The Nuclear Taboo

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

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The Nuclear Taboo

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Abbreviations

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