediately after the war, the bomb, while powerful, was not seen as a decisive weapon, and thus no taboo arose immediately.

The taboo began to emerge only gradually. In Chapter 3, I showed its origins in a set of policy precedents established in the immediate postwar period, both domestically in the US and internationally at the United Nations, which marked out nuclear weapons as different

³ Richard Falk, “The Special Challenge of Our Times: Cultural Norms Related to Nuclearism,” in Arthur Westing, ed., *Cultural Norms, War and the Environment*, SIPRI (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 56–57.

from conventional weapons. A key development was the definition by the UN in 1948 of a class of “weapons of mass destruction.” This formally linked nuclear weapons to previously banned chemical and biological weapons, and established a category in which the taboo took root. Soviet propaganda efforts to scare people about US atomic weapons, along with gradually increasing knowledge about the consequences of the Japan bombings, including radiation effects, contributed to a growing public fear of, and revulsion toward, nuclear weapons.

When the Korean War broke out in June 1950, US military planners immediately began to analyze nuclear options. As Chapter 4 showed, US leaders’ perceptions of a tentative nuclear taboo, which they associated with negative public attitudes toward nuclear weapons, played a role in constraining their resort to such weapons during the war. Truman, who had presided over the atomic attacks in 1945, now shied away from use of the bomb as morally repugnant. Although Eisenhower and his top advisors did not share this personal aversion, in contrast, they did perceive an emerging taboo as an unwelcome constraint on their freedom to use nuclear weapons.

The decade following the Korean War was a crucial one for the rise of the taboo. The development of the tremendously powerful H-bomb in the early 1950s was an important turning point. Its overwhelming destructive power left no doubt as to its decisiveness. Chapter 5 showed how, during this period, a global grassroots antinuclear weapons movement arose in response to nuclear testing and played a key role in delegitimizing nuclear weapons as acceptable for use in war. Disarmament diplomacy at the UN and Cold War power politics also contributed to the stigmatization of nuclear weapons. Collectively these efforts furthered the development of a taboo in the face of competing norms of use of tactical nuclear weapons that were being promoted by the Eisenhower administration and institutionalized in the US military. By the beginning of the 1960s, the taboo had prevailed as a *de facto* prohibition on any use of nuclear weapons.

Following the scare of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, a nuclear non-use norm began to become implicitly institutionalized in US–Soviet bilateral and multilateral arms control agreements. This development was driven significantly by the interest of the two superpowers in reducing the danger of nuclear war between them. Nevertheless, international pressure for nuclear restraint pushed the superpowers to be more forthcoming on arms control, leading to the adoption of a

range of bilateral and multilateral arms control agreements that began to restrict, in small incremental ways, the freedom to use nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile, an important test of the taboo came during the Vietnam War. As the evidence presented in Chapter 6 showed, US leaders gave little serious consideration to the use of nuclear weapons in this conflict. Although concerns about escalation and doubts about the military utility of the weapons played a role in encouraging restraint, these were powerfully reinforced by political and normative considerations. The taboo was significantly internalized by top leaders of the Johnson administration and operated more instrumentally for Nixon and Kissinger.

Following the Vietnam War, the notion of “peaceful nuclear explosions” was finally put to rest, and a revived antinuclear movement contributed significantly to the defeat of the neutron bomb in 1978. As Chapter 7 documented, both these developments helped to consolidate and reinforce the taboo. In the early 1980s, a heightening of Cold War tensions and the aggressive nuclear weapons policies of the Reagan administration spurred in the United States and Western Europe the emergence of the largest grassroots antinuclear movement ever, along with the most widespread public debate ever on the morality of nuclear weapons and deterrence.

With the end of the Cold War in 1989, the further development of the taboo took place in the context of North–South politics over how to distribute the burdens of, and responsibilities for, reducing nuclear dangers. When the Gulf War broke out in 1991, even though no danger of nuclear retaliation existed, US leaders gave no serious thought to the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear Iraq. As the evidence in Chapter 8 showed, this war demonstrated how a taboo had become more embedded and internalized, and also further contributed to strengthening it.

Following the war, in the mid-1990s, a renewed movement for abolition of nuclear weapons emerged, largely driven by civil society groups and non-nuclear states. As analyzed in Chapter 9, their successful effort to obtain a World Court opinion on the legality of nuclear weapons use represented a further incremental step in delegitimizing nuclear weapons. This chapter’s analysis of the relationship between the taboo and the nuclear non-proliferation regime shows how the taboo is part of a larger set of antinuclear norms that helps to structure a hierarchy of collective identities among states. This hierarchy is reflected in the asymmetrical application of various

antinuclear norms (including non-use, possession, and acquisition) and the ongoing contestation over who has access to the status of “responsible” nuclear state.

Overall, the analysis in this book shows that the rise and development of a nuclear taboo in world politics and US policy cannot be attributed straightforwardly to superpower self-interest, but instead is the result of a much broader set of factors, including a significant role for non-state actors and antinuclear public opinion. Once a situation of mutual vulnerability to nuclear destruction began to emerge in the late 1950s, a primary factor strengthening the taboo was superpower self-interest. But at critical junctures throughout the past half century, non-nuclear states and a global grassroots antinuclear weapons movement have played a crucial role in castigating nuclear weapons as unacceptable for use by civilized nations. Given that policies of use, not non-use, were formally institutionalized in US military doctrine, the development of the taboo is all the more remarkable.

I have suggested the key role of three groups of factors in the delegitimization of nuclear weapons and the formation of the taboo: a transnational antinuclear weapons movement and non-nuclear states’ strategic pressures and the risk of escalation, and the moral concerns of individual decisionmakers. More conceptually, I identified five mechanisms by which the taboo developed, including societal pressure, normative power politics, the construction of categories, institutionalization, and iterated behavior of non-use over time. The historically contingent nature of its development challenges easy arguments that the taboo is merely a function of the self-interest of the nuclear powers.

Several additional factors, both material and normative, facilitated the rise of the taboo. First, the difficulty of mastering nuclear technology inhibited a quick spread of nuclear weapons to numerous states. The slow pace of proliferation, reinforced much later by export controls, obstructed the widespread assimilation of nuclear weapons into arsenals around the world as “ordinary” weapons. This “bought time” for the taboo and other antinuclear norms – including the non-proliferation norm in the mid-1960s – to develop. Had nuclear weapons spread quickly early on, the development of a taboo against their use would have been much less likely.

A second factor facilitating the rise of the taboo is the general reconstruction of humanitarian norms since 1945. The norm against the strategic bombing of civilians, for example, severely violated in

World War II, has gradually recovered since then, during approximately the same period in which the nuclear taboo developed. As Ward Thomas has shown, in each subsequent war starting from Korea, through Vietnam, to the 1991 Gulf War, US leaders placed increasing emphasis on avoiding civilian casualties in conventional bombing raids.⁴ At the same time, the conclusion of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the 1977 Additional Protocols on humanitarian law contributed to strengthening humanitarian norms. Resting on a similar logic, the nuclear taboo drew strength from this growing intersection between military and humanitarian norms.

Finally, the fact that the United States, rather than the Soviet Union, had the bomb first may have made the taboo more likely. Democracy, in the form of public opinion, accountability, and norms of non-aggression, appears to have exerted an important restraint on US leaders, both during and beyond the period of US nuclear monopoly, thus contributing to the rise of a taboo.⁵ US accountability to the UN during the Korean War, however symbolic, also appears to have exerted a restraining effect on US leaders. As John Lewis Gaddis has noted, brutal leaders such as Stalin or Mao, had they possessed a nuclear monopoly, may have been more likely to brush aside “the competing priorities, the concerns about civil–military relations, the worries about what the allies would say, and – most particularly – the moral qualms that afflicted the Truman administration and, in time, Eisenhower’s as well.”⁶ Lacking public accountability, had Stalin possessed a nuclear monopoly he may have been more willing to use nuclear weapons in the Korean War, for example. In such a case, a taboo might never have emerged.

Alternative explanations

It may be argued that this story of the development of the taboo is largely one of self-interest and prudence. Scott Sagan, offering a realist

⁴ Ward Thomas, *The Ethics of Destruction: Norms and Force in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 150.

⁵ George H. Quester, *Nuclear Monopoly* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), pp. 185–92.

⁶ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 111. The case for democracy should not be overstated, however. It is not inevitably a force for nuclear restraint. As George Perkovich has pointed out, with the exceptions of Argentina and Brazil, “democracy actually correlates well with dogged possession of nuclear weapons,” George Perkovich, “Nuclear Proliferation: Think Again,” *Foreign Policy*, vol. 112 (Fall 1998), p. 18.

interpretation of the taboo, has suggested that the phenomenon of non-use is better understood as a “tradition of non-use” rather than as the expression of a taboo, because it is best explained by concerns about the long-term consequences of setting negative precedents rather than by concerns about normative acceptability.⁷ As discussed in Chapter 1, a taboo can be distinguished from a tradition by the fact that a tradition depends on precedent and reciprocity and is easily disrupted by a violation. In contrast, a taboo is an absolute prohibition that is not necessarily disrupted by a violation, and does not permit reciprocal behavior in response to a violation.

As I noted in Chapter 1, Sagan’s notion of a prudence-based “tradition” is a strong explanation, but it fails to capture the profound moral dimensions of debates over the use of nuclear weapons. The historical record shows that the actors themselves have viewed the non-use norm as more than simply a rule of prudence. They have thought about it and talked about it as a “taboo” with an explicit normative aspect, a sense of obligation, attached to it. Further, national leaders *themselves* perceived they were constrained by a “taboo” and not only by a “tradition.” Of course, the ultimate test of whether it is a taboo or a tradition would depend on a breach, which, fortunately, we have not had.

Some might argue that power politics largely accounts for the rise of the taboo. According to this view, its rise is best explained not as a “claim of the weak against the strong” but rather as a “claim of the strong against the strong.” This view emphasizes the key role of the Soviet Union in denouncing atomic weapons in the 1950s and beyond. These efforts to stigmatize the weapons of the West indeed helped to scare people about nuclear weapons and nuclear war. The United States relied much more heavily on nuclear weapons in its alliance and defense policies than did the Soviet Union, which relied on a larger conventional force. Thus the Soviets had an interest in promoting a norm that was more constraining for the United States than for themselves (the Chinese leadership, too, participated actively in the 1950 Stockholm “ban the bomb” campaign, hoping that this would inhibit American use of nuclear weapons in Korea).⁸

Admittedly, US leaders’ response to Soviet antinuclear propaganda in the 1950s was to redouble their efforts to defend the moral

⁷ Scott Sagan, “Realist Perspectives on Ethical Norms and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” in Sohail H. Hashmi and Steven P. Lee, *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 73–95.

⁸ Alan Whiting, *China Cross the Yalu* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), pp. 68–69.

legitimacy of nuclear weapons, not to support a taboo on their use. However, Soviet efforts were effective in large part because they coincided with the views of Western antinuclear weapons activists and also of developing countries, as well as with efforts in the UN to control such weapons. Without this larger context, US leaders' efforts to dismiss Soviet views as merely more Communist propaganda would likely have been more successful. It was the conjunction of factors – Soviet propaganda, policy efforts at the UN, the antinuclear weapons movement – that was important.

In a third line of critique, some might argue that we lack true “hard tests” for the salience of the taboo because no case has arisen since 1945 where the situation was dire enough that the United States really needed to use nuclear weapons. This is partly true. The US homeland has never been directly attacked. But we do have some revealing tests: in both Afghanistan and Vietnam, nuclear superpowers chose to lose a war rather than “win” it with nuclear weapons. The hardest test is probably the case of Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Avner Cohen, the pathbreaking historian of the Israeli nuclear program, has argued that despite the surprise Arab attack that plausibly threatened Israel's survival, Israeli leaders exercised restraint with regard to their nuclear arsenal for both realist and taboo reasons, long enough for the Israeli military to respond successfully and for the initial threat to the nation's survival to pass.⁹

Moreover, judging the salience of the taboo mainly in terms of “extreme tests” largely misses the point. Extreme tests are relatively rare in international affairs, in part because states are purposive actors who take steps to avoid them. Additionally, a focus on extreme tests assumes in advance that nuclear weapons are extreme weapons that could only be used in the direst circumstances. Instead, the interesting question is the prior one of how and why this came to be. What is striking from today's perspective is the number of occasions historically when US officials contemplated the use of nuclear weapons in cases of less than vital national interest.¹⁰ The fact that nuclear weapons have come to be ruled out for such “ordinary” contingencies is at least as significant as the extreme test. While extreme tests are important, they do not help to assess the changing legitimacy of use

⁹ Avner Cohen, “Israel and the Nuclear Taboo,” unpublished paper, University of Maryland, 1999.

¹⁰ See Richard Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1987).

of nuclear weapons in less extreme, but more likely, contingencies. This latter development reflects the real contribution of the taboo.

Finally, in the most skeptical view, some might ask: how can there be a nuclear taboo when nations are actively preparing to violate it? Philosopher Steven P. Lee, who has developed this critique most systematically, argues that it is impossible to speak of a taboo or the delegitimization of nuclear weapons as long as nations continue to rely on such weapons and to prepare for their use.¹¹ It is true that if nuclear weapons were fully delegitimized and their use unthinkable in absolutely all circumstances, we would expect nations to cease preparing for nuclear war and to get rid of their nuclear arsenals. That would suggest a fully robust taboo. The fact that we have not yet reached this final destination, however, should not prevent us from noticing that we have made it part way down the path.

Lee writes that nuclear weapons will be delegitimized when their use is “unthinkable,” that is, “when there is an objective basis in shared habits of mind for the mutual expectation that nuclear weapons would not be used by one’s opponent, even in a situation where their use might seem prudentially appropriate” and when their use “would not be regarded as a real alternative.”¹² I have shown in this book that the use of nuclear weapons *has* become unthinkable for many circumstances in which such use was once contemplated or regarded as a legitimate alternative – for almost every purpose except “last resort,” a term whose meaning itself has shifted over time. The fact that nations continue to maintain nuclear arsenals – though, notably, in smaller numbers than during the Cold War – shows that the taboo is not fully robust, but it also reveals the continuing belief in deterrence: that nuclear weapons prevent war even when they cannot be used. This is how prohibitory norms take hold in social life – not through immediately imposing absolute prohibitions, but by gradually raising the threshold for what constitutes acceptable behavior.¹³ Lee’s pessimistic conclusion that no nuclear taboo exists is thus overstated. It insufficiently appreciates how the threshold for the “legitimate” use of nuclear weapons has risen significantly

¹¹ Steven P. Lee in *Morality, Prudence, and Nuclear Weapons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 319–20, 407, fn. 42.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 319, 320.

¹³ Richard Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

for more than sixty years, to the point where it is demandingly or prohibitively high.

Still, how do we account for the apparent incongruity between the development of the taboo and the steady US nuclear arms build-up throughout the Cold War, including elaborate strategies and even “warfighting” doctrines designed to ensure that nuclear weapons would be used? Normative development tends to proceed neither linearly nor necessarily coherently: norms can (and often do) develop in the face of seemingly contradictory behavior.¹⁴ Even though US leaders came to believe that nuclear weapons should not really be used, they were not willing to give up nuclear *deterrence*. But they were caught in the paradox recognized early on by nuclear strategists: making deterrence credible (especially in the face of the threat of mutual assured destruction) required convincing the adversary that the United States would actually use such weapons. As such threats became less credible over time for both deterrence and normative reasons, more numerous and more elaborate weapons and strategies were sought in an attempt to bolster credibility.

Implications for theory

The role of norms: the effects of the taboo

The analysis here joins a growing body of literature on prohibitory norms in international relations that seriously challenges realist arguments that norms are merely epiphenomenal.¹⁵ The evidence presented in this book shows that the decisionmaking process with regard to the use of nuclear weapons was never purely about military utility but was always about political and normative considerations as well. Both those who found the taboo desirable or “right,” and those who found it inconvenient and sought to do away with it thought it constrained behavior – often their own – providing powerful evidence against skeptical arguments that “taboo talk” is simply “cheap

¹⁴ Thomas M. Franck, *The Power of Legitimacy Among Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 153–74.

¹⁵ Jeffrey W. Legro, *Cooperation Under Fire: Anglo-German Restraint During World War II* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Ethan Nadelmann, “Global Prohibition Regimes: The Evolution of Norms in International Society,” *International Organization*, vol. 44, no. 4 (Autumn 1990), pp. 479–526; Richard Price, “Reversing the Gun Sights: Transnational Civil Society Targets Landmines,” *International Organization*, vol. 52, no. 3 (Summer 1998), pp. 613–44; Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*; Thomas, *The Ethics of Destruction*.

talk." Deeper constitutive effects, such as the changing perception of "suitable targets," the understanding of military utility, the practice of stable deterrence, the category of weapons of mass destruction, and the identity of "civilized" state, provide further evidence.

The core analytical distinction of this book is between how norms constrain and how they constitute. While rationalist accounts of the constraining effects of norms are a good starting point, constructivist accounts point the way toward deeper constitutive and permissive effects. Conceptually, the analysis highlights the mutual shaping of norms, interests, and identities. Norms enter into, and change, the cost-benefit calculations of interests (constraining) but they also help to constitute those interests, as well as identities and practices, in the first place. Interests and norms may sometimes coincide but this does not itself render norms superfluous. The multiple ways that norms exert effects makes this clear, as in the legitimizing effect of the nuclear taboo on non-nuclear weapons, an unintended consequence of a categorization process. The unanticipated repercussions point to the thoroughly normative nature of social action. Norms do not work simply as triggers for a single kind of behavior but rather are part of complex sets of meanings, including permissions and prohibitions, through which people understand, and act in, the world. Contrary to neorealist assertions, "society," not anarchy, is the source of constraining and permissive effects.¹⁶

Recognizing the constraining and constitutive effects of norms helps to clarify the relation between the taboo and deterrence. This book has sought to bring together the analysis of norms with the analysis of deterrence. It must be underscored how marginal norms are in the traditional deterrence literature, which has emphasized the rationalist-based "requirements of deterrence" and the technical bases of stable nuclear deterrence.¹⁷ In contrast, I have suggested that norms play a crucial role in the success of deterrence. Specifically, the emergence of a nuclear taboo in world politics has produced two effects: first, by legitimizing deterrence rather than use as the appropriate role for nuclear weapons, the taboo has helped to stabilize mutual deterrence

¹⁶ The neorealist perspective in international relations sees the anarchical structure of the international system, understood in terms of the distribution of material power, as the source of constraining and permissive effects. The classic statement is Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

¹⁷ An important recent exception is Lawrence Fredman, *Deterrence* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).

between the nuclear superpowers. Second, at the same time, this normative development has undermined nuclear deterrence between nuclear and non-nuclear states. Because of the taboo, a nuclear threat against a non-nuclear state is no longer credible. The taboo also helps to explain additional puzzles for which conventional explanations cannot account – such as why the legitimacy of nuclear threats has declined, why even tactical nuclear weapons are regarded as immoral, and why there has been less nuclear proliferation than expected (a taboo reduces the value of nuclear warheads).

This story of the taboo also reminds us that even a hard-nosed topic such as deterrence has been permeated by moral concerns. Moral debate about nuclear weapons has ebbed and flowed during the nuclear era. In the immediate post-World War II period, leaders and segments of the public debated the need for international control of nuclear weapons. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, when the superpowers had become mutually vulnerable to a devastating nuclear attack, superpower self-interest provided the major impetus for the strengthening of a non-use regime. Moral discourse about nuclear weapons took second place to technical analyses of how to create stable nuclear deterrence in an era of mutual assured destruction.

In the late 1970s, however, moral debate over nuclear weapons returned, as prominent figures and large segments of the public began to question the morality of nuclear deterrence itself. Critics of US nuclear policy emphasized the immorality of relying on nuclear policies that seemed both irrational and contrary to US interests, values, and identity. Later, after the end of the Cold War, US leaders' reasoning for not using nuclear weapons in the 1991 Gulf War invoked both interests and morality. Officials and analysts argued both that it would not be in the US interest to violate the nuclear taboo and that it would simply be wrong to use a weapon that, in the 1990s, only the "uncivilized" would use.

These patterns suggest that rationality and morality with respect to nuclear weapons are often intertwined in ways that may be difficult to disentangle. Morality shapes conceptions of interest, and thus morality and interests are not entirely independent of each other.¹⁸ Further, rationality, like "interests," is sufficiently flexible that it can be stretched to include almost anything; the question is what gets to count as rational and why. The story told here concerns the

¹⁸ Lee, *Morality, Prudence and Nuclear Weapons*.

construction of both morality and rationality with respect to nuclear weapons.

Beyond rationalism

The analysis here draws on rationalist arguments about norms but also challenges them in several ways. Rationalists would argue that today the taboo is largely self-enforcing: it is maintained or enforced through mutual deterrence and the uncertain long-term consequences of any use of nuclear weapons. Norms are said to be easier to monitor and enforce among small groups than among large ones. With only eight (or possibly nine) nuclear powers, the enforcement of the norm is thus not too difficult.¹⁹ Additionally, the behavioral injunction of the non-use norm – no use of nuclear weapons – is very clear and thus, rationalists would argue, the norm does not necessarily need to be written into treaties.

There is some truth in this. As I noted earlier, however, the actors themselves have viewed the norm as more than simply a rule of prudence. They have thought about it and talked about it as a “taboo” with an explicit normative aspect, a sense of obligation, attached to it. Further, despite rationalist arguments that the norm is self-enforcing, few policymakers have thought that way. By the 1960s, the superpowers did not feel comfortable relying simply on the operation of mutual deterrence to guarantee non-use but instead sought to codify and institutionalize shared understandings of non-use in order to stabilize deterrence, even as US leaders resisted a formal prohibition. The antinuclear weapons coalition has certainly not viewed deterrence as sufficient guarantee of the taboo but has pursued a codified, formal prohibition and the stigmatization of nuclear weapons. The international community has also promoted a non-proliferation norm as a route to non-use. Thus, in addition to deterrence, other factors including law, internalization, and reputation help to support the taboo.

Further, the process of norm creation does not simply change behavior, it transforms the character of the actors themselves. That is, the taboo operates not simply by changing the incentives for behavior but by helping to redefine the identities of “civilized” states as those

¹⁹ Enforcement can also be carried out through sanctions, diplomacy, monitoring or other mechanisms, not just deterrence. This might be the response to a use of nuclear weapons by a third party state against a non-nuclear developing state.

who do not use nuclear weapons. To the extent that the taboo becomes internalized, its symbolic value becomes important and the original mechanisms behind its creation may recede into the background.

Game theorists hold that norms can serve as focal points, thus contributing to stable outcomes in the absence of a unique equilibrium. The analysis here helps to explain why one equilibrium got chosen over another. The taboo – as a total prohibition on use of nuclear weapons rather than one defined in terms of just war criteria – is the result of a conjuncture of self-conscious creation, intended and unintended patterns of practice, and contingent circumstances. The history of the taboo is the story of an intensive effort by several groups of actors to create a norm, and of an equally intensive effort by another group to resist it. The development of the taboo has depended importantly on discursive strategies – how nuclear weapons became categorized, interpreted, and politicized. As the taboo evolved, it provided agents and states with new understandings of – that is “constituted” – interests and identities. For example, the public’s changing interpretation of the correctness of Hiroshima and Nagasaki over the years is perhaps explicable in the terms of a general delegitimation of nuclear weapons. The number of those in the United States approving of the bombing diminished from a high of 86 percent in 1945 to a little over 50 percent in 1994. At the same time, critics of Truman’s decision to use the bomb in 1945 increased from about 19 percent in October 1945 to about 40 percent in 1994.²⁰

Finally, the case suggests that norms do not need to be formalized to have an effect, and that even a *de facto* norm may have some virtues. Here, the taboo runs up against realism. There is no legal prohibition on nuclear weapons because the great powers do not want it. As I argued in Chapter 7, however, having a *de facto* norm has helped to stabilize and legitimize deterrence.

How generalizable?

To other weapons

It might be argued that the case of the nuclear taboo is idiosyncratic, rather than typical. Because nuclear weapons represent a very special

²⁰ Beatrice Heuser, *The Bomb: Nuclear Weapons in their Historic, Strategic and Ethical Context* (London: Longmans, 2000), p. 183. It may also be partly explained by reduced racism toward the Japanese.

technology, one might claim that the political dynamics analyzed in this book have little relevance beyond this case. As a prohibitory norm, however, the nuclear taboo is hardly unique. Numerous prohibitory norms exist in international relations, and there are ongoing efforts to create more. The apparently obvious line of generalization would be to other weapons of mass destruction – chemical and biological weapons – for which we appear to reserve a similar opprobrium. There are some differences here with regard to historical development. The taboos against chemical and biological weapons date back much further than the nuclear taboo and also developed quite differently, through a much more “top-down,” legalistic process. By 1914 the norm against the use of poisoned weapons had been established by customary law, reinforced by the writings of international jurists. It was codified in the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 on the laws of war, and strengthened by the 1925 Geneva Protocol. The 1972 Biological Weapons Convention goes beyond banning use to also prohibiting the production and stockpiling of germ weapons, while the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention does the same for chemical weapons, with the addition of an enforcement and monitoring capability.²¹ Thus in contrast to the “bottom-up” development of the nuclear taboo, the modern chemical and biological weapons taboos were created through a series of multilateral negotiations and formalized early on at the international level – even before the invention of modern chemical and biological weapons – and then diffused into national practice.²²

Conceptually, however, important similarities exist among the chemical, biological, and nuclear taboos. They are all cases in which a significant moral opprobrium has attached to a particular weapon, and this factor appears necessary to explain the pattern of use and non-use. In each case, opprobrium cannot be explained simply as a function of the weapon’s “lack of military utility.” As with nuclear weapons, both biological and chemical weapons clearly have military utility in certain scenarios (indeed, arguments about lack of military utility appear to *follow* the formation of normative prohibitions

²¹ By May 2006 155 nations had joined the BWC (with 16 signatories yet to ratify). The treaty lacks enforcement mechanisms, however, and to date efforts to strengthen it have been unsuccessful. Biological weapons are biological infectious agents or toxins or microorganisms which cause illness or death in humans, animals, or plants. As of April 2006, 178 countries had ratified the CWC (with 8 signatories yet to ratify).

²² Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*.

as much as precede them).²³ Additionally, as with nuclear weapons, the intrinsic characteristics of chemical and biological weapons cannot fully explain their stigmatization.²⁴ Comprehensive explanations require taking into account social, political, and cultural factors. Finally, the mechanisms by which these taboos influence decisionmaking – through public opinion, reputation, and personal moral convictions – appear to be quite similar.

A less obvious generalization is to other types of weapons. The campaigns to ban land-mines and to control the spread of small arms and light weapons – also prohibitory efforts – exhibit important similarities to the nuclear case. In each case, transnational actors mobilized public support, disseminated information, and engaged in moral persuasion to pressure governments to change their policies.²⁵ The nuclear case thus adds to a growing body of research that finds that transnational citizens' movements and less powerful states have played an important role in global norm creation, often facilitated by the platform – or bullhorn – provided by international organizations.²⁶

To other nations

How well do the findings from the United States generalize to other nations? The fact that the taboo matters in the United States does not necessarily mean that it matters elsewhere. Because the United States is an open democracy, permeated by domestic opinion and ideas, and with a tradition of humanitarian rights and values, it may be an “easier” case for demonstrating the role of norms. Still, judging by opinion polls and government policies, most Western democracies,

²³ They would certainly have utility as instruments of mass terror and thus are especially suitable for terrorists and “dissatisfied” states. For the attractions and liabilities of biological weapons, and scenarios for their use, see Gregory Koblentz, “Pathogens as Weapons: The International Security Implications of Biological Warfare,” *International Security*, vol. 28, no. 3 (Winter 2003–04), pp. 84–122, and Susan B. Martin, “The Role of Biological Weapons in International Politics: The Real Military Revolution,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1 (March 2002), pp. 63–98. On chemical weapons, see *The Problem of Chemical and Biological Warfare*, vol. 1, SIPRI (New York: Humanities Press, 1971).

²⁴ Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*.

²⁵ Price, “Reversing the Gun Sights”; Keith Krause, “Multilateral Diplomacy, Norm Building and UN Conferences: The Case of Small Arms and Light Weapons,” *Global Governance*, vol. 8 (2002), pp. 247–63. See also Nadelmann, “Global Prohibition Regimes.”

²⁶ See, for example, Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Across Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); and Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

with the possible exception of France, have been even more antinuclear than the United States. This suggests that if the taboo operates in the United States, it probably operates in states that have historically been less reliant on, and less committed to, nuclear weapons, as well. Indeed, the vast majority of the countries around the world have forsworn nuclear weapons.²⁷ Thus although the taboo is probably not universal, it is certainly widespread, as demonstrated both through domestic policies and widespread diplomatic support.

Admittedly, although the nuclear taboo is a systemic phenomenon, this does not mean that it holds for all countries for similar reasons. As a collective attribute of the international community, it may be internalized by some states and held only instrumentally by others. Thus, although the taboo is almost certainly an internalized normative commitment in Japan, for example, it may function more instrumentally in India or Pakistan – i.e., they may take care not to flaunt their views as a concession to others who hold the taboo more substantively. Ideally, a full demonstration of the systemic and constitutive nature of the taboo would require investigating its impact and meaning in other countries beyond the present US case.

A particularly critical question is whether the taboo holds for non-democratic states, which are not accountable to public opinion, and whose internal decisionmaking we may know little about. The Soviet case may provide suggestive, if mixed, evidence. Although it is hard to be certain about the nature of Soviet beliefs about the taboo, during the Soviet Union's protracted war in Afghanistan, Soviet leaders acted as though nuclear weapons did not exist.²⁸ We know that they advocated a taboo for prudential reasons at least. They undertook a major conventional arms build-up in the late 1960s specifically to avoid having to initiate tactical nuclear strikes in a war with NATO, in order to avoid escalation and nuclear devastation of the Soviet Union. In the second half of the 1970s, Soviet leaders launched a

²⁷ The Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty is the mostly widely adhered to arms control treaty.

²⁸ The use or even the threat of use would hardly have been consistent with the Soviet public campaign, starting about 1977, for a joint pledge of no first use. Honore M. Catudal, *Soviet Strategy from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1989), pp. 112–18. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev came to the view that nuclear war was unacceptable sometime in the mid to late 1950s, but may have never quite abandoned the idea that nuclear weapons were usable. Vladislav M. Zubok and Hope M. Harrison, "The Nuclear Education of Nikita Khrushchev," in Gaddis, *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb*, pp. 141–68.

policy of trying to persuade NATO to declare a no-first-use policy.²⁹ At the same time, however, Soviet military plans envisioned a nuclear first strike to preempt a nuclear attack by the West, with the aim to fight and win such a conflict.³⁰

In 1993, Russia formally abandoned the Soviet no-first-use policy, first declared in 1982. This move likely reflected the weakened conventional strength of Russia following the end of the Cold War. It was unclear whether the policy change had any real effect on operational planning and it may have been mostly a political message to the West.³¹ It did not add new missions for nuclear weapons, nor did Russia's nuclear posture change. Instead, Russia continued to reduce its nuclear weapons arsenal at a pace faster than that dictated by the 1991 START treaty.³² However, the NATO enlargement process starting in the mid-1990s and later the 1999 NATO war in Kosovo increased Russian leaders' sense of threat and boosted the Russian military's interest in relying on nuclear weapons.³³ In January 2000, the Russian government released a new nuclear policy statement, which indicated a heightened sense of conflict with NATO and the United States on nuclear issues, and an increased reliance on the use of nuclear weapons, not only in response to a nuclear attack but also to a conventional attack.³⁴ Russia retained its non-use assurances to non-nuclear parties to the NPT, however, and some evidence suggests that Russian leaders may see reliance on nuclear weapons as a temporary "fix" to provide security while conventional forces are modernized and strengthened.³⁵ In any case, it is worth noting that even

²⁹ Michael McGwire, *Military Objectives in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1987), pp. 52–55, 338.

³⁰ For newly available Warsaw Pact documents, see National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book, No. 154 (May 2005), at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB154/index.htm

³¹ Alexei Arbatov, "Russian Military Doctrine and Nuclear Forces to the Year 2000 and Beyond," paper presented at the Conference on Russian Defense Policy Towards the Year 2000, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, March 26–27, 1997.

³² Nikolai Sokov, "Why Do States Rely on Nuclear Weapons? The Case of Russia and Beyond," *Non-proliferation Review*, vol. 9, no. 2 (Summer 2002), p. 103.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

³⁴ National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, January 10, 2000, excerpts at www.armscontrol.org/act/2000_01-02/docjf00.asp. For analysis, see Nikolai Sokov, "Russia's New National Security Concept: The Nuclear Angle" (January 2000, revised July 2004), at www.nti.org/db/nisprofs/over/concept.htm.

³⁵ Yuri Fedorov, "No First Use of Nuclear Weapons: Russia's Doctrine on Use of Nuclear Weapons," Pugwash Conference, London, November 2002, at www.pugwash.org/reports/nw/fedorov.htm; Nikolai Sokov, "Russia's Nuclear Doctrine," Research Report, Center for Non-proliferation Studies, August 2004, at www.nti.org/e_research/e3_55a.

Russia's current policy is not more pro-nuclear than US policy has been during the earlier course of the taboo's emergence.

Another critical cross-national generalization would be to the "new nuclear states." As noted earlier, the taboo apparently holds in Israel, despite an acute security situation where Israel's survival has often been perceived to be at stake. According to Avner Cohen, Israeli leaders were reluctant to consider use of nuclear weapons in wars against Arab states in 1967 and 1973, not only for prudential and organizational reasons but also because of normative factors. They viewed nuclear weapons as usable only in the last resort. Their reluctance was partly grounded in what Cohen calls a "double sense of prohibition": the evolving global normative prohibition against the use of nuclear weapons, and Israel's own moral code and culture of nuclear opacity.³⁶

As for India, after shocking the world with its nuclear weapons tests in May 1998, it announced in August 1999 that it was adopting a no-first-use policy and it pledged it would never use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states. In justifying India's possession of nuclear weapons after Indian leaders spent years castigating them as immoral, the Indian doctrine statement criticized the major nuclear powers' insistence on retaining first-use doctrines even against non-nuclear states, accusing them of legitimizing first use.³⁷ Despite criticisms that India's plan to build a nuclear triad along the model of the declared nuclear states was inconsistent with its stated aims of seeking only a "minimum but credible deterrent," Indian commentators emphasized that Indian nuclear doctrine sought to "chart a new path." Unlike most other nuclear states, India's nuclear weapons "are *not* meant to deter the use and threat of conventional weapons, chemical weapons, biological weapons or a generalized formulation of protecting national interests any time anywhere."³⁸ In 2003, however, India modified its doctrine to allow the use of nuclear weapons in

[html](#); Gunnar Arbman and Charles Thornton, "Russia's Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Part I, Background and Policy Issues," Swedish Defense Research Agency, FOI-R-1057-SE (November 2003), at www.cissm.umd.edu/documents/thorntonrussia.pdf.

³⁶ Cohen, "Israel and the Nuclear Taboo." For a history of the Israeli nuclear arsenal, see Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

³⁷ "National Security Advisory Board: Indian Nuclear Doctrine," August 18, 1999, at www.indianembassy.org/policy/CTBT/nuclear_doctrine_aug_17_1999.html. Howard Diamond, "India Releases Nuclear Doctrine, Looks to Emulate P-5 Arsenal," *Arms Control Today*, vol. 29, no. 5 (July/August 1999), p. 23.

³⁸ Jasjit Singh, "Indian Draft Nuclear Doctrine: Some Reflections," September 1999, at www.pugwash.org/reports/nw/nw7.htm (emphasis in original). Singh is a member of India's National Security Advisory Board.

response to attacks with chemical and biological weapons, thus emulating a policy adopted by the United States.³⁹

Not surprisingly, Pakistan, much weaker than India in conventional forces, rejected India's proposal to sign a bilateral no-first-use agreement after conducting its own nuclear tests. It instead offered talks on a comprehensive non-aggression pact. In 2003, Pakistani leaders said that they would dismantle Pakistan's nuclear arsenal if India were prepared to follow suit.⁴⁰ However, the repeated use of nuclear threats by both sides during crises since 1998, an apparently fearless attitude toward nuclear war on the part of some policymakers and segments of the public, and an emerging arms race are all worrisome. A critical factor appears to be "the absence of an informed and organized public opinion able to keep political and military leaders in check and restrain them from brandishing nuclear weapons."⁴¹

Finally, China has maintained a no-first-use policy since it exploded its first nuclear bomb in 1964, and has stated that it would not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states or in nuclear-weapons-free zones.⁴² Chinese policy documents and statements have emphasized the defensive nature of the small Chinese nuclear arsenal.⁴³ There is evidence, however, that as China slowly carries out its plans to modernize its aging nuclear arsenal, Chinese doctrine will include a greater role for nuclear weapons – perhaps in part a response to the perceived threat to the Chinese nuclear deterrent posed by US plans for a national missile defense.⁴⁴

³⁹ Harsh V. Pant, "India's Nuclear Doctrine and Command Structure: Implications for India and the World," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 2004.

⁴⁰ Farah Zhara, "Pakistan's Road to a Minimum Nuclear Deterrent," *Arms Control Today*, vol. 29, no. 5 (July/August 1999), pp. 9–13; "Pakistan States Nuclear Position," BBC News, May 5, 2003.

⁴¹ Pervez Hoodbhoy and Zia Mian, "The India-Pakistan conflict – Towards the Failure of Nuclear Deterrence," Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad and Princeton University, September 2002, www.gakushuin.ac.jp/~881791/hoodbhoy/Deterrence.html, p. 7.

⁴² White Paper on "China's National Defense," Information Office of the State Council, People's Republic of China, July 27, 1998, at www.nti.org/db/china/engdocs/wpnat.def.htm. The Nuclear Threat Initiative maintains an excellent website on China's nuclear policy, www.nti.org/db/china/index.html.

⁴³ White Paper on "China's National Defense in 2002," Information Office of the State Council, People's Republic of China, at www.nti.org/db/china/engdocs/wpan_def_2002.htm.

⁴⁴ Jing-Dong Yuan, "Chinese Responses to US Missile Defenses: Implications for Arms Control and Regional Security," *Non-proliferation Review*, vol. 10 (Spring 2003), pp. 75–96. Phillip Saunders and Jing-Dong Yuan, "China's Strategic Force Modernization: Issues and Implications for the United States," Center for Non-proliferation Studies, Monterey

This brief survey of selected nuclear countries raises the question of what explains the variation in the taboo globally. This important topic is beyond the scope of the present work and warrants more extended study. But it should be noted that, as an empirical matter, the variation is not great: the vast majority of states (nuclear and non-nuclear alike) share the taboo.

To non-state actors

The one group for whom the taboo may hold little meaning is terrorists. Indeed, terrorists derive their political impact precisely through flouting accepted norms and defying the authority of states to control violence. Traditionally, analysts of terrorism have argued that even terrorists are likely to be influenced, at least somewhat, by prevailing norms, since ultimately the terrorists' goal has been to rally public support for their cause, not alienate it, as killing mass numbers of people would do.⁴⁵ The pattern of terrorist attacks prior to the 1990s generally bore out this view.

However, the attack by the fundamentalist Islamic group Al Qaeda on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, following a series of large-scale attacks on US targets in the 1990s, substantially changed this view. The scale of the September 11 attacks, in which nearly 3,000 people were killed, along with Al Qaeda's declared hostility and intent to wage large-scale terrorist violence against US targets, suggests the group might have little hesitation in using weapons of mass destruction. Evidence gathered in Afghanistan in the wake of the 2001 attack suggested that Al Qaeda, and perhaps groups linked to it, actively sought weapons of mass destruction, including chemical weapons and radiological weapons (the so-called "dirty bomb").⁴⁶ In December 1998 interviews, Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden stated that it was a "religious duty" for

Institute of International Studies, 2000, at cns.miis.edu/cns/projects/eanp/conf/op4_sjd.pdf.

⁴⁵ Bruce Hoffmann, "Terrorists and WMD: Some Preliminary Hypotheses," *Non-proliferation Review*, vol. 4, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 1997), pp. 45–53; Jessica Stern, "Terrorist Motivations and Unconventional Weapons," in Peter R. Lavoy, Scott D. Sagan, and James J. Wirtz, *Planning the Unthinkable: How New Nuclear Powers Will Use Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Weapons* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 202–29; Lynn Snowden, "How Likely Are Terrorists to Use a Nuclear Strategy?" *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 46, no. 6 (February 2003), pp. 699–713.

⁴⁶ Graham Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: Times Books, 2004), pp. 25–26.

Muslims to acquire weapons of mass destruction including nuclear weapons. "How we use them is up to us," he added.⁴⁷ Nine months after 9/11, bin Laden's press spokesman announced on an Islamic web site, "We have the right to kill 4 million Americans" in response to alleged injuries to Muslims by American "imperialism."⁴⁸

There is thus little reason to assume that such terrorists would be restrained by a nuclear taboo. Indeed, they might relish violating it. Experts on terrorism suggest that religious extremists, "who tend to regard their own actions as being divinely sanctioned, are more likely to violate long-standing moral taboos against WMD use."⁴⁹ It is with respect to terrorists that the taboo may have a downside. It is precisely the possibility of transgressing a taboo for dramatic political effect that would make the use of radiological weapons, for example, attractive to terrorists. Radiological weapons are not necessarily more destructive than conventional weapons and are not useful for killing large numbers of people.⁵⁰ The transgressive nature of their use, however, would have a much more dramatic psychological and political effect than if terrorists simply set off a large conventional explosion. The public impact of the attack would be based largely on the fact that it occurred at all.

A terrorist use of nuclear weapons would certainly violate the taboo, but, as I discussed in Chapter 1, how states responded (e.g., whether with nuclear or conventional means) would determine whether the taboo was fatally disrupted. Given that the taboo may have little meaning for terrorists, preventing terrorist use of nuclear weapons requires robust controls on fissile material and weapons – or even elimination of the weapons themselves – to minimize the

⁴⁷ Interviews with Osama bin Laden, *Time Magazine*, December 23, 1998, and ABC News, December 24, 1998, at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/who/edicts.html.

⁴⁸ Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism*, p. 12.

⁴⁹ Gary Ackerman and Jeffery M. Bale, "Al Qa'ida and Weapons of Mass Destruction," at cns.miis.edu/pubs/other/alqwmtd.htm. For a valuable breakdown of the types of terrorist groups who might pursue nuclear terrorism, see Charles D. Ferguson and William C. Potter, *The Four Faces of Nuclear Terrorism* (Monterey Institute, Center for Non-proliferation Studies, 2004), pp. 18–23.

⁵⁰ Radiological weapons disperse radioactive material through conventional explosives, fire, or dilution. They are "generally felt to be suitable largely for terror, political, and area denial purposes, rather than for mass killings." Anthony H. Cordesman, "Radiological Weapons as a Means of Attack," November 30, 2001, at www.csis.org/burke/hd/reports/radiological.pdf.

chances that existing weapons and materials might fall into the wrong hands.⁵¹

The future of the nuclear taboo

What are the prospects for the nuclear taboo? How might it unravel? The taboo could unravel in several ways. It could weaken if the nuclear non-proliferation treaty were to come under serious challenge by the spread of weapons to additional states, if the military doctrines of nuclear states continue to emphasize nuclear weapons as an important instrument of national security and even develop new roles for them, and if the nuclear states rely on nuclear threats and deployments as instruments of policy. An especially damaging development would be the creation of new generations of “mini-nukes” that blur the line between conventional and nuclear weapons, potentially lowering the threshold for nuclear use. Even if the United States ultimately decided not to develop or test new types of small nuclear weapons, loose talk about the potential utility of nuclear weapons could weaken the nuclear taboo. Perhaps most obviously, the taboo would certainly be severely damaged (even if not necessarily totally eliminated) by any actual use of nuclear weapons.

More generally, two broader dynamics could put pressure on the taboo in the coming decades: changes in the nature of warfare and growing US hegemony. First, the changing nature of warfare may create new pressures for the consideration of nuclear options. The dominant threats to security today are posed by non-state actors (including terrorists) and so-called rogue states seeking access to weapons of mass destruction. Terrorists do not fight conventional wars and are also difficult to deter. Such unconventional threats may place pressure on military and political leaders to consider new roles for nuclear weapons in preempting use of other weapons of mass destruction. If US planners saw nuclear weapons as the only effective means to prevent a threatened devastating rogue actor attack with biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons, political leaders might come under great pressure to consider their use.

The US-led intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 reinforced interest among some US military planners in the idea of “bunker buster”

⁵¹ Nina Tannenwald, “Keeping Weapons from Terrorists: The Urgent Need for Arms Control,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 2 (Winter 2001), pp. 27–36.

nuclear warheads that could penetrate deep into the earth to destroy heavily reinforced underground facilities, such as those used in the production of chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons.⁵² The changing threat environment has also boosted interest in some quarters in building a new generation of small nuclear warheads. Advocates argue that smaller, more accurate, more “usable” nuclear weapons could reduce collateral damage and therefore would make deterrence with respect to rogue states more credible.⁵³ Critics have challenged these views, arguing that the goal of reducing collateral damage by nuclear weapons is not technically feasible.⁵⁴ Further, such weapons, by appearing more usable, would lower the threshold for nuclear war and would accelerate the proliferation of nuclear weapons generally.⁵⁵ Should production of new US warheads go forward, it would certainly represent a step backward in terms of the taboo. Although in many respects this policy would be no different from past US policies to build more usable warheads (for example, in the 1970s), it would be worse for the taboo today because it would reverse expectations established by the US decision in 1993 not to build new nuclear warheads.⁵⁶

⁵² Walter Pincus, “US Explores Developing Low-Yield Nuclear Weapons,” *Washington Post*, February 20, 2003. Paul Robinson, president and director, Sandia National Laboratories, “Pursuing a New Nuclear Weapons Policy for the 21st Century,” March 22, 2001, at www.sandia.gov/media/whitepaper/2001-04-Robinson.htm.

⁵³ Bryan L. Fearey, Paul C. White, John St. Ledger, and John D. Immele, “An Analysis of Reduced Collateral Damage Nuclear Weapons,” *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 22, no. 4 (October/November 2003), pp. 304–24. The authors are scientists at Los Alamos National Laboratory. As Ambassador Linton F. Brooks, administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration, stated, “I have a bias in favor of things that might be usable. I think that’s just an inherent part of deterrence” (Senate Armed Services Strategic Subcommittee hearing, April 8, 2003), at www.fcnl.org/issues/item.Php-item_id=451&issue_id=48.

⁵⁴ Critics argue that so-called earth penetrating nuclear weapons could not penetrate the earth deeply enough to avoid creating a huge crater above the target and spreading harmful radiation for miles. See Michael Levi, “Nuclear Bunker Buster Bombs,” *Scientific American*, vol. 291, no. 2 (August 2004), pp. 66–74; Robert W. Nelson, “Nuclear ‘Bunker Busters’ Would More Likely Disperse than Destroy Buried Stockpiles of Biological and Chemical Agents,” *Science and Global Security*, vol. 12, nos. 1–2 (January/August 2004), pp. 69–89. He writes, “The goal of a benign earth-penetrating nuclear weapon is physically impossible.”

⁵⁵ Sidney Drell, James Goodby, Raymond Jeanloz, and Robert Peurifoy, “A Strategic Choice: New Bunker Busters Versus Non-proliferation,” *Arms Control Today*, vol. 33, no. 2 (March 2003), p. 8; Bruce G. Blair, “We Keep Building Nukes for All the Wrong Reasons,” *The Washington Post*, May 25, 2003, p. B01.

⁵⁶ In 1993 Congress banned the development of low-yield nuclear warheads in what came to be known as the Spratt–Furse law. David Wright, “The Spratt–Furse Law on Mini-Nuke Development,” Backgrounder, Union of Concerned Scientists, May 11, 2003.

A second development that could put pressure on the taboo would be a new interpretation of US hegemony by US leaders, in which the unrivaled power position of the United States after the end of the Cold War is coupled with a new Hobbesian ideology in which the most powerful state or Leviathan rightfully controls the world order. This new understanding of hegemony could give rise to a discourse that seeks to legitimize use of nuclear weapons by the United States to enforce norms against “barbarians.” In recent years, US military planners have appeared to pursue new roles for nuclear weapons in counterproliferation strategies and in the fight against terrorism. US leaders have also expressed an active disdain for the UN and international treaties, and advocated a new doctrine of preemptive use of military force to prevent acquisition of weapons of mass destruction by others. In this view, norms that constrain other nations would not necessarily apply to the United States. The United States would reserve to itself alone the right to use force, including nuclear weapons, to enforce non-proliferation, non-use, and disarmament on other actors.⁵⁷ The development of new mini-nukes would be consistent with this scenario.

A particularly acute manifestation of this Hobbesian ideology is the development of antimissile systems, which the US government has argued are necessary to counter the threat posed by so-called rogue states armed with ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction.⁵⁸ Many domestic and foreign observers do not find the rogue state rationale for US missile defense sufficiently persuasive, since neither of the principal adversaries that missile defense supporters have in mind – North Korea and Iran – currently possesses the capability to attack the United States with ballistic missiles. Thus the principle importance of an antimissile system appears to lie in serving as a convenient fiction for casting off constraints on US power and for shifting the discourse on nuclear weapons.⁵⁹ Evidence for this was

⁵⁷ See the *US Nuclear Posture Review*, January 8, 2002, at www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm. According to a Bush administration official, “My ideal number of nuclear weapons states is one.” Bill Keller, “The Second Nuclear Age,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 4, 2003, p. 94.

⁵⁸ *US Nuclear Posture Review*, section III, “Ballistic Missile Defense”; Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, “Prepared Statement on Missile Defense,” House Armed Services Subcommittees on Procurement and Research and Development, June 17, 2002, at www.defenselink.mil/speeches/2002/s20020627-depsecdef1.html.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Charles L. Glaser and Steve Fetter, “National Missile Defense and the Future of US Nuclear Weapons Policy,” *International Security*, vol. 26, no. 1 (Summer 2001), pp. 40–92.

provided by the US unilateral termination of the 30-year-old Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty in June 2002, which removed an important, if implicit, codification of the nuclear taboo.⁶⁰ The regulative effect of this change was to open the way for the deployment of previously banned missile defenses. The constitutive effect was to remove the no-strategic-first-use agreement that was implicit in the ABM Treaty.⁶¹ The implications for the nuclear taboo remain to be seen. As a practical matter, the taboo is older, more widespread, and more internalized today than it was at the time of the ABM Treaty's adoption in 1972. The symbolism of the treaty's rejection is important, however, and the long-term consequences for the taboo could be serious.

The development of a Leviathan interpretation of US nuclear weapons would be extremely troubling. Fortunately, several factors, both realist and normative, militate against it. Concerns about setting undesirable precedents for the use of nuclear weapons – the negative consequences of demonstrating their utility (realist) and legitimacy (normative) – will remain powerful restraints for many US leaders. Further, the identity mechanism operating in the taboo is that “we” don’t use nuclear weapons – because of who we are, what our values are, what civilized states do and do not do, and so on. The identity of the adversary has become less relevant over time (this is true for the application of the laws of war generally). For this mechanism to change, US identity and self-conceptions would have to shift significantly. A US leadership emphasizing the role of power rather than the rule of law could certainly push on this identity, while a catastrophic attack on the United States could provide a reason for setting aside the nuclear taboo. Absent such a catastrophic attack, however, the shared history, experience, and domestic tradition of Americans emphasizing law and humanitarian values will make this identity difficult to undo easily or quickly. Further, unlike in the 1950s, the United States would have little support from its traditional NATO allies this time around in its efforts to relegitimize nuclear weapons.

Thus, changing discourse could also change the taboo. Today, however, the taboo is not sustained simply by discourse but has also been institutionalized and internalized to varying degrees in policy

⁶⁰ Michael Wines, “After US Scraps ABM Treaty, Russia Rejects Curbs of START II,” *New York Times*, June 15, 2002.

⁶¹ The ABM Treaty assumed a mutual vulnerability to annihilation. See Chapter 7 for this discussion.

and institutions, international agreements, and moral categories. Thus a shift in discourse alone would not necessarily immediately dissolve it. Nonetheless, over an extended period new rhetorics of pre-emption and power could certainly erode the taboo's strength. For those who might favor a Leviathan approach to the US role in the world, the problem is that, in the end, one cannot easily relegitimize nuclear weapons for the United States alone while delegitimizing them for the rest of the world. If the United States exempts itself from the opprobrium bestowed on nuclear weapons, it will lack the moral authority to bring the rest of the world along.⁶²

Limits to the delegitimization of nuclear weapons

Even if the taboo did not unravel, and nuclear weapons were not substantially relegitimized, several obstacles might exist to their full delegitimization. Although widespread support exists for further delegitimizing nuclear weapons, the general opprobrium is far from universal or complete. The nuclear powers themselves continue to believe firmly in the benefits of retaining nuclear capabilities. Leaders and publics in nuclear weapons states continue to believe that deterrence works and provides security – even if they would prefer deterrence at much lower arsenal levels.⁶³ And while there is a strong taboo on use, the prohibition on possession continues to apply only selectively. Existing stocks remain (there are still 30,000 nuclear weapons in the world today), and wider alliance systems such as NATO continue to tout the great value of such weapons as a basis for collective security.⁶⁴ The United States has recently implied through its words and actions that the very goal of nuclear disarmament might not even apply to “the world’s sole superpower,” and several of the newest nuclear states – especially India and Pakistan – may not have fully internalized the nuclear taboo.

A second obstacle to complete delegitimization is that, as Steven Lee notes, nuclear war may not be entirely analogous to other social practices that have been delegitimized, such as slavery, dueling, or cannibalism, because of the problem of escalation. There is no “blind

⁶² In my view, the belief that the United States could be accepted as a global hegemon above the rules by other states is implausible.

⁶³ *Mass and Elite Views on Nuclear Security: US National Security Surveys, 1993–99*, University of New Mexico Institute of Public Policy, at http://bush.tamu.edu/content/faculty/nsp/99_vol2.html.

⁶⁴ NATO’s 1999 Strategic Concept, at www.nato.int/docu/pr/1999/p99-065e.htm.

escalatory path" to cannibalism the way there is for nuclear war. Thus, he suggests, the requirements for delegitimizing nuclear weapons may be "more demanding than for other morally abhorrent social practices."⁶⁵ Specifically, the full delegitimization of nuclear weapons may require habits of non-aggression and pacificism more generally. This suggests a long-run link between the nuclear taboo and the broader "obsolescence" of war.

A third, quite different, obstacle to the full delegitimization of nuclear weapons may be the problem of "nuclear forgetting." As fear of nuclear war recedes from memory, this may erode inhibitions on the use of nuclear weapons. In the past, analysts have noted, the "enormous horror of nuclear weapons' effects" has made it possible for leaders to envision the destruction of a full-scale nuclear war in advance, and this strengthened their determination to avoid it.⁶⁶ As Lee has argued, however, a long period of non-use may cloud this "crystal ball effect," making nuclear war seem more remote, less immediate and horrific.⁶⁷ Similarly, Michael Mandelbaum writes, "Insofar as that fear [of nuclear war] is a product of human memory, it necessarily fades over time. The longer the nuclear system succeeds in maintaining equilibrium, the more precarious, in this sense, it will become."⁶⁸

This is an important concern, and suggests that individuals and society must keep the fear of nuclear war alive for future generations of leaders. It points to the importance of further cementing the taboo in law, institutions, and cultural practices as a way of sustaining collective memory.⁶⁹ As physicist Alvin Weinberg has observed, the process of embedding the taboo more deeply in our cultural practices has already begun. The memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is being "sanctified" in practices (pilgrimages, ceremonies, Hiroshima Day) and commemorative monuments and markers (the Peace Park in Hiroshima, the Bell at Oak Ridge National Laboratory) that preserve the immediacy of the atomic bombings and reinforce the creed of

⁶⁵ Lee, *Morality, Prudence, and Nuclear War*, pp. 322, 332.

⁶⁶ Albert Carnesale et al., *Living With Nuclear Weapons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 44.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

⁶⁸ Michael Mandelbaum, *The Nuclear Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 86.

⁶⁹ Collective memory is an "inherently historical" phenomenon which is "kept alive through the generations by an on-going process of socialization and ritual enactment." Wendt, *Social Theory*, p. 163.

“never again.” Similar to the way the Holocaust has been incorporated into Jewish liturgy, Hiroshima and Nagasaki are being incorporated into the liturgies of many faiths.⁷⁰ This “sanctification of Hiroshima” further reinforces the nuclear taboo and, by associating it with religious practices, grounds it in deeper cultural meanings and our identities.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the challenges facing the taboo. It is important to remember that the taboo has always been at risk, however. A major explanation for the lack of progress – or even backsliding – in recent years with regard to the nuclear taboo is the absence of a widespread grassroots antinuclear movement. Without such a movement, nuclear-armed governments feel little public pressure to pursue nuclear reductions. In addition, the end of US–Soviet Cold War rivalry reduced both the perceived risk of nuclear war and much of the normative power politics over nuclear weapons between Russia and the United States, thus eliminating sources of taboo formation. These factors, plus the security climate after 9/11, also help to explain the absence of a widespread antinuclear weapons movement.⁷¹

There are important positive developments nonetheless. Significant reductions in US and Russian nuclear arsenals have occurred: since the height of the Cold War, deployed nuclear warheads have been reduced by nearly 40,000.⁷² The capacity to use nuclear weapons remains confined to a small number of states, and the spread of democracy globally may improve prospects for the taboo. Additionally, the global arms control process is not only becoming more multi-lateral, but also more transnational and pluralistic, that is, a greater variety of actors is involved. The Europeans are increasingly defining themselves apart from the United States and are playing a more independent role on non-proliferation issues.⁷³ As discussed in Chapter 9, important “middle powers” have played a stronger role

⁷⁰ Alvin Weinberg, “The Bell and the Bomb,” *Cosmos Journal* (1997), www.cosmos-club.org/journals/1997/index.html; and Weinberg, “The Sanctification of Hiroshima,” *Oak Ridge Associated Universities*, November 1995.

⁷¹ Activists today are focused more on antiglobalization protests.

⁷² As of 2002, more than 30,000 intact warheads existed in the world’s nuclear arsenals, down from 70,000 at the peak in 1986. Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen, “Global Nuclear Stockpiles, 1945–2002,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 58, no. 6 (November/December 2002), pp. 103–04.

⁷³ Clara Portela, “The EU and the NPT: Testing the New European Non-proliferation Strategy,” *Disarmament Diplomacy*, no. 78 (July/August 2004), at www.acronym.org.uk/dd/dd78/78cp.htm.

in forwarding the nuclear disarmament agenda at the UN. They constitute a key coalition, along with arms control NGOs, which might push the taboo forward.⁷⁴ Transnational exchanges of nuclear experts and analysts, along with global communications, are helping to transmit ideas about nuclear deterrence and safety to policymakers in the new nuclear states.

Although the nuclear powers cling tenaciously to their nuclear warheads, it is hard to imagine circumstances in which US leaders would calculate that even *one* detonation of a US nuclear weapon would be in the national interest. Because the United States today possesses such overwhelming conventional superiority, only an adversary armed with nuclear weapons could truly threaten US forces on the battlefield. It is thus possible to build a strong rationalist argument that the United States should pursue very low levels of nuclear weapons or even abolition. As Jonathan Schell has argued, nuclear weapons remain legitimized by the belief that they prevent war.⁷⁵ If this belief were undermined, then the movement to get rid of them might cascade.

Lessons of the nuclear taboo

What does the story of the nuclear taboo have to tell us as both researchers and practitioners?

Lessons for researchers

The analysis of this book points toward four broad areas for future research. First is how the nuclear taboo as been accepted and internalized in other countries, especially non-democracies, and the mechanisms by which the taboo has been disseminated and institutionalized in specific cases. How do key decisionmakers come to accept the taboo? A second area of research is on whether and how states on the receiving end of nuclear threats have perceived the taboo. Why, for example, have nuclear threats appeared credible to some states but incredible to others? A third important area of inquiry is the broader issue of the role of norms and culture in deterrence, especially outside the US–Russian context. Although important work exists in this area

⁷⁴ New Agenda Coalition, "Non-proliferation and Disarmament Go Hand in Hand," *International Herald Tribune*, September 22, 2004.

⁷⁵ Jonathan Schell, *The Gift of Time: The Case for Abolishing Nuclear Weapons Now* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998).

(including the literature on “strategic culture”), much remains to be done, especially with regard to the interaction of domestic and global normative influences in new nuclear states.⁷⁶ Finally, a fourth area of research is the complex and mixed relationship between democracy and nuclear weapons, including the mixed record of democratic control over nuclear arsenals.

Lessons for practitioners

What practical actions would strengthen the taboo? Desirable policy measures would minimize the value of possessing nuclear weapons and continue narrowing the range of circumstances in which the first use of nuclear weapons could be seen as legitimate. A declared no-first-use agreement and the entry into force of the comprehensive test ban would be important steps in this direction. States should also increase the likelihood that, when crises tempt nations to engage in nuclear first use, other non-nuclear alternatives will be available. Thus, advances in conventional weapons generally help to support the taboo.⁷⁷ The more the military has real conventional alternatives, the less the perceived need to rely on nuclear weapons. The continued categorization of nuclear weapons as unacceptable “weapons of mass destruction” will also be essential, and developments that would tend to erode this, such as the development of new generations of very small nuclear weapons, should be avoided. Finally, other institutional approaches for strengthening inhibitions against use or threats of use of nuclear weapons may be possible, such as an agreement by all states that there be no first use without prior consultation with the United Nations Security Council.⁷⁸

Recently, some analysts have suggested that nuclear weapons should be categorized separately from chemical and biological weapons, on the grounds that nuclear weapons are much more lethal than the other two, and that the latter are not really weapons of mass destruction.⁷⁹ There is some merit to this argument. However, the nuclear

⁷⁶ See, for example, George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2001), and Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*.

⁷⁷ There may be some exceptions, i.e., conventional weapons that approach the destructive capacity of small nuclear weapons.

⁷⁸ George H. Quester and Victor A. Utgoff, “Toward an International Nuclear Security Policy,” *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 4 (1994), pp. 5–18.

⁷⁹ Philip Morrison and Kosta Tsipis, “Rightful Names,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 59, no. 3 (May/June 2003), p. 77. Their opening premise that “the term ‘weapons of mass destruction’ was long reserved for nuclear explosives” is incorrect.

taboo benefits from the discursive association of nuclear weapons with formally banned weapons. For example, once the first top leader is subjected to trial as a war criminal for using chemical or biological weapons (as President George W. Bush threatened Iraqi leaders if they used chemical or biological weapons during the 2003 war against Iraq), it will be only a small step to charging as a war criminal any leader who uses nuclear weapons.⁸⁰

The story told here also suggests the importance of democratizing domestic policymaking on nuclear weapons. This includes support for civilian nuclear analysts and arms control groups, as well as public education about nuclear issues. It also suggests the creation of state agencies with institutionalized interests in arms restraint, along with greater domestic transparency regarding the nation's nuclear matters. Democracy has not always been a force for nuclear restraint, either in the United States or elsewhere. But this may be due in part to excessive secrecy and distortions of the democratic process when it comes to nuclear weapons policymaking.⁸¹

Policymakers and advocates seeking to strengthen the taboo may also want to seek opportunities to "create meanings" that enhance the taboo. For example, should the US government formally decide not to build a new generation of small nuclear weapons, it would be better for the taboo if the US president announced the decision prominently at, say, Hiroshima, rather than merely releasing a press statement that portrayed the decision as the result of technical or cost considerations – more realist criteria. The actual decision would, of course, be the same in both cases, but the meaning would be quite different.

For activists, symbolic actions that keep the fear of nuclear war before governments and publics, such as demonstrations that feature symbols associating nuclear weapons with death and destruction, will be important. Civil society groups will need to continue to act as alternative sources of facts and information on, and interpretations of, nuclear matters. They will need to mobilize the general public, to raise both moral and strategic issues, and, generally, to demand governmental accountability for nuclear policy choices.

⁸⁰ "Bush Sees an 'Urgent Duty' to Act on Iraq," *New York Times*, October 8, 2002, p. A13.

⁸¹ Stephen I. Schwartz, ed., *Atomic Audit: The Costs and Consequences of US Nuclear Weapons Since 1940* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

Beyond the nuclear taboo

Beyond these short-run prescriptions, the story of the nuclear taboo suggests a grander possibility. One of the policy implications of this book is that it may be easier to ban the *use* of nuclear weapons than to ban the weapons themselves. Debates over nuclear disarmament have traditionally bogged down in concerns about “breakout” (stealthy rearming) by the nuclear powers, and the technical challenges of verifying disarmament.⁸² The negotiations on nuclear disarmament that have been going on under the auspices of the United Nations since the 1950s have proven to be far more effective in contributing to the normative opprobrium against nuclear weapons than in reducing their numbers.⁸³ For these reasons, although complete nuclear disarmament will undoubtedly continue to be the goal of many non-nuclear states, it will likely be politically easier to pursue strong restrictions and prohibitions on use than to ban the weapons themselves.

Short of eliminating the physical objects themselves, three normative developments could render nuclear weapons largely irrelevant: (1) an increasingly robust normative prohibition on their use; (2) a world of democratic states; or (3) the obsolescence of war in the international system. These “virtual abolition schemes” focus on changes of mind – habit, attitude, norms, law – more than on changes in numerical arsenals.

A first route to the virtual abolition of nuclear weapons would be an increasingly robust normative prohibition on their use. It may be that, given concerns about breakout, the world will be marginally safer with *some* nuclear weapons but with a strong stigmatization of them and of their use.⁸⁴ This could take the form of a declared no-first-use agreement or even a legal ban on all uses of nuclear weapons. A multilateral no-first-use agreement or legal ban would make it easier for states to reduce to low levels of nuclear weapons, because the weapons would become increasingly purposeless. Once

⁸² Charles L. Glaser, “The Flawed Case for Nuclear Disarmament,” *Survival*, vol. 40, no. 4 (Spring 1998), pp. 112–28.

⁸³ Most of the reduction in numbers has taken place in the context of US–Soviet/Russian bilateral agreements.

⁸⁴ For a proposal along these lines, see Stansfield Turner, *Caging the Genies: A Workable Solution for Nuclear, Chemical and Biological Weapons* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).

the use of nuclear weapons had been prohibited, even the threat of their use would likely become severely discredited.⁸⁵ Pressure would likely mount for changes in the composition of nuclear forces, such as the renunciation of weapons with first strike characteristics and/or war-fighting functions, and the de-alerting of strategic nuclear forces.⁸⁶ For some advocates of abolition, this approach would be the first step toward the eventual elimination of the physical weapons themselves.⁸⁷ For others, nuclear weapons would continue to exist in arsenals but with little or no relevance. As Bruce Russett has observed, "in a world of fewer weapons, lower tensions, and diminished ideological antagonisms, nuclear weapons might indeed become 'just another weapon' – not to be used like any other weapon but maintained without any intention whatever to use them on a mass scale, and with hardly any expectation of using them at all."⁸⁸ Although nuclear weapons might never be entirely abolished, their significance for global politics would wither away.

A second route to virtual abolition is a world of democratic states. In such a world, nuclear weapons, even if they were not abolished, might become largely vestigial. Indeed, if, as democratic peace theory holds, democratic states do not fight each other, nuclear weapons would become practically meaningless.⁸⁹ In such a security community, states would have no use for either nuclear weapons or elaborate armies. When majority or civilian rule returned in South Africa, Brazil, and Argentina, these countries abandoned or rolled

⁸⁵ In its 1996 advisory opinion, the World Court held that the threat of their use would then become illegal. International Court of Justice, "Legality of the Threat to Use Nuclear Weapons," General List no. 95, July 8, 1996, para 47. It is not clear that this would automatically be the case, however. One might argue, for example, that nuclear deterrence reduces the likelihood of war between nuclear-armed states and thus contributes to international peace and security.

⁸⁶ Tom Milne, "No First Use of Nuclear Weapons," Workshop Report, Pugwash Meeting No. 279, November 2002, at www.pugwash.org/reports/nw/milne.htm. Jozef Goldblat, "Prospects for a Ban on the Use of Nuclear Weapons," paper presented at the Third International Security Forum, Zurich, Switzerland, October 1998.

⁸⁷ Jozef Goldblat, "Making Nuclear Weapons Illegal," in Jack Steinberger, Bhalchandra Udgaonkar, and Joseph Rotblat, eds., *A Nuclear-Weapon-Free World* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 153–67.

⁸⁸ Bruce Russett, "An Acceptable Role for Nuclear Weapons?" in Charles Kegley and Kenneth L. Schwab, eds., *After the Cold War: Questioning the Morality of Nuclear Deterrence* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), p. 145.

⁸⁹ On the democratic peace theory see Michael Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies and Foreign Affairs," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 12, no. 3 (1983), pp. 205–35; and Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

back their nuclear programs. Five out of the nine current nuclear-armed states (declared and undeclared) are democracies (United States, Britain, France, India, and Israel), while Russia is in transition, but most of these nuclear democracies face perceived threats from non-democratic adversaries. In a world of democratic states, there would never be an occasion for the use of nuclear weapons.⁹⁰

Finally, a third route to virtual abolition is the obsolescence of war. Here we return to John Mueller's argument that the lack of major war since 1945, including the non-use of nuclear weapons, has been a function of deeper changes in the West regarding the legitimacy and utility of force as a means to ends.⁹¹ This argument suggests that war itself might go out of fashion and, with it, presumably nuclear weapons. A moderate abhorrence of war clearly helps to support and legitimize nuclear deterrence (since it makes deterrence preferable to war). Should such abhorrence take hold around the world, the likelihood of nuclear conflict would drop dramatically. With no major wars between states, the primary role for nuclear weapons would be to deter others' use of them. If abhorrence of war became extremely strong, however, even nuclear deterrence of any kind might come to be viewed as illegitimate.⁹² Nuclear weapons and large armies would become archaic and discredited relics of a bygone era.⁹³ If this point were reached, virtual abolition might lead to actual abolition.

These three virtual abolition schemes need not be mutually exclusive, of course. Indeed, the trends today suggest that all three are developing in at least some areas of the world. However, none of these normative trends, including the taboo itself, can be taken for granted. Virtual abolition, if it comes, will be a long, slow process taking place over many decades. Thus, for better or worse, nuclear weapons

⁹⁰ A world of democratic states would not address the problem posed by the existence of nuclear threats from non-state actors, however.

⁹¹ John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989). I address this argument in greater detail in Chapter 2.

⁹² Deterrence might also be displaced for an entirely different reason. The George W. Bush administration advocated downgrading deterrence (although not abandoning it) in favor of a doctrine of preemption. This would represent the relegitimization of war, not its obsolescence.

⁹³ Technically, this scenario does not fully address the issue of use of nuclear weapons in "minor" wars. Thus abhorrence of war would need to extend to all war, not just major wars, or, alternatively, we would need a nuclear taboo as well in order to inhibit use of nuclear weapons in minor wars.

seem destined to remain a central subject of international politics for some time to come. As long as this is so, the nuclear taboo will remain a crucial bulwark against the greatest danger of our age. The taboo has been constructed, with great effort, by many individuals and many nations, over more than fifty years. It is an enormous accomplishment. If we let it slip through our fingers, we will do so at our own peril.

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