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T.V. Paul. "Self-deterrence: Nuclear Weapons and the enduring credibility challenge." *International Journal* 71:1 (March 2016): 20-40. DOI: 10.1177/0020702015618682. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0020702015618682

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T.V. Paul has captured something both intangible and frustrating in debates over nuclear deterrence: the disconnect between strategic and moral thinking. Anyone who has worked on these issues is -- or should be -- struck by the almost casual way in which planners and strategists speak about the use of nuclear weapons, especially against small nuclear powers or even against non-nuclear states about to cross the nuclear threshold. It is not unusual to hear the use of five, ten, or twenty tactical nuclear weapons being mooted in various scenarios, or even to contemplate the employment of a small number of strategic strikes.

Planning and hypothesizing is what planners and strategists do, and it is unfair to criticize them too harshly for doing their jobs. To work on the problems of nuclear deterrence and the use of nuclear weapons, however, is also to face the reality that political leaders are not professional strategists. They make decisions differently from people who spend their days thinking about such things. The way they approach the terrible decision to

use nuclear weapons is unlikely to be influenced by what Jeffrey Lewis once called the "fine calculations of strategic planners."[1]

This is what makes Paul's article so valuable. He bypasses the issue of whether national leaders will be deterred by levels of actual damage to themselves and others, noting that deterrence among peers with nuclear arms, while still an important area for research and debate, has been studied extensively. Instead, Paul asks a better question: what happens when decision-makers recoil from using nuclear weapons against powers who cannot retaliate?

Paul begins with a short discussion of the debate over reputation and deterrence, a review that is useful mostly to remind us of how abstractly the international relations literature treats the use of nuclear weapons. As Paul reminds us, "the ability to do something is different from the willingness to do something" (25). This is a simple observation but it is at the root of many frustrating policy and theoretical discussions: during the debate over the Iran nuclear deal, for example, I personally encountered advocates of the deal who argued that if Iran left the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JPCOA), there was always the option to use nuclear weapons -- small ones, of course -- to destroy the Iranian program. Whether the United States has such a capability is a question for planners, but it is a world away from whether any U.S. leader would be willing to do such a thing.

Paul identifies three major influences that would 'self-deter' Western leaders from engaging in the use of nuclear arms against terrorists or non-nuclear states. (The issue of using nuclear weapons against terrorists is not as crazy as it sounds: the French defense ministry had to walk back an apparent reference by then-President Jacques Chirac in 2006 implying that France had such plans).[2] Paul uses Robert Jervis's definition of self-deterrence here, as "the cases in which a country is deterred by factors other than retaliation by others" (27). Paul divides these into the tradition of non-use, moral restraints, and legal considerations.

What Paul has called the "tradition of non-use" is intertwined with the slightly different 'taboo' proposed by Nina Tannenwald, and we need not decide which is the better term.[3] Rather, Paul is right to point out that recent memoirs, among other evidence, show how quickly U.S. leaders push nuclear arms off the table right at the outset of their deliberations. It is a tradition, as Paul notes in his discussion of the first Gulf War, rooted as much in practicality as anything else. Successive U.S. administrations have considered various nuclear scenarios against small nations and always abandoned them for a variety of reasons, including the difficulty of their execution.

Where Paul comes closer to a 'taboo' argument is in his discussion of moral constraints. Revisionist Cold War historians are keen to criticize President Harry Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb on Japan in 1945,

[1] Jeffrey Lewis, "Minimum Deterrence," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July/August 2008.

[2] See Bruno Tertrais, "French Perspectives On Nuclear Weapons And Nuclear Disarmament," Washington, DC: The Stimson Center, Studies on Unblocking the Road to Zero, May 4, 2009.

[3] See T.V. Paul, *The Tradition of Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons* (Stanford: Stanford Univerity Press, 2009), and Nina Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use," *International Organization* 53:3 (Summer 1999).

but Paul reminds us that the Truman who left office in 1953 was a different man. In his farewell address, Truman rebuked those who insisted he use nuclear weapons to end the Korean conflict. "For most Americans," Truman said, "the answer is quite simple: We are not made that way. We are a moral people" (35).

Paul is on to something here, because the fact of the matter is that these are the considerations that haunt real political leaders. They care about moral considerations, even when they violate them. President Richard Nixon, the man who sent waves of B-52s over Indochina, ordered a full review of the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) after being appalled at the number of casualties it envisioned on all sides. Paul Nitze -- Ronald Reagan's tough nuclear arms negotiator in the 1980s, and a conservative whom no one could accuse of being weak-kneed about strategic issues -- admitted before his death that he counseled President Reagan never to use nuclear weapons, *even in retaliation.*[4]

These considerations become exponentially larger when national leaders are faced with levying nuclear destruction on non-nuclear powers. How will an American president rationalize a nuclear strike in the Middle East, with the immense human and political consequences, when the existence of the United States itself is not threatened? I would argue that no President will take that decision; other strategists would counter that limiting U.S. and allied ground casualties will be enough to overcome such reluctance. We cannot know who is right at this point, but Paul makes a better case that an actual human being is more likely to be self-deterred from nuclear use than a hypothetical *homo economicus* pursuing an optimal ground strategy.

Likewise, Paul captures another intangible when he notes that no leader will willingly make a democratic state and global leader into an international pariah. The destruction that even a small nuclear weapon would bring to a less developed or weaker power would change the nature of the conflict, and no matter what the initial crisis was about, the outcome would center on the consequences of the nuclear strikes. The United States would win such a confrontation, and then bear the stain of nuclear use forever. (Again, consider the ritual of introspection and criticism that occurs each year during the anniversary of the atomic bombing of Japan, a far more defensible case than most modern scenarios.)

There are two problems in Paul's article. The less important issue is that his discussion of legal constraints feels somewhat tacked on to the more substantial analysis. It is true that Western leaders tend to be conscious of international law, but even they will sidestep international legal prohibitions when to do so suits their interests. No one has abdicated their nuclear arsenal merely because the World Court has deemed nuclear weapons illegal, and no U.S. leader is likely to worry too much about a purely legal argument except as a function of the international opprobrium that would fall on America after using a nuclear weapon.

The more important flaw is that Paul limits his discussion to nuclear use against non-nuclear states and actors. This prejudices the discussion: most of us can agree that using nuclear weapons against non-nuclear actors is morally reprehensible and unlikely ever to be a real policy choice. (This has not stopped former George W.

[4] Ambassador James Goodby related this story in 2009, and suggests that Nitze's advice "went back to his thinking about protracted nuclear war, which had to do with [Nitze's] ideas about how to deter the use of nuclear weapons. But of course deterrence easily blends into the idea of using these weapons in warfighting situations, and that's what we had gotten ourselves into." See James Goodby, "Arms Control since the Cold War," Footnotes: The Newsletter of FPRI's Wachman Center 14:9 (May 2009).

Bush administration official and nuclear analyst Elbridge Colby, for one, for arguing in 2013 that nuclear weapons could be used as retaliation for an "existential" cyber attack, whatever that is.)[5] The more excruciating dilemma is whether to use nuclear weapons in more ambiguous circumstances -- or after a small aggressor has used up whatever small arsenal it might have possessed. Would a U.S. President order nuclear use against a rogue state who had attacked the United States with nuclear arms merely to exact revenge? Perhaps - but as Paul tantalizingly suggests, perhaps not.

Still, Paul is starting from the simplest and clearest case, which helps us to frame the question. This is as it should be. In doing so, he has re-opened a debate long overdue, and confronted us with questions that are too often waved away with simplistic equations of strike and counterstrike that made sense, insofar as they ever did, only during the Cold War. Paul has performed an important service with this article: those who have found themselves searching for the words, or trying to get across the intuitive sense that a Western leader will not simply authorize the use of a nuclear weapon against a smaller, non-nuclear adversary, now has a clear and well-argued point of reference around which to organize their thoughts.

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[5] Elbridge Colby, "Cyberwar and the Nuclear Option," *The National Interest*, June 24, 2013.