

# H-Diplo | ISSF

Roundtable, Volume VII, No. 1 (2014)



A production of H-Diplo with the journals *Security Studies*, *International Security*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, and the International Studies Association's Security Studies Section (ISSS).

<http://www.issforum.org>

H-Diplo/ISSF Editors: **James McAllister and Diane Labrosse**  
H-Diplo/ISSF Roundtable and Web/Production Editor: **George Fujii**  
Commissioned for H-Diplo/ISSF by **James McAllister**

Introduction by **James McAllister**

---

**Thomas Nichols. *No Use: Nuclear Weapons and U.S. National Security*.** University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4566-0 (cloth, \$39.95/£26.00).

Published by H-Diplo/ISSF on **3 October 2014**

Stable URL: <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Roundtable-7-1.pdf>

## Contents

---

Introduction by James McAllister, Williams College.....	2
Review by Paul C. Avey, Southern Methodist University .....	4
Review by Jeffrey S. Lantis, The College of Wooster .....	10
Review by Amy Oakes, The College of William and Mary .....	13
Author's Response by Tom Nichols, Naval War College.....	17

© Copyright 2014



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Introduction by James McAllister, Williams College

---

One of the perennial questions of the nuclear age is ‘How Much is Enough?’ In the late 1950’s, Admiral Arleigh Burke and the U.S. Navy argued that the American arsenal could be much smaller than the massive one that had been created over the course of the decade. The Navy position, which came to be known as one of ‘minimum’ or ‘finite’ deterrence, never prevailed during the Cold War; the American nuclear arsenal during the Cold War contained over 30,000 warheads by the late 1960’s. In his thoughtful and provocative new book, Tom Nichols argues that the time for the adoption of a minimum deterrent posture is now. Despite the large reductions in the American arsenal since the end of the Cold War, Nichols argues that further reductions in the size of that arsenal are long overdue. In his view, the 1550 warheads provided for by the ‘New Start’ treaty can and should be reduced much further.

All of the contributors to this roundtable agree that Nichols has considerably advanced the debate over the role of nuclear weapons in the twenty-first century. Amy Oakes argues that “*No Use* presents a thoughtful contribution to the debate on U.S. nuclear strategy and Washington would be well served by giving Nichols’s case for minimum deterrence careful consideration.” Paul Avey suggests that “Nichols considerably advances the debate by articulating what a minimum deterrence posture should look like and outlining steps to attain that position.” Jeffrey Lantis believes that Nichols “offers a series of fairly bold recommendations for U.S. policy changes, including: a declaration of a doctrine of minimum deterrence, a U.S. no-first-use pledge, changes in nuclear targeting, reductions and changes in force structure, rethinking extended deterrence, and revisiting missile defense.” While *No Use* is largely devoted to the future of nuclear weapons in American strategy, the contributors also all agree that Nichols has done an excellent job of explaining the development of the American arsenal from 1945 to the present day.

It should not come as any surprise that the contributors to the roundtable believe that Nichols has advanced current debates rather than resolved them; a friendly critique that the author fully accepts in his response. Two specific issues raised by the contributors are worth highlighting. First, both Avey and Oakes suggest that Nichols might underestimate the role that the American nuclear arsenal continues to play in reassuring allies and preventing nuclear proliferation. As Avey asks, “Is it better to maintain a larger and more belligerent force posture than necessary for deterrence or risk additional nuclear proliferation?” While Nichols suggests that the answer to this question is no, Avey is correct to note that many analysts still believe that the answer continues to be yes. Second, Oakes questions the strategy of conventional retaliation advocated by Nichols as an alternative to nuclear threats against small nuclear powers. As Nichols himself suggests, conventional retaliation “will entail huge costs, and will almost certainly erase any savings to be found from scaling back the strategic deterrent to minimum levels” (177). While it might be the case that the leaders of small nuclear powers might be more effectively deterred by the threat of regime change, as Nichols argues, Oakes plausibly suggests that in the aftermath of Iraq and Afghanistan the American public is highly unlikely to support the policy recommended by the author.

H-Diplo/ISSF thanks Professor Nichols and all of the reviewers for their thoughtful contributions to the ongoing debate over the role of nuclear weapons in the twenty-first century.

**Participants:**

**Tom Nichols** is a Professor in the National Security Affairs Department at the U.S. Naval War College, a senior associate of the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs, and an adjunct at Harvard Extension School. He was personal staff for defense and security affairs in the United States Senate to the late Senator John Heinz of Pennsylvania. He holds a Ph.D. from Georgetown University, and the Certificate of the Harriman Institute for Advanced Study of the Soviet Union at Columbia University. His previous book was *Eve of Destruction: The Coming Age of Preventive War* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

**Paul Avey** is a Fellow at the Tower Center for Political Studies at Southern Methodist University. He was previously a Stanton Nuclear Security Fellow at MIT, a Predoctoral Fellow at Harvard, and earned his Ph.D. from the University of Notre Dame. He is the author or co-author of articles in *International Security*, *International Studies Quarterly*, and *Foreign Policy* and is currently working on a book project that explores why states without nuclear weapons challenge and resist nuclear armed opponents.

**Jeffrey S. Lantis** is Professor of Political Science at The College of Wooster. He teaches and researches on topics including international security, norms, nuclear nonproliferation strategic culture, and comparative foreign policy. A former Fulbright Senior Scholar in Australia, Lantis is author of books including *United States Foreign Policy in Action* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) and *The Life and Death of International Treaties* (Oxford University Press, 2009), and co-editor of *Foreign Policy in Comparative Perspective: Domestic and International Influences on State Behavior*, second edition (Sage/CQ Press, 2013). In addition, Lantis has published articles and book chapters on nonproliferation, the life-cycle of international regimes, executive decisions and preventive war, strategic culture, norm stewardship, and sensitive nuclear technology assistance. He is editor of a forthcoming special issue of *Contemporary Security Policy*, focused on strategic cultures and changing security dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region. Lantis has served as a Visiting Scholar in the Institute for Security and Conflict Studies at the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, in the School of Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University, the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University, and the German Council on Foreign Relations.

**Amy Oakes** is Associate Professor of Government at the College of William and Mary. She received her B.A. from Davidson College and her Ph.D. from the Ohio State University. In 2009-2010, she was a fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University. Her research focuses on the domestic causes of war and nuclear nonproliferation, and her work has appeared in *Security Studies*, *Politics & Gender*, *International Journal*, and *International Studies Quarterly*. She is the author of *Diversionsary War: Domestic Unrest and International Conflict* (Stanford University Press, 2012).

Review by Paul C. Avey, Southern Methodist University

---

Thomas Nichols makes a compelling case for reducing both the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and its role in U.S. national security. His study is driven by two interrelated questions: “Why is it so difficult for the major powers, and the United States in particular, to break the nuclear addiction, and what role should nuclear weapons play in America’s national security?” (5). The answer to the first question is largely bureaucratic and political inertia: an inability of political leaders to break from Cold War thinking – itself something of an incoherent muddle – and make the tough decisions to create a better policy. The second question is the core motivating factor for Nichols and his answer is clear: the United States can and should rely on a minimal nuclear deterrent. A minimal nuclear deterrent, he argues, is not only sufficient for U.S. security but will support U.S. foreign policy in many other areas as well.

First, what does a minimum nuclear deterrent look like? For Nichols, a minimum deterrent concerns both numbers and doctrine (109-124). In terms of doctrine, a minimum deterrent would consist of a no first-use pledge, de-alerting the nuclear arsenal, and targeting infrastructure rather than enemy nuclear forces. A minimum deterrent posture would also roll back extended nuclear deterrence guarantees, replacing those instead with conventional forces.<sup>1</sup> Against small nuclear states it would rely first and foremost on conventional retaliation and regime change rather than nuclear retaliation. This holds even in the event of a nuclear strike by a small state against the United States (157-169). In terms of physical capabilities, Nichols suggests an arsenal between 300 and 500 weapons would be sufficient (114-117). He is ambiguous on whether the triad of bombers, missiles, and submarines must all remain, though he is clear that at the least the ICBM forces must continue to exist. “Their location in the continental United States, rather than their number,” he argues, “is the source of their deterrent power, because there is no way to destroy them without violating the North American heartland and killing hundreds of thousands of American instantly (118).”<sup>2</sup> This, in turn, nearly guarantees an American nuclear response. Theater missile defenses have a place in a minimum deterrent posture; national missile defense does not.

Nichols builds his case for this deterrent force in several steps. He begins with two chapters outlining the history of American nuclear thinking from 1945 to the present. The chapters are a quick and excellent review of the subject. Indeed, the chapters are worth reading simply to see an overview of the major changes in U.S. strategy over time.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nichols is not entirely clear on this point. He notes that a no first-use pledge would essentially rule out U.S. nuclear strikes for anything other than a nuclear attack on the United States homeland *as well as* its close allies in NATO, Japan, and Australia, but then later argues that the U.S. should end nuclear defense commitments to NATO and Japan. See Nichols, *No Use*, pp. 111, 119-121.

<sup>2</sup> This puts Nichols at odds with many who argue that if the United States moved to a single leg of the triad it should rely on the submarine fleet because of its invulnerability. See, for example, Benjamin Friedman, Christopher Preble, and Matt Fay, “The End of Overkill? Reassessing U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy,” (Washington, D.C.: CATO Institute, 2013)

More importantly, the first two chapters serve to clear the intellectual landscape. The review of U.S. nuclear strategy during the Cold War reveals a weapon constantly in search of a strategy, lurching from problem to problem as a result of changing material circumstances (most notably Soviet capabilities), U.S. goals, and bureaucratic politics. In addition, operational planning never really kept up with doctrine, oftentimes resisting outside efforts to change nuclear targeting and practices. Given this rather unimpressive history, there is no golden-age of nuclear policy on which modern nuclear strategy should rely. Nichols then examines the three post-Cold War Nuclear Posture Reviews (1994, 2002, and 2010). He argues that the thinking reflects a continued reliance on Cold War 'lessons' and a failure to tackle tough questions in light of the changed geopolitical environment. The result is an uneasy series of compromises to justify and expand the role for large U.S. nuclear forces. To be sure, there were moderate reductions in the number of U.S. nuclear weapons (though these were contentious), renewed emphasis on missile defense (2002), and a vague commitment to global zero (2010). Still, at the end of 2010 "policy remained almost exactly where it was in 2002 and 1994, with U.S. nuclear weapons fulfilling the roles of a general deterrent, a potential battlefield response, and the final trump card, the ultimate punishment, to be inflicted on unrecalcitrant or undeterrable opponents" (78-79).

Chapters 3 and 4 form the core of the book. Nichols advances two main claims. First, that a minimal deterrent is effective against Russia and China. Second, that nuclear weapons lack much utility against small nuclear states (and by extension non-nuclear states) and therefore the U.S. does not need a large or complex force structure to deal with such challenges. In making these arguments he fleshes out his minimum deterrent policy in greater detail.

Nichols advances the basic, and to my mind plausible, claim that the high costs of enduring even a few nuclear strikes will cause policymakers in the major nuclear states – America, China, and Russia – to recoil at the chance of a nuclear confrontation. It is for this reason that various officials were and continue to be attracted to the minimum deterrent posture (83-95). He then addresses three counterarguments: first, that small arsenals are vulnerable and create preventive war incentives, second, that a small arsenal fails to deter anything but a massive strike because its inflexibility offers a choice of only destruction or capitulation, and finally that it relies on countervalue targeting and is therefore immoral. Nichols finds these arguments unpersuasive when confronted with the real world.<sup>3</sup> There is no political dispute between these states today that would justify the risks of a preventive strike. In addition, it is impossible for states to guarantee they would destroy all the adversary's weapons. Finally, there is no way to limit damage or escalation with even small counterforce strikes. The end result, then, is simply that "if a conflict somehow reaches the nuclear threshold – at least between Russia, China, and America – the decision will be only whether to cross the line into nuclear war to defend the national existence of

---

<sup>3</sup> "It is a maddening characteristic of most nuclear scenarios," he writes, "that they are built on the assumption that war has already broken out, which might be a convenient device for gamers and modelers but is little help to policymakers" (101).

the United States” (109). The minimum deterrent posture that he outlines takes these basic realities into account. It therefore continues to provide U.S. adversaries sufficient reason not to strike should the temptation arise.

Next, Nichols argues that the American arsenal lacks a basic credibility against small nuclear states. This is true even in response to a nuclear strike. Better, he argues, to rely on the overwhelming U.S. conventional advantage. Nichols recognizes that in the immediate aftermath of a strike there will be strong pressures to use nuclear weapons. This is partly an effort to re-establish deterrence by demonstrating the consequences of using nuclear weapons. It is also a response to the natural tendency to demand revenge. In the end, the costs of nuclear retaliation vastly outweigh the benefits in these situations. “The military and moral enormity of nuclear use, the potentially disproportionate scale of response, the unavoidable damage to innocent parties near the actual target, the risks of escalation, and the lasting effects of nuclear weapons make retaliation a vastly more complicated equation than the simple logic of assured destruction” (129). A conventional response that ends in regime change will be more credible because it avoids these problems and guarantees that the culprit will be captured and killed.

Overall, Nichols makes several contributions to scholarship. First, as noted above, he provides a useful summary of declared U.S. nuclear policy both during and after the Cold War. By doing so he clearly shows the trials and inconsistencies of strategic nuclear thinking since the dawn of the nuclear era. Second, Nichols considerably advances the debate by articulating what a minimum deterrence posture should look like and outlining steps to attain that position. This will win him few friends. Proponents of global zero and those advocating continued reliance on a large nuclear force posture will both be unsatisfied with Nichols’s middle way. Hopefully, this will encourage proponents of the current nuclear posture to more clearly articulate their rationale beyond simply hedging their bets. Finally, Nichols usefully draws attention to the various military and, more importantly, diplomatic benefits of reducing U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons. He is probably correct that U.S. presidents will be extremely reluctant to ever actually use a nuclear weapon. Making that explicit will start to reap some of the benefits from this de facto policy choice.

There are several issues that leave the analysis incomplete, though. First, Nichols’s call to eliminate the option of nuclear retaliation against a small state that used nuclear weapons is puzzling. The minimum deterrence posture as he defines it seems to leave room for a credible nuclear threat in these situations. After all, the small state has no hope of a counterforce strike even against a small U.S. arsenal. The United States could therefore physically retaliate. In addition, a retaliatory strike against an inferior nuclear opponent would not invite Armageddon. Finally, a no first-use policy allows retaliation after a nuclear strike. By definition, retaliation would be second-use. Nichols does identify many other potential problems, particularly moral ones, associated with relying on nuclear weapons to deter nuclear strikes from small states. “The moral consequences of nuclear retaliation themselves may corrode the credibility of nuclear threats, since the enemy might not believe that U.S. leaders will transgress their own traditions and values by engaging in deliberate nuclear revenge,” he argues (151). This is an empirical question, however, and

should be subjected to scrutiny. In addition, Nichols reopens space for counterarguments claiming that keeping nuclear options available reduces the likelihood of follow-up strikes against the U.S. homeland and military. These may be unlikely for the reasons Nichols asserts, but they are not implausible. And recent research shows the American public to be surprisingly tolerant of nuclear strikes to safeguard U.S. lives.<sup>4</sup>

Second, by focusing on the difficulties U.S. policymakers face and the inconsistencies in American strategy, Nichols provides only a partial answer to his first question: Why is it so difficult for the United States to break the nuclear addiction? A recent wave of research in political science suggests that a large part of the answer is that the United States does gain significant advantages from its nuclear arsenal when confronting nuclear-inferior and non-nuclear opponents.<sup>5</sup> For instance, scholars have found that states with more nuclear weapons are more likely to win disputes against opponents with fewer weapons or no weapons at all.<sup>6</sup> In a forthcoming article, Matthew Fuhrmann and Todd Sechser report that formal alliances with nuclear states do provide benefits for allies suggesting that extended deterrence guarantees are valuable.<sup>7</sup> Others find that states with more nuclear weapons are less likely to be the target of challenges.<sup>8</sup> Vipin Narang shows that outside the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain, tactical nuclear weapons integrated into military structures enhance deterrence.<sup>9</sup> To be sure, one can legitimately question the data and methods in many of these studies. Scholars are currently doing exactly that as they refine and build this research program.<sup>10</sup> It is worth pointing out, though, that many historians

---

<sup>4</sup> Daryl G. Press, Scott D. Sagan, and Benjamin Valentino, "Atomic Aversion: Experimental Evidence on Taboos, Traditions, and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 1 (February 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Nichols recognizes a role for nuclear weapons as a deterrent against Russia and China. However, he questions the value of nuclear superiority against nuclear adversaries and by extension non-nuclear opponents.

<sup>6</sup> Kyle Beardsley and Victor Asal, "Winning with the Bomb," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (April 2009); and Matthew Kroenig, "Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes," *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (January 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Fuhrmann and Todd S. Sechser, "Signaling Alliance Commitments: Hand-Tying and Sunk Costs in Extended Nuclear Deterrence," *American Journal of Political Science*, forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> Mathew Kroenig and Michael Weintraub, "The Nuclear Balance and International Conflict," Mortara Working Paper 2011-10, June 2011

<sup>9</sup> Vipin Narang, "What does it take to Deter? Regional Power Nuclear Postures and International Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (June 2013)

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the recent forum hosted by H-Diplo, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Nuclear Weapons," H-Diplo/ISSF Forum, No. 2, June 15, 2014, <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Forum-2.pdf>; the exchange between Mathew Kroenig and Todd Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann at the Duck of Minerva, <http://www.whiteoliphant.com/duckofminerva/>, March 25, 28, and 29, 2013; as well as Mark S. Bell and Nicholas L. Miller, "Questioning the Effect of Nuclear Weapons on Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, forthcoming; and Alexander M. Montgomery and Scott D. Sagan, "The Perils of Predicting

and political scientists relying on qualitative historical evidence have come to similar conclusions.<sup>11</sup> Some former American policymakers may focus on those instances where nuclear weapons seemed inadequate, but overall the United States may be benefiting quite a bit. The fact that the United States has enjoyed superiority against nearly all its rivals may reinforce the tendency among Americans not to notice the benefits of their nuclear advantage.

Third, American security guarantees to allies were often important in countering nuclear proliferation. These guarantees are arguably more credible when the United States can point to a large nuclear arsenal with a counterforce strategy.<sup>12</sup> This makes comparisons of the American arsenal to those of Britain, China, and France somewhat difficult. Those states may be content with a smaller nuclear force for their security. But they have much less expansive commitments and goals. Whether the United States should maintain those commitments is itself subject to debate, of course.<sup>13</sup> Setting that debate aside for the moment, the basic proliferation issue highlights a potential tradeoff that policy-makers must face. Is it better to maintain a larger force structure and more belligerent force posture than necessary for deterrence in order to curb nuclear proliferation or shrink the nuclear arsenal and its role at the risk of additional nuclear proliferation? For many, the former may seem preferable to the latter.

The debate on the role and size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is gaining increased attention. Nichols makes an important contribution to that debate, and *No Use* should be widely read. In particular, he deserves credit for outlining what a minimum deterrent posture would actually look like. For those sympathetic to the minimum deterrence position, the next step is to systematically address the evidence that nuclear weapons convey political leverage. Scholars have begun looking at the impact across different types of issues, such as the benefits for deterrence versus compellence. It is equally important to flesh out whether there are thresholds (numerical or otherwise) for political leverage as well as how much is necessary to reassure allies (something that neither the quantitative nor qualitative literature has done). Doing so will require greater examination of how non-nuclear states – both allies and adversaries – think about nuclear arsenals. This research is important to

---

Proliferation,” in Robert Rauchhaus, Matthew Kroenig, and Erik Gartzk, eds., *Causes and Consequences of Nuclear Proliferation*, (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Marc Trachtenberg, “The Influence of Nuclear Weapons in the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *International Security*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Summer 1985), pp. 137-163; Richard K. Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1987); Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), chaps. 3-4; Keir A. Lieber, *War and the Engineers: The Primacy of Politics over Technology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), chap. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Francis J. Gavin, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Nuclear Weapons: A Review Essay,” H-Diplo/ISSF Forum, No. 2, June 15, 2014, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment,” *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Winter 2012/13); Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014).

those advocating that the United States should rely on a minimum deterrent. Otherwise, proponents of a minimum deterrent are always vulnerable to the counterclaim that it is better to be safe than sorry.

Review by Jeffrey S. Lantis, The College of Wooster

---

**N**o Use: *Nuclear Weapons and U.S. National Security* explores competing visions for nuclear weapons and nuclear strategy in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> world. The author, Thomas Nichols, appears to have two main goals in mind for this volume: First, he seeks to advance the dialogue in academic and policy-making circles on whether nuclear weapons have any use at all today. As an informed and sometimes provocative survey of the landscape of perspectives on denuclearization in the last decade, the book succeeds in this goal. Second, the author hopes that by promoting critical dialogue we can effectively reduce “the centrality of nuclear weapons in U.S. security strategy in the twenty-first century” to the point where they will have no real utility (12). This is a higher hurdle. In the end, while many will find themselves in agreement with the book’s primary points, they may be less convinced by the robustness of its conclusions.

The book certainly makes useful contributions to the nuclear dialogue. The author frames the discussion in the recognition that the “use of nuclear weapons and the possibility of nuclear war” have been “constant companions” to many of the most important questions in world politics for decades (ix). And he writes eloquently of their power: Nuclear weapons “are different from other instruments of war. Not only is their power beyond imagination, but also they are still the first and only weapons capable of eradicating human civilization. Historical analogies fail us, because none exist” (5). Beyond physical security, however, are the *meanings* we assign to nuclear weapons, the assumptions that we make about them. Here, I believe the book offers its most notable contributions—and tiptoes close to a central precept of constructivist security studies, while never quite acknowledging so: that ideas about international security may matter as much or more than material circumstances. This, then, is a call to reckon with the meanings and frames we associate with nuclear weapons and in the process to develop more progressive understandings of security in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 1 offers an informed survey of the development of nuclear strategy during the Cold War with an emphasis the dual dimensions of object and meaning. The author notes that, “for the first few years after the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the United States did not have a nuclear ‘strategy’ so much as it had a nuclear ‘problem.’” Its essence was that “nuclear superiority did not seem to buy very much security, especially in Europe” (17-18). But Americans hardly had a choice at the time: “even with mass conscription or huge increases in defense spending, there was no way to fight the Communist bloc on its own terms” (19). Nuclear weapons meant security in a dangerous nuclear standoff, and the United States adopted a doctrine of massive retaliation. The Soviet and U.S. arsenals grew. American policy-makers, political scientists, and pundits were ‘thinking the unthinkable’ throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. They returned to this mindset in earnest in the Reagan era, and the author asserts they have never quite dispensed with it.

Chapter 2 of the book deftly explores the ‘promises and failure’ of nuclear weapons after the Cold War. While many hoped this structural transformation might quickly make these

weapons obsolete, the reality has fallen far short. The author describe a series of efforts to revisit nuclear strategy in the form of Quadrennial Defense Reviews and National Military Strategy reviews, as well as general reflections on adjustments in nuclear posture in the 1990s. But those who sought to redefine the meaning of nuclear weapons in the new era were largely unsuccessful, and the rush by some states to develop nuclear weapons of their own continued. Thus, Nichols contends, the end of the Cold War resolved almost nothing among American defense intellectuals, military planners, and policymakers in relation to nuclear deterrence.

Chapters 3 and 4 of the book explore the contours of this debate in relation to modern questions about ‘minimum deterrence’ and nuclear deterrence of small states and rogue actors. The author thoughtfully explores the question of whether deterrence is existential or can be tailored to fit each opponent. But Nichols is not satisfied with the limited strategic thinking by government officials on these questions. For example, he criticizes the 2002 Nuclear Policy Review for its articulation of the pursuit of two “contradictory goals at once” (63). The George W. Bush administration sought to preserve traditional deterrence, but endorsed preemption (really, preventive) war for terrorist groups and rogue states. Rather, he asserts, it is time we face a new reality: The “number of weapons required to deter policymakers in the ‘real world’ has long been far fewer than several thousand or even several hundred. It may in fact be much closer to the simplest number of all: one” (85). In asymmetric relationships like the U.S. standoff with North Korea and Iran today, we are already effectively engaged in minimal nuclear deterrence.

In the final three chapters of his book, Nichols builds his argument for achieving a “post-nuclear age,” with minimum deterrence as a foundation to pursue the eventual goal of the abolition of nuclear weapons. He offers a series of fairly bold recommendations for U.S. policy changes, including: a declaration of a doctrine of minimum deterrence, a U.S. no-first-use pledge, changes in nuclear targeting, reductions and changes in force structure, rethinking extended deterrence, and revisiting missile defense. Here the reader will be struck both by how important these themes are, yet the limited attention they receive. While each has received extensive attention in other volumes—including works by the author—they are discussed here in abbreviated form as ingredients in a broader recipe. Nichols rightly asserts, for example, that U.S. leadership may be essential to guide the world to a “post-nuclear age,” but does not fully explore the complex international political dynamics and multilateral diplomacy required to achieve this goal. The author recognizes that for the United States to lead “will require difficult and politically unpopular choices, material sacrifice, steadfast diplomacy, and the courage to assert America’s confidence in its ability to lead and protect the international order without nuclear threats” (111). Yet, this seems a rather tall order for a government that is ending its commitment to its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and opting to try to ‘lead from behind’ on a variety of global issues.

Other limitations will also become apparent to the reader. For example, in building a case for nuclear abolition, the author devotes surprisingly little time and attention to the Global Zero campaign, a powerful intellectual and grassroots movement over the last decade committed to this same purpose. The book does not fully explore how the efforts by the Obama administration—arguably the most committed administration to the goals Nichols

espouses in this book in decades—have fallen far short of these goals (such as in the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review). And while he recognizes that a shift away from a reliance on nuclear weapons will require a major investment in conventional forces, the author devotes little time to the process by which ideas would be changed to justify this new, major fiscal commitment. If the adoption of a new conventional retaliation posture “would be the single largest change in U.S. security policy since the advent of the nuclear age” entailing “huge costs” (177), how exactly is the United States to achieve this goal in an era of budget sequester and polarized government? Furthermore, the detailed discussion of bureaucratic inertia and controversies associated with past nuclear strategy development (as detailed in Chapter 2) appear to fall away in relation to these new prescriptions.

In summary, this is an interesting, eloquent, and informed work that seems somewhat incomplete. Nichols succeeds in advancing debates about the importance and meaning of nuclear weapons in the twenty-first century. He calls for us to make hard choices, to confront the realities of a changed nuclear age. But a cogent argument that nuclear weapons have *different* meanings in the new era may not convince readers that they have *no* utility whatsoever. For better or worse, debates about this dimension of material and ideational security are likely to continue.

**N**o *Use* centers on two questions: Why has the United States' Cold War nuclear doctrine and force structure persisted despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, and what role should nuclear weapons play in U.S. national security? In his answer to these questions, Thomas Nichols offers an engaging and incisive analysis of U.S. nuclear strategy during and after the Cold War, highlighting the faulty logic on which much of American thinking about deterrence was built. He then urges Washington to lead the charge in changing "global norms about the purpose and meaning of nuclear arms" by adopting a new approach to nuclear doctrine based on minimum deterrence, a shift that would require embracing a policy of 'no first use' and radically reducing the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal (11).

Nichols's argument for minimum deterrence is premised on the claim that the United States should use its nuclear capability solely to deter an attack on the homeland and this aim can be accomplished with many fewer weapons than are required by the traditional doctrine of mutual assured destruction. That is, leaders "refrain from using nuclear weapons not because they instinctively fear complete national destruction, but because they instinctively fear any nuclear use at all" (85).

The author addresses several concerns raised by opponents of minimum deterrence. For example, critics maintain that a small arsenal comprised of strategic nuclear weapons would be ill-suited for fighting a limited nuclear war. As a result, in the event of an attack on American interests overseas, Washington would face an unpalatable choice between launching devastating nuclear strikes and humiliating inaction—reducing the credibility of deterrent threats. In response, Nichols questions whether limited nuclear war is possible, even with the United States' current force structure. He points in particular to the considerable potential for escalation following a nuclear exchange. For instance, due to the loss of the Soviet satellite states, nuclear strikes against Russia in the post-Cold War world would require targeting its heartland, resulting in tremendous damage. And it would be difficult to predict the response of leaders as casualties mount. "Brave talk of limited nuclear exchanges," Nichols concludes, "far overestimates what people and their governments are capable of handling as national disasters.... And how likely would they be to restrain their desire for full retaliation" (108)?

A shift to minimum deterrence raises the question of how the United States would manage the threat from rogue states. For Nichols, the answer is that Washington should threaten small powers with conventional war and regime change if they attack the United States with weapons of mass destruction. Importantly, he cautions against retaliating against any attack, including a nuclear strike, with nuclear weapons. He posits that a small attacker is likely to launch its entire stock of weapons at the United States during a nuclear strike, fearing, for example, that any individual missile might fail. The implication is that any American response to such an attack would serve no military purpose (as there would be no residual forces to eliminate) and be purely an act of retribution. Nichols contends that

the moral implications of destroying a country for punishment (a likely outcome given the small size of the attacker) would both prevent the United States from retaliating and render any nuclear threats against small states incredible. In contrast, given the United States' track record in Iraq, Kosovo, and Libya—coupled with the desire of illiberal leaders to, above all, stay in power—the threat of regime change is a credible and effective deterrent.

*No Use* is an important defense of minimum deterrence that should prompt a serious appraisal of the future of nuclear weapons in U.S. security strategy—one which, as Nichols makes clear, is long overdue. However, as praise is not as useful as criticism, here are a few thoughts that may merit further discussion.

First, Nichols may underestimate the potential for escalation in conflicts against small powers. He maintains, for example, that concerns about the “moral enormity of nuclear use” and “the unavoidable damage to innocent parties” will make nuclear retaliation against a rogue state by Washington far from automatic (129). At the same time, however, Nichols sees a high risk of escalation in any limited nuclear conflict between the United States and a major power, such as Russia or China, given the “emotional and psychological effects on leaders and the public” that would result from a first strike (108).

Would some of the pressures for escalation that Nichols identifies in major-power nuclear conflicts not also operate in asymmetric ones? It is quite likely that any misgivings U.S. leaders feel regarding the morality of massive retaliation would be trumped by the desire for vengeance after a nuclear strike. Historically, when a weaker enemy has targeted the United States in a surprise attack, Washington's response has often been wrathful, ferocious, and crusading. Following the air raid on Pearl Harbor, the United States launched a four-year campaign that ended with almost every Japanese city reduced to rubble. Similarly, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 triggered a global war on terror and the occupation of two countries. Indeed, convinced of its own moral standing in these conflicts, the United States lost its inhibitions against killing civilians. In both Pearl Harbor and 9/11, the United States suffered a few thousand fatalities in a conventional attack. It is difficult to believe that, in the wake of a nuclear strike by a rogue state, American policymakers would suddenly be restrained by concerns about the fate of the enemy's civilians.

Second, Nichols predicts that small states will launch their entire stock of nuclear weapons in a first strike against the United States, eliminating a military rationale to retaliate and allowing Washington to pursue a policy of conventional regime change. But it is far more likely that any small-power attacker that strikes the United States will hold some nuclear weapons in reserve precisely to deter Washington from pursuing regime change.

Consider, for example, a North Korean nuclear strike on the United States. If North Korea employs its entire arsenal, it will be a sitting duck for conventional regime change. However, if Pyongyang retains some residual nuclear arms, the United States will retaliate forcefully and perhaps brutally, but may not seek to overturn the government. After all, nuclear weapons are highly effective at deterring regime change because these threats are

credible. Certainly North Korea's leaders are fully aware that nuclear weapons offer some insurance against regime change and will seek to preserve a second-strike capability.

Even if Nichols is correct and a small attacker did exhaust its arsenal, how could Washington be certain that the attacker no longer posed a nuclear threat? Even if the American intelligence community was fairly certain that no weapons remained, few U.S. leaders would chance being wrong. It seems likely therefore that Washington would retaliate in kind to guarantee that the nuclear threat had been extinguished.

In summary, a nuclear attack by a small state is likely to trigger a nuclear response by the United States. The small state will probably keep some nuclear weapons in reserve, thereby preventing Washington from following a policy of conventional regime change.

Third, Nichols admits that a greater reliance on conventional war to manage the threat from rogue states "will entail huge costs" (177). Even so, he downplays the dangers of adopting a policy of regime change. The last decade has starkly revealed the costs of regime change and prolonged nation-building. Given the experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, the American public has virtually no appetite for similar operations. The best hope would then be for the United States to ensure that such conflicts remain limited in the vein of Kosovo or Libya. As Nichols notes, intervention does not require "a long-term occupation of the kind that took place in Iraq and Afghanistan. Destroying an outlaw regime is not the same thing as pledging to create a liberal democracy in its place" (164). But it is not evident that Washington can achieve the goals through regime change identified by Nichols and avoid long-term missions. How can the United States guarantee that, say, Iran or North Korea does not resume its pursuit of nuclear weapons absent a multi-year nation-building campaign? It is noteworthy that the Bush administration invaded Afghanistan and Iraq determined to avoid prolonged nation-building—and yet this is precisely what occurred. As the so-called Pottery Barn rule holds: you break it, you own it.

Finally, Nichols identifies several steps that the United States could take to implement minimum deterrence, including ending arms control negotiations with Russia and extended deterrence. He may be too quick to abandon these policies, however. Nichols advocates ending further negotiations on arms reductions with Russia because Moscow appears to be committed to a large nuclear force for the foreseeable future. Instead, he argues, by "junking the complicated legalism of formal arms control, the United States could construct a deterrent that suits America's needs and reflects American assumptions about the types and numbers of weapons needed to serve American purposes" (114-115). Nichols makes a compelling case for how minimum deterrence benefits the United States. But he skates over the perhaps even greater benefits that would be accrued if U.S. rivals were also to embrace minimum deterrence. A smaller Russian arsenal would mean fewer weapons pointed at the United States, less probability of nuclear accidents and the theft of weapons or fissile material, and a new Russian nuclear doctrine focused on using its capability solely to deter an attack on the homeland.

This begs the question: would Russia accept deep cuts in its nuclear arsenal? Progress would be slow, but not impossible. After all, Moscow has already accepted dramatic

reductions in its weaponry. At its peak in 1986, the Soviet nuclear stockpile contained approximately 45,000 weapons.<sup>1</sup> Russia's arsenal now contains about 8,500 warheads, with half slated for dismantlement.<sup>2</sup> This represents a staggering 81-percent reduction in Soviet/Russian nuclear arms. With considerable headway already made, why can Washington not persuade Moscow to agree to further reductions? Certainly the last part of the road—that is, negotiating an agreement to limit each country to the 300 to 1,000 weapons required for minimum deterrence—is the most challenging to navigate. And current U.S.-Russian relations are far from cordial. But if the United States remains committed to the negotiations—and importantly does not unilaterally dismantle most of its arsenal and thereby give up its main source of leverage over Russia—progress could be made over time. And even if that progress is incremental, a world in which the United States and its rivals move towards minimum deterrence together is surely preferable to one in which Washington goes it alone.

Nichols may also underestimate the efficacy of extended deterrence. He declares that extended deterrence “has run its course,” adding that U.S. adversaries are more likely to fear American conventional forces than they are to “quail at half-hearted nuclear threats that the Americans themselves might not know how to execute if the need arose” (121). But if Washington's security assurances are so incredible, why are U.S. allies so eager to find shelter under the American nuclear umbrella? The reality is that extended deterrence need not be perfectly credible to be effective. When the punishment is sufficiently severe—nuclear war with the United States—even “half-hearted” threats can be effective at deterring aggression.

These points aside, *No Use* presents a thoughtful contribution to the debate on U.S. nuclear strategy, and Washington would be well served by giving Nichols's case for minimum deterrence careful consideration.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert S. Norris and Thomas B. Cochran, *U.S.-USSR/ Russian Strategic Offensive Nuclear Forces, 1945-1996* (Washington, DC: National Resources Defense Council, 1997), 44.

<sup>2</sup> “Global Fissile Material Report 2013,” *International Panel on Fissile Materials*, January 2012, [www.fissilematerials.org](http://www.fissilematerials.org), 9.

**Author's Response by Tom Nichols, Naval War College**

---

I am grateful to H-Diplo/ISSF for hosting this roundtable, and to the reviewers for the evident and careful attention they paid to the book and to its arguments. I find myself in a difficult position writing an author's response not because I take issue with the reviewers' points, but because I agree with so many of them. The reform of American nuclear strategy is a vexing subject, and my goal was not to provide a comprehensive solution but to mark a path for more discussion. I cannot disagree with any of the reviewers that some of the more controversial aspects from *No Use* are problematic, but I am gratified to be part of what all of us agree is a long overdue debate.

In the meantime, I will note our major area of agreement, and then do my best to respond to some of the specific issues raised by the reviewers. At the outset, I appreciate the fact that they seem to agree that the book offers a reasonable overview of nuclear strategy to the present day. If Drs. Oakes, Ivey, and Lantis all feel, in Paul Avey's words, that "the first two chapters serve to clear the intellectual landscape" and that I've done a fair job of reviewing the "how we got here" problem, then at least we are starting from the same basis for discussion.

None of the reviewers, if I am reading them accurately, takes serious issue with the idea that the future of U.S. nuclear strategy lies, in some way, with a move away from Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) and toward minimum deterrence. The problem is how to craft that strategy, and what a force structure organized around a minimum deterrent looks like. To take but one example, Amy Oakes wonders why I pursue unilateralism in force reductions. "A world in which the United States and its rivals move towards minimum deterrence together," she writes, "is surely preferable to one in which Washington goes it alone." I agree. But given the nature of Russia's internally-driven nuclear obsession, to say nothing of the state of the current Russian regime, the question when it comes to nuclear strategy is whether it is better for Washington to go it alone or to do nothing at all because of an outdated insistence on maintaining some kind of nuclear "leverage" with Moscow which no longer exists. The Russians wanted the New START Treaty, but the United States wanted it more, and it paid a greater domestic political price to get it. That's not "leverage."

Jeffrey Lantis rightly notes that my conditions for minimum deterrence, including no-first-use, infrastructure targeting, and other issues are discussed "in abbreviated form as ingredients in a broader recipe," and do not receive as much attention as he believes they merit. To this I can only say he is quite right, but as he himself notes, each of these "has received extensive attention in other volumes." I was trying to avoid plowing, yet again, the specific ground of each of those debates. Instead, my goal was to move past the piecemeal opposition to each of those discrete elements of minimum deterrence, because such granular objections are a tactic that has been used by opponents of nuclear reform to great effect as a means of smothering the larger, overall discussion of strategy

The defeat of nuclear reform by defeating each possible policy change in isolation from the others is sometimes taken to great lengths by nuclear traditionalists. (Although I make only passing reference to this in the book, an early review of one of the chapters generated an objection that my concerns about the externalities of destroying North Korea had not taken enough account of matters like “weather over the target set.”) I think we have had enough of those dilatory debates, including, as Lantis notes, the ones that clearly led to the disastrous PowerPoint exercises that culminated in the failed nuclear reviews of 1994, 2002, and 2010.

This is also why, as Avey writes, I am “ambiguous” on the need for a triad. Originally, I had devoted a section of the book to consideration of removing the nuclear bomber force from the U.S. strategic deterrent. During the writing of the book, however, I found that this derailed many conversations with colleagues, civilian and military, who would agree about the need to move to a minimum deterrent, and then dig in against removing any one part of the triad. Therefore, I decided to focus on the area of agreement rather than difference, and to leave the details of force structure to force planners, whom I think should be given new instructions. Whether they will follow those instructions is a good question. But right now, reform is complicated by the fact that we seem to be working the problem backward, arguing over the details of the existing force structure and thus continually and repeatedly deriving the same strategy from all of that structure’s embedded assumptions. This was the trap I was trying to avoid.

Obviously, there is stronger disagreement over what to do about small states with very small nuclear arsenals. I completely understand the objections raised by all three reviewers: during the many papers and presentations I gave during the book’s drafting, nothing generated more controversy than that issue, and so the concerns of the reviewers were not a surprise.

I only wish I had better answers for them. Like many who have engaged the subject of nuclear reform, I am frustrated by the unwillingness of the nuclear establishment (by which I mean the government itself, private industry, and the non-government intellectual infrastructure that deals with nuclear issues) to do more to disentangle deterrence from capabilities, and to make greater distinctions between peers like Russian and China and small nations in crowded regions. If I have fallen short in providing a better answer, I hope I have at least finally insisted on the right question instead of the one-size-fits-all Cold War approaches that today govern our nuclear thinking mostly by default.

I am hesitant, I admit, about Paul Avey’s suggestion that political science is offering better answers. While I take the point about the work of Vipin Narang and others, I am (as Professors Narang, Fuhmann, and other colleagues know) skeptical about any studies that claim an empirical basis for conclusions about how nuclear states will act in a nuclear conflict. No matter how hard we hammer the data to come up with comparable cases, the fact remains that the case set of post-1945 nuclear wars is exactly zero. I do agree with Avey that there are “many historians and political scientists relying on qualitative historical evidence,” and I find those examples (especially recent studies by Francis Gavin and Amy Oakes, among others) more useful and thought-provoking.

Still, that does not leave us with much of an empirical basis for generalization. The reviewers have a strong point, for example, that I'm making a large and difficult assumption that any American administration would ever be able to withstand my call to forego revenge for a nuclear attack. (Oakes makes a particularly incisive argument in this regard.) Guided by intuition rather than data – again, we have no case studies on which to rely – I too have deep doubts on that score. But this is exactly why I want a new approach established and institutionalized *ahead* of time: during crises and war, the urge to default to whatever retaliatory plan is already on the shelf, especially with millions of Americans howling for blood, will be difficult to resist.

I must add, however, that I don't think it matters very much what the average American, asked in peacetime and without duress, thinks about nuclear taboos or nuclear issues in general. The Press/Sagan/Valentino piece noted by Avey relies on a representative sample of American citizens, which will be quite useful if the next nuclear crisis is resolved on Twitter or Facebook.<sup>1</sup> But policymakers take decisions every day that defy public wishes, and nowhere is this a more salient realization than with nuclear weapons, which most Americans do not understand and about which they prefer not to think very much. Policymakers and elected leaders are not Martians, but neither are they ordinary citizens.

With that said, I agree that conventional retaliation entails a long-term military rebuilding program, which in turn raises serious doubts about whether such an idea could ever get off the ground among the citizens who would have to pay for it. Lantis scores a direct hit on my argument when he writes: "The detailed discussion of bureaucratic inertia and controversies associated with past nuclear strategy development appear to fall away in relation to these new prescriptions." I wish he were wrong, but he isn't. *No Use* does spend quite a bit of time – in a chapter I pared down repeatedly for length – presenting evidence about the magnificent inertia of the nuclear establishment. How then, can I think it is possible to sweep that inertia aside?

Maybe it is not possible, but my argument in the book's discussion of the history of our three major nuclear reviews is that we have not really tried. The U.S. nuclear establishment has controlled the terms of debate in each of them because no one inside the bureaucracy has made any serious attempt to contradict those terms. What I propose will undoubtedly require legislative and executive action at a level rarely seen in military reform, even larger than that of the Goldwater-Nichols reforms of 1986.<sup>2</sup> I am not swayed, however, by Lantis's concern about sequesters and budget cuts, and I would caution that we must not be hobbled by a failure of imagination. I doubt anyone during the recession years of the late

---

<sup>1</sup> Daryl G. Press, Scott D. Sagan, and Benjamin Valentino, "Atomic Aversion: Experimental Evidence on Taboos, Traditions, and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 1 (February 2013).

<sup>2</sup> The magnitude of this effort is described in James Locher, *Victory on the Potomac: The Goldwater-Nichols Act Unifies the Pentagon* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2002).

1970s would have imagined the massive Carter-Reagan military build-up and subsequent NATO resurgence that took place less than five years later. International circumstances and political administrations change; to have argued during the fall of Saigon in 1975 that the total dissolution of the USSR was only 15 years away would have been to invite dismissal as a partisan or a crank, or both.

Still, I cannot deny that only the most optimistic advocate of nuclear reform would argue that anything can get done in the current atmosphere of trench warfare between the Obama administration and its Republican opponents. As I note in the book, New START should have been a no-brainer and yet barely passed. Whether we should blame GOP intransigence, the Obama administration's strategic incoherence, or the successful lobbying of nuclear traditionalists (and I blame all three), it is true nonetheless that if anything I wrote in *No Use* is likely to happen, it will have to wait until after 2017 and a new President. I would be pleased to think that the book could be a springboard for a new administration's approach to nuclear reform, but I doubt that the future of the U.S. nuclear deterrent will play a larger role in the next presidential election than it has in the previous six.

Regarding the mechanics of conventional retaliation, I do have a clear disagreement with Amy Oakes's objection that I am downplaying the costs of the so-called "Pottery Barn rule," in which regime change in the enemy state means that if "you break it, you own it." She is not wrong about the costs of victory and occupation, but I am at a loss to see her alternative. On the one hand, she makes an excellent case that revenge will be difficult to forego, using Pearl Harbor as an example. On the other, however, she invokes the Pottery Barn warning. I assume we agree that if a small nation attacks the United States with nuclear weapons, it will suffer regime change one way or another, and so I am mystified by the implication that nuclear retaliation is superior to conventional retaliation, since nuclear use *compounds* the costs of the Pottery Barn problem beyond calculation.

If the United States retaliates, for example, against North Korea with nuclear weapons and thus achieves a military "victory" over the defeated regime, then the same Pottery Barn rule applies – only this time, as I note in the book, it will include the occupation and administration of a post-nuclear landscape that will be orders of magnitude more difficult than a conventional victory. I fail to see why Oakes or other critics think nuclear threats solve a problem that has, as the book notes, vexed Western leaders since the 1960s.

On the concept of extended deterrence, however, Avey and Oakes are right to note that it looks like I finessed (or fudged) the question. Oakes points out that I note that extended deterrence has run its course, but without really tackling the concept head-on. Avey rightly suggests that I seem to accept it and dismiss it at the same time.

Here, I will plead poor (or elliptical) writing rather than subterfuge. I suggest that Japan and Australia and other U.S. allies are still covered by the American deterrent, because I cannot envision those nations being in any danger of a nuclear strike from Russia or China in any circumstance other than a global war that has already broken out and already involves the United States. How this would happen is unclear to me, but if it were the case, then I could imagine something like extended deterrence coming into play. (As Avey notes,

I find it maddening that nuclear scenarios seem to start with little more than the hand-wave of “assume a war.”) My real concern about extended deterrence – and my conviction that it has run its course – has to do with nuclear attacks from small nations.

Here, the reviewers do not engage the problem I raised about nuclear fears among U.S. allies or other nations. The Fukushima disaster happened during the writing of the book, and more than a few critics of the original concept behind *No Use* said to me during that disaster that the panicked reaction (described in detail in the book) to the meltdowns made them at least think about how other nations, especially Japan, might react to a plan to destroy North Korea, and whether a “they hit us, we hit them” equation is too facile. I think that problem becomes significantly larger when rewritten as “they hit someone else, we hit them.” While I don’t think public opinion on nuclear strategy means very much, I am more concerned by the impact of widespread public *panic*, which will be a different beast entirely, especially if the United States itself were the not the object of the initial attack.

Oakes and Avey raise a better and much more difficult question about whether a small nuclear power would hold weapons in reserve and thus obviate my protest against nuclear retaliation. I wrestled with that question for a long time, and once again, I am not sure I have a good answer, or at least one on which I can mount a strong defense of the point.

Neither, however, do the reviewers. No matter how many close-enough, almost-comparable empirical studies are done, we have no case against which to measure our competing guesses. I take Oakes’s point that a rogue regime might want to hold on to its last nuclear reserve as a guarantee against retaliation, but I can just as easily see a millenarian regime like that in Iran, or a completely insulated leader of questionable sanity, like Kim Jong Un (or as I think of him, Dennis Rodman’s best friend in Pyongyang), taking an apocalyptic risk rather than courting a technical failure and bringing on the worst of all worlds: retaliation for a failed nuclear attack.

Note, however, that points about the need to engage in a counterattack meant to limit damage to the U.S. are not the same as my point about *revenge*. This is why I included Paul Nitze’s startling admission in the book that he had once advised Ronald Reagan never to use nuclear weapons, especially in retaliation: because I suspect Nitze and other leaders have the same moral qualms I do about acting when enemy nuclear use is already a fact (and in the case of the Cold War, when all is already lost). More to the point, and at the risk of descending to operational arguments, I question whether Oakes in particular is making too convenient an assumption – and I am fully aware that I am guilty of making a few in the book – about what it would take to destroy the remaining threat to the United States. If the U.S. does not know where North Korea’s last nuclear weapon might be, will it destroy...what? Pyongyang itself? Will it engage in patterned nuclear bombardments of suspected mobile launcher areas? Will it react to the deaths of hundreds of thousands by incinerating millions, even in just one enemy city, in the hopes of killing their leadership or paralyzing their command and control?

I don’t know, and neither does anyone else. And so I return to the central point of the latter third of the book: why make such incredible nuclear threats when perfectly credible

conventional threats are at hand and have proven their ability to attain success? I will close here by taking my reviewers to task for debating a somewhat different question than the one I asked. I was not arguing, in the abstract, why an American government *should* make credible nuclear threats against small states, I was arguing that such threats literally *cannot* be created, as they are inherently non-credible to the United States and to its rogue opponents for all the reasons I discuss at length in *No Use*. Critics might argue that new technologies (like tiny-yield bunker busters, for example) will eventually overcome my objections. Like former White House advisor McGeorge Bundy in 1969, however, I remain convinced that these are plans and ideas whose drastic consequences seem acceptable in classrooms and think-tanks, but not in the real world of policy.<sup>3</sup>

I am gratified nonetheless that the reviewers found, if I may be forgiven the pun, at least some use in *No Use*. The best reviews are the ones that make the author think hard and question his own fundamental assumptions, and Avey, Lantis and Oakes have all succeeded in that. I genuinely thank them for their analyses and for the care they took in engaging the ideas in the book.

---

<sup>3</sup> McGeorge Bundy, "To Cap the Volcano," *Foreign Affairs*, October 1969, 9--10.