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978-0-521-81886-5 - The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945

Nina Tannenwald

Excerpt

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1 Introduction: the tradition of nuclear non-use

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

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

Thomas C. Schelling, 2002

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The unexpected tradition of non-use

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The challenge of explaining non-use

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁴ Mueller, *Retreat From Doomsday*.

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

The nuclear taboo

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What makes it a taboo?

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

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

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

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

²⁴ Steiner, *Taboo*, p. 112.

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