Stigmatizing the Bomb: Origins of the Nuclear Taboo

Nina Tannenwald

International Security, Volume 29, Number 4, Spring 2005, pp. 5-49
(Article)

Published by The MIT Press

Stigmatizing the Bomb

Origins of the Nuclear Taboo

Nina Tannenwald

In 1958 Lt. Gen. James Gavin, a principal promoter in the U.S. military of the development of tactical nuclear weapons, wrote, "Nuclear weapons will become conventional for several reasons, among them cost, effectiveness against enemy weapons, and ease of handling."[1] Indeed, during the 1950s numerous U.S. leaders fully expected that a nuclear weapon would become "just another weapon." Secretary of State John Foster Dulles accepted "the ultimate inevitability" that tactical nuclear weapons would gain "conventional" status.[2] Adm. 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."[3]

These leaders were articulating a view with a long tradition in the history of weapons and warfare: a weapon once introduced inevitably comes to be widely accepted as legitimate. In reality, however, nuclear weapons have come to be defined as abhorrent and unacceptable weapons of mass destruction, with a taboo on their use. This taboo is associated with a widespread revulsion toward nuclear weapons and broadly held inhibitions on their use. The opprobrium has come to apply to all nuclear weapons, not just to large bombs or to certain types or uses of nuclear weapons. It has developed to the point that uses of nuclear weapons that were once considered plausible by at least some U.S. decisionmakers—for example, tactical battlefield uses in limited wars and direct threats to deter enemies from conventional attack—have been severely delegitimized and are practically unthinkable policy options. Thomas

Nina Tannenwald is Director of the International Relations Program and Joukowsky Family Research Assistant Professor at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University.

For their helpful comments and criticisms on earlier versions of this article, the author is grateful to participants in the University of Chicago's Program on International Security Policy Seminar and the Olin Seminar at Harvard University. She would also like to acknowledge the contributions of participants in seminars at Dartmouth College and the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University, as well as helpful suggestions from two anonymous reviewers for *International Security.*

1. James M. Gavin, *War and Peace in the Space Age* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), p. 265.
2. NSC (National Security Council) meeting, May 27, 1957, in *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS), 1955–57,* Vol. 19 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), p. 499.
3. NSC meeting, February 27, 1956, in ibid., p. 211.

International Security, Vol. 29, No. 4 (Spring 2005), pp. 5–49

Schelling has argued that "the evolution of that status [nuclear taboo] has been as important as the development of nuclear arsenals."[4] Evidence suggests that the taboo has helped to constrain resort to the use of nuclear weapons since 1945 both by reinforcing deterrence and by inducing restraint even in cases where deterrence did not operate.[5]

What gave rise to this taboo? Schelling attributes the taboo to a general sense of revulsion associated with such destructive weapons and the perception that nuclear weapons have come to be viewed as different.[6] He does not, however, trace the evolution of this process. Historian John Lewis Gaddis has argued that moral considerations help to explain the nonuse of nuclear weapons by the United States in the first ten years of the Cold War, but he does not specifically connect this sentiment to the development of a taboo.[7]

Within the field of international relations, there has been little systematic analysis of the nuclear taboo. Traditional realists, of course, 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 nonuse existed, it would reflect the interests of the most powerful (nuclear) states.[8] Rationalist approaches, which are often sympathetic to norms, could easily incorporate the existence of a taboo.[9] 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.[10]

---

4. Thomas C. Schelling, "A Half-Century without Nuclear War," Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy (2000), http://www.puaf.umd.edu/IPPP/Summer00/legacy_of_hiroshima.htm.
5. See Nina Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and Normative Basis of Nuclear Nonuse," *International Organization,* Vol. 53, No. 3 (Summer 1999), pp. 433–468.
6. Thomas C. Schelling, "The Role of Nuclear Weapons," in L. Benjamin Ederington and Michael J. Mazarr, eds., *Turning Point: The Gulf War and U.S. Military Strategy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994), pp. 105–115.
7. John Lewis Gaddis, "The Origins of Self-Deterrence: The United States and the Nonuse of Nuclear Weapons, 1945–1958," in Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
8. For realist arguments on norms, see Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); and 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), pp. 73–95.
9. 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, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), chaps. 4, 5; and Edna Ullman-Margalit, *The Emergence of Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
10. 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.

As I show in this article, although there is some truth to these explanations, they are inadequate. The nuclear taboo was pursued in part against the preferences of the United States, which, for the first part of the nuclear era, opposed creation of a taboo because it would deny the self-proclaimed right of the United States to rely on nuclear weapons for its security. I argue for a broader explanation that emphasizes the role of a global antinuclear weapons movement and nonnuclear states, as well as Cold War power politics, in the development of the taboo.[11] The model of norm creation here highlights the role of antinuclear discourse and politics in the creation of the taboo. Although rationalist variables are important, the taboo cannot be explained simply as the straightforward result of rational adaptation to strategic circumstances.

The larger questions are: where do global norms come from? How and why do they develop? And how are they 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. The case is important practically because it illuminates an important source of restraint on the use of nuclear weapons.

In this article I locate the origins of the nuclear taboo after 1945 in a set of domestic and international factors and trace its subsequent development. Elsewhere I have analyzed how the taboo has influenced U.S. decisionmaking in specific instances, but here I focus on what accounts for the rise of the taboo and how it developed in global politics and U.S. policy.[12] Ideally, a full account would require an examination of how the taboo came to be accepted and internalized in the decisionmaking of other countries as well. The central role of the United States in the development of the taboo, however, makes it a particularly significant case.

The article proceeds in four parts. First, I lay out the main characteristics of the nuclear taboo and the core of my argument. Second, taking a process-tracing approach, I analyze the evolution of the nuclear taboo and identify the main factors and mechanisms that account for this development. Third, I consider some challenges to, and extensions of, the argument and the prospects

11. 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. 153–185.

12. See Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo." This earlier article analyzed the role of the taboo in constraining the U.S resort to nuclear weapons in four cases. It focused on the taboo as an independent variable and did not treat the issue of how the taboo arose. The present article, in contrast, focuses mainly on the taboo as the dependent variable and analyzes factors contributing to its rise.

for the nuclear taboo in the future. In conclusion, I summarize some implications of the argument for theory and policy.

The Nuclear Taboo: A De Facto Normative Prohibition

In this section I define the nuclear taboo, describe its main features, and outline the process by which it arose.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NUCLEAR TABOO

The nuclear taboo refers to a de facto prohibition against the first use of nuclear weapons. The taboo is not the behavior (of nonuse) itself but rather the normative belief about the behavior. By "norm," I mean a standard of right or wrong, a prescription or proscription for behavior "for a given identity."[13] A taboo is a particularly forceful kind of normative prohibition that is concerned with the protection of individuals and societies from behavior that is defined or perceived to be dangerous. It typically refers to something that is not done, not said, or not touched.[14]

What makes the prohibition against using nuclear weapons a taboo rather than simply a norm? There are two elements to a taboo: its objective characteristics and its intersubjective, phenomenological aspect, that is, the meaning it has for people. Objectively, the nuclear taboo exhibits many, although not all, of the characteristics associated with taboos: it is a prohibition, it refers to danger, and it involves expectations of awful or uncertain consequences or sanctions if violated. Further, it is also a "bright line" norm: once the threshold between use and nonuse is crossed, one is immediately in a new world with all the unimaginable consequences that could follow.[15] Finally, the nuclear taboo counteracts the deep attraction that nuclear weapons present to national leaders as the "ultimate weapon" and reminds them of the danger that lurks behind such weapons.[16]

---

13. Peter J. Katzenstein, Alexander Wendt, and Ronald Jepperson, "Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security," in Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 54.
14. Franz Steiner, *Taboo* (London: Cohen and West, 1956), p. 21; and Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).
15. Deterrence analysts commonly refer to the "nuclear threshold." For an analogous nonnuclear 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 is impossible to return.
16. The dual nature of the bomb as both an 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.

Several aspects of the nuclear prohibition, however, are decidedly unlike those 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 Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), the vast majority of states are prohibited from acquiring or possessing nuclear weapons. The five declared nuclear states (Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States), however, are allowed by the treaty to possess nuclear weapons temporarily pending complete disarmament and to prepare to use them.[17] Thus the nuclear prohibition departs in some ways from the objective characteristics of a taboo.

The nuclear taboo, however, also has an intersubjective or a phenomenological aspect: it is a taboo because people believe it to be. Political and military leaders themselves began using the term to refer to this normative perception starting in the early 1950s, even when, objectively, a tradition of nonuse hardly existed. If actors see the use of nuclear weapons as if it were a taboo, as their rhetoric suggests, then this could affect their choices and behavior. In the words of sociologists William and Dorothy Thomas, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."[18] This subjective (and intersubjective) sense of "taboo-ness" is one of the factors that makes the tradition of nuclear nonuse a taboo rather than simply a norm.

Although one might be skeptical that this is just empty rhetoric, this belief is not entirely detached from reality. Evidence for the taboo lies in discourse, institutions, and behavior. The most obvious evidence 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 governments and leaders, the resolutions of international organizations, and the private moral concerns of individual decisionmakers. The discourse evidence is supplemented both 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, he denuclearization of the army and marines, and the buildup of conventional alternatives). As the inhibition on use has developed over time, it has taken on more taboo-like qualities—unthinkingness and taken-for-grantedness. As a systemic phenomenon, the taboo exists at the collective level of the interna-

17. Under article 6 of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the declared nuclear states are obligated to pursue complete nuclear disarmament.
18. William I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas, *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), p. 572.

tional community (represented especially by the United Nations), but this need not mean that all countries have internalized it to the same degree.

As noted earlier, the 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 UN General Assembly and other international forums have repeatedly proclaimed the use of nuclear weapons as illegal, the United States and other nuclear powers have consistently voted against these. U.S. legal analyses have repeatedly 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.[19] 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 uses of nuclear weapons are illegal.[20]

Nevertheless, legal use has been gradually chipped away through incremental restrictions—an array of treaties and regimes that 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 (i.e., political declarations by the nuclear powers that they will not use nuclear weapons against nonnuclear states that are members of the NPT). Together, these agreements enhance the normative presumption against nuclear use. By multiplying the number of forums where a decision to use nuclear weapons would have to be defended, they substantially increase the burden of proof for any such decision.[21] Many of these legal constraints have been incorporated into U.S. domestic practice, where they are reflected in constraints on deployments and targeting, proliferation, arms control, and use.[22] Thus, while

19. George Bunn, "U.S. Law of Nuclear Weapons," *Naval War College Review,* Vol. 32, No. 4 (July–August 1984), pp. 46–62.
20. The World Court found that the use or threatened use 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, 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. For an analysis, see Michael N. Schmitt, "The International Court of Justice and the Use of Nuclear Weapons," *Naval War College Review,* Vol. 51, No. 2 (Spring 1998), pp. 91–116.
21. Harald Mueller, "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, 1993), pp. 361–388.
22. Bunn, "U.S. Law of Nuclear Weapons."

the legality of nuclear weapons remains in dispute, the trend line of decreasing legitimacy and circumscribed legality is clear.

EXPLANATION OF THE NUCLEAR TABOO

Realist and rationalist explanations would emphasize the role of material power and interest in the creation of the taboo, but 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. Although Cold War power politics played a role, the rise of the taboo has been driven significantly by a grassroots global antinuclear weapons movement, the UN, and nonnuclear states. The taboo developed in the face of consistent, vociferous, and long-standing official resistance by the U.S. government and the other democratic nuclear powers to any efforts to ban the use of nuclear weapons. In the critical first fifteen years of the nuclear era, when important precedents of nonuse were set, and continuing in some fashion through to the present, less powerful states and nonstate actors have sought to stigmatize nuclear weapons, exerting pressure in favor of nuclear arms control and calling for a ban on their use. The eventual strategic stalemate between the superpowers also contributed to the development of the taboo, but this factor entered into account only in the 1960s, after a tentative taboo had already begun to emerge.

Further, the taboo possesses an important moral component, for which power and interest explanations cannot fully account. At its core is the belief that nuclear weapons, because of their immense destructive power, flagrantly violate long-standing 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 noncombatants, or more generally, the innocent, and to cause excessive destruction.

The particular shape the taboo took, however, was a matter of politics and history.[23] In fact, the evolution of the taboo has been shaped by the ongoing competition of 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 the weapon depends on how it is used. The second view, which ultimately prevailed, though not without struggle, is that any use of the weapons is prohibited; that is, the weapons them-

23. For a useful distinction between abstract moral norms and ethical norms of international politics, see Ward Thomas, *The Ethics of Destruction: Norms and Force in International Relations* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001).

selves are proscribed. 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.[24] Focal points, however, are not natural or intrinsic. They depend on the cultural, political, and social context, and on the identities of the actors.[25] The line between conventional and 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.

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 preexisting 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."

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 origins of interests and the historically constructed nature of both rationality and morality.[26] Thomas Risse, Stephen Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink have identified three processes by which international norms develop and become implemented domestically: instrumental adaptation and strategic bargaining, moral consciousness-raising, and institutionalization and habitualization.[27] I draw on these to construct four pathways by which the taboo developed.

The first pathway, societal pressure, is a bottom-up process of normative change in which domestic and transnational social groups—such as the antinuclear weapons movement—along with international organizations politicize issues and put pressure on decisionmakers to change state policy

24. Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960); and Schelling, "The Role of Nuclear Weapons."
25. Albert Yee, "Thick Rationality and the Missing 'Brute Fact': The Limits of Rationalist Incorporation of Norms and Ideas," *Journal of Politics,* Vol. 59, No. 4 (November 1997), p. 1026.
26. 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. 319–363; and Richard Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997).
27. 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.

or practices.[28] Such groups act especially through moral consciousness-raising—identifying problems, providing information, framing issues, and shaping discourse.[29]

A second pathway is normative power politics, in which states seek, through 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. Here, actors can be viewed as engaging in processes of "strategic social construction," a realist notion wherein the construction of norms is part of the game of power.[30]

A third pathway is the role of individual state decisionmakers whose actions in crucial ways foster nuclear restraint. Individual leaders may act for reasons of moral conscience (e.g., they believe that using nuclear weapons would simply be wrong) or on the basis of cognitive assumptions (e.g., they come to believe that the weapons lack military utility).[31]

The 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. The iteration of nonuse over time, for whatever reasons—deterrence, lack of readiness, scarcity of bombs, moral inhibitions, or contingency—becomes a convention, and a convention eventually gives rise to a normative obligation.[32] This pathway emphasizes the role of precedent, habit, and pattern in the development of a norm.

Together these mechanisms contribute to changing the discourse regarding nuclear weapons. As the taboo develops, it becomes increasingly internalized in the belief systems of decisionmakers and institutionalized within governments. As evidence of this, one should expect to see identity and self-interest defined in ways that increasingly take the taboo for granted. That is, the pro-

---

28. Jeffrey Checkel, "Norms, Institutions, and National Identity in Contemporary Europe," *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 43, No. 1 (March 1999), p. 88.
29. Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 17–19. See also Sanjeev Khagram, James V. Riker, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); and Jackie Smith, Charles Chatfield, and Ron Pagnucco, *Transnational Social Movements and Global Politics: Solidarity beyond the State* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1997).
30. Krasner, *Sovereignty.*
31. On the role of the moral conscience of individuals, see Robert W. McElroy, *Morality and American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).
32. George I. Mavrodes, "Conventions and the Morality of War," in Charles R. Beitz, Marshall Cohen, Thomas Scanlon, and A. John Simmons, eds., *International Ethics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 75–89.

cess 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).

I divide the history of the taboo into two stages: an initial period of emergence and a second period, following the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, when the taboo began to become institutionalized and internalized. In the first stage, the taboo is tentative and competes with other possible nuclear norms that were being promoted (such as "conventionalization"); in the second stage, the taboo has begun to prevail over competing discourses. In what follows, I focus primarily on the crucial formative period of the nuclear taboo in the 1950s and its increasing acceptance and consolidation from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Emergence and Evolution of the Nuclear Taboo, 1945–Present

In 1945 nuclear weapons were new, and no particular moral stigma attached to them. A taboo on their first use began to emerge in the 1950s as a result of the creation of operational precedents and categories that established nuclear weapons as different from other kinds of weapons. It was also a result of antinuclear weapons politics that began to cast nuclear weapons as morally problematic. As the taboo emerged, the Eisenhower administration sought to resist it and to promote a competing norm of selective use of nuclear weapons.

The use of the atomic bomb by the United States against Japan in August 1945 seemed perfectly legitimate to most U.S. political and military leaders, in many ways a more or less seamless continuation of the strategic bombing already witnessed during World War II.[33] Strategic, domestic, and bureaucratic pressures swept away the few scattered ethical doubts raised about the new weapon prior to its use.[34] The American public endorsed the correctness, legitimacy, and even justice of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to

33. Barton J. Bernstein, "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (January/February 1995), pp. 135–152. The March 10, 1945, firebombing of Tokyo killed 80,000–100,000 people, and the Hamburg and Dresden bombings killed almost as many as the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Hiroshima is estimated to have immediately killed 70,000–80,000, and Nagasaki 35,000–40,000. Various fatalities estimates are listed in Barton J. Bernstein, "Truman and the A-Bomb: Targeting Noncombatants, Using the Bomb, and His Defending the 'Decision,'" *Journal of Military History*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (July 1998), p. 565, n. 43.

34. See, for example, the memo by Undersecretary of the U.S. Navy Ralph Bard to Secretary of War Henry Stimson, June 17, 1945, questioning the morality of the decision to use the bomb without warning. Reprinted in Martin Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (New York: Random House, 1975), appendix.

end this horrific war, with about 86 percent of those surveyed shortly after the war approving its use.[35]

President Harry Truman's initial justifications for ordering the bombing, immediately after the war, invoked both moral and racist arguments. He stated that it repaid the Japanese for their perfidious attack on Pearl Harbor and for their wartime atrocities. If they did not accept Allied war terms, he threatened to "obliterate more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise the Japanese have above ground" and to inflict "a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth" (implying more atomic bombing).[36] As historian Paul Boyer has observed, this threat implied that "the Japanese were subhuman creatures to whom the moral restraint of nations need not apply."[37] During the war, U.S. anti-Japanese propaganda had been deeply racist, and similar racist arguments and images were employed in the justification of the atomic bombings.[38] It was only two months later, in a message to Congress on October 3, 1945, on atomic energy legislation, that Truman put forth the strategic argument—what became the dominant justification: that using the bomb had been necessary to save American lives.[39] The atomic bombing initially evoked protests only from pacifists, a few church leaders, and a segment of the atomic scientists.[40]

Several features characterized the first five years after 1945: the American public was not particularly bothered by atomic bombs—radiation did not become a significant issue until the 1950s—and the atomic bomb was not viewed as a decisive weapon.[41] There was thus a great deal of uncertainty regarding nuclear weapons. Although many individuals, including some U.S. leaders,

---

35. Paul Boyer, *Fallout: A Historian Reflects on America's Half-Century Encounter with Nuclear Weapons* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), p. 25; and John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973), pp. 172–173.
36. "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, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1960), pp. 198–199.
37. Boyer, *Fallout*, p. 20.
38. 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, 1986).
39. "Special Message to Congress on Atomic Energy, October 3, 1945," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman,* pp. 362–366.
40. See Alice Kimball Smith, *A Peril and a Hope: The Scientists' Movement in America, 1945–47* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); and Lawrence S. Wittner, *One World or None: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement through 1953,* Vol. 1: *The Struggle against the Bomb* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993).
41. It was only with the 1952 development of the hydrogen bomb, many times more powerful than the atomic bomb, that nuclear weapons were viewed as decisive weapons.

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 to explain why the atomic bomb was not inherently seen as a taboo weapon and why it did not become so immediately following its initial use.

World War II had provided two competing precedents for how the bomb might be viewed in the years to come. On one hand, its apparently successful use as a weapon of terror against Japan could easily have set a precedent for greater use. A course of action consistent with this precedent would thus have been to further assimilate the bomb unproblematically into existing strategic bombing strategy and plans. This was certainly the view of the U.S. Air Force, the military service that would deliver any atomic weapon. Its early plans for future use of the atomic bomb included dropping it on enemy cities, just as had been done against Japan.[42] For the air force, the bomb did not usher in any military or moral revolution.[43]

An alternative model was suggested by the nonuse of chemical weapons—poison gas—during the war, the first time that a weapon used successfully in one war (World War I) remained unused in the next. This precedent received explicit attention in the atomic scientists' Franck report of June 1945 advocating alternatives to dropping the bomb on Japan. The report 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."[44] It was precisely this possibility that began to trouble some U.S. officials shortly after the war. As reports of deaths from radiation began to trickle out of Japan in the months after the war, they started to worry about the possible analogy between poison gas and radiation released by atomic explosions. A sustained public relations effort by the U.S. War Department and Gen. Leslie Groves, head of the Manhattan Project, to minimize evidence about radiation illness appeared to be driven by unease over the possible assimilation of the atomic

42. One early 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." *The Implications of the Atom Bomb for the Size, Composition, Organization, and Role of the Future Air Force* [Spaatz report], October 23, 1945, p. 29, quoted in Samuel R. Williamson and Steven L. Reardon, *The Origins of U.S. Nuclear Strategy, 1945–1953* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), p. 29.
43. Bret J. Cillessen, "Embracing the Bomb: Ethics, Morality, and Nuclear Deterrence in the U.S. Air Force, 1945–55," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (March 1998), pp. 96–134.
44. "Report of the Committee on Political and Social Problems, Manhattan Project 'Metallurgical Laboratory,'" University of Chicago, June 11, 1945 (Franck report), http://www.dannen.com/decision/franck.html.

bomb with chemical weapons, which President Franklin Roosevelt had publicly denounced in 1943 as "terrible and inhumane."[45] In September 1946 Harvey Bundy, assistant to former Secretary of War Henry Stimson, wrote in a retrospective account, "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."[46] As a June 1946 report in the *New Yorker* noted, radiation effects threatened "the humaneness of American methods of warfare," and so the U.S. Army, "sensitive to such criticism, felt called upon to prove as soon as possible, that the new bombs were entitled to the same degree of respect accorded by the civilized world to rockets, mines, incendiaries, and sixteen-inch shells."[47]

These two phenomena—use and nonuse, 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 nuclear weapons, two factors in particular contributed to this process: the initial nuclear policies of President Truman, and the definition of a category of "weapons of mass destruction" by the United Nations in 1948. Truman left a mixed legacy with regard to nuclear weapons. On one hand, in terms of numbers, he eventually set the United States on the course of an immense nuclear arms buildup and made nuclear weapons the centerpiece of U.S. defense strategy.[48] On the other, he helped put in place bureaucratic and

45. Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Statement Warning the Axis against Using Poison Gas," June 8, 1943. For a detailed recounting of the effort to suppress evidence on radiation effects, see Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), pp. 40–64.

46. Draft by Harvey Bundy, "Notes on the Use by the United States of the Atomic Bomb," September 25, 1946, in Record Group 77, Groves Top Secret Docs. 20, quoted in Barton J. Bernstein, "Doing Nuclear History: Treating Scholarship Fairly and Interpreting Pre-Hiroshima Thinking About 'Radioactive Poisoning,'" *SHAFR Newsletter,* September 1996, p. 17. Bernstein suggests that this statement is probably not true, however, because officials gave little thought to radioactivity before Hiroshima, and the main factor determining blast height was blast effects. It is more revealing of their anxieties after Hiroshima. Bernstein, "Doing Nuclear History," pp. 17–36.

47. Daniel Lang, "A Reporter at Large," *New Yorker,* June 8, 1946, p. 62.

48. 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.

institutional practices, both domestically and internationally at the UN, that singled out the bomb as different from other kinds of military weapons. These early policies created a mind-set in which the taboo took root.

From the beginning, Truman argued that nuclear bombs were not ordinary weapons and made little effort to legitimate 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 U.S. president having sole authority over their use.[49] Until 1949 he was still interested in the possibility of international control of atomic energy. Truman's own abhorrence of atomic weapons, seemingly derived from his experience of having used them on Japan, appeared to play an important role here. Truman is often seen as the president who used the bomb without hesitation and never regretted his decision, but in fact, he became troubled. A day after the attack on Nagasaki, on August 10, he ordered a halt to further atomic bombings upon receiving reports and photographs of its effects. He told his cabinet, "The thought of wiping out another 100,000 people was too horrible" to contemplate.[50] Later, during the Korean War, he recoiled at the thought of using atomic weapons.[51]

Internationally, the establishment at the new United Nations of a commission tasked with pursuing nuclear disarmament 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."[52] 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

49. Steven L. Rearden, *History of the Office of Secretary of Defense,* Vol. 1: *The Formative Years, 1947–50* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), pp. 425–431.
50. Quoted in John Morton Blum, ed., *The Price of Vision: The Diary of Henry A. Wallace, 1942–1946* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), pp. 473–474. In defending his decision not to turn custody of the bomb over to the military, Truman explained, "I don't think we ought to use this thing [the atomic bomb] unless we absolutely have to. It is . . . so terribly destructive . . . 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." Quoted in David E. Lilienthal, *The Journals of David E. Lilienthal,* Vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 391.
51. Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry. S. Truman* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 304.
52. UN General Assembly resolution 1(1), January 24, 1946, in *Documents on Disarmament, 1945–1959,* Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, August 1960), p. 6.

and its disarmament bodies represented, in effect, the institutionalization of "antinuclear weapon-ism."[53] Because of this, the UN has 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 use of nuclear weapons as a first step toward a comprehensive program of disarmament.[54] U.S. 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 unaccompanied by verified disarmament.[55] The UN's disarmament agenda intersected with normative power politics to create an element of rhetorical entrapment. 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.

A second important contribution of the UN, in addition to its role as a forum for delegitimation politics, was the creation of a new conceptual 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 initially a creation of the great powers, based on language

53. *The United Nations and Disarmament, 1945–1970* (New York: United Nations, 1970). The phrase is awkward, but many nonnuclear states oppose nuclear weapons yet remain 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. 367–379.

54. 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).

55. See, for example, "Reply to Russian Proposal on Atomic Armaments," study by Policy Planning Staff, April 23, 1954, in *FRUS, 1952–54*, Vol. 2, Pt. 2 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), pp. 1389–1392.

drafted by U.S. officials. Vannevar Bush, a former dean and engineering professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and at the time director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development, drafted the language of a U.S.-U.K.-Canadian communiqué in November 1945 calling for the establishment of an international commission to make proposals for "the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction."[56] In his memoirs, Bush stated that the language was primarily intended to refer to biological weapons.[57] The same phrasing appeared in the January 1946 General Assembly resolution that created the UN Atomic Energy Commission.[58] After much deliberation, in August 1948 the UN Commission for Conventional Armaments formally 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."[59] As the UN increasingly became seized with the issue of nuclear weapons, it acted as an incubator for a discourse of weapons of mass destruction. The phrase became an important discursive category in which the taboo became anchored.

A coalition of the weak: the antinuclear weapons movement

Starting in the 1950s, a global grassroots antinuclear weapons movement began to stigmatize nuclear weapons. The public was, overall, quiescent regarding the atomic bomb until the early 1950s. In October 1949 citizens of Hiroshima violated U.S. occupation regulations and staged the first rally to openly demand abolition of the atomic bomb. In 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 500 million people all over the world. This petition was in part the result of power politics, since it was an element of the Soviet Union's strategy to delegitimize U.S. nuclear weapons, but it also held great appeal for people around the world. Then,

56. "Declaration on Atomic Energy by President Truman and Prime Ministers Atlee and King," November 15, 1945, *United States Treaties and Other International Acts Series,* No. 1504, http://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.
57. Vannevar Bush, *Pieces of the Action* (New York: William Morrow, 1970), pp. 297–298.
58. UN General Assembly resolution, 1(1).
59. "Resolution of the Commission for Conventional Armaments: Definition of Armaments," August 12, 1948, in *Documents on Disarmament, 1945–1959,* Vol. 1, p. 176.

starting in 1954, in the wake of the first U.S. 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. Taking hold primarily in North America, Western Europe, and Japan, it came to include prominent intellectuals, scientists, pacifist and church groups, housewives, and students.[60] Prominent figures included Norman Cousens, Linus Pauling, and Bertrand Russell. Both reflecting and fostering growing antinuclear public sentiment, groups such as the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy and the Committee for Non-Violent Action in the United States, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in Britain, and the transnational 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.[61]

These movements were driven by a growing fear of nuclear war and a general sense of revulsion regarding nuclear weapons. The largest protests were stimulated by fears of the negative health and environmental consequences of U.S and Soviet atmospheric nuclear weapons tests, which were scattering radioactive fallout around the globe. By July 1953 radioactive Strontrium-90, which can cause cancer and genetic defects, had been detected in animal bones and milk products.[62] The initial U.S. and Soviet tests of the powerful H-bomb, in 1954 and 1955 respectively, did much to stoke public anxieties about nuclear weapons. Calling for an end to nuclear tests, protesters held demonstrations and meetings, circulated peace petitions, ran ads in major newspapers, and, starting in 1957, engaged in civil disobedience and direct action protests including trespassing onto nuclear weapons sites and sailing into testing zones.[63] Many of the demonstrations, and especially the protest voyages, generated widespread media coverage. U.S. public opinion polls began to shift to majority support of no first use of nuclear weapons in the mid-1950s (and

60. 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. 2: *The Struggle against the Bomb* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997); 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, Calif.: Sage, 1989).

61. The activities of these groups are documented in detail in Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb;* Carter, *Peace Movements,* chap. 3; and Richard Taylor, *Against the Bomb: The British Peace Movement, 1958–1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

62. 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.

63. See Carter, *Peace Movements,* chap. 3; and Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb.*

have remained there ever since), well before most leaders entertained such thoughts.[64]

The antinuclear weapons movement contributed to the formation of a taboo in three ways: by shifting the discourse on nuclear weapons, by engaging in moral consciousness-raising, and by 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 alter the perception of nuclear weapons from primarily explosive devices to much 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 in part through the efforts of scientists and peace groups.[65] The radio appeals of Albert Schweitzer, the renowned physician and humanitarian, for example, calling for an end to nuclear testing, made a substantial contribution to mobilizing public opinion against nuclear weapons.[66] 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."[67]

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 a moral imperative. The leaders of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in Britain defined their main thrust as publicizing the moral case against nuclear warfare.[68] As Canon John Collins, a leader of the campaign, told a meeting of 5,000 people in Febru-

64. Thomas Graham, *American Public Opinion on NATO, Extended Deterrence, and the Use of Nuclear Weapons,* Occasional Paper No. 4 (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for Science and International Affairs, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1989), pp. 13–14.
65. On the activities of the scientists' Pugwash group, which held its first conference in 1957, see Joseph Rotblat, *Scientists in the Quest for Peace: A History of the Pugwash Conferences* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972). In 1995 Pugwash was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its work to address the threat of nuclear war.
66. Milton S. Katz, *Ban the Bomb: A History of SANE, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, 1957–1985* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1986), p. 116.
67. Quoted in Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb,* p. 31.
68. Taylor, *Against the Bomb,* pp. 36–42.

ary 1958, "The question of whether we arm ourselves with nuclear weapons is, perhaps, the supreme moral issue of our day."[69]

Third, antinuclear groups mobilized public opinion to put pressure on national leaders to justify and even change their states' nuclear policies. In doing so, antinuclear groups emphasized that nuclear policymaking could not simply be the prerogative of nuclear-armed governments because it legitimately engaged a global constituency. As the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy put it in an ad in the *New York Times* in November 1957, the great "challenge of the age" was to move beyond traditional interests of the nation-state to "a higher loyalty"—a loyalty "to the human community."[70]

As I document in the next section, there is strong evidence that increasing antinuclear sentiment had a direct effect on national leaders.[71] During the Korean War, and in crises in Dien Bien Phu and the Taiwan Strait in the 1950s, President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles explicitly associated negative domestic and world public opinion on nuclear weapons with an emerging taboo, which they viewed as an unwelcome constraint on their freedom to use nuclear weapons. In a National Security Council (NSC) meeting in October 1953, Dulles stated, "Somehow or other we must manage to remove the taboo from the use of these weapons."[72] Their perception of an emerging taboo appears to have played a role in inhibiting a casual resort to use of nuclear weapons during Cold War crises in Asia.[73] In turn, the nonuse of nuclear weapons during these crises—despite the United States' increasing reliance on them in its security policies—established an important behavioral precedent for nonuse.

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT FIGHTS BACK

In contrast to the antinuclear weapons politics at the global level, within U.S. policy, the trend shifted toward greater reliance on use of nuclear weapons in U.S. military planning. This period illustrates how the U.S. government engaged in a process of strategic social construction as it sought to counteract an

69. Quoted in Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb*, p. 47.
70. Reprinted in Katz, *Ban the Bomb*, p. 27.
71. See also Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb*, chaps. 6–8, 15–17; and Jeffrey Knopf, *Domestic Society and International Cooperation: The Impact of Protest on U.S. Arms Control Policies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chaps. 4, 5.
72. NSC meeting, October 7, 1953, in *FRUS, 1952–54*, Vol. 2, Pt. 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), p. 533.
73. Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo."

emerging taboo against first use of nuclear weapons by creating an alternative norm that tactical nuclear weapons should be treated as ordinary weapons.

By the spring of 1953, the U.S. State Department perceived a need to "reduce the moral stigma" associated with atomic weapons.[74] Following the Korean War, the Eisenhower administration embarked on a deliberate and intensive policy to "conventionalize" atomic weapons. This was made possible by the growing availability of tactical or small nuclear weapons. After the development by both the Soviet Union and the United States in the 1950s of thermonuclear weapons, which clearly violated all traditional notions of proportionality, the perception that strategic nuclear weapons could have no meaningful uses increased. The development of smaller, tactical nuclear weapons, however, left open the possibility that such weapons might still serve military purposes. 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 such weapons politically acceptable. This policy was driven by the presumed cost-effectiveness of tactical nuclear weapons over conventional forces and the need to make the U.S. nuclear deterrent threat more credible.[75] But its success required making nuclear weapons more normatively acceptable.

At the operational level, a new group of Joint Chiefs, worried about the precedent of nonuse set by Korea, wanted a clearer decision as to whether nuclear weapons would be available for use in war.[76] From 1953 to 1960, nuclear weapons were steadily integrated into U.S. military doctrine and all the services with the explicit goal, as stated in NSC 162/2, approved on October 29, 1953, of "treating them as conventional" and "as available for use as other munitions."[77] 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

74. Memo 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, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.
75. Gavin, *War and Peace in the Space Age*, p. 265; and Saki Dockrill, *Eisenhower's New-Look National Security Policy, 1953–61* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996), pp. 48–71.
76. This was the theme of numerous high-level meetings on nuclear weapons policy throughout this period. See memo, NSC meeting, October 13, 1953, in *FRUS, 1952–54,* Vol. 2, Pt. 1, pp. 546–547; and memo, NSC meeting, October 7, 1953, in *FRUS, 1952–54,* Vol. 2, Pt. 1, pp. 532–34.
77. "NSC 162/2," October 29, 1953, in *FRUS, 1952–54,* Vol. 2, Pt. 1, p. 593.

plans on the prompt use of nuclear weapons whether the aggressor had used them or not. As part of the implementation of this strategy, the United States transported large numbers of tactical nuclear weapons to Europe.[78]

With regard to the normative strategy, U.S. political and military leaders explicitly sought to counter an emerging stigma or taboo with alternative moral and legal interpretations of nuclear weapons, ones that emphasized their similarities, rather than differences, with other kinds of weapons. From 1953 until about 1958, in both internal and public forums, Secretary of State Dulles took the lead in pursuing a campaign to break down the "false distinction" between conventional and nuclear weapons and to promote the idea that nuclear weapons could be used conventionally. At a press conference in December 1954, in the context of the ongoing crisis with Communist China over the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu, he stated that current U.S. 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 Allied bombing of German cities in World War II. Atomic weapons merely had "greater destructive capacities" than earlier weapons, reflecting a general trend in weapons development.[79] In 1955 the United States issued its first formal statement defending the legality of use of nuclear weapons.[80]

Dulles continued to make these points in public speeches and statements over the next few years. In an article in *Foreign Affairs* in October 1957, he wrote 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."[81] In other words, Dulles was explicitly arguing that tactical nuclear weapons should no longer be categorized as weapons of mass destruction.

This history is familiar to nuclear historians, but less well appreciated is the

78. See Robert Osgood, *NATO: The Entangling Alliance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), chap. 5.
79. "Strategic Concept," State Department press release, December 21, 1954, box 332, Dulles Papers, Vol. 3, E, Seeley G. Mudd Library, Princeton, New Jersey.
80. *The Law of Land Warfare,* Department of the Army Field Manual FM 27-10 (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, July 18, 1956), http://faculty.ed.umuc.edu/?nstanton/FM27-10.htm, sec. 3, no. 35.
81. John Foster Dulles, "Challenge and Response in United States Policy," *Foreign Affairs,* Vol. 36, No. 1 (October 1957), pp. 31, 33.

extent to which Dulles's campaign was an explicitly moral strategy. It might be argued that Eisenhower and Dulles's public assertions about the conventional status of tactical nuclear weapons were aimed mainly at adversaries abroad as a way to strengthen the U.S. deterrent threat. But the evidence is overwhelming that a primary purpose was to counter growing revulsion toward nuclear weapons at home and among allied publics. A national intelligence estimate (NIE) 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."[82] U.S. leaders recognized 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 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."[83]

By the second half of the 1950s, the U.S. and other Western governments viewed the growing antinuclear movement with alarm. They 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."[84] This included disseminating pronuclear propaganda, some of it knowingly false, and deliberately suppressing information about radiation hazards and testing from the public.[85] The U.S. government's ongoing attempts to suppress knowledge and information about the effects of nuclear weapons highlighted the important role played by civil society movements as alternative sources of facts, information, and analysis.

THE TABOO PREVAILS

By the end of the 1950s, it was clear that the conventionalization policies had failed. As Eisenhower and Dulles conceded, people continued to believe that

82. NIE 100-05-55, "Implications of Growing Nuclear Capabilities for the Communist Bloc and the Free World," June 14, 1955, in *FRUS, 1955–57,* Vol. 19 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), p. 85.
83. NSC meeting, May 17, 1957, in *FRUS, 1955–57,* Vol. 19, p. 500.
84. Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb,* pp. 116, 361–370.
85. For an extensive discussion of government secrecy and mendacity regarding nuclear weapons, see Stephen Schwartz, ed., *Atomic Audit: The Costs and Consequences of U.S. Nuclear Weapons since 1940* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1998).

nuclear weapons, even tactical nuclear weapons, were different. In May 1957 Dulles stated that "he was convinced that world opinion was not yet ready to accept the general use of nuclear weapons in local conflicts." If the United States resorted to such a war, "we will . . . be cast as a ruthless military power, as was Germany earlier."[86] 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% of U.S. opinion opposes the course we have been following."[87] Eisenhower and Dulles's concession represented instrumental adaptation to the pressures of the antinuclear movement and public opinion. They did not personally share the emerging taboo. Indeed, Dulles continued to predict that "all this would change at some point in the future, but the time had not yet come, even if the United States is beginning to manufacture these smaller nuclear weapons."[88]

By August 1958 Eisenhower was reacting skeptically to enthusiastic reports about recent weapons tests from his pro-nuclear-testing advisers: "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."[89] Under pressure of mobilized public opinion, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Britain adopted a testing moratorium in 1958 and later an atmospheric test ban in 1963. Never before in history had there been a ban on testing a weapon, bolstering the special status of nuclear weapons. In July 1959 State Department officials who thought that greater conventional forces were the key to the politically acceptable use of force argued for removing the planning assumption that nuclear weapons would be considered "as conventional weapons from a military point of view."[90] Because of opposing views within the administration, this problem was still unsolved when Eisenhower left office in January 1961.

Internalization: Institutionalization and Consolidation, 1960s and 1970s

By the beginning of the 1960s, the taboo had largely prevailed over competing interpretations of nuclear weapons. As noted earlier, antinuclear-weaponism had been institutionalized in the UN disarmament machinery from an early

86. NSC meeting, May 27, 1957, in *FRUS, 1955–57,* Vol. 19, p. 500.
87. Quoted in Gaddis, "The Origins of Self-Deterrence," p. 145.
88. NSC meeting, May 27, 1957, in *FRUS, 1955–57,* Vol. 19, p. 501.
89. Quoted in Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb,* p. 182.
90. NSC meeting, July 9, 1959, NSC Series, Ann Whitman Files, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.

date. Now the nuclear taboo began to become institutionalized more broadly in multilateral and U.S.-Soviet bilateral arms control agreements and within the U.S. government itself. This was made possible by widespread acceptance of the view that nuclear weapons should be for deterrence, not use. This shift was reflected in the policies of the incoming John F. Kennedy administration in 1961, which sought to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons and develop more "flexible" conventional alternatives.[91] In contrast to the U.S. position in the 1950s, U.S. leaders began to indicate a willingness to accept some formal limitations on use of nuclear weapons.

Thus, in 1967 the United States accepted for the first time a legal restriction on its right to use nuclear weapons when it joined the Latin American nuclear weapons–free zone, first proposed by Mexico. In 1972 the United States concluded the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty with the Soviet Union. This was essentially a de facto "no strategic first use" treaty.[92] In 1978, in response to long-standing demands from nonaligned states, the United States along with other nuclear powers offered negative security assurances to nonnuclear states that were party to the nuclear nonproliferation treaty. Even though only a political commitment, it confirmed the greatly reduced range of circumstances in which U.S. leaders would consider the use of nuclear weapons.

Several factors contributed to this shift toward institutionalization and efforts to strengthen the taboo during this period. First, the emergence of a strategic stalemate between the superpowers reinforced the view that deterrence, not use, must be the appropriate role for nuclear weapons. The shock of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis contributed to the superpowers' shared recognition that security in the nuclear age could not be achieved unilaterally and that nuclear war between them would be a disaster.[93] Following the missile crisis, U.S. and Soviet leaders sought to restrain the arms race and to codify in arms control and security cooperation agreements shared understandings of the nature of security in the nuclear age. Agreements that established some norms and

91. William Kaufman, *The McNamara Strategy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964); and Philip Nash, "Bear Any Burden? John F. Kennedy and Nuclear Weapons," 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), pp. 120–140.

92. By prohibiting missile defenses, the ABM treaty required each side to leave itself completely vulnerable to attack by the other (i.e., a situation of mutual assured destruction). Such an agreement was only possible with a high level of mutual understanding that both sides were rational, and neither side intended to attack the other first.

93. Alexander L. George, Philip J. Farley, and Alexander Dallin, eds., *U.S.-Soviet Security Cooperation: Achievements, Lessons, Failures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

rules of crisis management—for example, the U.S. Soviet "hotline" (a dedicated link between the U.S. president and the Soviet leader), crisis management centers, and decisionmaking procedures for crisis behavior—implied a shared assumption that neither is intending to use nuclear weapons, or, if one is used, that it was not intentional.[94]

A second factor contributing to the institutionalization of the taboo was the emergence of a nonaligned-country majority in the UN General Assembly. Taking advantage of their new numbers, starting in 1961 the nonaligned states began to pass resolutions calling for a ban on the use of nuclear weapons and equating their use with crimes against humanity.[95] Putting the issue on the agenda forced the nuclear states to defend their nuclear policies. In the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee, the nonaligned states were relentless in pressuring the superpowers to be more forthcoming on arms control. Internal documents make clear that U.S. officials repeatedly felt obliged to "show progress" on multilateral arms control. In policy discussions, U.S. arms control officials argued strongly for a positive response to the "growing pressure" from the nonaligned states for nonuse assurances as a way to encourage wider accession to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and also to provide firmer ground for fending off more "disadvantageous limitations" on use of nuclear weapons (i.e., a no-first-use pledge).[96]

A third factor that helped to strengthen the taboo during this period was the democratization of the nuclear policymaking process in the United States. A wider range of domestic actors became involved in nuclear and security matters. Initially nuclear matters were primarily the province of the security and scientific elite. By the early 1970s, however, civilian arms control analysts, the environmental movement, and the antinuclear weapons movement were challenging both nuclear weapons policy and the civil nuclear power industry.[97] At the same time, the interests and influence of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA, established in 1961), the State Department, the

94. Bruce Russett, "The Real Decline of Nuclear Hegemony," in Ernst-Otto Czempiel and James N. Rosenau, eds., *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989), p. 188.
95. General Assembly resolutions on this topic include 1653 (XVI) of November 24, 1961; 33/71 B of December 14, 1978; 34/83 G of December 11, 1979; 35/152 D of December 12, 1980; and 36/92 I of December 9, 1981.
96. Telegram from the Department of State to the U.S. embassy in Korea, October 31, 1966, in *FRUS, 1964–68*, Vol. 11: *Arms Control and Disarmament* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997), pp. 399–400.
97. Carter, *Peace Movements*.

Bureau of the Budget, and Congress in nuclear matters increased.[98] The institutional interests of these agencies in favor of arms restraint provided a counterweight to the pronuclear views of the military and the Atomic Energy Commission. Their influence helped both to consolidate the taboo as a total ban on nuclear weapons and to preserve the line between conventional and nuclear weapons.

For example, during negotiations on the NPT in 1965–68, ACDA wanted to define nuclear weapons as encompassing all nuclear explosions. The U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, eager to promote "peaceful nuclear explosions" (or PNEs) for industrial purposes, wanted the latter to be permitted. The United States finally abandoned its PNEs program in 1974 because of questions about feasibility and environmental consequences, but also because it interfered with arms control efforts and faced declining enthusiasm from officials more concerned about reducing the appeal of nuclear weapons.[99] As Schelling has noted, "The decisive argument against PNEs was that they would accustom the world to nuclear explosions, undermining the belief that nuclear explosions were inherently evil and reducing inhibitions on using nuclear weapons."[100]

A fourth factor contributing to the taboo during this period was the strong personal objections to nuclear weapons by top political leaders in the Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson administrations. Senior-level U.S. officials such as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk found the idea of use of such weapons largely "unthinkable," for military but also for political and moral reasons.[101] Rusk wrote later that if the United States ever used nuclear weapons, "we would have worn the mark of Cain for generations to come."[102] In what must be counted as a remarkable development, both McNamara and Rusk, who harbored private doubts about the wisdom and reality of NATO's "flexible response" policy based on a threat of first use, quietly promoted a de facto no-first-use position. They made statements to the effect that they would never advise the president to use nuclear weapons first.[103]

98. Eric Mlyn, *The State, Society, and Limited Nuclear War* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1995).
99. "A Report to the President by the Committee on Nuclear Proliferation [Gilpatric committee]," January 21, 1965, in *FRUS, 1964–68,* Vol. 11, pp. 181–182; and Trevor Findlay, *Nuclear Dynamite: The Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Fiasco* (Sydney: Brassey's Australia, 1990).
100. Schelling, "The Role of Nuclear Weapons," p. 110.
101. NSC meeting, April 22, 1964, in *FRUS, 1964–68,* Vol. 1: *Vietnam, 1964,* p. 258.
102. Dean Rusk, as told to Richard Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), pp. 248, 252.
103. Marc Trachtenberg, "The Berlin Crisis," in Trachtenberg, ed., *History and Strategy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 220; and Robert McNamara, with Brian Van De Mark, *In*

They also took operational steps to reign in the flexibility of use, such as blocking the development of small nuclear weapons and implementing electronic locks (permissive action links) to prevent unauthorized launching of nuclear weapons.[104] The Vietnam War confirmed that even use of tactical nuclear weapons against a nonnuclear state would be a political disaster.[105] The nonuse of nuclear weapons during this war both reflected and reinforced the growing taboo on their use. By the time Richard Nixon entered office in January 1969, he could bluff with his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, about wanting to use a nuclear weapon on North Vietnam, but they both knew that they were constrained by the beliefs of others, even if they did not personally share the taboo.[106]

The domestic and international furor that erupted in 1977–78 over the issue of building and deploying a neutron bomb is a puzzling phenomenon that is otherwise inexplicable without reference to a strengthening taboo and its discursive effects. As Stanley Hoffmann observed, even though, in principle, the neutron bomb met all the requirements of traditional just war theory, it was rejected because of fear that it would make nuclear weapons seem more usable and thus blur the line between conventional and nuclear war.[107] A revived antinuclear movement (which had earlier faded as activists became more focused on the Vietnam War) successfully mobilized broad public opposition to the neutron bomb, leading to President Jimmy Carter's decision to leave the weapon on the drawing board, even though, objectively, the neutron bomb was hardly more inhumane than the enormously destructive warheads that filled the U.S. nuclear arsenal.[108]

The period of the 1960s and 1970s thus highlights the often contradictory

---

Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam (New York: Times Books, 1995); and Rusk, *As I Saw It*, p. 248.

104. Peter Stein and Peter Feaver, *Assuring Control of Nuclear Weapons: The Evolution of Permissive Action Links* (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for Science and International Affairs, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1987).

105. F. Dyson, R. Gomer, S. Weinberg, and S.C. Wright, *Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Southeast Asia*, Study S-266, Jason Division, report to the Army, DAHC 15-67C-0011, Washington, D.C., March 1967.

106. White House tapes, April 25, 1972, Executive Office Building Tape 332-25, Nixon Presidential Materials Project (NPMP); and 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.

107. Stanley Hoffmann, *Duties beyond Borders: On the Limits and Possibilities of Ethical International Politics* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1981), pp. 75–76. See Sherri Wasserman, *The Neutron Bomb Controversy: A Study in Alliance Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1983). The neutron bomb, or "enhanced radiation weapon," is small in size and has reduced blast and heat but releases more radiation.

108. Lawrence Wittner, *Toward Nuclear Abolition: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Move-*

path of normative development. Strategic interests helped to strengthen the taboo but also placed important limits on the degree to which it could be formalized and institutionalized. Because of U.S. extended deterrence commitments, U.S. leaders resisted demands for greater and more explicit institutionalization of a no-first-use commitment. Nevertheless, active U.S. resistance to formal, de jure commitments of nuclear nonuse went hand in hand with a slide toward what some analysts and policymakers argued was essentially a de facto no-first-use position in U.S. policy.[109]

Revival of the antinuclear movement and return of the moral debate

In the 1980s, a revived antinuclear movement began to challenge even deterrence itself. In 1981 and 1982, the largest antinuclear movement in history arose in the United States and Europe to protest the Ronald Reagan administration's seeming repudiation of arms control and pursuit of war-fighting strategies of deterrence. Millions of demonstrators took to the streets in European capitals to block planned deployments of NATO nuclear weapons, while the nuclear freeze movement swept the United States.[110] These protests ultimately helped to bring the Reagan administration back to the arms control table. Meanwhile, mounting dissatisfaction with the strategy of deterrence was reflected in renewed calls for a no-first-use policy and in renewed moral debate over nuclear weapons, spurred by a scathing moral critique of deterrence by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in October 1982.[111] In 1983 former Undersecretary of State George Ball strongly criticized U.S. policy to use nuclear weapons to defend Europe against a Soviet conventional attack, writing that a sense of revulsion, not limited to Americans, "has enveloped nuclear weapons in a rigid taboo." Any nation that "first broke the taboo by using the H-bomb" would "suffer universal condemnation."[112]

---

ment, 1971 to the Present, Vol. 3 of *The Struggle against the Bomb* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 47–50.

109. Lawrence Weiler, "No First Use: A History," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists,* Vol. 39, No. 2 (February 1983), pp. 28–34.

110. John Lofland, *Polite Protesters: The American Peace Movement of the 1980s* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1993); Robert Kleidman, *Organizing for Peace: Neutrality, the Test Ban, and the Freeze* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1993), chap. 6; and Knopf, *Domestic Society and International Cooperation,* chap. 7.

111. 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. 753–768; and National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response,* a pastoral letter on war and peace, May 3, 1983 (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1983).

112. George W. Ball, "The Cosmic Bluff," *New York Review of Books,* July 21, 1983, pp. 37–38.

These debates over the rationality and morality of deterrence affirmed and contributed to the increasing perception of the declining utility and legitimacy of nuclear weapons as instruments of war.[113] By the close of the 1980s, many welcomed the end of the Cold War as a significant opportunity to explicitly reduce reliance on nuclear weapons in national security policies and to further delegitimize them.

ANALYSIS OF THE TABOO

How and why did the nuclear taboo emerge and prevail? First, it was actively promoted by a grassroots and state-level antinuclear weapons movement, which successfully used the UN and other international forums in a discursive strategy both to maintain a categorical distinction between conventional and nuclear weapons and to stigmatize the latter as unacceptable weapons of mass destruction. Soviet antinuclear propaganda contributed to and reinforced this movement. 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. The antinuclear movement promoted both causal knowledge and principled beliefs and fostered alternative discourses of nuclear weapons. Additionally, the UN and other international organizations played a key role in disseminating antinuclear weapons norms. UN disarmament conferences, for example, such as the special sessions on disarmament in 1978 and 1982, helped greatly to stimulate popular interest in disarmament, further contributing to antinuclear public sentiment.[114]

Second, the actual practice of nonuse 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 nonuse as a total, rather than selective, prohibition on use of nuclear weapons. Third, a taboo was more consistent with escalation concerns than were the competing norms, which it in turn helped to reinforce. Fourth, the slow spread of nuclear weapons to other states, inhibited initially by the difficulty of nuclear weapons technology and later by nonproliferation policies and norms, created time for the taboo to take root.

Finally, the role of historical contingency in the development of the taboo must be taken into account. For example, if Eisenhower had been president be-

113. David S. Yost, "The Delegitimization of Nuclear Deterrence?" *Armed Forces and Society,* Vol. 16, No. 4 (Summer 1990), pp. 487–508; and Edward Luttwak, "An Emerging Post-Nuclear Era?" *Washington Quarterly,* Vol. 11, No. 1 (Winter 1988), pp. 5–15.
114. Wittner, *Toward Nuclear Abolition,* pp. 28–29.

fore Truman, the development of the taboo might have proceeded quite differently—or not at all.

BEYOND THE U.S. CASE

Although the nuclear taboo is widespread today, it is probably not universal. A critical question is whether it holds for new nuclear states and for nondemocratic states that are not accountable to public opinion. The Soviet case may provide suggestive evidence for the latter. 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, it acted as if nuclear weapons did not exist.[115] We know that Soviet leaders advocated nonuse for prudential reasons at least. They undertook a major conventional arms buildup in the late 1960s specifically to avoid having to initiate tactical nuclear strikes in a war with NATO, and thus avoid escalation and the nuclear devastation of Russia. In the second half of the 1970s, Soviet leaders sought unsuccessfully to persuade NATO to declare a no-first-use policy.[116]

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.[117] In January 2000, in response to an increased sense of threat from an enlarging NATO, Russian leaders again lowered the threshold for using nuclear weapons, stating that such weapons would be used not only in response to a nuclear attack but also in response to a conventional attack.[118] Russia, however, has retained its nonuse assurances against nonnuclear states that are party to the NPT.[119] Some evidence suggests that Russian leaders may see reliance on nuclear weapons as a temporary

115. The use or even the threat of use of nuclear weapons 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 Nuclear Strategy from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities, 1989), pp. 112–118.

116. Michael McGwire, *Military Objectives in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1987), pp. 52–55, 338.

117. Nikolai Sokov, "Why Do States Rely on Nuclear Weapons? The Case of Russia and Beyond," *Nonproliferation Review,* Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 2002), pp. 101–111.

118. "National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, January 10, 2000, excerpts at http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2000_01-02/docjf00.asp. For analysis, see Nikolai Sokov, "Russia's New National Security Concept: The Nuclear Angle," Center for Nonproliferation Studies, January 2000, rev. July 2004, http://www.nti.org/db/nisprofs/over/concept.htm.

119. Yuri Fedorov, "No First Use of Nuclear Weapons: Russia's Doctrine on Use of Nuclear Weapons," Pugwash Conference, London, England, November 15–17, 2002, http://www.pugwash.org/reports/nw/federov.htm.

measure to provide security until the country's conventional forces can be modernized and strengthened.[120]

The taboo apparently holds even in Israel, which, although democratic, has long faced an acute security situation where its survival has often been perceived to be at stake. Avner Cohen, the pathbreaking historian of the Israeli nuclear arsenal, argues that 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.[121]

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 pledged it would never use nuclear weapons against nonnuclear 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 nonnuclear states, accusing them of seeking to legitimize this practice.[122] 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 those of most other nuclear states, India's nuclear weapons "are *not* meant to deter the use and threat of use of conventional weapons, chemical weapons, biological weapons or a generalized formulation of protecting national interests any time anywhere."[123]

---

120. Nikolai Sokov, "Russia's Nuclear Doctrine," research report, Center for Nonproliferation Studies, August 2004, http://www.nti.org/e_research/e3_55a.html.

121. Avner Cohen, "Israel and the Nuclear Taboo," University of Maryland, 1999; and Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

122. "Draft Report of National Security Advisory Board on Indian Nuclear Doctrine," August 17, 1999, http://www.indianembassy.org/policy/CTBT/nuclear_doctrine_aug_17_1999.html; and Howard Diamond, "India Releases Nuclear Doctrine, Looks to Emulate P-5 Arsenals," *Arms Control Today,* No. 29, No. 5 (July/August 1999), p. 23.

123. Jasjit Singh, "Indian Draft Nuclear Doctrine: Some Reflections," September 1999, http://www.pugwash.org/reports/nw/nw7.htm (emphasis in original). Singh is a member of India's National Security Advisory Board. In 2003, however, India modified its doctrine to allow use of nuclear weapons to deter or respond to attacks with chemical and biological weapons, thus emulating a policy adopted by the United States. Harsh V. Pant, "India's Nuclear Doctrine and Com-

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 nonaggression pact.[124] However, worrisome developments include 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 regional arms race. 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."[125] These further cases suggest the prospect that the taboo could come to be held in the new nuclear countries, but they also highlight the challenges that the taboo faces.

Challenges to the Argument

It may be argued that this story of the development of the nuclear taboo is largely one of self-interest and prudence. Scott Sagan, offering a realist interpretation of the taboo, suggests that the phenomenon of nonuse is better understood as a "tradition of nonuse" rather than as the expression of a taboo, because it is best explained by prudential rather than normative concerns. Nonuse may be "due less to an internalized nuclear taboo" and more to "longer-term material factors" and to "concerns about precedent setting."[126]

Sagan's notion of a prudence-based tradition is a strong argument, but it fails to capture the profound moral dimensions of debates over nuclear weapons.[127] The historical record shows that the actors themselves have viewed the nonuse 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.

---

mand Structure: Implications for India and the World," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, September 2–5, 2004.

124. Farah Zhara, "Pakistan's Road to a Minimum Nuclear Deterrent," *Arms Control Today*, Vol. 29, No. 5 (July/August 1999), pp. 9–13.

125. Pervez Hoodbhoy and Zia Mian, "The India-Pakistan Conflict—Towards the Failure of Nuclear Deterrence," Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan, and Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, September 2002, http://www.gakushuin.ac.jp/~881791/hoodbhoy/Deterrence.html, p. 7.

126. Sagan, "Realist Perspectives on Ethical Norms and Weapons of Mass Destruction," pp. 82, 83.

127. I leave aside here the fact that there is little that is realist about the notion of precedent.

Moreover, the nuclear taboo qualifies as a taboo according to Sagan's own distinction between a tradition, which is easily disrupted by a violation, and a taboo, which is more robust.[128] Not all violations would necessarily disrupt the nuclear taboo. As the pedophilia scandals engulfing the U.S. Roman Catholic Church in 2002 showed, the taboo against pedophilia was not lessened even by revelations of multiple offenses, implicitly sanctioned by moral authority and over long periods.[129] While a use of a nuclear weapon would certainly violate the taboo, whether it disrupted it 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 use would likely have a similar impact.

A deliberate, "rational" use by one of the major nuclear powers, such as the United States, would present a hard case. Still, even here, whether the taboo was fatally disrupted would depend heavily on the circumstances of the case and how the international community responded. Was U.S. 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 it drew from it about the circumstances (if any) 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. But in the most hopeful case, these efforts could actually reinforce the taboo, rather than signal its demise.

Sagan's notion of a tradition anchored in precedent is similar to Ward Thomas's notion of "convention-dependent" norms—norms that are anchored in reciprocity and therefore last only as long as reciprocity does. Once one side breaks such a norm, the other side then feels free to (and generally does) follow suit.[130] In contrast, in the case of a taboo, violation by one party does not necessarily constitute permission for violations by others. The single use of a nuclear weapon would not necessarily constitute permission for other coun-

128. Sagan, "Realist Perspectives on Ethical Norms and Weapons of Mass Destruction," p. 76.
129. I thank Duncan Snidal for discussion on this section.
130. Thomas, *The Ethics of Destruction*.

tries to follow suit. If a rogue actor used a nuclear weapon against U.S. 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, there would also be significant international pressure 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).

These factors suggest that the nuclear taboo is indeed more of a taboo than simply a tradition. Still, the nuclear taboo is 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 even limited use of nuclear weapons can set a precedent, legitimizing their use for at least some conflict scenarios, and thus fatally disrupting the taboo.[131] 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.[132] In contrast, a violation of the pedophilia taboo can be kept secret or quarantined. The relevant collectivity is large, and there remains a sizable community 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 the reconstruction of a transformed world is vastly more challenging than the maintenance of 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, the international community would have to respond with extremely strong measures to reconstruct and strengthen it.

Some might argue that power politics largely accounts for the rise of the taboo, and that the taboo is best explained not as a weapon of the weak against

131. This point was made by Thomas Schelling in the 1950s in the context of the Korean War. Schelling, *Nuclear Weapons and Limited War* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand, 1959).
132. The category of rogue states provides an example of one such social boundary.

the strong but rather as a weapon 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. Soviet efforts to stigmatize the weapons of the West indeed helped to scare people about nuclear weapons and nuclear war. The United States depended much more heavily on nuclear weapons in its alliance and defense polices 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 (the Chinese leadership also participated actively in the 1950 Stockholm ban-the-bomb campaign, hoping that this would inhibit U.S. use of nuclear weapons in Korea).[133]

Admittedly, U.S. leaders' response to Soviet antinuclear propaganda in the 1950s was to redouble their efforts to defend the moral legitimacy of nuclear weapons, not to support a taboo on their use. Soviet efforts, however, were effective in 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, U.S. leaders' attempts 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, and the antinuclear weapons movement—that was important.

Finally, in the most skeptical view, critics may ask: how can there be a nuclear taboo when nations are actively preparing to violate it? That is, as long as nations continue to rely on nuclear weapons and prepare for their use, how is it possible to speak of a taboo?[134] It is true that if nuclear weapons were fully delegitimized and their use fully 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 nuclear states have not yet reached this end point, however, should not prevent us from noticing that they have made it part way down the path. 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 has shifted over time. The fact that nations continue to maintain nuclear arsenals—though

133. Allen S. Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision to Enter the Korean War* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), pp. 68–69.
134. For this view, see Steven P. Lee, *Morality, Prudence, and Nuclear Weapons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 319–320, 407, n. 42.

at much lower levels of alert status and 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 the way prohibitive norms work. They 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."[135] 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 shifts conceptions of both utility and legitimacy.

Rationalists might argue that 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 nuclear powers, the enforcement of the norm is thus not too difficult.[136] Additionally, the behavioral injunction of the nonuse norm—no use of nuclear weapons—is very clear and thus, rationalists might argue, the norm does not necessarily need to be written in to treaties.

There is much truth in this. But as I noted above, actors themselves have viewed the norm as more than simply a rule of prudence, and have thought about it and talked about it as a taboo, with an explicit normative dimension. 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 nonuse, but instead sought to codify and institutionalize shared understandings of nonuse in some fashion in order to stabilize deterrence, even as the United States has resisted a formal prohibition. The antinuclear weapons coalition has certainly not viewed deterrence as sufficient support for the taboo, but has pursued a codified, formal prohibition and the stigmatization of nuclear weapons. The international community has also promoted a nonproliferation norm as a route to nonuse. Thus, in addition to deterrence, other

135. Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo,* p. 122.
136. Enforcement could 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 nonnuclear developing state.

factors including law, public opinion, internalization, and reputation help to support the taboo.

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 was chosen over another. The development of the taboo has been the result of both self-interested and normative concerns, and 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 the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings over the years is perhaps explicable in terms of the general delegitimation of nuclear weapons. The number of those approving of the bombings diminished from a high of 86 percent in 1945 to slightly more than 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.[137]

The overall effect of the taboo has been to diminish the utility and legitimacy of nuclear weapons as instruments of war. More paradoxically, the taboo has also helped to stabilize, rather than undermine, mutual nuclear deterrence between the superpowers, not by any technical means but by helping to embed deterrence in a set of shared practices, institutions, and expectations. It can be argued that it is in the nuclear powers' interests to build a taboo against use of nuclear weapons in order to diminish the incentive of other states to acquire such weapons, that is, to deter nuclear proliferation. For the United States especially, it is possible to build a strong rationalist argument that, even though the U.S. government did not accept arguments for the abolition of nuclear weapons, abolition or at least a strong nuclear taboo would serve U.S. interests in an era of overwhelming U.S. conventional superiority. The problem is that promoting a taboo diminishes the utility of one's own nuclear weapons as well. Ultimately, a nuclear taboo is actually in the greatest interest of small, nonnuclear states because they have no recourse against nuclear attack other than the restraint induced by the norm. The nuclear powers, in theory, can always rely on mutual deterrence for their security.

---

137. Beatrice Heuser, *The Bomb: Nuclear Weapons in their Historic, Strategic, and Ethical Context* (London: Longman's, 2000), p. 183. It may also be partly explained by reduced racism toward the Japanese.

TERRORISTS AND THE NUCLEAR TABOO

The one group for whom the taboo may hold little meaning is terrorists. Indeed, terrorists derive their impact precisely through flouting accepted norms for political effect and defying the authority of states to control violence.[138] The attacks by al-Qaida, a fundamentalist Islamic group, on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, following a series of large-scale attacks on U.S. targets in the 1990s, substantially support this view. Evidence gathered in Afghanistan in the wake of the 2001 attacks suggested that al-Qaida, and perhaps groups linked to it, actively sought weapons of mass destruction, including chemical weapons and radiological weapons, or so-called dirty bombs.[139] The scale of the September 11 attacks, in which nearly 3,000 people were killed, along with al-Qaida's declared hostility and intent to wage large-scale terrorist violence against U.S. targets, suggests the group might have little hesitation to use weapons of mass destruction. In December 1998 interviews, al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden stated that it was a "religious duty" for Muslims to acquire weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. "How we use them is up to us," he added.[140] Nine months after September 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."[141]

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."[142] It is with respect to terrorists that the taboo may have a downside. It is precisely the possibility of transgressing a taboo for dramatic

138. Bruce Hoffmann, "Terrorists and WMD: Some Preliminary Hypotheses," *Nonproliferation Review,* Vol. 4, No. 3 (Spring/Summer 1997), pp. 45–53; and Jessica Stern, "Terrorist Motivations and Unconventional Weapons," in Peter R. Lavoy, Scott D. Sagan, and James J. Wirtz, eds., *Planning the Unthinkable: How New Nuclear Powers Will Use Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Weapons* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 202–229.

139. Graham Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: Times Books, 2004), pp. 25–26.

140. Interviews with Osama bin Laden, *Time,* December 23, 1998, and ABC News, December 24, 1998, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/who/edicts.html.

141. Quoted in Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism*, p. 12.

142. Gary A. Ackerman and Jeffery M. Bale, "Al Qa'ida and Weapons of Mass Destruction," Center for Nonproliferation Studies, December 31, 2002, http://cns.miis.edu/pubs/other/alqwmd.htm. For a valuable breakdown of the types of terrorist groups that might pursue nuclear terrorism, see Charles D. Ferguson and William C. Potter, *The Four Faces of Nuclear Terrorism* (Monterey, Calif.: Monterey Institute, Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 2004), pp. 18–23.

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.[143] 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 initially be based on the fact that it occurred at all.

A terrorist use of nuclear weapons would certainly violate the taboo, but, again, 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 points toward robust controls on fissile material and weapons or even elimination of the weapons themselves, to minimize the chances that existing weapons or nuclear material fall into the wrong hands.[144]

PROSPECTS FOR THE NUCLEAR TABOO

What are the future prospects for the taboo? How might it unravel? It could unravel in several ways. It could weaken in the future if the NPT were to come under serious challenge by the proliferation of weapons to new states, if the nuclear 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. Development of new generations of "mini-nukes" that blur the line between conventional and nuclear weapons, thus lowering the threshold for nuclear use, would be especially damaging. Even if the United States ultimately decided not to develop or to test new types of small nuclear weapons, loose talk about the potential utility of nuclear weapons could weaken the nuclear taboo. Finally, the taboo would certainly be severely damaged (even if not necessarily totally disrupted) by any use of nuclear weapons.

Two factors could put pressure on the taboo in the coming decades: (1) changes in the nature of warfare and threats, and (2) U.S. hegemony. First,

---

143. 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," Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 30, 2001, http://www.csis.org/burke/hd/reports/radiological.pdf.

144. 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.

the changing nature of warfare may create new pressures for consideration of nuclear options. The dominant threats to the security of states today are posed by nonstate actors, including terrorists, and so-called rogue states seeking access to weapons of mass destruction. Terrorists do not fight conventional wars and are 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 U.S. planners viewed nuclear weapons as the only effective means to preempt a threatened devastating rogue-actor attack with biological weapons, for example, political leaders might come under great pressure to consider use of nuclear weapons.

The U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 reinforced interest among some U.S. military planners in the idea of "bunker buster" nuclear warheads that could penetrate deeply into the earth to destroy heavily reinforced underground facilities, such as those used in the production of chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons.[145] Proponents also argue that smaller, more accurate, more "usable" nuclear weapons could reduce collateral damage and therefore would be more effective in the complex calculus of deterrence.[146] Critics argue that the development of reduced-collateral-damage nuclear weapons is not technically feasible.[147] Further, such weapons, by appearing more usable, would lower the threshold for using nuclear weapons and would accelerate the proliferation of nuclear weapons generally.[148] Should production of these new warheads go forward, this would certainly represent a step backward in

145. Walter Pincus, "U.S. Explores Developing Low-Yield Nuclear Weapons," *Washington Post*, February 20, 2003; and Paul Robinson, president and director, Sandia National Laboratories, "Pursuing a New Nuclear Weapons Policy for the 21st Century," March 22, 2001, http://www.sandia.gov/media/whitepaper/2001-04-Robinson.htm.

146. 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. 304–324. The authors are scientists at Los Alamos National Laboratory. An early seminal article was 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. 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, http://www.fcnl.org/issues/item.php?item_id=451&issue_id=48.

147. 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; and Robert W. Nelson, "Nuclear 'Bunker Busters' Would More Likely Disperse Than Destroy Buried Stockpiles of Biological and Chemical Agents," *Science & Global Security,* Vol. 12, Nos. 1–2 (January–August 2004), pp. 69–89.

148. Sidney Drell, James Goodby, Raymond Jeanloz, and Robert Peurifoy, "A Strategic Choice: New Bunker Busters Versus Nonproliferation," *Arms Control Today,* Vol. 33, No. 2 (March 2003),

terms of the taboo. Although in many respects this policy would be no different from past U.S. policies to build more usable warheads (e.g., in the 1970s), it would be worse for the taboo today because it would reverse expectations established by the U.S. decision in 1993 not to build new nuclear warheads.[149]

A second factor putting pressure on the taboo would be a new interpretation of U.S. hegemony, 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 interpretation of hegemony could give rise to a discourse that seeks to legitimize use of nuclear weapons by the United States to enforce norms against so-called barbarians. In recent years, U.S. leaders have appeared to pursue new roles for nuclear weapons in counterproliferation strategies and the fight against terrorism, while expressing active disdain for the UN and international treaties and advocating a new doctrine of preemptive use of military force to prevent acquisition of weapons of mass destruction by other actors. In this view, norms that constrain others would not necessarily apply to the United States. The United States would reserve to itself alone the right to use force, including the use of nuclear weapons, to enforce nonproliferation, nonuse, and disarmament against other actors.[150] The development of new mini-nukes would be consistent with this scenario.

Such a development would be extremely troubling. However, several factors, both realist and normative, militate against it. Concerns about setting undesirable precedents for use of nuclear weapons—the negative consequences of demonstrating their utility (realist) and legitimacy (normative)—will remain powerful restraints for many U.S. leaders. Further, the identity mechanism operating in the taboo is that "we" do not use nuclear weapons—because of who we are and what our values are, because civilized states do not do this, 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, U.S. identity and self-conceptions would have to shift

---

p. 8; and Bruce G. Blair, "We Keep Building Nukes for All the Wrong Reasons," *Washington Post,* May 25, 2003, p. B01.

149. 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.

150. *U.S. Nuclear Posture Review,* January 8, 2002, http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm. According to an official in George W. Bush's administration, "My ideal number of nuclear weapons states is one." Quoted in Bill Keller, "The Second Nuclear Age," *New York Times Magazine,* May 4, 2003, p. 94.

significantly. A U.S. leadership emphasizing the role of power rather than the rule of law could certainly put pressure on this identity, while a catastrophic attack on the United States could provide a powerful motivation 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 in its efforts to relegitimize nuclear weapons.

Today the taboo is reflected not simply in discourse; it has also been internalized to varying degrees in policy and institutions, international agreements, and moral categories. Thus a shift in discourse alone would not necessarily immediately dissolve the taboo, but over an extended period, such a shift could erode it. For those who might favor a Leviathan approach to the U.S. role in the world, the problem is that, in the end, it will be impossible to 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.[151]

Conclusion

This analysis shows that the rise of a nuclear taboo in world politics and in U.S. policy cannot simply be attributed straightforwardly to superpower self-interest, but instead is the result of a much broader set of factors, including importantly, a significant role for nonstate actors and antinuclear public opinion. Once a situation of mutual capacity to inflict unacceptable damage developed in the late 1950s, a primary factor driving the strengthening of the taboo was superpower self-interest. But in the critical early period of the nuclear era, when important precedents of nonuse were set, and continuing in some fashion through to the present, a global grassroots antinuclear weapons movement and nonnuclear states have played a critical role in subjecting nuclear weapons to criticism and castigating them as unacceptable for use. Given that use was what was institutionalized in the U.S. military, the development of the taboo is all the more remarkable.

This case thus adds to a growing body of research that finds that transna-

151. In my view, the belief that other states would accept the United States as a global hegemon exempt from the rules is implausible.

tional movements and less powerful states have played an important role in global norm creation.[152] They are often greatly facilitated in this endeavor by the platform—or bullhorn—provided by international organizations. The case also suggests that norms do not need to be formalized to have an effect, and that there may be some virtues in a de facto norm. The "demands" for a stronger taboo, however, have always been greater than what the nuclear powers have been willing to deliver. Here, the taboo runs up against realism. The absence of a formal legal prohibition on nuclear weapons stems primarily from the fact that the great powers do not want it. But having a de facto norm has helped to stabilize and legitimize deterrence between the nuclear states, even as it has undermined deterrence between nuclear and nonnuclear states.

The analysis here suggests at least two important areas for future research. One is how the taboo has been accepted and internalized in other countries, especially nondemocracies, 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 the complex and mixed relationship between democracy and nuclear weapons, including the mixed record of democratic control over nuclear arsenals.

What kinds of 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 a ratified comprehensive test ban would be important steps in this direction. States should also increase the likelihood that alternatives will be found in crises that threaten nuclear first use. The continued categorization of nuclear weapons as unacceptable weapons of mass destruction will be essential, and developments that would tend to erode this, such as the building of new generations of very small nuclear weapons, should be avoided. Institutional approaches or agreements for strengthening inhibitions against use or threats of use may be possible, such as an agreement by all states that there be no first use of nuclear weapons without prior consultation with the United Nations Security Council.[153]

---

152. See, for example, Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999); and Richard Price, "Reversing the Gun Sights: Transnational Civil Society Targets Landmines," *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Summer 1998), pp. 613–644.

153. George H. Quester and Victor A. Utgoff, "Toward an International Nuclear Security Policy," *Washington Quaterly*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Autumn 1994), pp. 5–18.

Recently, some analysts have suggested that nuclear weapons should be categorized separately from chemical and biological weapons because nuclear weapons are much more lethal, and because the latter two are not really weapons of mass destruction.[154] The nuclear taboo, however, benefits from its discursive association with formally banned weapons. For example, once the first top leader is subjected to trial as a war criminal for using chemical 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 used nuclear weapons.[155]

In addition, the analysis suggests the importance of democratizing domestic policymaking on nuclear weapons. This includes support for civilian nuclear analysts and arms control groups, and other groups in civil society, as well as public education about nuclear weapons. It also suggests the creation of government bureaucracies mandated with institutionalized interests in arms restraint, along with greater domestic transparency about a nation's nuclear matters. Democracy, however, 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.[156]

One of the policy implications of this argument is that it will be easier to ban the use of nuclear weapons than to ban the weapons themselves. The negotiations on nuclear disarmament that have been going on under the auspices of the United Nations since the 1950s have been far more effective in contributing to the normative opprobrium against nuclear weapons than in reducing their numbers. Although complete nuclear disarmament will undoubtedly continue to be the goal of many nonnuclear states, it is probably unlikely to happen, in part because of fears of "breakout" (secret rearming) by the nuclear powers.[157] It will be politically easier to pursue strong restrictions and prohibitions on use.

As physicist Alvin Weinberg has observed, today the nuclear taboo is not only a political phenomenon but is also becoming more deeply embedded in

154. 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.
155. "Bush Sees an 'Urgent Duty' to Act on Iraq," *New York Times,* October 8, 2002, p. A13.
156. Schwartz, *Atomic Audit.*
157. Charles L. Glaser, "The Flawed Case for Nuclear Disarmament," *Survival,* Vol. 40, No. 4 (Spring 1998), pp. 112–128.

our cultural practices. The memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is being "sanctified" by being turned into a religious tradition with the creation of commemorative monuments and markers (the Peace Park in Hiroshima and the Bell at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in the United States) and practices (journeys to these pilgrimage sites and ceremonies marking Hiroshima Day). Such sites and practices keep alive the memory of the atomic bombings and the need to prevent the use of nuclear weapons ever again.[158] This "sanctification of Hiroshima" further reinforces the nuclear taboo and, by associating it with religious practices, embeds it in deeper cultural meanings and our identities.

158. Alvin M. Weinberg, "The Bell and the Bomb," *Cosmos Journal* (1997), http://www.cosmosclub.org/journals/1997/index.html; and Alvin M. Weinberg, "The Sanctification of Hiroshima," Oak Ridge Associated Universities, November 1995.