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## H-Diplo | ISSF Article Review 1

**Francis J. Gavin. "Same As It Ever Was: Nuclear Alarmism, Proliferation, and the Cold War."** *International Security* 34:3 (Winter 2009/10): 7-37. DOI: 10.1162/isec.2010.34.3.7.  
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Review by **John Mueller**, The Ohio State University

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**N**ot only is Francis Gavin one of those rare individuals today who actually remembers the Cold War, but he believes it is relevant to today's concerns. In this bright and engaging article, he examines several myths concerning the Cold War and nuclear weapons and the alarm they have so routinely inspired.

Critiquing assertions popular in some circles today, he insists that the weapons are not more dangerous than they were in the past, that they did not consistently provide stability during the Cold War, that they have not been the only force driving nuclear proliferation, and that the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union should be distinguished from their geopolitical and ideological rivalry.

His primary focus is on proliferation, noting pertinently that extravagant and persistently unfulfilled fears about nuclear “tipping points” have been around for decades. In the process, he emphasizes that proliferation alarm during the Cold War surely rivals, perhaps totally eclipses, that currently engendered about the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran or North Korea.

In the early 1960s, decision-makers became nearly hysterical over the possibility of nuclear weapons in the hands of the mother of all rogues, Communist China. At the time, China had launched an invasion of India, threatened Taiwan, casually and repeatedly downplayed the consequences of nuclear war, initiated bizarre and mindless domestic policies that resulted in the starvation of tens of millions of its own people, and was a loud, persistent, and proud state sponsor of insurgencies in a whole bunch of little countries in which United States fancied it had vital interests.

Scary. However, as Gavin points out, China became, if anything, “less aggressive and more mature” after it obtained the bomb, and, contrary to almost all expectations, it has actually produced far fewer of them than it could have (16, 31). Gavin extrapolates plausibly that if Iran or North Korea want nuclear weapons, they may think they need them, like China, merely to deter the glowering United States (34).

If there is a problem with this appealing, thoughtful, and well-constructed article, it is that Gavin is insufficiently true to his title. In many places he argues not that *it is the same* as it ever was, but rather that it was much *worse* during the Cold War. In this vein, he notes the “apocalyptic challenges” Cold Warriors faced (13), the high “danger and risk levels” they endured during their “confrontations” (15), the many nuclear threats they hurled at each other (23), their “dangerous” crises (24), and their steely efforts to exhibit “resolve” and “credibility” (26).

Insofar as this characterizes the Cold War, contrary to Gavin’s suggestion, I do not think the situation came about, because of the existence of nuclear weapons (24-27). It emerged rather from the memory of the run-up to World War II, which inspired the much under-examined conclusion that one must fight over militarily inconsequential territory like Ethiopia, Manchuria, and the Sudetenland because to do otherwise only whets the appetite of the aggressor.

However, although there was an important ideological challenge during the Cold War that led to colorful crises in the center and tragic wars on the periphery, no one was thinking of direct Hitlerian aggression--the concern, perhaps the only one, for which nuclear weapons are most relevant. Nonetheless, under the sway of fancied fears, the Cold War contestants spent massively on the weapons, postured uncertainly, and spun out a vast, forehead-furling literature aptly labeled “nuclear metaphysics” by Robert H. Johnson in a brilliant book.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Johnson, *Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994), 78. This valuable and much-neglected book has recently been reprinted: [www.edupublisher.com/EPBookstore/PolsCE.html](http://www.edupublisher.com/EPBookstore/PolsCE.html)

In my view it was all neatly encapsulated in a recollection by John F. Kennedy's Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, of a "confrontation" he once had with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev:

"Mr. Rusk, Konrad Adenauer has told me that Germany would not fight a nuclear war over Berlin. Charles de Gaulle has told me that France would not fight a nuclear war over Berlin. Harold Macmillan has told me that England would not fight a nuclear war over Berlin. Why should I believe that you Americans would fight a nuclear war over Berlin?" That was quite a question, with Khrushchev staring at me with his little pig eyes. I couldn't call Kennedy and ask, "What do I tell the son of a bitch now?" So I stared back at him and said, "Mr. Chairman, you will have to take into account the possibility that we Americans are just goddam [sic] fools." We glared at each other, unblinking, and then he changed the subject and gave me three gold watches to take home to my children.<sup>2</sup>

Danger? Apocalypse? I don't think so. Since there was in essence nothing for the weapons to deter, nuclear hysteria during the Cold War, like current alarmism about little rogues and the virtually non-existent al-Qaeda, resembles the histrionics more appropriate to farce than to cosmic cliffhangers. Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali in their *Khrushchev's Cold War* a book wisely much cited by Gavin, aptly compare their lead character to the Wizard of Oz.<sup>3</sup>

In the midst of the Cold War Warner Schilling observed, "At the summit of foreign policy, one always finds simplicity and spook."<sup>4</sup> Same as it ever was.

**John Mueller** is professor of political science at Ohio State University. His most recent book is *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda* (Oxford University Press, 2010). Other books include *Overblown* (Free Press, 2006) which deals with terrorism and other inflated threats, *The Remnants of War* (Cornell University Press, 2004), *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (Free Press, 1989), and *Astaire Dancing* (Knopf, 1985). His "What Was the Cold War About? Evidence from Its Ending" appeared in *Political Science Quarterly*, Winter 2004-05.

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<sup>2</sup> Dean Rusk as told to Richard Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: Norton, 1990), 227-228.

<sup>3</sup> Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary* (New York: Norton, 2006), 541-542.

<sup>4</sup> Warner R. Schilling, "Surprise Attack, Death, and War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 9:3 (September 1965): 389.