
The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use

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We have recently witnessed the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of 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 still lack a full understanding of how this tradition arose and is maintained and of its prospects for the future. The widely cited explanation is deterrence, but this account is either wrong or incomplete. Although an element of sheer luck no doubt has played a part in this fortuitous outcome, this article argues that a normative element must be taken into account in explaining why nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945. A normative prohibition on nuclear use has developed in the global system, which, although not (yet) a fully robust norm, has stigmatized nuclear weapons as unacceptable weapons of mass destruction. Without this normative stigma, there might have been more “use.”¹ This article examines this phenomenon in the context of the nuclear experience of the United States.

This investigation is motivated by several empirical anomalies in the conventional account—deterrence—of the non-use of nuclear weapons since 1945. First is the non-use of nuclear weapons in cases where there was no fear of nuclear retaliation, that is, where the adversary could not retaliate in kind. This anomaly 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 tonnage equivalent to dozens of Hiroshima bombs) and in the 1991 Persian

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1. 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, making threats, and alliance relations.

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Gulf War. Fear of retaliation also does not account for why Britain did not use nuclear weapons in the Falklands, nor for why the Soviet Union did not resort to nuclear weapons to avoid defeat in Afghanistan.

A second anomaly emerges when we turn the question around and ask why nuclear weapons, supposedly fearsome deterrent weapons, have not deterred attacks by non-nuclear states against nuclear states. China attacked U.S. forces in the Korean War, North Vietnam attacked U.S. forces in the Vietnam War, Argentina attacked Britain in the Falklands in 1982, and Iraq attacked U.S. forces and Israel in the 1991 Persian 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.² 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 U.S. security guarantees extend the U.S. nuclear umbrella to these non-nuclear states are inadequate, since some of these non-nuclear (but nuclear-capable) states lack U.S. guarantees.³

I argue that these patterns cannot be accounted for without taking into account the development of a normative prohibition against nuclear weapons. This norm is essential to explaining why nuclear weapons have remained unused and to accounting for their special status as “taboo” weapons.⁴ Its effect has been to delegitimize nuclear weapons as weapons of war and to embed deterrence practices in a set of norms (regulatory and constitutive) that stabilize and restrain the self-help behavior of states. The larger issue is how conventions (norms, taboos) affect military capabilities and thus the practice of self-help in the international system.⁵

My main rival hypothesis in this article is a realist account, which claims that the non-use of nuclear weapons can be explained solely on the basis of material factors. A structural realist argument holds that norms are simply a function of power and interests and thus produce no independent analytical leverage.⁶ Realists would deny that a taboo exists or that, at minimum, it can be usefully 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 can better account for nuclear non-use than one without it. I do not claim that the taboo is the sole explanation for non-use nor that it explains most of non-use. Rather, in contrast to realism, which claims that material

2. Müller 1991.

3. For example, states like Sweden and Switzerland. Sagan 1997.

4. Throughout the article, “non-use” should be understood as referring to the issue of first use of nuclear weapons only.

5. Katzenstein 1996.

6. See Mearsheimer 1994; and Krasner 1995.

forces matter completely, I argue that the taboo is a necessary element in explaining the historical pattern of non-use. It does not simply account for the “residual variance,” however. Norms 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. My primary question is thus how the taboo operates, and I show that the taboo has more effects than both realists and rationalists recognize. The origin of the taboo is an extremely important issue, but for reasons of space and analytical focus, I do not probe it here.⁷

The article proceeds as follows: First, I introduce the nuclear taboo, discuss three types of normative “effects,” and compare the taboo explanation to the dominant materialist explanations. I then evaluate the role of the taboo empirically by analyzing and comparing U.S. decision making on nuclear use in four historical cases: Japan, 1945; the Korean War, 1950–53; the Vietnam War during the 1960s; and the 1991 Persian Gulf War. I conclude by suggesting some ways that the analysis might be extended as well as implications of the argument for both theory and policy.

The Nuclear Taboo

It is widely acknowledged today among nuclear policy analysts and public officials that a “nuclear taboo” exists at the global level. The taboo is associated with widespread popular revulsion against nuclear weapons and widely held inhibitions on their use. Prominent analysts and theorists of deterrence, such as George Quester, Thomas Schelling, and Bruce Russett, have noted this phenomenon and suggest that it has played a role in explaining non-use.⁸ As Schelling first noted thirty years ago, the special status of nuclear weapons is something we have come to take for granted today.⁹ No one today thinks nuclear weapons are “just another weapon.” Whereas once countries such as Sweden, Switzerland, and Australia assumed they would acquire nuclear weapons as simply the latest in modern weapons technology, few think this way today.¹⁰

By *global level* I refer to the collective level of the international community. The taboo is a systemic phenomenon. The shift in international attitudes toward nuclear weapons from 1945 to the present is well documented based on global public opin-

7. Questions of origins and effects of norms can indeed be separated, since the functioning of a norm may differ from historical explanations for its rise. For example, the rise of the taboo historically has not been a simple function of the interests of the nuclear powers. Indeed, one of the most interesting features of its development is that it has been driven significantly by domestic and international grassroots peace and antinuclear movements, and the norm has developed *despite* consistent and long-standing official U.S. resistance to it. Ultimately, a nuclear non-use norm is in the greatest interest of small, non-nuclear states, since they have no recourse against nuclear attack other than the restraint induced by the norm. The nuclear powers, in principle, can always rely on deterrence for their security. See Tannenwald, in process.

8. See Quester 1991; Schelling 1994; and Russett 1989. See also Gaddis 1987a; Bundy 1988; Herring 1991; Müller 1991; and Paul 1995.

9. Schelling [1960] 1980, 257–66, and 1994.

10. Quester 1991.

ion, disarmament politics at the United Nations and other multilateral fora, and diplomatic statements in, and repeated resolutions of, the UN General Assembly calling for a ban on nuclear weapons. The decreasing legitimacy of nuclear weapons is not simply reflected in public opinion but has become institutionalized in an array of international agreements and regimes, both multilateral and bilateral, which together circumscribe the realm of legitimate nuclear use and restrict freedom of action with respect to nuclear weapons. These include nuclear weapons free zones, arms control agreements, “negative security assurances,” and the general laws of armed conflict.¹¹ Although there is no explicit legal prohibition outlawing nuclear weapons use, and its legality remains in dispute, the trend line of decreasing legitimacy and circumscribed legality is clear.¹² Together, these agreements enhance the normative presumption against nuclear use, and, by multiplying the fora where a decision to use nuclear weapons would have to be defended, substantially increase the burden of proof for any such decision.¹³

The nuclear taboo refers to a *de facto* prohibition against the use of nuclear weapons. The taboo is not the behavior (of non-use) itself, but rather the normative belief about the behavior. In this article, 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. A taboo is a particularly forceful kind of normative prohibition that, according to the anthropological and sociological literature, deals with “the sociology of danger.”¹⁴ It is concerned with the protection of individuals and societies from behavior defined or perceived to be dangerous and typically refers to something that is not done, said, or touched.

I use the term *taboo* because it has often been used by political and military leaders themselves to refer to this normative phenomenon. However, a caveat is in order. The word *taboo* is generally associated with a stronger and more developed normative prohibition than the word *norm* and connotes such qualities as absoluteness, unthinkability, and taken-for-grantedness. It also involves expectations of awful consequences or sanctions to follow in the wake of a taboo violation. In its early days, the norm of nuclear non-use was clearly not a taboo in these senses, even though some decision makers referred to it as such. It has taken on more “taboo”-like qualities as it has developed over time. The fact that the word *taboo* is used, however, sheds important light on how its users perceive the world.

11. For example, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT, 1968); the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (1996); treaties that create nuclear weapons-free zones in Latin America, Africa, the South Pacific, on the moon, and the seabed; and U.S.–Soviet/Russian nuclear arms control agreements. Fujita 1988. “Negative security assurances” are declarations by the nuclear powers that they will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states party to the NPT. Bunn 1997.

12. In a 1996 advisory opinion, the World Court found that the use or threat of nuclear weapons is “generally” unlawful but said it could not “definitively” conclude whether it would be unlawful in extreme circumstances of self-defense if the survival of the state were at stake. United Nations 1996.

13. Müller 1993.

14. Steiner 1956, 21.

Three Normative Effects

I analyze the role of the taboo in terms of three kinds of normative effects: regulative (or constraining), constitutive, and a subset of constitutive effects I call “permissive.” It is commonly noted that there are different kinds of norms and rules.¹⁵ However, since any given norm can operate in different ways, and may have multiple effects, it is analytically useful to think in terms of different kinds of effects of norms. Regulative effects, emphasized by rationalist approaches to international relations, refer to how norms constrain or “regulate antecedently existing activities.”¹⁶ In contrast, constitutive effects, emphasized by constructivist perspectives, refer to how rules and norms, through actor practices, create or define forms of behavior, roles, and identities.¹⁷

The primary regulative effect of the taboo is the injunction against using nuclear weapons first. It constrains a behavior (nuclear use) that would exist whether or not there were any rules about it. But the taboo also exhibits several constitutive effects: on the categories actors use to understand weapons and on the identity of a “civilized” state. Categories provide important boundaries with implications for both behavior and identity. The taboo helps to define a category of unacceptable “weapons of mass destruction,” distinguished from unproblematic “conventional” weapons that are, in contrast, viewed as legitimate and usable. The taboo has also become part of a broader discourse—a set of practices—of the society of states defining what it means to be a “civilized” member of the international community. One of the requirements for being a “civilized” state is participation in the regulation of warfare—a practice that began among European states during the nineteenth century.¹⁸ The nuclear taboo has become part of the contemporary discourse of “civilization,” itself a much more deeply embedded or highly “taken-for-granted” norm than the nuclear taboo. It is evoked in such phrases as were used in the Persian Gulf War to demonize Saddam Hussein: “only a barbarian would use nuclear weapons.”

Finally, permissive effects—a subset of constitutive effects—are secondary, indirect, or “shadow” effects, often unintended consequences of the operation of a norm. By this notion I refer to the way norms—particularly taboos—by serving as focal points, selectively divert our normative gaze. By defining categories of weapons in certain ways, such as “weapons of mass destruction,” and drawing our attention to associated normative injunctions, they may obscure other “facts” about the world and shield other practices from attention. Thus one effect of the nuclear taboo, for example, may be to shield non-nuclear weapons from normative opprobrium.

This article thus takes the rationalist account of norms as its starting point but extends it in a constructivist direction by emphasizing a broader range of normative effects and the multiple effects of a single norm. Although the causal nature of norms, particularly the matter of constitutive “causality,” is currently an issue of some de-

15. Kratochwil 1989.

16. See Searle 1995, 27; Keohane 1984; and Elster 1989.

17. See Dessler 1989; Kratochwil 1989; Adler 1997; and Wendt 1999.

18. Gong 1985.

bate in the field, the important point is that both constitutive and causal effects influence outcomes, though in different ways.¹⁹

While a full accounting would require examining the origins and operations of the taboo in a variety of countries, the United States presents the most interesting case of nuclear non-use. It has seriously considered or threatened the use of nuclear weapons on more occasions than any other nuclear power, it has relied on nuclear weapons most heavily in its defense and alliance policies, it has steadily resisted any specific legal prohibition on first use, and, of course, it is the only country to have actually used nuclear weapons in war.²⁰

Alternative Explanations: Materialism Versus the Taboo

The question of why nuclear weapons were not used during the Cold War is a difficult one, because the causes of “nonevents” are notoriously difficult to pin down. A number of factors complicate it, 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.²¹

Nevertheless, although a variety of explanations have been offered, the dominant explanations are materialist. The most widely accepted account, rational deterrence, is important but incomplete. It offers a compelling account, based on rational self-interest—fear of nuclear retaliation—of why the superpowers did not use nuclear weapons against each other after the late 1950s or so (when the United States began to become vulnerable to Soviet nuclear retaliation). However, it does not account for the empirical universe of cases of nuclear non-use mentioned at the outset. Further, as critiques from psychology have identified, “deterrence” itself is problematic.²² Like all rationalist theory, deterrence theory takes interests as exogenously given.²³ Doing so, however, leaves it fundamentally unable to explain the criteria for “deterrence,” that is, what goes into leaders’ calculations of “unacceptable costs.” Although nuclear weapons might seem to be self-evident deterrent weapons, even the combined 20,000 warheads of the U.S. and Israeli nuclear arsenals failed to deter Iraq’s attacks on Kuwait, Israel, and U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia in 1991. In order to determine “what deters” and how deterrence “works,” the identity and interests of actors, and the normative context, must be examined.

A second materialist but “nondeterrence” account moves outside deterrence theory to identify a broader set of material factors that would account for non-use, including

19. See Wendt 1999; Ruggie 1998; and Kratochwil 1989.

20. The Soviet Union, in contrast, relied on large conventional forces as well as nuclear weapons during the Cold War, whereas China has had a “no first use” nuclear policy from the beginning.

21. These are discussed by Gaddis 1987b; and Jervis 1989a.

22. See Mercer 1996; Jervis 1989b; and Lebow and Stein 1989.

23. Achen and Snidal 1989.

such factors as fear of long-term consequences, certain kinds of public opinion constraints, and an array of domestic or internal considerations: lack of organizational readiness, shortage of bombs, shortage of delivery vehicles, and so on.²⁴ This explanation improves on the traditional deterrence account because it can potentially account for those cases of non-use where mutual deterrence did not apply—that is, where the adversary did not possess nuclear weapons.

In contrast to these materialist accounts stands a “norms” or taboo explanation. It introduces a normative element into the equation, holding that “norms” (as well as “non-norms”) factors may account for non-use.

To evaluate empirically the autonomous influence of the taboo in accounting for non-use as compared to a purely materialist account, I set up a competitive test. One analytical goal would be to establish what proportion of the “outcomes” is explained by “norms” and what proportion is explained by material factors. This would be the approach taken by neoliberal institutionalism, a view quite sympathetic to the role of norms.

From a more constructivist perspective, however, the competitive test has limitations. One problem is that the supposed “non-norms” factors may not in fact be independent variables. They may only become politically salient because of the prior existence of a taboo or norm, however strong or weak. For example, public opinion or factors such as “readiness” may not be unrelated to a prior or emerging taboo, which influenced the framing of choices at an earlier period. Second, the competitive test approach assumes that one can easily distinguish between “material” and “normative” factors. But this may not always be the case. Public opinion, for instance, is an ambiguous area. Depending on its degree of normative content and how it figures in the analysis, public opinion may be seen as an element of either hypothesis. While public opinion may enter as a factor into the self-interested cost-benefit calculations of decision makers, it may also provide a vehicle for the insertion of moral and other values into the policy process.²⁵ In the taboo case, antinuclear public opinion was closely linked historically to the emergence of the taboo, in part because leaders themselves interpreted it as such.

Clearly, any sufficient explanation must synthesize material and normative factors, and a full account entails all three explanations: deterrence, “nondeterrence” material factors, and the taboo—though not, of course, equally or necessarily in all cases. But because of the possible lack of independence among variables, it might be mistaken to treat the taboo as if it simply captured the residual variance that other factors leave unexplained. Realists tend to think like rationalists: they focus on constraining effects of norms and tend to see material factors and norms as totally distinct and independent entities. This is often the case. But we should also recognize that there are other effects of norms in which so-called material factors cannot be understood independently of the prevailing normative context. Thus, although the taboo

24. Gaddis 1987a.

25. McElroy 1992.

is not the sole explanation for non-use (non-use has occurred for other reasons), it is essential to explaining the overall pattern of non-use.²⁶

The evidence I draw on consists of the U.S. documentary record on decision making on nuclear use, including recently declassified archival sources, memoirs of participants, secondary historical works, and, where possible, interviews with policymakers. What kind of evidence would discriminate between the materialist and taboo explanations? A purely materialist explanation would expect to see decision making about nuclear use reflect cost-benefit-type thinking in terms of “non-norms” factors, such as fear of escalation, global war, or long-term retaliation; the military utility of nuclear weapons; weapons availability; and the costs and feasibility of nuclear weapons and their alternatives. Decision making would not reflect any “taboo” factors. Additionally, it would evaluate the nuclear option in terms of consequences for U.S. interests, not in terms of whether it was inherently “right” or “wrong.”

In contrast a taboo explanation would expect to see explicit reference to a norm or what I call “taboo talk.” This refers, in the first instance, to explicit reference to a perceived taboo. Evidence could take two forms: first, the taboo could enter the decision-making process instrumentally in the form of a perceived “cost,” manifesting itself as an exogenously given constraint on decision making. Second, one would also expect to see non-cost-benefit-type reasoning along the lines of “this is simply wrong” in and of itself (because of who we are, what our values are, “we just don’t do things like this,” “because it isn’t done by anyone,” and so on). This reasoning reflects a “logic of appropriateness” rather than a “logic of consequences.” Here the taboo becomes more widespread and pervasive. It is no longer attached only to actors who hold it, thereby appearing to decision makers primarily as an appeasement of others’ views. Rather, it becomes similar to *jus cogens* in international law, where the sentiment is simply noted as being “out there” and “taken for granted.”²⁷ In the first case, the taboo is operating instrumentally; in the second, substantively. These are two different ways norms operate, reflecting differing degrees of robustness of the taboo.²⁸ At an even greater level of “taken-for-grantedness,” the taboo might become a shared but “unspoken” assumption of decision makers.

Taboo talk is not just “cheap talk,” as realists might imagine. Although we should always be alert to the incentives actors have to misrepresent their motives, in this case decision makers themselves believed they were constrained by a taboo—including those who objected to it as an unwelcome constraint on their behavior and sought to do away with it. The fact that people talk and act as if they believe a taboo exists is important evidence into what orients—and constrains—behavior. The notion of “burden of proof,” which indicates where the normative presumptions in a discourse lie, provides a useful measuring device.²⁹ Norms shape expectations and

26. Sayre-McCord 1996.

27. *Jus cogens* is Latin for “compelling law” and refers to norms of general international law so fundamental to the overriding interests and values of the international community that they may not be derogated from. Hannikainen 1988.

28. Finnemore and Sikkink 1998.

29. Gaskins 1992.

thus shift the burden of proof in arguments about responsibilities, grievances, and legitimate courses of action.³⁰ The burden of proof for choosing a nuclear option has increased over time, and not merely because of questions of utility. In general, we can expect the burden of proof to become more demanding as the normative effects of the taboo become deeper and more widespread over time.

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

Despite the overlapping predictions, and support for both explanations in the empirical record, the taboo explanation is ultimately more powerful because it captures more of the evidence. As is evident in the following discussion, the material constraints explanation cannot account for all the “taboo talk” in the historical record on decision making on nuclear use. Further, the taboo argument does not exclude material interests, whereas the materialist explanation does exclude norms. Normative explanations do not claim that material factors do not matter; rather, that they are often indeterminate and are socially interpreted. But, in contrast, the materialist explanation does claim that non-use can be accounted for solely or primarily on the basis of material factors.

In the remainder of the article I illustrate the role of the taboo in four cases—Japan in 1945, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Persian Gulf War. These are good cases for several reasons: they include cases of both “use” and “non-use” (the dependent variable varies), and they span the Cold War, reflecting representative periods (before, during, and after), thus facilitating the analysis of normative change over time. They are also all cases in which mutual nuclear deterrence did not operate. U.S. leaders could have used nuclear weapons had they wished to without fear of nuclear retaliation. I focus on nondeterrence cases here on the assumption that if we can explain non-use on the basis of mutual assured destruction (MAD), we need not care about a taboo (though elsewhere I expand the analysis into “deterrence” itself). U.S. leaders used nuclear weapons on Japan to end World War II, contemplated their use to avoid defeat or stalemate in Korea (the most serious crisis of the early Cold War), but gave little serious consideration to their use during the Vietnam War or against non-nuclear Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War.

30. Bilmes 1986, 174.

I highlight in these cases the role of a nuclear taboo in constraining use of nuclear weapons, and how the “burden of proof” with regard to nuclear use has shifted across time. The four cases reflect different stages of the taboo. In 1945, nuclear weapons were new, and no nuclear taboo existed. However, a long-standing prior tradition existed deriving from just war theory, ethical concerns, international law, national manuals of military conduct, and state practice regarding necessity and proportionality in the use of force. During the Korean War, a norm was beginning to emerge and operated mostly instrumentally, although some decision makers harbored moral qualms about using nuclear weapons. By the time of the Vietnam War, and even more so during the Gulf War, the taboo operated at a more constitutive or “taken-for-granted” level. As would be expected, constraining effects were visible earlier in the Cold War, whereas deeper constitutive and permissive effects became more prominent later on as the taboo developed and began to become institutionalized. Constitutive effects were only beginning to emerge in the Korean case, visible, for example, in the contested categorization of nuclear weapons as “unconventional” weapons. By the time of the 1991 Gulf War, nuclear weapons had become solidly established as unacceptable “weapons of mass destruction,” giving rise to some secondary or permissive effects on perceptions of the relative acceptability of other forms of destruction. Such phenomena point to deeper effects of the taboo later in time.

Four Cases: Use and Non-use

Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Legitimacy of the Bomb

In the U.S. decision to use atomic bombs to end the war against Japan in 1945, the burden of proof was clearly on those few officials who harbored doubts about the wisdom of using the new weapon.³¹ Although the decision itself remains controversial, it is clear that in 1945, unlike today, no special stigma attached to nuclear weapons. As the historical record indicates, in 1945 most generals and politicians were little troubled by atomic weapons, for two reasons. First, the atomic bombings were simply an extension of strategic bombing during a war that had substantially elevated the scale of destruction, flattening great cities in Europe and Japan. By the time atomic bombs were used, World War II had created a seamless web between nuclear and conventional bombing, and between “tactical” and “strategic” bombing.³² Second, as historian Barton Bernstein has argued, atomic weapons posed no great moral problems for decision makers, because the accumulated barbarities of World War II—incendiary bombings of civilians, the brutal fighting on Okinawa—had already swept away the traditional moral codes and laws of war.³³

For President Truman and his advisors in 1945, there was thus no compelling reason not to use the bomb. As Truman’s secretary of war Henry Stimson later wrote,

31. On the 1945 decision, see Sayle 1995; Takaki 1995; Bernstein 1995; and Sherwin 1977.

32. On the erosion of moral constraints on strategic bombing, see Schaffer 1985.

33. Bernstein 1995.

the atomic bomb seemed “as legitimate as any other of the deadly explosive weapons of modern war.”³⁴ Although some scientists and even a few officials expressed misgivings about the moral implications of using the bomb without warning, their concerns did not find a receptive audience. The decision on use was almost a non-decision, the outcome of a process set in motion much earlier by the expectation that any available atomic weapon would be used on Germany. When the war against Germany ended earlier, most political and military leaders who knew about the bomb assumed that it would be used on Japan as soon as it was ready.

Thus in World War II, the burden of proof was clearly on those who opposed using atomic weapons. Given the horrors of the war, the desire to end it as quickly as possible while minimizing further American casualties, the momentum of the bomb project, and the general perception that atomic weapons were as legitimate as any other weapon, there was no argument with great enough weight to stop their use.³⁵ After the war, 80 percent of Americans surveyed supported use of the atomic bombs, and moral arguments were invoked in justification.

The Korean War: The Emerging Taboo

Only five years later, in the Korean War, political and military leaders clearly felt some inhibitions when considering nuclear options. As the first case of overt aggression against a U.S. ally in the postwar period, the North Korean attack on South Korea in June 1950 could well have provided an occasion for the United States to use atomic weapons. Truman presided over the war at the time of greatest military setbacks for the United States and its allies, when outright defeat or withdrawal was a likely possibility. Later, in spring 1953, Eisenhower considered using tactical atomic weapons as a way to force an end to the stalemated war. The Soviet Union had tested its first atomic weapon in 1949 but had little capability to threaten the United States. Given the widespread perception of U.S. and Western conventional weakness, and the fact that nuclear weapons had become the centerpiece of U.S. defense strategy after 1948, there was no necessary reason to assume that they would not be used to defend U.S. interests. Indeed, at least one U.S. military leader fully expected this would be the case.³⁶

The North Korean attack and then the surprise entry of Chinese troops into the war at the end of November 1950 threatened a U.S.–UN military disaster. Truman and his advisers discussed atomic weapons off and on throughout the first year of the war. But although they took at least minimal steps to deploy atomic bombers at staging areas during the war, they eventually privately ruled out using such weapons in Korea.³⁷ Truman’s generals were divided, with commanders in the field and weapons specialists in the Pentagon more interested in atomic options than his top military advisers, the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Joint Chiefs identified several military reasons against using atomic weapons: the stockpile of bombs was too small to risk their use

34. Henry Stimson, “The Decision to Use the Bomb,” *Harper’s*, February 1947, 98.

35. Bundy 1988, 52.

36. Taylor 1972, 134.

37. Dingman 1988.

in Asia rather than in Europe, the core security interest of the United States, they felt few useful targets existed in Korea, and they feared that atomic weapons might not be decisive, thus diminishing their deterrent effect elsewhere.³⁸ These views were not uniformly shared among generals, however, as others argued that indeed Korea did present suitable targets for tactical use of nuclear weapons.

But additionally, the public horror of atomic weapons presented a serious political obstacle. Even before China entered the war, State Department studies suggested that foreign governments and peoples would strongly oppose use of atomic weapons. The bomb had come to have a special horrifying status. An officer in the State Department's Bureau of Far East Affairs warned in November 1950 that even though "the military results achieved by atomic bombardment may be *identical* to those attained by conventional weapons, the effect on world opinion will be vastly different. The A-bomb has the status of a peculiar monster conceived by American cunning, and its use by us, in whatever situation, would be exploited to our serious detriment."³⁹ When in late November 1950 Truman inadvertently left the impression at a press conference that atomic weapons were "under active consideration," a political and diplomatic furor ensued. British prime minister Clement Attlee rushed to Washington for anxious discussions on nuclear use policy. Reports followed from Third World officials suggesting that the United States was "willing to use mass destruction methods on Asians but not on Europeans."⁴⁰ At the end of November 1950 the Joint Chiefs advised that using nuclear weapons was inappropriate except under the most compelling military circumstances, citing, in addition to battlefield factors, world opinion and the risk of escalation.⁴¹ Secretary of State Dean Acheson thought that the Chinese might not act "rationally" if atomic weapons were used.⁴²

Although fear of provoking some form of Soviet intervention initially acted as a constraint on expanding the war, U.S. leaders uniformly thought that the Soviet Union would not risk global war at this time and would wait until it was in a stronger position vis-à-vis the United States. As the war wore on and it became clear that the Soviets were being quite cautious in their behavior, U.S. leaders could entertain relatively aggressive policies.⁴³ If Truman had chosen to expand the war outside Korea, atomic weapons could have been used to advantage—and in fact military leaders believed their use would be required—to attack air bases and military facilities in Manchuria. In April 1951 General Matthew Ridgway, taking over as commander in Korea, was given authority for an atomic strike in retaliation for a major Chinese air strike originating outside Korea.⁴⁴

38. U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter FRUS), Korea 1950, 1276–81; Schnabel and Watson 1979, 287–333; and Taylor 1972, 134.

39. Memorandum, 8 November 1950, FRUS, Korea 1950, 1098–1100 (emphasis added).

40. Telegram, The United States Representative at the United Nations to the Secretary of State, 1 December 1950, FRUS, Korea 1950, 1300.

41. Schnabel and Watson 1979, 339, 405–406.

42. Acheson 1969, 472.

43. See Trachtenberg 1991; Foot 1985; Leffler 1992, 367–70; and Nitze 1989, 109.

44. Dingman 1988, 76.

Thus, although there were multiple reasons for not using atomic weapons in 1950, political and moral factors may have been critical. Perceived public opprobrium against using atomic weapons on Chinese cities made it difficult to think about this option in any purely military fashion. The concerns here were both instrumental and substantive. U.S. leaders worried that using atomic weapons would destroy Asian and others' support for the United States in any future global war with the Soviet Union—an instrumental concern. If the United States acted “immorally” (by using atomic weapons) it would sacrifice its ability to lead.⁴⁵ The State Department followed public opinion closely, reporting in the months after Truman's infamous press conference that European public opinion on atomic weapons was generally negative.⁴⁶ Opposition to nuclear use by British allies also acted as a significant source of constraint.

But it is also clear that some U.S. leaders were uncomfortable with atomic bombing of cities as a violation of perceived American values. General Ridgway wrote later that using nuclear weapons in situations short of retaliation or survival of the homeland was “the ultimate in immorality” (thus implicitly rejecting the Hiroshima precedent).⁴⁷ Paul Nitze, director of policy planning, who believed that nuclear weapons represented continuity, not change, and were not an “absolute” weapon, nevertheless found them “offensive to all morality.”⁴⁸ He lobbied for a buildup of U.S. conventional forces.

General Douglas MacArthur, commander in the field, was the most influential military voice to call prominently for nuclear use. Dean Rusk, at the time assistant secretary of state for the Far East, shared MacArthur's advocacy of a more aggressive China policy during the war but opposed nuclear use as entirely disproportionate. “MacArthur urged all-out war against China,” he recalled. “All-out war would have required the mass destruction of Chinese cities. We would have worn the mark of Cain for generations to come. The political effect would have been devastating. Truman never spent an instant even thinking about it.”⁴⁹

At one point, some of Truman's advisers thought about bombing a large dam on the Yalu River. General Hoyt Vandenberg, air force chief of staff, had gone to Korea, flown a plane over the dam, and dropped the largest conventional bomb in the U.S. arsenal on it. It made only a small scar on the dam's surface. Returning to Washington, he reported that the United States could knock the dam out only with nuclear

45. Memorandum by Paul Nitze, director of policy planning, 4 November 1950, FRUS, Korea 1950, 1042.

46. National Archives, RG 59, Survey of Western Opinion on the Atom Bomb as an Immoral Weapon. Office of Intelligence Research. Special Assistant to the Secretary of State for Atomic Energy, Box 7, Department of State Records, 13 February 1951, 1, 6–7, 10.

47. Ridgway 1967, 76. He held similar views about preventive war plans in the 1950s, arguing that preventive war would be “contrary to every principle upon which our nation has been founded.” Ridgway, Memorandum for the Record, 17 May 1954, quoted in Rosenberg 1983, 34.

48. From a letter written on 1 July 1954 to his friend Joseph Alsop, quoted in Talbot 1988, 64, also 35, 63–64.

49. Interview with Rusk in Newhouse 1989, 84. Also Rusk 1990, 170.

weapons. “Truman refused,” recalled Rusk.⁵⁰ Truman later recalled his resistance to the pressures of some of his generals to use nuclear weapons on Chinese cities. “I could not bring myself to order the slaughter of 25,000,000. . . . I just could not make the order for a Third World War.”⁵¹ Nitze reaffirmed that “no one in the executive branch to my knowledge was pushing for use of nuclear weapons.”⁵²

The overall picture is that Truman and his advisers sought to avoid using nuclear weapons in ways that U.S. leaders at the end of World War II did not. Although calls for a more aggressive China policy, including the use of atomic weapons if necessary, came from both outside and inside the administration, these were rejected. Truman’s own personal post-Hiroshima abhorrence of atomic weapons appears to have been a critical factor.⁵³ It thus appears that moral concerns on the part of some officials about using such a disproportionate weapon and perceived opposition from world publics and leaders, including accusations of racism, had an inhibiting effect on Truman and his advisers during the war.

But inhibitions about nuclear weapons may have operated in more indirect ways as well, for example, by influencing perceptions about suitable targets and the state of readiness for tactical nuclear warfare. Military officers disagreed about whether Korea offered suitable targets for the tactical use of nuclear weapons. Displaying the kinds of cognitive consistency linkage Robert Jervis has often noted, those in favor of nuclear use (such as weapons specialists and MacArthur) tended to argue that there were suitable targets in Korea, whereas those opposed to nuclear use (such as the Joint Chiefs) tended to argue that there were no good targets. Few argued positions in between that were less cognitively consistent (for example, that nuclear weapons should be used, but unfortunately there were no good targets; or that there were many good targets in Korea, but nevertheless nuclear weapons should not be used).

Determining whether there was an objective lack of “targets” is thus difficult. Some of those who thought Korea presented suitable targets saw the real problem as a lack of readiness to deliver atomic weapons in a tactical fashion rather than any objective lack of “targets” per se. In March 1951 a Johns Hopkins University research group working with the Far East Command informed MacArthur that many “large targets of opportunity” existed for nuclear attack. But the group found U.S. forces ill-prepared for tactical nuclear warfare. Virtually no U.S. or allied troops had been trained in using nuclear weapons on the battlefield.⁵⁴ The only way to deliver a bomb would have been with B-29s flying from Japan or Okinawa, and Operation Hudson Harbor in late September and early October 1951 confirmed how difficult it

50. Rusk 1990, 170. Yalu River hydroelectric plants were eventually bombed with conventional weapons in June 1952 on request from the commander in Korea, Mark Clark. Clodfelter 1989, 17, 19.

51. Ferrell 1980, 304.

52. From interview with Nitze in Newhouse 1989, 83.

53. Boyer 1998, chap. 3.

54. L. Rumbaugh et al., *Tactical Employment of Atomic Weapons*. Operations Research Office, Far East Command report ORO-R-2(FEC), Tokyo, 1 March 1951, quoted in Hayes 1991, 9–10, 344.

would be to locate tactical targets, such as large masses of enemy troops, in a timely fashion.⁵⁵

One question is why the state of readiness for tactical nuclear warfare was low. And here Truman's general reluctance to consider nuclear weapons as like any other weapon, and his lack of enthusiasm for developing nuclear capabilities in the years immediately after World War II, must be taken into account. Because of this, as Rosenberg and others have documented, U.S. planning for nuclear warfare lagged in the years before Korea.⁵⁶ Although atomic scientists were already at work developing tactical nuclear weapons and had been promoting them as a more moral alternative to the H-bomb and strategic nuclear bombing, military planning for their use moved more slowly.⁵⁷ In short, inhibitions about using nuclear weapons in general may have delayed readiness and planning for tactical nuclear use—which in turn shaped perceptions of the “lack of suitable targets.”

Certainly those who opposed the limited course of action Truman took in Korea thought such inhibitions affected decision makers. Two of those most in favor of using nuclear weapons in Korea were Generals K. D. Nichols and James Gavin. In late 1952, General Nichols, chief of the Armed Services Special Weapons Project, and probably the principal Pentagon authority on, and promoter of, nuclear weapons, expressed his disappointment over the failure to use nuclear weapons in Korea. He had personally pressed his views in favor of nuclear use on each of the three Joint Chiefs but found them “lukewarm” to the idea. In a memo he argued for a deliberate use of nuclear weapons in the war against China as a way to demonstrate U.S. resolve and willingness to use any weapon in the arsenal, but fretted that “I knew that many individuals in the United States opposed such thinking for idealistic, moral, or other reasons.”⁵⁸ Nichols' advocacy of nuclear use was in fact a recommendation to take deliberate action to prevent any kind of special status from attaching to nuclear weapons—exactly the kind of action one would look for as an indicator of an emerging—though contested—norm.

Army General Gavin, a member of the Weapons Systems Evaluation Group (WSEG) and a principal promoter in the military of the development of tactical nuclear weapons, had accompanied Nichols on this pro-nuclear lobbying effort and shared his disappointment. He recounted in his memoirs their recommendation to General Ridgway that the president use nuclear weapons against North Korean forces, feeling that “it would have been militarily inexcusable to allow the 8th Army to be destroyed without even using the most powerful weapons in our arsenal.” Gavin had visited Korea in the fall of 1950, accompanied by weapons scientists, as part of a WSEG research trip, and returned enthusiastic about the value of tactical nuclear weapons for battlefield use. In his view, as he wrote later, the United States and its allies were defeated in Korea and later at Dien Bien Phu because of the lack of readiness to use tactical nuclear weapons:

55. See Foot 1985, 105; and Schnabel and Watson 1979, 613–14.

56. See Rosenberg 1983; Art 1991; and Freedman 1989.

57. Evangelista 1988, chap. 4.

58. Nichols 1987, 291.

If in the past ten years we had spent even a small part of [the resources spent on general war] in developing and procuring the means of dealing with limited war, we could have settled Korea and Dien Bien Phu quickly in our favor. Tactical nuclear missiles, sky cavalry, and increased assault airlift can contribute decisively to that kind of an operation.⁵⁹

In Gavin's view, the United States had not pursued tactical nuclear options aggressively enough because of "old thinking" that nuclear weapons could only be used strategically and also because of moral qualms about nuclear weapons in general. He complained, "the situation in the summer of 1950 offered us a number of well worthwhile tactical nuclear targets if we had had the moral courage to make the decision to use them."⁶⁰

In sum, the evidence suggests that while top military and political leaders identified multiple reasons for not using nuclear weapons, the normative opprobrium that was already developing heightened the salience of moral and political concerns, which in turn influenced the analysis of military options and capabilities. Nuclear weapons were clearly acquiring a special status that encouraged political leaders to view them as weapons of last resort.

This attitude changed somewhat when Eisenhower took office. It was during his tenure as president that the issue of a nuclear taboo became quite explicit—a taboo that he and his secretary of state John Foster Dulles deplored and disparaged. Eisenhower took office in January 1953 frustrated by the stalemated war in Korea and determined to find a way to end it. By this time tactical nuclear weapons had become available. Eisenhower viewed them as a rapid and less costly way to force an end to the conflict. As he recalled in his memoirs, "to keep the attack from becoming overly costly, it was clear that we would have to use atomic weapons."⁶¹ But an emerging "taboo" posed an obstacle to the administration's freedom to use such weapons. Here the contested nature of the taboo becomes evident, as U.S. leaders perceived a taboo developing and sought to challenge it.

Discussions in the Eisenhower National Security Council (NSC) provide some of the best records we have of high-level serious consideration of nuclear weapons use. The subject was brought up seven times in the spring of 1953. Both Eisenhower and Dulles sought to resist an emerging perception that nuclear weapons should not be used and appeared far more concerned with the constraints imposed by a perceived taboo on nuclear weapons and negative public opinion than with any fear of Soviet retaliation.⁶² "This moral problem" as Dulles referred to it, could potentially be an obstacle, inhibiting use of the atomic bomb. He lamented what he saw as Soviet success in setting nuclear weapons apart from all other weapons in a special category and urged that the United States "try to break down this false distinction."⁶³

59. Gavin 1958, 124, 127–28.

60. Gavin 1958, 116.

61. Eisenhower 1963, 180.

62. Betts 1987, 31–47.

63. NSC meeting, 11 February 1953, FRUS, Korea 1952–54, Part I, 770.

Later in the spring Eisenhower asserted his complete agreement with Dulles that “somehow or other the tabu which surrounds the use of atomic weapons would have to be destroyed.”⁶⁴ Eisenhower kept insisting against his skeptical military advisers that nuclear weapons were more cost effective than conventional ordnance and that criteria for evaluation should be purely military cost-benefit analysis.⁶⁵ The Kaesong area “provided a good target for this type of weapon,” he suggested.⁶⁶ Dismissing the possibility of moral concerns, he repeatedly insisted that nuclear weapons should be regarded as “simply another weapon in our arsenal.”⁶⁷ This view was facilitated by growth in the size of the nuclear arsenal: by 1953, “scarcity” of nuclear warheads was no longer a limiting factor.⁶⁸

While the Joint Chiefs remained skeptical of the utility of atomic weapons inside Korea, their use outside Korea would be “highly advantageous.”⁶⁹ With continued lack of progress at the Panmunjom peace talks, at the end of May 1953, the NSC approved a contingency plan by the Joint Chiefs for a major attack on China, including use of atomic weapons, to force an end to the conflict if the talks broke down. As outlined by General Collins, U.S. forces would first use mustard gas to drive the Chinese out of their dug-in positions. The enemy soldiers would then be effective targets for U.S. tactical atomic weapons.⁷⁰ The plan would take effect the following year. General Clark was advised to revise his war plan, OPLAN 8-52, to meet the new objectives and the decision to employ nuclear weapons.⁷¹ As it turned out, only a few weeks later the Chinese agreed to acceptable terms, and a truce was signed a month later.

It is sometimes argued that Eisenhower, famous for his dissembling, merely talked a “tough” line on tactical nuclear weapons in order to maximize “deterrence.” But these discussions were internal policy deliberations of the highest level where the audience he was attempting to persuade were his own advisers, not foreign enemies. These were not statements for public consumption. What is important here is that U.S. leaders clearly perceived an emerging taboo as an unwelcome constraint on their freedom to use any weapon in the arsenal. They discussed ways to challenge, “dissipate,” or “destroy” it; analyzed how serious it was; and considered, for example, whether potentially ruptured relations with the allies could be repaired if the United States were to use tactical atomic weapons. Thus, although they disagreed on the utility of atomic weapons in Korea, there was little disagreement on the taboo. In his memoirs Eisenhower maintained that he was ready to challenge it: he asserted

64. NSC meeting, 31 March 1953, *ibid.*, 827.

65. See 13 May 1953, *ibid.*, 1014; and Memorandum by the NSC Adviser to the Secretary of Defense, 21 March 1953, *ibid.*

66. NSC meeting, 11 February 1953, *ibid.*, 770.

67. NSC meeting, 6 May 1953, *ibid.*, 977.

68. The U.S. nuclear stockpile grew from 250 bombs in 1949 to 1,187 in 1953.

69. NSC meeting, 13 May 1953, FRUS, Korea, 1952–54, 1014.

70. NSC meeting, 20 May 1953, Whitman Files, NSC Series, Dwight David Eisenhower Library (hereafter DDEL), 8.

71. Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense, 19 May 1953, *ibid.*; NSC meeting, 20 May 1953, *ibid.*, 1064–68; and Schnabel and Watson 1979, 961–62.

that he was prepared to use atomic weapons if necessary to achieve a settlement at the peace talks and that he “would not be limited by any world-wide gentleman’s agreement.”⁷²

What role did the taboo play, then? The fact that nuclear weapons were not used was clearly due in part to a fortuitous sequence of events in which the Chinese, for their own reasons, decided to terminate the conflict when they did.⁷³ For the United States, with contingency plans in place for atomic strikes in the event of an armistice breakdown, it was to some extent a case of nondecision. Thus non-use was in part a function of Chinese forbearance. But the taboo appears to have had a constraining effect by preventing a casual resort to nuclear weapons. It bought time for other things to happen. Leaders themselves believed they were constrained by it. During the discussion with the president on 31 March 1953 on the need to destroy the “tabu,” Dulles admitted that since “in the present state of world opinion we could not use an A-bomb, we should make every effort now to dissipate this feeling, *especially since we are spending such vast sums on the production of weapons we cannot use.*”⁷⁴ During an NSC discussion on atomic-use policy in August 1953, shortly after the war had ended, Admiral Radford, now chairman of the Joint Chiefs, complained that the United States had been “spending vast sums on the manufacture of these weapons and at the same time we were holding back on their use because of our concern for public opinion.” In his view it was “high time” that nuclear-use policy was clarified.⁷⁵

There is only scant evidence from this period of concern over the consequences of demonstrating that nuclear weapons were usable, which would provide support for a long-term-consequences (materialist) explanation. In general, such concerns seemed remote from policymakers’ minds during the first part of the Cold War, at least until proliferation became an issue in the early 1960s. They were certainly not as prominent as the taboo issue in the Korea case. Dulles was acutely attuned to public opinion for most of his life, and the theme of public opposition to nuclear use was one he returned to frequently throughout the 1950s. In subsequent crises in Dien Bien Phu and the Taiwan Straits, as in Korea, he continued to perceive a taboo as an unfortunate hindrance on U.S. leaders’ freedom to use tactical atomic weapons.⁷⁶

By the late 1950s, it was clear that Dulles’ campaign to persuade Americans and the allies to treat nuclear weapons “as having become ‘conventional’ ” had failed.⁷⁷ In 1958 Eisenhower noted to Dulles with regard to the administration’s policy of “massive retaliation,” which called for use of tactical atomic weapons in both global

72. Eisenhower 1963, 181.

73. The role of a U.S. nuclear threat in bringing about this outcome is disputed but does not appear to have played the role that Dulles later claimed for it. Foot 1985.

74. The italicized clause remained classified until December 1996. NSC Meeting, 31 March 1953, Whitman Files, NSC Series, Box 4, DDEL, 13 (emphasis added).

75. NSC meeting, 27 August 1953, FRUS, 1952–54, National Security Affairs, Vol. II, Part I, 447.

76. See Gaddis 1987a.

77. National Archives, RG 59, Proposed “Talking Paper” for use in clarifying U.S. Position Regarding Atomic and Hydrogen Weapons at NATO meeting 23 April 1954. Excerpt. RG 59, 250, 50, Lot 57D 688, Box 342.

and local conflicts, that “as much as two-thirds of the world and 50 percent of U.S. opinion opposes the course we have been following.”⁷⁸ As Thomas Schelling has noted, however “false” Dulles might have believed the distinction between conventional and tactical nuclear weapons to be, it was “real” because it was believed to be real by others.⁷⁹ And thus it had real effects—a good example of the influence of constitutive effects (for example, defining categories) on outcomes.

In sum, during the Korean War, an emerging taboo shaped how U.S. leaders defined their interests. In contrast to the moral opprobrium Truman personally felt, the taboo operated mostly instrumentally for Eisenhower and Dulles, constraining a casual resort to tactical nuclear weapons. The burden of proof for a decision to use such weapons had already begun to shift. For those who wanted to challenge the emerging taboo, the best way to do so would have been to actually use such weapons, but the political costs of doing so were already high. Thus the regulative or constraining effect of the taboo was most prominent at this point. But the political debate over the categorization of nuclear weapons as “unordinary” weapons, and the implications of such weapons for American values and identity, suggest the early development of constitutive effects. By the time of the Vietnam War ten years later, the taboo was operating in a much more substantive fashion.

The Vietnam War: A Hard Test for the Taboo

The Vietnam War offers a good test of the taboo. In Vietnam, the United States chose to lose a humiliating and destructive war against a small, non-nuclear adversary while all its nuclear weapons remained on the shelf. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the Vietnam War for our purposes is how little nuclear weapons were an issue. Despite repeated declarations that winning the war was vital for U.S. interests and a frustrating war effort on behalf of South Vietnam sustained at enormous cost in lives and treasure, U.S. political and military leaders did not come close to using nuclear weapons in the conflict. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson gave little serious consideration to nuclear options and declined to make any nuclear threats, despite some recommendations to do so. Although President Nixon and his national security adviser Henry Kissinger more actively explored nuclear options, and engaged in vague nuclear threats, in the end they also did not come close to actually using them in the conflict.

There was no lack of warheads nor any shortage of suitable targets had they been interested in using nuclear weapons. Ports, landing places, supply lines, bridges, railways, and airfields could all have been hit decisively with relatively low-yield weapons, and as McGeorge Bundy, national security adviser to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, later observed, “quite possibly with human losses lower than those of the war that was actually fought.” Further, fear of nuclear retaliation was not a prominent concern. Bundy recalled, “Very little, if at all, was [the non-use of nuclear

78. Quoted in Gaddis 1987a, 145.

79. Schelling 1994, 197.

weapons] for fear that friends of [North] Vietnam with warheads of their own, Russians or Chinese, would use some of them in reply.”⁸⁰

Certainly one material constraint on using nuclear weapons was the risk of a wider war with China. U.S. leaders worried that a U.S. invasion of North Vietnam or the use of tactical nuclear weapons there could bring China into the war. Winning a war against China might itself require use of nuclear weapons. In a remote but worst-case scenario, this could provoke Soviet entry into the war, though most U.S. officials judged this unlikely. But political and military leaders disagreed bitterly over such escalation risks throughout the war. The Joint Chiefs tended to see the risks as much lower than did political leaders and hence were more willing to endorse aggressive policies. The Joint Chiefs, along with commanders in the field, consistently lobbied for expanding the war and removing limitations on the fighting as the only way to achieve victory. They noted, “Certainly no responsible person proposes to go about such a war, if it should occur, on a basis remotely resembling Korea. ‘Possibly even the use of nuclear weapons at some point’ is of course why we spend billions to have them.”⁸¹ Although military commanders were at times divided over whether nuclear weapons would be needed in a wider war, the Joint Chiefs did estimate that tactical nuclear weapons would be militarily useful, arguing in a memo that “nuclear attacks would have a far greater probability” of stopping a Chinese attack than responding with conventional weapons.⁸² Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara later commented that he was “appalled” by the “cavalier” way in which the military recommended aggressive policies, which in his view raised unacceptable risks of war with China and U.S. use of nuclear weapons.⁸³

Thus U.S. leaders worried that they would be forced to use nuclear weapons first, with unpredictable consequences—evidence for a long-term consequences argument. But in the face of uncertainty and disagreement over escalation risks, political and normative concerns about using nuclear weapons became particularly salient, if not decisive, for many top officials. As in Korea, U.S. leaders worried that, given world public abhorrence of nuclear weapons—now even stronger than in the 1950s—use of such weapons in the Vietnam conflict would jeopardize the U.S. moral and leadership position in the eyes of friends and allies, especially if the United States used nuclear weapons again on Asians. In a memo to President Johnson, Undersecretary of State George Ball wrote: “To use nuclear weapons against the Chinese would obviously raise the most profound political problems. Not only would their use generate probably irresistible pressures for a major Soviet involvement, but the United States would be vulnerable to the charge that it was willing to use nuclear weapons against non-whites only.”⁸⁴ Foreign leaders privately and publicly cautioned against

80. Bundy 1988, 536.

81. *Pentagon Papers* 1971–72, 3:623.

82. Memorandum from Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense, 2 March 1964, JCSM-174–64, FRUS, 1964–68, Vietnam, Vol. I, 1964, 115.

83. McNamara 1995, 160–61, 275.

84. Memorandum from Acting Secretary of State Ball to President Johnson, 13 February 1965, FRUS, Vietnam, Vol. II, January–June 1965, 255.

nuclear use. After a trip to Southeast Asia in 1964, Dean Rusk, secretary of state to both Kennedy and Johnson, reported to the NSC that he had been impressed by a “passionate statement” by Chiang Kai Shek, leader of nationalist China, that “nuclear war in Asia would be wrong.”⁸⁵ Mounting public opposition to the war gave U.S. leaders a demoralizing foretaste of the kind of world public outrage a use of nuclear weapons might provoke.

But it was not only the concerns and abhorrence of others that played a role. The nuclear taboo was becoming entrenched among high officials of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Many of them already possessed a set of strongly held beliefs about nuclear weapons when they entered office. By the time of the Vietnam War, Cold War crises over Berlin and Laos in 1961 and Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962 had already forced them to confront the possibility of nuclear use. Appalled by the Eisenhower nuclear doctrine of “massive retaliation,” Kennedy and his advisers sought more “flexible” war plans that included greater emphasis on conventional weapons. From early in his tenure as secretary of defense, McNamara opposed the use of nuclear weapons, viewing them as morally objectionable and lacking in utility. He has stated frequently that he privately advised both Kennedy and Johnson never to initiate the use of nuclear weapons, and they agreed.⁸⁶ During a discussion in November 1964 of U.S. military options in Vietnam that touched briefly on nuclear weapons, McNamara stated that he “could not imagine a case where they would be considered.”⁸⁷ According to Rusk, “we never seriously considered using nuclear weapons in Vietnam.” Like McNamara, Rusk found nuclear weapons abhorrent. He advocated aggressive uses of force but opposed use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam because of fallout risks and political costs and especially because of the unacceptable destruction of civilians.⁸⁸ He wrote later, “Under no circumstances would I have participated in an order to launch a first strike, with the possible exception of a massive [Soviet] conventional attack on West Europe,” which he thought unlikely.⁸⁹ These are remarkable statements from McNamara and Rusk. In effect, top U.S. officials harbored private commitments to “no first use,” in part for moral reasons, despite the fact that such views directly contradicted official U.S. deterrence policy relying on a threat to use nuclear weapons first.

Furthermore, top officials not only privately opposed using nuclear weapons, but even the mere analysis of such weapons in the de rigueur cost-benefit fashion for which the Kennedy administration was famous was practically taboo. Samuel Cohen, a weapons physicist working for the RAND Corporation, and one of the rare enthusiasts for tactical nuclear options in the war, ran up against the taboo mindset. As he recalled, “anyone in the Pentagon who was caught thinking seriously of using nuclear

85. NSC Meeting, 22 April 1964, FRUS, 1964–68, Vol. I. Vietnam 1964, 258. Also *Pentagon Papers* 1971–72, 3:65.

86. See McNamara 1983; and Blight 1998.

87. *Pentagon Papers* 1971–72, 3:238.

88. Rusk 1990, 457.

89. *Ibid.*, 248.

weapons in this conflict would find his neck in the wringer in short order.”⁹⁰ In a memo dated 12 September 1967, the deputy to the national security adviser listed seven military measures to achieve a “more spectacular rate of progress” in the war. The last was “Create wasteland with low yield nuclear weapons in southern part of North Vietnam—virtually unthinkable.”⁹¹ A meeting in March 1968 between Johnson administration officials and a group of elder statesmen consulting on U.S. military options in Vietnam concluded, with no evident discussion, that “use of atomic weapons is unthinkable.”⁹²

The one attempt by the Johnson administration to look more closely at the military utility of nuclear weapons—to relieve the siege of the marine garrison at Khe Sanh in early 1968—was aborted quickly in a public relations nightmare. New evidence suggests that top administration officials discussed the topic at several meetings throughout the tense key days of late January and early February 1968, albeit with a tone of the greatest reluctance.⁹³ Johnson made it clear he had no wish to face a decision on use of nuclear weapons and repeatedly sought assurance from military leaders that they had adequate conventional forces to defend Khe Sanh. At the request of General Earle Wheeler, chair of the Joint Chiefs, General William Westmoreland, U.S. commander in Vietnam, convened a secret study group to analyze nuclear options.⁹⁴ Westmoreland, a consistent advocate of greater force in Vietnam, wrote in his memoirs that he thought consideration of tactical nuclear options at Khe Sanh a prudent idea. He saw analogies to the use of atomic bombs in World War II to send a message to Japan, as well as to the role of U.S. nuclear threats to North Korea. He wrote that “use of a few small tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam—or even the threat of them—might have quickly brought the war there to an end.”⁹⁵ But Washington quickly quashed the study group, fearing it would leak to the press. Rumors swirled nevertheless, and the resulting popular outcry illustrated the extreme sensitivity of the issue. The White House and Pentagon vehemently denied that nuclear weapons were under consideration, and Johnson was later furious about the “irresponsibility” reflected in talk about plans to use nuclear weapons.⁹⁶

As in Korea, those who disagreed with official policy thought that normative concerns inhibited policymakers from thinking “rationally” about nuclear options. Samuel Cohen, the RAND weapons scientist, attempted in vain to interest Washington in the virtues of “discriminate” nuclear weapons in Vietnam. He recalled, “I put my mind

90. Cohen 1983, 95.

91. Memorandum for Rostow from Robert Ginsburgh, 12 September 1967, Lyndon Bains Johnson Library, National Security Files (hereafter LBJL NSF), Folder: Robert S. McNamara—SEA, Files of Walt Rostow, Box 3, 2.

92. Summary of Notes by M. Bundy concerning Wise Men’s meeting, 26 March 1968, LBJL NSF, Tom Johnson Meeting Notes File, Special Advisory Group, Box 2.

93. LBJL NSF, Nuclear Weapons—Contingency Planning (folder), Walt Rostow Files, Box 7; Tom Johnson Meeting Notes Files, Box 2.

94. General Wheeler to General Westmoreland and Admiral Sharp (JCS 01154), 1 February 1968, LBJL NSF, NSC Histories, box 47.

95. Westmoreland 1976, 338

96. Barrett 1997, 722.

to work on how nuclear weapons might be used to thwart the Vietcong.”⁹⁷ His account of his efforts to promote tactical nuclear options during the war as well as his analysis of the nature of resistance provide a fascinating window into the operation of the taboo. As he recalled later, during a presentation on tactical nuclear weapons he gave to key planners in the State Department in 1965, it quickly became evident that however intrigued his audience was from a technical point of view, they were “adamantly opposed to the development and use of such weapons from a political point of view.” During the course of the talk he described several hypothetical weapons in which low-yield nuclear weapons would be used to propel metal projectiles or massive conventional weapons payloads. In one example, the nuclear explosion would take place over the battlefield but would give “only conventional effects on the target.” He expected that there might be some interest in these options, which he argued were more effective and discriminate than standard high-explosive attacks. Instead, “the opposition remained unanimous, for the simple reason that it was not really the nature of the effects that counted. Rather, it was the fact that a nuclear explosion was taking place over the area of theater operations.”⁹⁸ Even if the nuclear explosions took place in the United States, as in another example, his audience remained adamantly opposed. These reactions impressed upon Cohen the depth of official feeling against the military use of nuclear explosives. “By now I realized that as long as a nuclear explosive was used in anger, U.S. policy held the type of explosive and geographical location of detonation to be absolutely irrelevant. The cardinal point was that it was the act of detonating the explosive in anger that was a political taboo.”⁹⁹

At a retrospective conference on the Vietnam War in 1997, McNamara denied forcefully that world public opinion constrained U.S. use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam. He insisted instead that “it was because it was neither militarily desirable nor morally acceptable. . . . It had nothing whatever to do with what the world might have thought about it.”¹⁰⁰ Given the significant role that negative public opinion played in shaping U.S. decision making on the war more generally, McNamara’s strong claim seems implausible. It does seem intended, however, to underscore the degree to which he and others believed that using nuclear weapons was simply “wrong;” that is, that it was not a matter of appeasing others’ views, rather “We thought it was wrong.”

In stark contrast, the taboo operated primarily as an instrumental—though critical—constraint on top officials of the Nixon administration, who exhibited no such personal reluctance to thinking about nuclear options. President Nixon, the archetypal anticommunist hawk, dreamed of ending the Vietnam War with a “knockout blow.” He believed approvingly that U.S. nuclear threats had ended the Korean War and expected to utilize the same principle of the threat of excessive use of force to bring

97. Cohen 1983, 84.

98. *Ibid.*, 93.

99. *Ibid.*, 93–94.

100. Blight 1998, 88.

victory in Vietnam.¹⁰¹ He stated in an interview with *Time* magazine in 1985 that he had considered the use of nuclear weapons four times during his administration, one of which was to end the Vietnam War.¹⁰² However, Henry Kissinger, Nixon's national security adviser, repudiated Nixon's claim publicly. Kissinger reported in an interview that "I can safely say that there was never a concrete occasion or crisis in which the use of nuclear weapons was considered by the government."¹⁰³ Kissinger had written a best-selling book, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, which advocated use of tactical nuclear weapons in limited wars. Since the publication of the book in 1957, Kissinger had drawn back from that policy.

Because of Nixon's penchant for inflated rhetoric and because the memoir accounts of this period are unusually ideological and selective, the evidence is often difficult to interpret. Nevertheless, Kissinger's denial appears overstated. During the review process of Vietnam even before his inauguration, Nixon says he considered and, with apparent regret, rejected either bombing dikes or using nuclear weapons, saying he "could not allow my heart to rule my head"—his heart wanting the knock-out blow, his head constrained by the public outrage he knew it would provoke. Had he chosen either of these courses of action, "the resulting domestic and international uproar would have damaged our foreign policy on all fronts."¹⁰⁴ He also noted that it would have hampered improved relations with the Soviet Union and China.

The key case, however, is Operation Duck Hook, a plan for a massive use of force against North Vietnam in the fall of 1969. Developed by Kissinger and a few associates, it called for massive bombing of Hanoi, Haiphong, and other key areas in North Vietnam; the mining of harbors and rivers; the bombing of the dike system; a ground invasion of North Vietnam; the destruction, possibly with nuclear weapons, of the main north-south passes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail; and the bombing of North Vietnam's main railroad links with China. A separate, even more secret study dealt with the implications of using tactical nuclear weapons on the rail lines, the main funnel for supplies from the Soviet Union and China.¹⁰⁵ According to H. R. Haldeman, Nixon's chief of staff and confidante, Kissinger had lobbied for nuclear options in the spring and fall of 1969.¹⁰⁶

After massive public protests against the war in the United States in October 1969, however, Nixon cancelled Duck Hook. In his memoirs, he suggests that the worldwide furor over escalation of the war undermined his plans.¹⁰⁷ Haldeman apparently opposed using nuclear weapons in Vietnam primarily because it might hurt Nixon's reelection chances in 1972.¹⁰⁸ Had Nixon been able to secretly use tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam along the model of the secret bombing of Cambodia, there is

101. Haldeman 1978, 83.

102. "What the President Saw: A Nation Coming into Its Own," *Time*, 29 July 1985, 48–53.

103. "An Interview with Henry A. Kissinger: 'We Were Never Close to Nuclear War,'" *Washington Post*, 11 August 1985, L8.

104. Nixon 1985, 102; and 1978, 347–48.

105. Hersh 1983, 120.

106. *Ibid.*, 128–29.

107. Nixon 1978, 403–405.

108. Hersh 1983, 129.

little reason to think he would not have done so. As it was, he kept the Duck Hook planning secret from even his secretaries of state and defense. When the latter found out about it—only when Nixon himself leaked the plan—they urged against it, emphasizing the mounting public opposition to escalating the war.¹⁰⁹ Two scientists who were consulted on the Duck Hook nuclear targeting plans opposed the nuclear course of action, for both military and moral reasons.¹¹⁰

Thus Nixon, who clearly harbored few personal inhibitions about violating an array of important democratic norms during his presidency when he thought he could get away with it, was powerfully constrained by the abhorrence and opposition of others. Alexander Haig, Kissinger's military assistant, a hard-liner who had served in Vietnam and later became secretary of state, and who helped plan Duck Hook, attributed the non-use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam and other Cold War conflicts to normative concerns—of others. He wrote in 1992, "On the American side, the moral argument against the use of such weapons, or even the threat of their use, took on the force of religious belief."¹¹¹ He argued against this moral perspective and worried that such inhibitions would undermine deterrence. "Nevertheless," he wrote, "... the mere existence of our superior power often bailed us out of potential disaster even though we were determined, in the depths of the national soul, never to use it."¹¹² Because of such moral inhibitions, he felt that no U.S. president would resort to nuclear weapons except in the extreme case of the defense of Europe.

Referring to something as a religious belief suggests that it is held as a matter of faith and fervor and is unsusceptible to, or at least distinct from, "rational" argument. This is not unlike a taboo. In sum, although the non-use of nuclear weapons was not entirely taken for granted in the Vietnam War—because decision makers in all three administrations did, with varying degrees of reluctance and frequency, turn their minds to such options—many qualities associated with tabooeness had become visible. For the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, the taboo operated particularly substantively or constitutively, evident, for example, in beliefs that using nuclear weapons was simply "wrong" and in the reluctance to even think about nuclear options, including nuclear threats. Although they identified military, political, and moral reasons not to use nuclear weapons, by the time of the Vietnam War political and normative considerations overwhelmed any military utility nuclear weapons might have. As Samuel Cohen's experience indicated, the burden of proof now required justifying even just thinking about nuclear options.

In contrast, for Nixon and Kissinger—as for Eisenhower earlier, less influenced by personal moral convictions—the taboo operated primarily as an instrumental constraint on resort to nuclear weapons. Though Nixon talked a tough line, and sent notes to the North Vietnamese threatening massive uses of force if they did not agree to negotiate, in the end he and Kissinger were repeatedly rolled back from their aspirations for knockout blows by domestic and world public condemnation. Nixon

109. See Ambrose 1989, 301; and Bundy 1998, 80.

110. Hersh 1983, 129.

111. Haig 1992, 28.

112. *Ibid.*, 554.

probably did not share the nuclear taboo—he did not consider it “wrong” to use nuclear weapons—but he was constrained because others, including members of his own bureaucracy, held it.¹¹³ As Kissinger later argued, “Never had the military gap between a superpower and a non-nuclear state been greater; never was it less likely to be invoked.”¹¹⁴

The 1991 Gulf War: The Taboo in the Post-Cold War World

In the 1991 war to overturn the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, U.S. leaders ruled out using nuclear weapons even though Iraq was a non-nuclear adversary. It might be argued that this war does not offer a good test of the nuclear taboo because the kind of dire circumstances that would call up consideration of a nuclear option never really emerged for the United States and its coalition allies. Nevertheless, this case is important. It represents the first major conflict of the post-Cold War world, when the threat of nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union had substantially diminished. Iraq wielded the world’s fourth largest conventional army at the time. Military and civilian experts worried in advance about the high level of casualties U.S. troops might sustain, especially if Iraq used chemical or biological weapons. Further, far from being a non-issue, nuclear weapons were an important part of the context of the Persian Gulf conflict. The war was legitimized in part by the goal of destroying Iraq’s nuclear capabilities, and, over the course of the conflict, U.S. officials made vague and not-so-vague nuclear threats, made concrete by the presence of nearly one thousand nuclear weapons aboard U.S. and allied ships in the Persian Gulf.¹¹⁵

A desert scenario such as the Iraqi invasion actually presents very favorable conditions for the militarily effective use of small nuclear weapons. A low-yield tactical nuclear weapon could have been used against massed Iraqi troops or a discrete military complex and could have destroyed the many underground Iraqi targets more easily than conventional weapons. Unlike in Japan, where bombs were dropped on civilians, in southern Kuwait nuclear weapons would kill only soldiers. Some reports during the Gulf crisis even suggested that under certain circumstances, using nuclear weapons would have resulted in fewer deaths in the coalition and on the Iraqi side than using the conventional weapons needed to assure victory.¹¹⁶

Nevertheless, there was hardly any consideration of nuclear use by top U.S. officials in the Gulf War. Although military planners and several government nuclear agencies examined tactical nuclear options for retaliation against Iraqi use of chemical and biological weapons, as well as a few more far-fetched scenarios, such options were never deliberated at the political level.¹¹⁷ Said one White House official, “the issue of our nuclear weapons use never came up to my knowledge during the entire

113. For a similar argument, see Bundy 1988.

114. Kissinger 1994, 607–608.

115. Arkin 1996.

116. See “The Nuclear Option: Thinking the Unthinkable,” *Newsweek*, 14 January 1991, 17; “U.S. Can Do Battle with ‘Tactical Nukes,’ ” *Washington Times*, 29 January 1991, B9.

117. See Powell 1995, 486; “Nuclear Option Against Iraq Considered,” *Washington Post*, 16 October 1990, D1; and Arkin 1996.

crisis.” A civilian Pentagon official reported that nuclear weapons “were not part of our mindset.”¹¹⁸ The assumption was simply that conventional forces would be used. In fact, newly available memoir accounts of top officials confirm that President Bush decided at Camp David in December 1990 that the United States would not retaliate with nuclear or chemical weapons even if the Iraqis attacked with chemical weapons.¹¹⁹ Nuclear options were not written into the war plans for U.S. Central Command, which covers the Persian Gulf region.

Why were nuclear weapons not used nor even seriously considered? A realist would argue that the United States had other alternatives and did not need to use nuclear weapons. This argument is, of course, true. Given the conventional capabilities the coalition possessed, military and political leaders believed that nuclear weapons were not needed. But this begs the question of why nuclear weapons are not just another weapon of war and implies a hierarchy in which nuclear weapons are already stigmatized as an extreme and unacceptable form of weaponry. The availability of adequate conventional alternatives is itself a function of this historical process of stigmatization.

Although the uncertain long-term consequences of nuclear use were the chief material constraining factor, this became increasingly difficult to separate out from taboo issues in the debates. Both official and civilian analysts made numerous explicit references to a nuclear taboo. But in contrast to the tentative nature of the norm during the Korean War, this time officials themselves were the leading articulators of the importance of the taboo and of the disastrous military, political, and moral consequences that would attend any violation of the by now long tradition of non-use. In his memoirs, Colin Powell, chair of the Joint Chiefs, reports that in mid-October 1990, when asked by Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney about nuclear options, he responded, “Let’s not even think about nukes. You know we’re not going to let that genie loose.”¹²⁰ In January 1991, prior to the outbreak of the air war, CIA director William Webster said that a U.S. decision to breach the forty-five-year-old taboo against nuclear weapons use would be seen as so “appalling” that it should not be considered in the crisis.¹²¹ Even military leaders, after much debate, concluded that in practical terms nuclear weapons were “taboo” and therefore “fundamentally unusable.” An important constraint was the political costs and moral opprobrium that would be incurred by “rattling the nuclear saber.” This could shatter the fragile coalition arrayed against Iraq. “You lose the moral high ground if you use one of those stupid things,” said a senior army planner privy to the discussions of the Joint Chiefs, in comments reminiscent of those of Eisenhower and Dulles during the Korean War.¹²²

118. Author interviews, Washington D.C., March 1992.

119. See Bush and Scowcroft 1998, 463; and Baker 1995, 359.

120. Powell 1995, 486.

121. See “U.S. Rules Out Gulf Use of Nuclear, Chemical Arms,” *Washington Post*, 7 January 1991, A1, A22; and Bundy 1991.

122. “U.S. Forces Have No Nuclear Arms in Gulf States, No Plans to Use Them,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 October 1990, A6, A7.

Thus the taboo had clear constraining effects. But deeper, constitutive effects were also evident in arguments that using nuclear weapons would violate America's conception of itself as a moral, civilized nation. Upholding the taboo was essential to validating this identity. The taboo was no longer simply a "constraint" but had itself become a foreign policy goal for a "civilized" state. The actual use of nuclear weapons appeared to top political leaders as largely "unthinkable." White House chief of staff John Sununu, known for his conservative views, when asked about possible use of tactical nuclear weapons, reportedly said, "we just don't do things like that."¹²³ Commentators suggested that the United States would place itself outside the bounds of civilization if it used nuclear weapons and would become the "the pariah of nations." French president François Mitterrand publicly rejected any use of nuclear weapons as recourse to "barbarian methods."¹²⁴ These kinds of convictions, which go well beyond arguments from utility to those of identity and community, invoke a deeper discourse of "civilization." They illustrate constitutive effects of the taboo. By the time of the Gulf War, in contrast to 1945, Americans had come to see nuclear use as contrary to their perceptions of themselves.

The Gulf War also provides an especially clear example of permissive or secondary effects of the taboo, the legitimization of other forms of destruction. Permissive effects tend to be associated with more highly developed norms and thus have not figured in the discussion thus far. Even though nuclear weapons were ruled out in the Gulf War, the United States was nevertheless willing to contemplate policies of great destructiveness in Iraq. This was reflected both in the lethality of weapons used and in targeting policies that, though their immediate collateral damage was minimal, inflicted great damage on Iraqi civil infrastructure and led indirectly to large numbers of civilian deaths.¹²⁵

This outcome raises the issue of the convergence in destructive power of small nuclear weapons and advanced conventional weapons. With this trend, the traditional threshold between nuclear and conventional technology may become increasingly blurred. Fuel-air explosives, part of a new generation of highly lethal conventional weapons, provide a case in point. During the Gulf War, coalition military leaders worried about Iraq's possible use of fuel-air explosives and then used such weapons themselves at the end of the war against Iraqi forces. Military officials described them as capable of delivering a devastating blast similar to a small nuclear explosion over an area several miles wide.¹²⁶ Official and private statements on why the United States would not need to resort to nuclear weapons in the Gulf War generally echoed the theme that the coalition could create equivalent damage with conventional forces without the moral "downside" of using nuclear weapons. The destructiveness of

123. Author interview, Policy Planning, 6 March 1992.

124. "Land War to Start Soon, Mitterrand Says," *Washington Post*, 8 February 1991, A28.

125. The Gulf War was "the most fire-power intensive conflict since WWII." Michael Klare, "High-Death Weapons of the Gulf War," *The Nation*, 3 June 1991. About 250,000 tons of conventional bombs were dropped in forty-three days in the Gulf War, for an average of 5,800 tons per day. Keaney and Cohen 1993.

126. "Iraqi Bomb Gives Nuke-Type Blast, Pentagon Says," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 October 1990, 18.

nuclear weapons per se was not a prominent feature of the reasoning. That is, the reasoning was not “nuclear weapons are too destructive” but rather “we now have weapons that are as destructive as nuclear weapons.”¹²⁷

The strength of the nuclear taboo and the odium attached to nuclear weapons as weapons of mass destruction renders illegitimate most uses of nuclear weapons, even though certain kinds or uses of nuclear weapons could, from a just war perspective, conceivably be justified. The feature of nuclear weapons at the core of the taboo—their disproportionate nature—may change with advancing technology. As scattered proponents of tactical nuclear use during the Gulf War argued, in some circumstances the use of very small, accurate “micronukes” with low yields could minimize disproportionate destruction and avoid killing noncombatants.¹²⁸ Such a capability must be juxtaposed against the coalition’s destruction of the Iraqi electric and water infrastructure during the Gulf War, which caused vast numbers of civilian deaths due to infectious diseases and to lack of food, water, and medical care.¹²⁹ Such an attack erodes the moral claims against killing noncombatants, which are the traditional basis for objection to nuclear weapons. Thus, the nuclear taboo may have “permissive” or “shadow” effects, such as permitting other weapons and practices that, though they avoid the stigma of nuclear means, accomplish equally destructive ends.

The point of this discussion is not to critique Gulf War military policy nor to suggest that nuclear weapons should be more usable. It is rather to note that norms have multiple effects and may be applied in contradictory ways. One effect of the nuclear taboo has been to divert our attention from, and in fact legitimize, other practices—such as developments in conventional weapons—that are quite terrifying in themselves.¹³⁰ Hence we are less likely to question them.

In sum, U.S. leaders in the Gulf War did not use, nor even consider, nuclear weapons both because they did not need to and because they did not want to. The nuclear taboo affected outcomes in several ways. As in Korea, it operated instrumentally, as when policymakers calculated that violating it would result in political costs and moral opprobrium for the United States. But in contrast to Korea, it also operated in a more taken-for-granted, constitutive fashion, as when using nuclear weapons—violating the taboo—simply seemed “wrong” and “not what we do.” U.S. leaders publicly upheld the value of the taboo. However, although they ruled out any actual use of nuclear weapons, they did employ a subtle nuclear threat against Saddam Hussein in January 1991, a policy Secretary of State James Baker described as “calculated ambiguity.”¹³¹ Although this provides a telling reminder that they still saw some utility in the political weight of the bomb, it did continue the trend toward

127. *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, 10 February 1991, 15.

128. See “Calls by Some on GOP Right to Consider a Nuclear Strike Spark Heated Debate,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 February 1991; and Dowler and Howard 1991.

129. See United Nations 1991; and Ascherio et al. 1992.

130. John Keegan, “The Specter of Conventional War: There Are Worse Things Than a Small Nuclear Bomb,” *Harper’s*, July 1983, 10.

131. Baker 1995, 359.

vaguer and subtler nuclear threats, and, unlike during the Cold War, U.S. leaders were clear in their own minds that they were bluffing and had no intention of actually using such weapons. There was no tangible preparation for nuclear use. The fact that the few individuals who publicly advocated nuclear use were branded as kooks or crazies indicates how substantial the burden of proof had become—though the taboo was not yet fully robust—and the increasingly taken-for-granted nature of assumptions of non-use.

Norms and Causal Mechanisms

What are the specific causal mechanisms by which the taboo operated? This story suggests three: domestic public opinion, world opinion (U.S. leaders perceived favorable world opinion as crucial to sustaining their legitimate leadership of the Western alliance), and personal conviction informed by beliefs about American values and conceptions of the appropriate behavior of civilized nations. More conceptually, norms work through three pathways: force, self-interest, and legitimacy. In this story, the taboo operated both by appearing as a constraint on self-interested decision makers—entirely consistent with a rationalist conception of the instrumental operation of a norm as a “cost”—and in a more substantive or principled fashion as reflected in beliefs about the growing illegitimacy of nuclear use.

What is the relationship between the taboo and public opinion? Public opposition to nuclear weapons was based on a mixture of (self-interested) fear, horror, and moral opprobrium as well as the perception that nuclear weapons are different. European allies were more opposed to atomic weapons than Americans since the former felt they would be the battleground in any atomic war between the superpowers. But American public opinion became set against the first use of nuclear weapons by 1954 and remained there, well before most policymakers came to such thoughts.¹³² The taboo, though closely equated with public opinion in the early years, became much more than that over time as the result of the rise of global antinuclear politics, both grassroots and diplomatic, and the emergence of nuclear arms control efforts starting in the mid-1950s.¹³³ The fact that leaders themselves used the word *taboo*—a term linked to notions of contamination and danger going well beyond simply public opinion—suggests the special status that was already beginning to attach to such weapons.

Conclusion

The cases discussed in this article provide plausible evidence for the role of a developing nuclear taboo in inhibiting U.S. resort to nuclear weapons after 1945. No taboo

132. Graham 1989.

133. Wittner 1997.

existed in 1945, but from the Korean War, when an emerging taboo entered deliberations mostly as an instrumental consideration, to 1991, when it had become more embedded and internalized, it has helped to restrain use of nuclear weapons through appearing as a “constraint” to actors and through more constitutive processes of stigmatization and categorization. Ultimately, in delegitimizing nuclear weapons, the nuclear taboo has constrained the practice of self-help in the international system. States are not free to resort to nuclear weapons without incurring moral opprobrium or political costs. National leaders are forced to seek alternative technologies for use in war or defense or else risk being classified as outside the bounds of “civilized” international society. If there had been no normative opprobrium—that is, if the “rules” had been different—it is likely that we would have seen resort to such weapons at some point during the Cold War.

I have set aside here many pertinent questions about the taboo—details about its scope, robustness, origins, and institutionalization—in order to focus on showing how it has affected outcomes. The analysis here joins a growing body of literature on prohibitory norms in international relations that seriously challenges realist arguments that norms are merely epiphenomenal.¹³⁴ Whereas material constraints are part of the story of non-use, a purely materialist account of this phenomenon is impossible. Both those who found the taboo desirable or “right” and those who found it inconvenient and sought to do away with it thought it constrained behavior—often their own—providing powerful evidence against skeptical arguments that taboo talk is simply “cheap talk.” Deeper constitutive effects, such as the perception of “suitable targets,” the category of weapons of mass destruction, and the identity of “civilized” state, provide further evidence.

The core analytical distinction of this article is between how norms constrain and how they constitute. While rationalist accounts of the constraining effects of norms are a good starting point, constructivist accounts point the way toward deeper constitutive and permissive effects. Overall, the analysis highlights the mutual shaping of norms and interests. Norms enter into, and change, the cost-benefit calculations of interests (constraining), but they also help to constitute those interests, identities, and practices in the first place. Interests and international norms may coincide, but this coincidence does not render norms superfluous. The multiple ways norms have effects makes this clear, as evidenced in the legitimizing effect of the nuclear taboo on non-nuclear weapons, an unintended consequence of a categorization process. These various kinds of effects point to the thoroughly normative nature of social action. Norms do not simply work as triggers for one kind of behavior but rather are part of complex sets of meanings, including permissions and prohibitions, through which people understand, and act in, the world.

How do we account for the apparent incongruity between the development of the norm and the steady U.S. nuclear arms buildup throughout the Cold War, including elaborate strategies and even “war-fighting” doctrines designed to ensure that nuclear weapons would be used? Normative development tends to proceed neither linearly

134. See Legro 1995; Nadelman 1990; and Price 1998 and 1995.

nor necessarily coherently: norms can (and often do) develop in the face of seemingly contradictory behavior. Even though U.S. leaders came to believe that nuclear weapons should not really be used, they were not willing to give up nuclear deterrence. But they were caught in the paradox recognized early on by nuclear strategists: making deterrence credible (especially in the face of the threat of mutual assured destruction) required convincing the adversary that the United States would actually use such weapons. As such threats became less credible over time for both deterrence and normative reasons, ever more and fancier weapons and strategies were sought in an attempt to bolster credibility. Additionally, the fact that the decision to use nuclear weapons rests with the president creates a significant gap between what the military has plans for and what the president might actually do. The historical record suggests that presidential thinking about nuclear weapons has been relatively independent of strategic planning in the military.¹³⁵ As the cases here show, what goes on behind the public face of policy may be a different story.

How generalizable are the findings from the U.S. case? The fact that the taboo matters in the United States does not necessarily mean that it matters elsewhere. Because the United States is an open democracy, penetrated by domestic opinion and ideas, and with a perceived tradition of humanitarian rights and values, it may in this sense be an “easier” case for the role of norms. Still, judging by opinion polls and government policies, most Western democracies, with the possible exception of France, have been more anti-nuclear than the United States. This suggests that if the taboo operates in the United States, it probably operates in other democracies less committed to, and reliant on, nuclear weapons historically. Ideally, a full demonstration of the systematic and constitutive nature of the taboo would require investigating its role in the decision making of other countries, especially nondemocratic ones where the leadership is less susceptible to public opposition.

Still, though the taboo is probably not universal, it is today widespread, as demonstrated both through domestic policies and widespread diplomatic support. Further, though it is a systemic phenomenon, this does not mean that it holds for all countries for similar reasons. As a collective phenomenon of the international community, it may be held substantively by some states and only instrumentally by others. Thus, it may function “instrumentally” in Israel or Pakistan, for example—that is, they take care not to flaunt their views as a concession to others who hold the taboo more substantively. This raises a further set of questions about how the taboo has been disseminated, strengthened, institutionalized, and “enforced.” Although I do not address these here, much of the explanation is to be found in global antinuclear politics and especially the politics of nuclear nonproliferation, the foremost arena today for disseminating and strengthening the taboo—as well as for resistance to such efforts.

In the end, it may be that the taboo on first use of nuclear weapons is only the tip of the iceberg and that even nuclear deterrence of any kind will also come to be viewed as illegitimate. The non-use of nuclear weapons during the Cold War and their stigmatization may be a function of a deeper trend toward the obsolescence of war more

135. See Betts 1987; and Freedman 1989.

generally.¹³⁶ Sorting this out, however, requires first understanding the nature of normative constraints on nuclear weapons themselves and the far-reaching nature of normative effects more generally.

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136. See Ray 1989; and Mueller 1989.

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