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Roundtable Review 16-33

James H. Lebovic, *The False Promise of Superiority: The United States and Nuclear Deterrence after the Cold War*. Oxford University Press, 2023. ISBN: 9780197680872

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Introduction by Keith Shimko, Purdue University

Three quarters of a century since the first and only use of nuclear weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the nuclear landscape has changed substantially in terms of the number of nuclear powers, the size of nuclear arsenals, and the destructiveness of the weapons themselves. Despite this transformation, the basic questions occupying both policymakers and scholars have remained largely the same. What impact have nuclear weapons had, especially given their non-use since August 1945? What are nuclear weapons good for? Do nuclear advantages translate into meaningful political leverage? What is nuclear "superiority"? Does "superiority" lead to any meaningful strategic benefits? What are the requirements of nuclear deterrence? One or more these questions lies at the heart of virtually every significant nuclear debate. It is thus no surprise that James Lebovic's *The False Promise of Nuclear Superiority* tackles a number of these questions, as do the contributors to this roundtable.[1]

The contributors to this roundtable largely offer favorable assessments of the book, while mentioning some potential shortcoming's along the way.

Lebovic, of course, is by no means the first to question the meaning and strategic value of nuclear superiority. Noting that "it is a short road" from Robert Jervis's seminal *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* to Lebovic's critique of current arguments for nuclear superiority, Paul Avey argues that "Lebovic's argument aligns with the most important nuclear revolution claims."[2] Chief among these is that nuclear deterrence, both primary and extended, is relatively easy and quite robust provided potential adversaries possess a survivable retaliatory capability. It is the mere possibility of a devastatingly destructive nuclear response that instills the caution at the heart of deterrence. Unless nuclear superiority is defined as possession of a disarming first-strike capability, it will do little to alter that basic reality of nuclear deterrence.[3] The ability to inflict more damage on an opponent than they can inflict on you offers no real

[1] In the spirit of complete transparency, I should note at the outset that I reviewed this book in manuscript form in 2022 for Oxford University Press when it was considering publication. It probably goes without saying that I offered a very favorable assessment. I also provided the following promotional blurb the next year reflecting the substance of my original review: "James Lebovic's *The False Promise of Superiority* is a real breath of fresh air that makes a vital contribution to ongoing debates about nuclear strategy, especially the nature, meaning and significance of nuclear "superiority." Challenging approaches to nuclear strategy that rely on capabilities rather than intentions and real-world decision-making dynamics, Lebovic makes a compelling case that nuclear strategists and policy makers should focus on what potential adversaries are likely to do as opposed to what they can do." I confess that I was not exactly a tough audience since I already shared many, perhaps even most, of Lebovic's criticisms of contemporary thinking about nuclear weapons and the consequences/benefits of nuclear superiority.

[2] Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 1984).

[3] The seminal works of the nuclear revolution school are Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Cornell University Press, 1990); Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (Winter 1979-1980), 617-633; Kenneth Waltz, "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities," *The American Political Science Review* 84: 3 (Sep., 1990), 731-745; and, more recently, Thomas M. Nichols, *No Use: Nuclear Weapons and U.S. National Security* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

coercive advantage. Though Avey praises Lebovic's perspective, drawing on his own research he wonders why non-nuclear states ever fight or threaten nuclear states. Like several others in this roundtable, also wishes Lebovic had offered more in terms recommendations for an alternative nuclear posture. Even though Lebovic's argument "suggests a minimal deterrent with clear, tailored communication of vital interests to friends and foes," he never explicitly endorses minimal deterrence. Indeed, in his response Lebovic argues simply that "there are no absolute or relative markers by which to argue conclusively for or against the minimalist or maximalist position."

Like Avey, Mark Bell notes that Lebovic's "arguments are not entirely novel, and echo previous works emphasizing the significance of the "nuclear revolution." He argues that the value of Lebovic's book is not that he ventures into any uncharted territory but rather "updates some of these arguments and demonstrates their applicability in the post-Cold War world." Bell does not disagree with Lebovic's central argument that decision makers tend to focus on an adversary's capabilities instead of intentions in ways that are likely to exaggerate the benefits of nuclear superiority. Even if they should not do so, Bell points to Lebovic's success in demonstrating that they do and are likely to continue doing so. This being the case, Bell wonders if Lebovic's prescriptions are realistic, highlighting in particular China's ongoing nuclear buildup. Bell also shares the frustration several contributors to this roundtable express in terms of "pinning down" the policy implications of Lebovic's analysis. Even when he finds some of Lebovic's recommendations "compelling," Bell predicts on the basis of Lebovic's own analysis that "we should not anticipate that US policymakers will find it tempting to move towards Lebovic's preferred policies anytime soon."

Matthew Fuhrmann sees Lebovic's arguments against nuclear superiority as "comprehensively laid out" as well as "persuasive and thought-provoking." In the spirit of "constructive engagement," however, he raises questions related to the evidence Lebovic presents. This consists largely of two case studies, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. The Cuban Missile Crisis is particularly interesting since, as Fuhrmann notes, it is often presented as one the more compelling cases demonstrating the value of American nuclear superiority. Though Fuhrmann argues "the Cuba case offers considerable support for the book's claims about nuclear superiority," he does not find that Lebovic's book offers the strongest case. He finds Lebovic's engagement with the evidence in this case wanting, and concludes that he is "not sure if the Cuba chapter supports what I see as the book's core claim: that nuclear superiority does not translate into coercive advantages." Fuhrmann finds the Iran case less problematic. And though he realizes the limits of what can be done in a single book, Fuhrmann suggests a variety of other cases that could have been helpful in assessing the book's central question of whether nuclear superiority matters in terms of offering coercive benefits.

Maria Rost Rublee begins her review by referencing Lebovic's "decimation of the nuclear superiority argument." She then moves quickly to use Lebovic's book as a stepping stone to a broader critique of the nuclear literature, noting that his analysis of the nuclear superiority argument "is just the tip of the iceberg." She sees much of the literature and research as rife with flawed operationalizations of quantitative variables/indicators and littered with analyses that largely ignore non-quantitative factors (emotional,

psychological and organizational) that shape real world nuclear decision making. She thinks this is driven in large part by the professional incentives of the contemporary academy, arguing that "from questionable (even laughable) operationalization choices, to failure to consider factors that cannot be easily quantified, the nuclear scholarship literature has been driven off course by the quest to quantify and publish in high-impact (mostly quantitative) journals." Rublee offers a few tentative ideas about how to solve this larger disciplinary problem, which is clearly beyond the scope of this roundtable. Rublee ends with a call for greater dialogue with constructivism and critical security studies, which she sees as consistent with Lebovic's focus on factors such as intentions instead of quantitative measure of capabilities.

In his response, Lebovic engages in some detail with criticisms and suggestions in the same friendly and constructive spirit they were no doubt offered. There is no need to summarize all his responses here. The important take away is that all the contributors view *The False Promise of Superiority* as a valuable contribution to current debates, particularly as they relate to the supposed benefits of nuclear superiority. The lively exchange in the roundtable provides ample evidence of the importance of the issues Lebovic addresses as well as the intellectual rigor of his analysis.

Contributors:

James H. Lebovic is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at The George Washington University. He has published widely on defense policy, deterrence strategy, arms control, military budgets and procurement, foreign aid, democracy and human rights, international organizations, international conflict and cooperation, and military intervention. He previously authored seven books including *The False Promise of Superiority: The United States and Nuclear Deterrence, After the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2023), *Planning to Fail: The US War in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan* (Oxford University Press, 2019), *Flawed Logics: Strategic Nuclear Arms Control from Truman to Obama* (Johns Hopkins, 2013), *The Limits of US Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq* (Johns Hopkins, 2010), and *Deterring International Terrorism and Rogue States: US National Security Policy after 9/11* (Routledge 2007). He has completed work on an eighth book, tentatively entitled, *Shots in the Dark: The Origins of Costly US Wars*. From 2015–2017, he chaired the International Security Studies Section of the International Studies Association.

Keith Shimko is Professor of Political Science at Purdue University. He has published and teaches in the areas of international security, technology and warfare, foreign policy and international relations theory. He is the author of *The Foreign Policy Puzzle: Interests, Threats and Tools* (Oxford University Press, 2017), *The Iraq Wars and America's Military Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), *International Relations: Perspectives and Controversies* (Cengage, 2015, 5th edition), and *Images and Arms Control: Perceptions of the Soviet Union in the Reagan Administration* (University of Michigan Press, 1991).

Paul C. Avey is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Virginia Tech. His research interests include nuclear politics, US foreign policy, and academic-policy engagement. He is the author of *Tempting Fate:*

Why Nonnuclear States Confront Nuclear Opponents (Cornell University Press, 2019), and author or coauthor of articles in multiple academic and policy journals and sites. Avey was a 2018–2019 Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow based at the United States Department of Defense, a postdoctoral fellow with the Tower Center for Political Studies at SMU, a Stanton Nuclear Security Fellow at MIT, and a pre-doctoral fellow at Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. He earned a PhD and MA in political science from the University of Notre Dame, an MA in social sciences from the University of Chicago, and a BA in political science and history from the University of Iowa.

Mark S. Bell is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Minnesota. His research examines issues relating to nuclear weapons and proliferation, international relations theory, and US and British foreign policy. His book, *Nuclear Reactions: How Nuclear-Armed States Behave* was published by Cornell University Press in 2021, and other work has been published in journals including *International Organization*, *International Security*, *International Studies Quarterly*, the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, and *Texas National Security Review*. He holds a PhD in Political Science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a Master's in Public Policy from Harvard Kennedy School and a BA in Politics, Philosophy, and Economics from St. Anne's College, Oxford University.

Matthew Fuhrmann is a Professor of Political Science in the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. He is also a visiting professor at Yale University in the department of Political Science and the Jackson School for Global Affairs. He has been a Visiting Associate Professor at Stanford University, Stanton Nuclear Security Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, and Research Fellow at Harvard University's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. He was named an Andrew Carnegie Fellow in 2016 by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. His research and teaching focus on international security issues with an emphasis on nuclear weapons, diplomacy and bargaining, and alliance politics. He is the author of three books, including *Influence Without Arms: The New Logic of Nuclear Deterrence* (Cambridge University Press, 2024) and *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge University Press, 2017, with Todd S. Sechser). His articles are published in journals such as *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *International Organization*, *International Security*, and *International Studies Quarterly*.

Maria Rost Rublee is Professor of International Relations at the University of Melbourne, with expertise in international relations, including nuclear politics, maritime security, and gender and diversity in national security. Her research agenda on the social construction of national security is internationally recognized, leading to an award-winning monograph, two edited books, and over 40 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, in addition to non-traditional research outputs. Her work has been funded by grants from US Institute of Peace, the Australian Department of Defense, the Canadian Department of Defense, and the Japan Foundation, among others. She is former chair of the International Security Studies Section (ISSS) of the International Studies Association (ISA), and founder and chair of the ISSS Global Taskforce on Diversity in Security Studies. Her PhD is from George Washington University.

Review by Paul C. Avey, Virginia Tech

Do nuclear weapons convey political leverage? The question is no less important for having been asked before. James H. Lebovic takes it up in his thought-provoking and wide-ranging study. He carefully examines the logics underpinning US nuclear policies and arguments made by strategic analysts. He concludes that while the destructive potential of nuclear weapons provides some deterrence benefit (10, 229-230), nuclear superiority provides few coercive—both deterrence and compellence—benefits.[1] Moreover, the concept itself is flawed. That much is apparent from the title. Lebovic's argument goes further. Policies purported to enhance nuclear credibility are also suspect. The net costs of pursuing superior capabilities and accompanying tactics are negative. Lebovic makes a valuable contribution to debates on nuclear superiority as well as the theory of the nuclear revolution by updating several of the theory's claims.[2]

At a deeper level, Lebovic offers a compelling challenge to the notion that technological fixes and clever policy tactics can solve most foreign policy problems. Many policymakers focus on what is measurable. This comes at the expense of addressing the political roots of disputes. Strategists who abstract away from history and politics generate ever more sophisticated models with diminishing returns for policy.[3]

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[1] I follow Thomas Schelling and use coercion to include both deterrence and compellence. On coercion, see Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Yale University Press); Tami Davis Biddle, "Coercion Theory: A Basic Introduction for Practitioners," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020).

[2] For direct assessments of superiority, see David C. Logan, "The Nuclear Balance Is What States Make of It," *International Security* 46, No. 4 (Spring 2022): 172-215; Matthew Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Oxford University Press, 2018); and Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). Core works in the theory of the nuclear revolution tradition include Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 1984); Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Cornell University Press, 1989); Charles L. Glaser, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy* (Princeton University Press, 1990); Stephen van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Cornell University Press, 1999), chap. 8; Kenneth N. Waltz, "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities," *American Political Science Review*, 84, no. 3 (September 1990): 731-45; and Waltz's contributions in Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: An Enduring Debate* (W.W. Norton, 2013). For recent critiques, see Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy;* Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy* (Brookings Institution Press, 2020); Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution that Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age* (Cornell University Press, 2020); and Mark S. Bell, *Nuclear Reactions: How Nuclear-Armed States Behave* (Cornell University Press, 2021). I assess the last four in Paul C. Avey, "Just Like Yesterday? New Critiques of the Nuclear Revolution," *Texas National Security Review*, vol. 6, no. 2 (Spring 2023).

[3] Paul C. Avey and Michael C. Desch, "The Bumpy Road to a 'Science' of Nuclear Strategy," in *Bridging the Theory-Practice Divide in International Relations* ed. Daniel Maliniak, Susan Peterson, Ryan Powers, and Michael Tierney, (Georgetown University Press, 2020), 205-224.

In this review I first briefly outline Lebovic's argument. I then situate it within the theory of the nuclear revolution. Finally, I dutifully perform my task as a reviewer to critique, highlighting complications arising from Lebovic's focus on superiority's shortcoming while simultaneously acknowledging the importance of capabilities and tactics.

Lebovic's argument proceeds in three parts. The first examines the pursuit of capability. Lebovic interrogates Cold War strategies that failed to overcome the challenge of nuclear stalemate and subsequently infused post-Cold War thinking (17-38). Rather than tailoring capabilities and options to meet ends, plans followed capabilities and the pursuit of options became its own end. Studies purporting to show the benefits of superiority suffer from measurement flaws (50-62).[4] Superiority is not necessary for extended deterrence or to deter so-called rogue states (83-87). The United States, even with superiority, is unlikely to execute nuclear strikes. Against a nuclear opponent, US strikes risk nuclear retaliation (62-63, 72-79). Against all states US strikes would incur the costs of violating the tradition of non-use (64-72).[5]

In the second part Lebovic evaluates tactics to enhance credibility "should adversaries doubt the fact, or utility, of a US nuclear advantage" (91). Though Lebovic's analysis focuses on superiority, much of the discussion is relevant when there is no advantage. States, or their leaders, can make firm commitments, attempt to manipulate risk, and/or seek to develop a reputation for resolve. Each of these suffers from a basic problem: they ultimately depend on the receiving party clearly understanding the signal and backing down (8, 11, 91-92). For a variety of reasons, though, messages can become muddled or lead the target to

[4] See also Logan, "The Nuclear Balance Is What States Make of It."

[5] Lebovic rejects the stronger normative claim that there is a nuclear taboo. The seminal work on the nuclear taboo is Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). For recent discussions, see Michael Smetana and Carmen Wunderlich, "Forum: Nonuse of Nuclear Weapons in World Politics: Toward the Third Generation of 'Nuclear Taboo' Research," *International Studies Review*, vol. 23, no. 3 (September 2021), 1072-1099; and Mark S. Bell, Malfrid Braut-Hegghammer, Yogesh Ioshi, Benoit Pelopidas, Kjolv Egelan, Janina Dill, Scott D. Sagan, and Benjamin A. Valentino, "Public Opinion and the Nuclear Taboo Across Nations: An Exchange," *Security Studies* vol. 32, no. 1 (2023), 166-204. For a comprehensive list of sources, see "Nuclear Taboo Database," Peace Research Center Prague, accessed October 27, 2023, https://www.prcprague.cz/nuclear-taboo-database. The meaning or components of the tradition varies among authors. Some focus on the dangers of establishing a precedent for use and increasing proliferation incentives, while others add reputational costs from violating normative proscriptions and see the tradition and taboo as merely differences in degree. On the former, see Scott D. Sagan, "Realist Perspectives on Ethical Norms and Weapons of Mass Destruction," in Sohail Hashmi and Steven Lee, (eds.), *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives* (Cambridge University Press 2004) 73-95. On the latter, T.V. Paul "Taboo or Tradition? The Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons in World Politics," *Review of International Studies*, vol. 36 (2010), 853-863; T.V. Paul, *The Tradition of Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons* (Stanford University Press, 2009). For discussions, see Rebecca Davis Gibbons and Keir Lieber, "How Durable is the Nuclear Weapons Taboo?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* vol. 42, no. 1 (2019), 33-34; Reid B.C. Pauly, "Would U.S. Leaders Push the Button? Wargames and the Sources of Nuclear Restraint," *International Security*, vol. 43, no. 2 (Fall 2018), 161-170; Paul C. Avey, "MAD and Taboo: US Expert Views on Nuclear Deterrence, Coercion, and Non-Use Norms," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 17, no. 2 (April 2021), 3-4.

become more entrenched in its position, potentially escalating a dispute. Indeed, leaders may not fully understand or control their own signals.

The book concludes with two cases that illustrate these dynamics. The first examines the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Lebovic's innovative coding scheme of senior official's arguments makes this a welcome addition to the literature on the crisis. The second case looks at debates surrounding US policy toward Iran, particularly the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. He usefully calls attention to the inconsistency of those who stress US superiority's benefits but also express alarm with the potential of a small Iranian nuclear arsenal.

Lebovic's argument fits within the theory of the nuclear revolution in two ways. First, the intellectual genesis for many proponents was a critique of US nuclear policy and debates.[6] It is a short road from Robert Jervis's *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* and Charles Glaser's *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy* to *The False Promise of Nuclear Superiority* in that regard. Why, then, do officials and analysts consistently pursue misguided policies? Lebovic identifies one common explanation: flawed thinking (1, 3, 6, 10-12, 220-227).[7] In this case, an emphasis on tangible capabilities and short-term objectives over more important but abstract dynamics and strategic interactions (9-10, 225-227).

Second, Lebovic's argument aligns with the most important nuclear revolution claims. True, proponents do not agree on every point and Lebovic is no exception. For instance, it is closer to what Lieber and Press call a "minimum deterrence" position than some nuclear revolution proponents and more skeptical of risk manipulation than others (89).[8] Yet the key area of agreement is that once two states can both retaliate with some amount of nuclear destruction after the other's nuclear strike—once they are in mutual vulnerability—fine-grained calculations succumb to the "condition," "fact," or "oppressive facts" that both parties can inflict terrible devastation.[9] Thus, Lebovic writes that the "robustness of nuclear deterrence lies not in the probability of a response but in the potential enormity of its cost" (84), adding that "policymakers must acknowledge that nuclear weapons are exceptional in the damage they can inflict and the unknowns and uncertainties of use" (230). Kenneth Waltz agreed: "uncertainty of response, not

[6] Green, *The Revolution That Failed*, 9.

[7] Jervis and Waltz focused on pre-nuclear or "conventionalization" in thinking, see Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy*, 14, 29, 56-63, 147; Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, 15-16, 18; Waltz, "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities," 731; Waltz, "More May Be Better," 24, 29-30, 34. For a slightly different assessment of Jervis' and Waltz's positions, which nevertheless highlights the centrality of flawed thinking, see Zachary Zwald, "Imaginary Nuclear Conflicts: Explaining Deterrence Policy Preference Formation," *Security Studies*, vol. 22, no. 4 (2013), 644-645, 648-649. For additional explanations, see Green, *The Revolution that Failed*, 15-19; and Lieber and Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*, 4-5.

[8] Lieber and Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*, 36-39.

[9] Respectively, Glaser, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy*, 4; Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* chapter 3; Lebovic, *The False Promise of Superiority*, 1.

certainty, is required for [nuclear] deterrence because, if retaliation occurs, one risks losing so much."[10] Or as Jervis put it, "because the specter of devastation is present in any superpower confrontation, the fear of all-out war can deter many adventures even though starting such a war would be irrational."[11] Other areas of agreement are apparent as well. For instance, extended deterrence is easier than presumed, stalemate is durable, and the pursuit of superiority is not only unnecessary but frequently counterproductive.[12]

Lebovic does not reject the importance of capabilities and tactics. This is apparent when he argues that the destructive power of even a few nuclear weapons matters and that the pursuit of certain capabilities and/or tactics generate (often negative) reactions. Yet by focusing nearly exclusively on superiority's shortcomings Lebovic at times overlooks or downplays alternative explanations for policy and introduces tensions into his argument.

The very effectiveness of nuclear deterrence may help to explain elements of US behavior. In a survey of current and former US national security officials and international relations scholars, I found that majorities discounted the utility of nuclear weapons for compellence but saw some utility for deterrence.[13] This finding is consistent with Lebovic's analysis. An effective deterrent, though, augments the ability of nuclear armed adversaries and allies to pursue policies inimical to US preferences.[14] US leaders who seek to exercise influence abroad with minimal constraints have an incentive to counter proliferation. Lebovic suggests that US nuclear capabilities can play a role here. "A nuclear aspirant or nuclear-armed state," he writes, "with its options of ambitions constrained (deterred), might eventually concede to (internal and external) forces that reduce the incentive to arm" (229). In that case, an expansive US nuclear capability, including supporting elements, that raises the costs of competing may be more effective at constraining a rival's nuclear ambitions.[15] On the topic of allies, Lebovic is likely correct that even a low likelihood of nuclear retaliation will give rivals pause before launching a major challenge to an extended deterrent commitment (84).[16] But as he notes , it may be easier to deter than reassure (83). Accommodating allied

[10] Kenneth N. Waltz, "More May Be Better," in Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: An Enduring Debate* (W.W. Norton, 2013), 6-9, 15, 19-26, 33-34, 39-40 quote at 24. See also Waltz, "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities," 733-734.

[11] Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, chapter 1, quote at 22.

[12] Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, 2, 7-10, 18, 22-23, 29-35, 38, 42-45, 226-234, 246-257; Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy*, 26-29, 34-37, 41-46, 59-63, 156-157; Waltz, "More May Be Better," 7-8, 19-26, 29-32; Waltz, "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities," 732, 739, 743; Glaser, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy*, 13-15, 94-99, 133-165, 320, 362; Green, *The Revolution That Failed*, 29-31; Lieber and Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*, 27-28, 67; Keir A. Lieber, *War and the Engineers: The Primacy of Politics over Technology*, (Cornell University Press, 2005), 126-127.

[13] Avey, "MAD and Taboo.".

[14] Bell, *Nuclear Reactions*, 168-170; Gavin, *Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy*, 86, 161-163.

[15] Gavin, *Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy*, 95. Though see Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy*, chap. 8

[16] Matthew Fuhrmann and Todd S. Sechser, "Signaling Alliance Commitments: Hand-Tying and Sunk Costs in Extended Nuclear Deterrence," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 58, no. 4 (October 2014), 919-935.

concerns has significantly shaped US nuclear and foreign policy.[17] Policymakers may have seen a robust US nuclear posture as preferable to a modest posture that risked additional proliferation to US allies and partners. One can argue that the United States should place less weight on nonproliferation or adopt a more restrained grand strategy.[18] The point is that an appreciation of nuclear deterrence can interact with US intentions to influence decisions.

Acknowledging a role for capabilities and doctrine highlights the utility of exploring how developments in those areas incentivize certain policies and outcomes. For example, Vipin Narang shows that a state's strategic environment, civil-military dynamics, and relative resource constraints affect force posture which then has different deterrent effects.[19] Leaders may legitimately worry—albeit too much at times—about unforeseen technological and operational developments that threaten to upend stalemate.[20] One could also turn portions of Lebovic's analysis around. Other states have agency and are capable of pursuing tactics that spur counterproductive (from their perspective) US reactions.[21]

In downplaying capability distinctions, Lebovic introduces tensions between some of his claims. If states so frequently discount the prospect of nuclear strikes (62, 72, 88-92), then why is there a deterrent benefit? Why is extended deterrence not incredibly difficult? Alternatively, if even a small chance of nuclear strikes induces caution, why do states ever fight a nuclear-armed opponent? Here, Lebovic might have explored how the scope of deterrence might vary by the nuclear balance. Applying lessons from one type of

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[17] Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton University Press, 1999); Kristina Spohr, "Helmut Schmidt and the Shaping of Western Security in the Late 1970s: The Guadeloupe Summit of 1979," *The International History Review*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2015), 167-192; Green, *The Revolution that Failed*, 100-103, 138-139, 166-167, 173-174, 212-214, 228-231; Susan Colbourn, *Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons that Nearly Destroyed NATO* (Cornell University Press, 2022); Kaplan, *The Bomb*, chap. 10; Gavin, *Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy*, 92-96, 142; Bell, *Nuclear Reactions*, 128-131, 144-145. On various US nonproliferation tools, see Gavin, *Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy*, chapter 4; Or Rabinowitz and Nicholas L. Miller, "Keeping the Bombs in the Basement: U.S. Nonproliferation Policy toward Israel, South Africa, and Pakistan," *International Security*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2015), 47-86; Nicholas L. Miller, *Stopping the Bomb: The Sources and Effectiveness of US Nonproliferation Policy* (Cornell University Press, 2018); Rupal N. Mehta, *Delaying Doomsday: The Politics of Nuclear Reversal* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Rachel Elizabeth Whitlark, *All Options on the Table: Leaders, Preventive War, and Nuclear Proliferation* (Cornell University Press, 2021); Rebecca Davis Gibbons, *The Hegemon's Tool Kit: US Leadership and the Politics of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime* (Cornell University Press, 2022). For a general argument on the relationship between nonproliferation, security assurances, and intra-alliance coercion, see Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, *Nuclear Politics: The Strategic Causes of Proliferation* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[18] Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2014).

[19] Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

[20] Green, *The Revolution that Failed*, chapter 2; Lieber and Press, chapter 3. Though see Christopher Clary, "Survivability in the New Era of Counterforce," in *The Fragile Balance of Terror: Deterrence in the New Nuclear Age*, ed. Vipin Narang and Scott D. Sagan, (Cornell University Press, 2022), 154-181.

[21] Lebovic alludes to this at times (e.g., 3, 102, 106, 163-164, 172), but does not develop it.

relationship to another may be problematic. Lebovic rightly points to fears of nuclear retaliation (in stalemate) and violating the non-use tradition (in stalemate or not) as constraints on nuclear strikes. I would add that, depending on the situation, nuclear states may worry that strikes will create battlefield complications, destroy valuable territory, generate adverse nonnuclear expansion of violence, and/or create human and material costs for other states that generate backlash independent of concerns about upending a tradition.[22] Nonnuclear states that are conventionally weaker than their nuclear opponents can exploit these inhibitions on nuclear use. Nonnuclear states also have a variety of strategies to further reduce the incentives for nuclear strikes.[23] The dynamics between two or more states that can inflict immediate devastation on one another are likely much more delicate for at least three reasons. First, two sides could attempt a coercive nuclear demonstration. Second, if one side had, or believed it had, a disarmament capability there might be incentives to use nuclear weapons first if escalation appeared inevitable.[24] This cannot occur in a nuclear monopoly.[25] Third, even if the prospect of deliberate escalation is low, the danger of inadvertent escalation in stalemate is likely higher than when only one side has nuclear weapons.[26] Policymakers who stare at those risks are apt to exercise caution.[27]

Lebovic shows that many of the arguments he examines contain flaws. The wrong capabilities and doctrine can lead to problems, particularly if the United States maintains expansive global objectives. Yet Lebovic does not outline a better (or at least less bad) approach in much detail. He suggests a minimal deterrent with clear, tailored communication of vital interests to friends and foes (116, 228-230). Others can identify challenges with that position. Subjecting his preferred approach to the same level of scrutiny as the various superiority and credibility arguments would provide a more complete net assessment.[28] This would no doubt vary across different actors and issues. It may be unfair to ask Lebovic to have added to what is

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[22] Paul C. Avey, *Tempting Fate: Why Nonnuclear States Confront Nuclear Opponents* (Cornell University Press, 2019), 18-21; Sechser and Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, 47-50; Kyungwon Suh, "Does the Bomb Really Embolden? Revisiting the Statistical Evidence for the Nuclear Emboldenment Thesis," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2022), 4.

[23] This is consistent with Lebovic's observation that nuclear capabilities matter more when a state is conventionally weak (61). Historically, there have been few, if any, wars between nuclear and nonnuclear states when the former is conventionally weak relative to the latter. This suggests that the prospect of nuclear strikes, both deliberate and inadvertent, loom larger for powerful nonnuclear states. Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 30-35, 43-45, 67-71, 90-94, 117-121, 136-142, 153-158.

[24] Those incentives could also make it more likely escalation appeared inevitable. Lebovic offers slightly different first-strike incentives in potential US-China and US-North Korea conflicts (140, 144). These are again scenarios involving at least two nuclear weapon states.

[25] The nonnuclear side cannot, by definition, launch a preemptive nuclear strike even if it feared the nuclear opponent would use nuclear weapons. For the nuclear side there is no potential nuclear use to preempt. Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 30.

[26] This is particularly likely if the nonnuclear side is conventionally weaker than the nuclear side.

[27] Avey, "Just Like Yesterday?".

[28] Glaser offers an example in *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy*. Lebovic's discussion of commitments is more complete in this regard, discussing how both clear and vague commitments create challenges but one is preferable.

already an expansive work. *The False Promise of Superiority*, in addition to contributing to essential debates on its own terms, then, provides a springboard for such an analysis.

Review by Mark S. Bell, University of Minnesota

The United States' distinctive nuclear posture has long been a vehicle that scholars have used to debate broader theoretical questions about the role that nuclear weapons play in international politics. The commitments of the United States to nuclear superiority, limited nuclear options, and damage limitation have all provided fodder for a number of scholars and analysts who are convinced that such commitments are irrational or unwise.[1] And, in turn, others have argued that such commitments are not only defensible but in fact offer the United States significant advantages in international politics.[2] These positions, in turn, are used to articulate and support broader claims about the way in which nuclear weapons have transformed (or failed to transform) the nature of international politics.[3]

James Lebovic's wide-ranging new book represents the latest addition to this intellectual tradition. Lebovic offers a range of arguments that collectively question the value of nuclear superiority—and the belief of US policymakers in its coercive and broader political value. Lebovic's conclusion, as the title implies, is that the allure of nuclear superiority is illusory and dangerous. The book weaves together theoretical argumentation and empirical evidence that are primarily drawn from the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and US efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. While Lebovic offers a range of arguments, many build on a few key insights: that policymakers tend to focus on capabilities rather than intentions and thus overemphasize the importance of weapons that policymakers generally have little interest in using; that a range of factors limit the political utility of nuclear weapons, including a longstanding tradition of non-use; that compellence (whether with nuclear weapons or not) is generally difficult; and that crises are harder to control than policymakers might like to imagine.

Many of these arguments are not entirely novel, and echo previous works emphasizing the significance of the "nuclear revolution." However, Lebovic's book usefully updates some of these arguments and demonstrates their applicability in the post-Cold War world. And Lebovic's emphasis on the tendency of

[1] See, for example, Robert Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly* 94: 4 (1979): 617-633; Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 1985); Kenneth N. Waltz, "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities," *American Political Science Review* 84: 3 (1990): 730-745; Charles L. Glaser, *Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy* (Princeton University Press, 1990); Glaser and Steve Fetter, "Counterforce Revisited: Assessing the Nuclear Posture Review's New Missions," *International Security* 30: 2 (2005): 84-126.

[2] See, for example, Earl C. Ravenal, "Counterforce and Alliance: the Ultimate Connection," *International Security* 6: 4 (1982): 26-43; Matthew Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Strategic Superiority Matters* (Oxford University Press, 2018); Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution that Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[3] In addition to the works listed in footnote 1 above, see, for example, Glaser, "Why Even Good Defenses May be Bad," *International Security* 9: 2 (1984): 92-123; Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Cornell University Press, 1989); Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Cornell University Press, 1999), ch. 8. For a review of recent critiques of the "nuclear revolution," see Paul C. Avey, "Just Like Yesterday? New Critiques of the Nuclear Revolution," *Texas National Security Review* 6: 2 (2023): 9-31.

policymakers to focus on capabilities rather than intentions—and the ways in which this tendency leads policymakers to overestimate the benefits of nuclear superiority—is particularly interesting. While there are many things that states *could* do with nuclear weapons, Lebovic is correct to argue that there are often very few things that policymakers *would* do with them. The fact that there are few issues about which states care sufficiently to use nuclear weapons provides a significant and often-ignored constraint on the political utility of nuclear weapons or of nuclear superiority.

While the book is consistently interesting and filled with insights, there are also some weaknesses, ambiguities, and missing links that may lessen the receptivity of US policymakers to Lebovic's recommendations. I focus on three here.

First, like many works in the "nuclear revolution" tradition, Lebovic's argument is in large part normative: it offers an argument for how policymakers should behave while simultaneously acknowledging that they generally do not behave in the way that Lebovic would like. Lebovic's argument attributes this disconnect to a range of factors: psychological biases, organizational dynamics, misguided analysis, and so on. But this disconnect is more problematic for Lebovic's argument than he acknowledges. If there are so many reasons why policymakers might succumb to the tendency to engage in competitive and coercive nuclear policies, and, indeed, if it is empirically obvious that they *do* succumb to those tendencies, we should probably expect that policymakers in other countries may a) succumb to the same tendencies and b) design their own policies in the expectation that US policymakers will continue to succumb to them. Much like in the tragedy of the prisoner's dilemma, the political pressures to defect to nuclear competition are strong even if all parties know that doing so will leave them collectively worse off. And once we understand those dynamics, it is not clear that Lebovic's prescriptions remain attractive.[4]

China's ongoing nuclear buildup provides an excellent example of these dynamics. China's significant nuclear investments may plausibly be motivated by a defensive desire to retain a reliable second-strike capability in the face of a potent and counterforce-oriented US nuclear posture.[5] If so, China may simply be seeking to deter US aggression against core Chinese interests. But improving Chinese deterrence also necessarily enables other Chinese behaviors: if nuclear weapons deter (say) the United States from taking action *x* against China, then any behavior China might take for which *x* might be a negative consequence will become more attractive.[6] For the United States, which is keen to deter a range of actions in the Pacific which China might potentially be interested in taking, China's nuclear buildup is therefore hard to ignore even if a plausible interpretation of Chinese intentions is a defensive one. This illustrates the ease with

[4] This argument echoes a critique John Mearsheimer makes of Charles Glaser's *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton University Press, 2010). John J. Mearsheimer, "Realists as Idealists," *Security Studies* 20:3 (2011): 424-430.

[5] Caitlin Talmadge and Joshua Rovner, "The Meaning of China's Nuclear Modernization," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (forthcoming, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2023.2212871).

[6] On the enabling effects of nuclear weapons, see Mark S. Bell, *Nuclear Reactions: How Nuclear-Armed States Behave* (Cornell University Press, 2021).

which states can easily slip into competitive nuclear policies and suggests a more rational (and tragic) explanation than Lebovic's for why states may often focus on capabilities rather than intentions.[7]

This raises a second issue, which is that Lebovic underexplores the connections between nuclear competition and the United States' grand strategic goals. As a result, the difficult trade-offs involved in policymakers moving towards Lebovic's preferred policies are underemphasized. Specifically, the more aggressive and ambitious parts of US nuclear posture: the commitments to nuclear superiority, limited nuclear options, and damage limitation (whether achieved offensively or defensively) all emerged out of key US grand strategic objectives: extending deterrence to geographically-distant allies and simultaneously inhibiting the inclinations of those very allies to acquire their own nuclear weapons.[8] Each of these goals is crucial to a broader grand strategy that is aimed at preserving American primacy and freedom of action in the international system. Moving to Lebovic's preferred policies might therefore be possible, but from the perspective of US policymakers, doing so would remove a keystone of US grand strategy, jeopardize core US grand strategic goals, and potentially result in a world with far more nuclear powers. These trade-offs may be worth making or may not be as biting as US policymakers might fear, but it would be helpful for Lebovic's argument to address these concerns and trade-offs more explicitly.

Third, and finally, despite the fact that to a significant degree this book is a normative work that aims to guide policymakers to pursue a more sensible set of policies, pinning down the prescriptive implications of Lebovic's argument in practical terms is challenging. For example, Lebovic's bottom line is to recommend caution: policymakers should be cautious in wielding such destructive weapons to achieve political goals and should "stay clear of the brink" (228) and prioritize deterrence over compellence (229). But what this means in practical terms is unclear. Consider the current US policy with respect to Ukraine.[9] The United States seeks to provide assistance to Ukraine as it defends itself from Russian aggression. To this end, the United States has provided Ukraine with tens of billions of dollars of security assistance that has been critical to Ukraine's military resistance;[10] has openly transported those capabilities through NATO allies to Ukraine's borders and into Ukraine; and brought Finland into NATO, doubling the length of the direct border between Russia and thus adding a range of plausible escalatory pathways to those that already exist

[7] The broader theoretical point is that capabilities are often consistent with a range of different intentions.
[8] See, for example, Ravenal, "Counterforce and Alliance," Francis J. Gavin, "Strategies of Inhibition: U.S. Grand Strategy, the Nuclear Revolution, and Nonproliferation," *International Security* 40, no. 1 (2015): 9-46; Green, *The Revolution that Failed;* Gavin, "Rethinking the Bomb: Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy," *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (2018): 74-100.
[9] This review was written before the 2024 election and the second Trump administration coming into office. The discussion of Ukraine reflects US policy at the time of writing.
[10] As of February 2023, the United States had committed about $30bn in security assistance since Russia's invasion. US Department of Defense, "Fact Sheet on U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine (February 3, 2023), https://media.defense.gov/2023/Feb/03/2003155499/-1/-1/0/20230119-UKRAINE-FACT-SHEET-FEB-3.PDF.

between NATO and Russia.[11] At the same time, the United States has refrained from intervening directly in the conflict, or from supplying Ukraine with various military capabilities that it fears might unduly provoke Russian escalation, and has not sought to bring Ukraine into NATO. It is unclear how Lebovic's arguments would evaluate the sum of US behavior in this instance. Is the US effort to compel a change in Russian behavior over an issue in which Russia has fundamentally greater interests than the United States an example of reckless nuclear-superiority-fueled brinkmanship? Or is it an example of precisely the cautious and calibrated approach that Lebovic would recommend in order to reduce the danger that Russia's nuclear-enabled aggression ends up succeeding? Both of these divergent interpretations seem plausibly consistent with Lebovic's argument.

Overall, therefore, Lebovic's book offers a range of compelling insights in support of the argument that the United States should seek to do less with its nuclear weapons. But we should not anticipate that US policymakers will find it tempting to move towards Lebovic's preferred policies anytime soon. Competitive and coercive nuclear policies remain—perhaps unfortunately—hard-wired into US foreign policy.

[11] CNN, "Finland joins NATO, Doubling Military Alliance's Border with Russia in a Blow for Putin," (April 4, 2023), https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/04/europe/finland-joins-nato-intl/index.html.

Review by Matthew Fuhrmann, Texas A&M University

The nuclear landscape is changing. China's rise—including its expanding nuclear capabilities—force the United States to grapple with the possibility of facing two nuclear-armed peer competitors. North Korea's small nuclear arsenal has become more sophisticated, and it now has intercontinental ballistic missiles that are probably capable of hitting the US mainland. Meanwhile, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2021 and Russian President Vladimir Putin's nuclear saber-rattling raise the possibility of future nuclear weapons proliferation, as countries seek insurance against future military aggression.

It is important to understand the role that nuclear weapons play in the world today. Fortunately, nuclear strategy and deterrence have reemerged as central topics for political scientists and historians over the last decade.[1] James Lebovic's *The False Promise of Superiority* is a welcome addition to this growing body of work on the political effects of nuclear weapons.

The book is framed around the issue of nuclear superiority, seeking to explain whether more nuclear firepower gives a country coercive advantage in international politics. The book's argument is clear: it does not. *The False Promise of Superiority* comprehensively lays out the case against nuclear superiority. It does so by bringing to light logical problems with the theory of superiority, and by documenting ways in which the theory is inconsistent with the historical record. The book also addresses three ways in which countries might be able to gain leverage from having nuclear superiority: making public commitments, manipulating risk, and developing a reputation for resolve. None of these tactics are much help in using nuclear superiority to gain an advantage, the book shows.

The arguments against nuclear superiority are comprehensively laid out, and they are persuasive and thought-provoking. Anyone interested in nuclear superiority, and nuclear deterrence more generally, would benefit from reading and engaging with this book. In the spirit of constructive engagement, I will raise two questions about the book.

First, how strong is the evidence in favor of the book's theory? The book provides two in-depth case studies: the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Although various case evidence is

[1] Examples of books include Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton University Press, 2014); Brad Roberts, *The Case of US Nuclear Weapons in the Twenty-First Century* (Stanford University Press, 2015); Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); Matthew Kroenig, *The Logic of American Nuclear Strategy: Why Superiority Matters* (Oxford University Press, 2018); Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution* (Cornell University Press, 2020); Susan Colbourn, *Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons That Nearly Destroyed NATO* (Cornell University Press, 2022); and Narang and Scott Sagan, eds., *The Fragile Balance of Terror: Deterrence in the Nuclear Age* (Cornell University Press, 2023).

interspersed throughout the book, these two case studies seemingly form the book's empirical core. The two in depth case studies are interesting but leave some questions unanswered.

The Cuba case focuses on how capabilities and tactics dominate debates during crises, highlighting the ways in which this can be dangerous. It includes a novel analysis of comments made by US crisis participants, based on transcripts from NSC meetings. However, I am not sure if the Cuba chapter supports what I see as the book's core claim: that nuclear superiority does not translate into coercive advantages. The chapter certainly hints at this, and one of the four pitfalls highlighted at the end is that officials might not seriously consider how US nuclear superiority provides an advantage during a crisis. Elsewhere, in chapter 3, the book lays out some evidence against nuclear superiority in the Cuban Missile Crisis (60-62). Overall, though, I would have liked to have seen more evidence about the role that nuclear superiority played (or did not play) in this case. Proponents of the view that nuclear superiority matters often point to the crisis in 1962 as a key supportive case—maybe *the* most supportive case.[2] It is therefore important for a book that argues against this view to deeply engage with the evidence from Cuba. While the book offers deep engagement with the evidence, much of it does not speak directly to the issue of nuclear superiority.

My view is that the Cuba case offers considerable support for the book's claims about nuclear superiority. Other work highlights several reasons: the US had conventional superiority in the Caribbean; American officials did not seem to take comfort in their apparent nuclear advantage; the Soviets initiated the crisis in the first place by introducing the missiles; Moscow pushed hard during the crisis, taking risky actions with its nuclear forces; and the US had an easier time meeting its objective during the 1970 Cienfuegos crisis, when the Soviets cancelled plans to build a submarine base in Cuba, even though its nuclear advantage had largely eroded by that point.[3] *The False Promise of Superiority* highlights some of these arguments. But I think the case would have been stronger if these claims had been developed more fully, and if the case study was more clearly framed around what I took as the book's central question—does nuclear superiority matter?

The Iran case study provides a clearer answer to this question. It interestingly shows that proponents of nuclear superiority claimed that Iran's possession of a small nuclear arsenal would lead to the loss of US leverage. This is an apparent contradiction since Washington would still have an overwhelming nuclear advantage over Tehran, giving it the ability to prevail when bargaining with Iran. In addition, US nuclear superiority did not appear to be much use in coercing Iran. Instead, Iran negotiated with the United States primarily in order to receive relief from the sanctions that had crippled Tehran's economy for many years.

Other cases are relevant for assessing claims about nuclear superiority as well. Proponents might argue that US nuclear superiority led to victories in two crises with China in the Taiwan Strait during the 1950s. Or that Soviet nuclear superiority helped it coerce China during the 1969 border war. They might also posit that nuclear advantages helped the United States during the Korean War in 1950-53, the Indochina War in 1954,

[2] For an overview, see Marc Trachtenberg, "The Influence of Nuclear Weapons in the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Security* 10:1 (Summer, 1985): 137-163.

[3] These arguments appear in Sechser and Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, 205-210.

or the 1971 Bangladesh War. These cases are seemingly supportive of the nuclear superiority school. In each of them, the side with nuclear superiority prevailed in a crisis after making a coercive demand and (at least implicitly) brandishing its nuclear forces.[4] Based on the material in the book, it is unclear how its arguments play out in these episodes. There are obvious limits to what a single book can do. At the same time, a more comprehensive answer to this question would have provided a more complete sense of how the arguments fare against the historical record. An in depth look at these cases would only strengthen the argument that it is difficult to use nuclear superiority to gain coercive leverage. In all the cases, there were mitigating factors that make one question the role that nuclear superiority played in the outcome.

One challenge from an empirical standpoint is that the book is expansive in scope. Although *The False Promise of Superiority* is framed primarily around the issue of nuclear superiority, it develops other themes. The book also seems to be partially about how decision-makers focus on short-term tactical considerations in crises, and the ways in which nuclear crises can produce dangerous escalatory risks. At times, it seems to be a book about the difficultly in using various signaling devices to convey foreign policy intentions, irrespective of nuclear superiority. Across 7 chapters, the book identifies 39 different implications of its arguments. Understandably, it is difficult to provide comprehensive empirical tests for all of the claims in the book.

My second general question relates to the book's framing. The book describes one line of thinking—the view that nuclear superiority generates coercive leverage—that emerged during the Cold War and continues to receive support from scholars and policymakers. It then argues that this perspective misses the mark, explaining why nuclear superiority does not matter all that much in world politics. This framing gives the impression that the nuclear superiority school is the dominant view in scholarship, and that the book is going to set the record straight. It is surely true that many people adhere to the view that nuclear superiority matters, but I see the current state of scholarship differently.

In my view, there is an ongoing debate. Some scholars argue that nuclear superiority matters and others claim that it does not. The other side of the debate seems downplayed in *The False Promise of* Superiority. Robert Jervis published a paper in 1979 titled "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter."[5] This view became an element of the so called "Theory of the Nuclear Revolution" (TNR)—the idea that nuclear weapons transformed international politics by essentially eliminating the possibility of major war and serious crises among great powers.[6] Based on this line of thinking, countries needed a secure second-strike capability to deter serious military disputes. Because a single nuclear attack on a major city would be so devastating, a potentially small but reliable retaliatory nuclear force was all a country needed to dissuade its rivals from invading. For many years, TNR shaped the way that scholars thought about the political effects

[4] See Sechser and Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, chapter 6.
[5] Robert Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly* 94:4 (Winter 1979-1980), 617-633.
[6] On this view, see Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Cornell University Press, 1989); and Kenneth Waltz, "Nuclear Myths and Political Realities," *The American Political Science Review* 84:3 (September 1990), 731-745.

of nuclear weapons. It would therefore be helpful to know more about how the book's arguments are similar and different to earlier scholarship.

The False Promise of Superiority makes important contributions to our understanding of nuclear deterrence and superiority. I just think the book could more clearly spell out the ways in which it moves the existing debate forward. Part of this involves more explicitly engaging both sides of the debate, and then spelling out areas of agreement and divergence with the book's arguments. As I see it, one of the book's contributions comes from the explanation for why nuclear superiority does not matter. The book has an interesting argument about the factors that policymakers tend to emphasize during crises, and why nuclear advantage is generally not one of them. This explanation is novel and more rooted in psychological factors compared to the mechanisms highlighted by others who share the general view that it is difficult to gain leverage from nuclear superiority.

Review by Maria Rost Rublee, University of Melbourne

In his book *The False Promise of Superiority*, James Lebovic raises a worrying trend: the academic and policy focus on the virtues of US nuclear superiority, which supposedly can provide strategic advantage for Washington. Instead, as Lebovic ably argues, nuclear superiority is unlikely to provide the touted benefits and is more likely to lead to miscalculation and instability, thus raising—not lowering—the risk of nuclear conflict. In other words, nuclear superiority makes us all less safe. In this review, I discuss Lebovic's decimation of the nuclear superiority argument, as well as how the important conversations that Lebovic has started need to continue in the field.

The False Promise masterfully uncovers the numerous assumptions that undergird nuclear superiority. As Lebovic argues, "specious arguments survive because the terms of reference remain remote from view, and immune from scrutiny"—and his book is devoted to tenaciously unearthing these hidden assumptions and exposing them to rigorous analysis (53). In almost all cases, he finds them wanting. Across eight chapters, Lebovic takes a broad reckoning of historical and current arguments for nuclear superiority, collating an impressive list of over 40 "perils & pitfalls" that "distort thinking about the benefits of nuclear capability or various compensatory coercive tactics" (10). Most of these faulty assumptions can fit under two related categories: an overfocus on a narrow slice of quantitative material nuclear capability, and an almost complete neglect of the psychological and organization aspects of nuclear deterrence.

Quantitative Failures

The issues with the quantitative work that underlies policy prescriptions for nuclear superiority have been discussed elsewhere.[1] Lebovic, however, goes through them with a fine-tooth comb and raises additional questions about why proponents of nuclear superiority focus only on capacity as opposed to other critical quantitative measures. To start, if you want to be able to rely on the results of statistical analysis, high-quality operationalization of variables is essential. Yet Lebovic details serious and numerous problems with operationalization in the work of scholars who promote nuclear superiority, and his analysis calls into question whether these mathematical treatments of nuclear superiority are reliable at all. (Nuclear scholarship more generally is rife with problems in operationalization of variables, as I discuss below.)

In addition, Lebovic examines a mathematical question that is at least as important as simple nuclear capability: attack effectiveness. Given that the unspoken promise of nuclear superiority is that it will allow a state to disarm an opponent prior to a nuclear attack, looking only at simple nuclear capability is only part

[1] Kyungwon Suh, "Nuclear Balance and the Initiation of Nuclear Crises: Does Superiority Matter?" *Journal of Peace Research* 60:2 (2023): 337-351; Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); Daniel A. McGinnis-Welsh, "Disentangling from Nuclear Superiority-Brinkmanship Theory: Combating a Legacy of Bootstrapping toward Armageddon," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 7:3 (May-June 2024): 188-205.

of the equation—one must also look at the effectiveness of your arsenal. As Lebovic calculates, even a very small adversary arsenal is difficult to completely destroy:

> The superior party must accept a sizable risk that at least one warhead will survive even a highly effective attack. Indeed, with an arsenal of around 15 warheads, roughly an even chance exists that at least one warhead will survive, and a one-in-three chance exists that at least three warheads will survive, to threaten (and potentially harm) the attacker (76).

Given that nuclear superiority arguments are often made in regard to rivals with arsenals that are much larger than 15, Lebovic's assessment here deflates any faith one can have in the key benefit that nuclear superiority is supposed to provide.

The Importance of Non-Quantitative Factors

The False Promise also highlights another key failure of the nuclear superiority literature: its lack of engagement with the intentions, beliefs, and organization policies that shape how leaders use their nuclear capacity (and are motivated by others' nuclear capacity). Through analysis of Cold War deterrence doctrines and multiple case studies, Lebovic provides detailed evidence of at least a dozen ways in which nuclear decision-making is shaped much more by perceptions of capability and intent, rather than simple numbers. As he argues, scholars of nuclear primacy:

> fail to attend to an underlying reality: assumptions about adversary intent—conjectures influenced by political, social, psychological, and organizational factors—will determine how the parties act in a conflict, and whether they seek to avoid one (1).

Lebovic documents how advocates of nuclear superiority ignore adversary intent, or assume it to be just like theirs. For example, much of the focus is on how to improve credibility through signaling and resolve, with little attention paid to how the challenger will interpret and process those behaviors. In addition, they ignore dynamic, relational interactions: the fact that parties' intents change throughout the course of a conflict, based in part on what their adversary says and does. As a result, the strategies encouraged by nuclear superiority proponents can backfire badly:

> Threats, risky action, and bold commitments might not ameliorate conflict; instead, they might reinforce the target's propensity to resist, or even fuel, an action-reaction process that could spiral out of control (8).

The impact of emotions—or at least what Lebovic refers to as "nonrational processes—is also discounted in nuclear superiority strategies (40). For example, a smaller state that is motivated by revenge, hate, or religious fervour may have much higher cost sensitivities than expected. Lebovic articulates this well in his scrutiny of the analogy of a game of chicken between two vehicles: "If the driver of the small car seeks

vengeance, would that not swamp relative-cost considerations in assessments of risk propensities?" (52-53). Lebovic also notes how organizational and psychological factors can influence US decision-making in negative ways. As he notes, "nuclear options beget nuclear temptations—and illusions that feed temptations" (19).

Where to From Here?

As we consider the utility of nuclear deterrence and nuclear capabilities, in light of Russia's nuclear threats and Iran's recent attack on Israel, we as a field must do better. Lebovic's twin foci on doing quantitative work better and paying proper attention to non-quantitative variables are important lessons for us.

Quantitative work in nuclear politics is rife with serious problems. Lebovic's analysis of the nuclear superiority argument is just the tip of the iceberg. rom questionable (even laughable) operationalization choices, to failure to consider factors that cannot be easily quantified, the nuclear scholarship literature has been driven off course by the quest to quantify and publish in high-impact (mostly quantitative) journals. In addition to Lebovic, numerous other scholars have documented this trend, including Mark Bell, who notes that quantitative findings are often more tentative than scholars realize, and Montgomery and Sagan, who note several significant problems plaguing the literature.[2] However, this research, which serves a critical role in our field by detailing the serious methodological flaws of much of the literature, attracts relatively few citations, while the bold claims generated by problematic research gather many more citations and policymaker attention.[3]

What can be done? I cannot help but wonder why editors are not addressing this matter. Why is this work not being subjected to greater scrutiny? Are fancy models and bold claims all that is required for publication? Indeed, perhaps we need to call journal editors to account, for they are the ones who publish articles with splashy findings without always engaging reviewers who know both the methods and the content of nuclear politics. Given the consistent failings documented by Lebovic and others, such editors must ensure they include reviewers with content knowledge in nuclear politics, not just methods expertise,

[2] Mark S. Bell, "Examining Explanations for Nuclear Proliferation," *International Studies Quarterly* 60:3 (2016): 520-529; Alexander H. Montgomery and Scott D. Sagan, "The Perils of Predicting Proliferation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53:2 (2009): 302-328.

[3] For example, Bell "Examining Explanations for Nuclear Proliferation," and Montgomery and Sagan, "The Perils of Predicting Proliferation," have less than 250 citations in total, despite detailing issues with more than 10 articles. On the other hand, work in just one problematic area on nuclear primacy and superiority—by Matthew Kroenig, Keir Lieber and Daryl Press has generated more than 1300 citations to date. As McGinnis-Welsh notes in "Disentangling from Nuclear Superiority-Brinkmanship Theory," (188), Kroenig's book on nuclear superiority is currently featured prominently in United States' Air Force Chief of Staff's reading list; no research critical of Kroenig's methods is also on the list ("Professional Reading Lists," Chief of Staff of the Air Force Reading List, 2024, https://afrl.libguides.com/).

and they should ask authors to address counterarguments. (While my own work in nuclear politics is qualitative, I incorporate statistical analysis in other areas of my research. As a result, I am often called upon by journals to review quantitative nuclear work, and I do so as much as possible. Most of the time, the work is plagued by the errors pointed out by Lebovic, Bell, Montgomery and Sagan, and others. However, I am only one reviewer in a sea of manuscripts.) Perhaps scholars of nuclear politics, led by Lebovic, Bell, myself, and others, could call for a workshop with journal editors to detail the significant, continuing methodological problems of quantitative work in the field and how editors can help fix it, rather than continue to contribute to it. I for one would gladly engage in such a process. The best side benefit is that truly outstanding quantitative work in nuclear politics—of which there is a great deal—would have a better chance of being read and engaged with.

The next, related call to action for the field that emerges from *The False Promise* is the need for quantitative work in nuclear politics to take qualitative work more seriously—again an area that journal editors can have a hand in addressing. Most of Lebovic's analysis focuses on how non-quantitative factors significantly shape how nuclear capabilities actually impact world politics. Many of his insights are buttressed by work already done in international relations. Engaging with that work, and citing it, would have strengthened his already impressive analysis. For example, Lebovic emphasizes the importance of understanding how one's adversaries think—how those leaders might interpret signaling, what they consider to be a benefit and cost, and how they weigh the risks of nuclear conflict. Even what is considered evidence to be evaluated is up for grabs: "beliefs determine how the evidence is viewed—indeed, whether it is considered evidence" (172).

This detailed, continued discussion throughout the book strongly calls to mind constructivism: the material world is always interpreted, and those interpretations differ between people.[4] For example, Lebovic points out how interpretations of Iran's intentions are critical to policy advocacy:

> The point is that important indicators of nuclear progress fuel debate but do not determine the essential positions of policy advocates. Why else has Iran attracted global attention when Japan and South Korea have more developed nuclear infrastructures, and by various metrics, present the greater proliferation threat? (209).

Of course, many academics have written extensively about the social construction of nuclear politics, myself included.[5] Regarding Lebovic's argument about Iran's intentions, the immediate quotation that comes to mind is Alexander Wendt's classic statement on the puzzle:

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[4] Martha Finnemore, *National Interests in International Society* (Cornell University Press, 1996).
[5] Jacques EC Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); Nina Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use," *International Organization* 53:3 (1999): 433-68; Maria Rost Rublee, *Nonproliferation Norms: Why States Choose Nuclear Restraint* (University of Georgia Press, 2009); Maria Rost Rublee and Carmen Wunderlich, "The Vitality of the NPT after 50," *Contemporary Security Policy* 43:1 (2022): 5-23.

> 500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons, because the British are friends of the United States and the North Koreans are not, and amity or enmity is a function of shared understandings.... Material capabilities as such explain nothing; their effects presuppose structures of shared knowledge, which vary and which are not reducible to capabilities.[6]

In other words, Lebovic's work points to fruitful engagement between strategic studies and critical security studies. While many of those who work in strategic studies and quantitative nuclear politics do not engage with more critical scholars, to do so could be quite enriching on both sides. For example, Lebovic's points on the importance of understanding adversary intentions would be enriched by engagement with the literature on strategic empathy[7], as well as psychology and deterrence.[8] Lebovic's discussion of "the limits of calculating winners and losers in a nuclear exchange from simple numbers of immediate fatalities" feeds directly into a large literature on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear war (54).[9] Critical security studies scholars would do well to heed Lebovic's work; he provides great substantiation to his claim that we shouldn't depend on "simple math to solve conceptual problems" (58). Indeed, there is great promise for dialogue and collaboration here.

Lebovic's criticism of proponents of nuclear superiority is quite sharp. He argues their work rests on "deficient logic" and shows a "pervasive blindness" (3), and their policy prescriptions "court disaster" (11). He accuses them of a "cavalier embrace of nuclear weapons and a false sense of immunity from the disastrous effects of a nuclear conflict" (2). However, it is important to remember that this is not just an academic exercise. These arguments have real policy impact, and potentially extremely negative ones. As Lebovic demonstrates, nuclear superiority likely worsens security and heightens the risk of nuclear conflict. Given the results of nuclear war cannot be limited by time or space, the seriousness of consequences warrants such severe criticism.

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[6] Alexander Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," *International Security* 20:1 (1995): 73.
[7] Claire Yorke, "Is Empathy a Strategic Imperative? A Review Essay," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 46:5 (2023): 1082-1102; Thomas S. Mowle, "Sabbatical: Baghdad," *International Studies Perspectives* 7:3 (August 2006): iv-vi.
[8] Samuel Zilincik and Tim Sweijs, "Beyond deterrence: Reconceptualizing denial strategies and rethinking their emotional effects," *Contemporary Security Policy* 44:2 (2023): 248-275; Reid B. C. Pauly and Rose McDermott, "The Psychology of Nuclear Brinkmanship," *International Security* 47:3 (2023): 9-51.
[9] John Borrie, "Humanitarian reframing of nuclear weapons and the logic of a ban," *International Affairs* 90:3 (2014): 625-646; Laura Considine, "The 'standardization of catastrophe': Nuclear disarmament, the Humanitarian Initiative and the politics of the unthinkable," *European Journal of International Relations* 23:3 (2017): 681-702; Nick Ritchie, "A hegemonic nuclear order: Understanding the Ban Treaty and the power politics of nuclear weapons," *Contemporary Security Policy* 40:4 (2019): 409-434.

Response by James H. Lebovic, The George Washington University

I thank the roundtable participants, Paul C. Avey, Mark S. Bell, Matthew Fuhrmann, and Maria Rost Rublee, for their careful reading and generally positive assessment of my book—and Keith Shimko for graciously agreeing to write the roundtable introduction. As the participants accurately note, I maintain that the contemporary case for "nuclear superiority" relies too heavily on capability-based reasoning and the complementary influence of coercive tactics. In consequence, strategists a) understate the risks and potential costs of employing nuclear weapons to destroy the nuclear capabilities of adversaries (in pursuit of "damage limitation," 39-40), and b) overstate the potential benefits, and understate the potential risks, of employing coercive tactics to deter or compel weaker nuclear opponents. These tactics could well prove ineffective or counterproductive. In a world without misperception, organizational routines, and bureaucratic politics—or tradeoffs and opportunity costs—parties are better off with more rather than less nuclear capability; a larger opposing arsenal increases the costs to opponents of competition and warfare. In the world in which we live, however, possessing a more capable arsenal creates provocations, fosters illusions of potential invulnerability, and invites temptations to act upon those illusions.

The reviewers' insightful remarks and questions create an opportunity for me to elaborate on these arguments, to probe their underlying assumptions, and assess the implications more fully. I will address these remarks and questions in their order of presentation in the reviews.

I agree with many of Avey's assertions, which I believe are generally consistent with my own. But Avey also identifies "tensions" in my arguments. Because "states so frequently discount the prospect of nuclear strikes," he asks, "why is there a deterrent benefit?" and "Why is extended deterrence not incredibly difficult?" He asks further "why states ever fight a nuclear-armed opponent?" I respond, here, by noting that the potential costs of US retaliation provide considerable inducement for US adversaries to suppress their doubts about whether the United States will invite retaliation against its own territory by employing nuclear weapons in defense of a US ally. I note, however, that US adversaries recognize that the US propensity to employ nuclear weapons will vary with the provocation—and thus that nuclear weapons might not deter threats below the nuclear threshold. To the contrary, the reasoning of the "stability-instability paradox" suggests that a nuclear stalemate will increase the likelihood of conflict below that threshold since states feel free to conflict at "lesser" levels (7). Indeed, I identify a host of reasons, including normative prohibitions and the non-use tradition, that keep states from employing nuclear weapons even against non-nuclear opponents.

Avey also believes that I should have detailed an alternative approach in concluding nevertheless that my position is "closer" to what is often termed a "minimum deterrence" position (than that which is articulated by some "nuclear revolution proponents")[1]—that is, I push for "a minimal deterrent with clear,

[1] On minimum deterrence, see Jeffrey Lewis, "Minimum Deterrence," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 64: 3 (July/August 2008): 38-41; Paul Doty, "The Minimum Deterrent and Beyond," *Daedalus* 138:4 (2009): 130-139; and James Wood

tailored communication of vital interests to friends and foes." Avey's comment is correct in one respect. I do not clearly develop a rival approach. I seek, instead, to pierce the illusion that technology and tactics can overcome the limits that are fundamental to nuclear deterrence relationships. But I did not intend to endorse a "minimum-deterrence" strategy, as it is traditionally understood.[2]

True, I accept that the numbers and capabilities by which we measure nuclear advantages are profoundly arbitrary and vary by assumption. Should they reflect the prewar or, instead, the postwar balance of nuclear forces; the damage that is inflicted in absolute or, instead, in relative terms; the willingness of the parties to accept or, instead, to impose costs? But I also recognize that a small nuclear arsenal is potentially problematic: competitors can achieve relative advantages quickly, or surreptitiously, with slight increases in the size of their arsenals. I further accept that bigger, survivable arsenals can reduce an adversary's uncertainty about whether the possessor can inflict prohibitive costs on an attacker. I note, for instance, that the formidable US arsenal dwarfs North Korean capabilities and will most certainly temper a North Korean desire to employ nuclear weapons even in times of crisis.

In reflection, I am struck by the similarity between the dilemmas provoked at both extremes on the nuclear-capability spectrum. They constitute opposite sides of the same coin. For one thing, a risk of over-optimism is present at both ends of the spectrum. With minimum deterrence, the risk is overconfidence by a party that its survivable arsenal is sufficient to deter an attack. By contrast, with superiority, the risk is overconfidence by a party that it can either disarm an adversary, in a preventative attack, or coerce an adversary to back down.

At both ends of the spectrum, political leaders confront the fundamental dilemmas of deterrence. Thus, the age-old question of "how much is enough" looms unanswered, regardless of the size of a nuclear arsenal. There are no absolute or relative markers by which to argue conclusively for or against the minimalist or maximalist position. We can challenge the minimum-deterrent position by arguing that increasing the potential costs to an adversary, of attacking, strengthens deterrence and makes it more difficult for adversaries to compete. The US reaction to the Iranian nuclear threat conveyed the message, however, that the United States nevertheless takes the potential threat from small adversary nuclear arsenals quite seriously. Under most circumstances, the possibility that a single nuclear weapon will hit the United States will prevent US leaders from initiating a first-strike attack against a nuclear-armed opponent, regardless of the size of the opponent's nuclear arsenal. By the same token, we can challenge the US pursuit of "superiority" by arguing (as I do) that the United States must nonetheless accept that the threatened or actual US employment of nuclear weapons invites severe retaliatory costs and comes, then, with great risks.

Forsyth Jr., B. Chance Saltzman, and Gary Schaub Jr., "Minimum Deterrence and its Critics," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 4:4 (Winter 2010): 3-12. On the nuclear revolution in general, see Robert Jervis. *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Cornell University Press: 1984).

[2] See footnote 1.

Bell maintains, for his part, that "like many works in the 'nuclear revolution' tradition," my argument is "in large part normative." I agree that I wrote the book with a clear purpose—to expose the false promise of superiority and argue against its pointless, even dangerous, pursuit. The book is not a "normative" work, however, based on my understanding of the term. I do not propose that the United States adhere to a "standard" of socially acceptable behavior. Instead, I ground my policy inferences in social-scientific principles and evidence. That quibble aside, Bell is correct that, whatever I say, or US policymakers might do, states will continue to compete (and succumb to the tendencies that I outline in my book). But that does not negate the paradoxical realities of nuclear competition: states compete to achieve nuclear advantages (and avoid nuclear disadvantages) that offer a questionable practical payoff. The evidence is neutral, at best, on whether states can translate nuclear "advantages" into coercive gains (through compellence); and the evidence is that states shy from opportunities to use nuclear weapons, even against nonnuclear opponents. Put simply, there is a difference between nuclear competition and nuclear-weapons use. Leaders might seek relative advantages through competition but concede—by their conduct, to date—that a nuclear exchange is cost prohibitive.

Bell argues further that the US emphasis on superiority is part of a US grand strategy that would lose coherence absent the pursuit of nuclear superiority. As he puts it, "doing so would remove a keystone of US grand strategy, jeopardize core US grand strategic goals, and potentially result in a world with far more nuclear powers." Bell's comment thereby begs the question of why superiority is a necessary part of the strategy. Throughout the book I argue that focusing on nuclear advantages (and disadvantages) yields an overly narrow view of policy problems.

US nuclear capability advantages arguably reassure allies to whom the United States "extends" deterrence. But arguing thusly neglects two factors. First, it implicitly downplays the perceived risk to the United States of a small number of adversary weapons hitting the United States in retaliation. That is important since nuclear deterrence resides in large part in the willingness of the United States to endure an attack. In the sixties, that was the basis of French President Charles De Gaulle's famous question: Would the United States willingly trade New York for Paris? De Gaulle was presumably unimpressed by the US capability to destroy life within the Soviet Union. His concern was whether the United States would accept the enormous costs required to come to the defense of an ally. Whether or not the United States can reduce those costs, offensively or defensively, a substantial nuclear risk to the United States will remain should it engage in nuclear conflict. Second, emphasizing US advantages from their nuclear capabilities nonetheless neglects the potent threat that a US nuclear response, of any magnitude, presents to a US adversary whatever its doubts about the likelihood of that response. The potentially enormous retaliatory costs that the United States can inflict outweigh suspicions that the United States is loath to act.

Bell also notes the difficulty of translating my general assessments into policy recommendations. He questions, then, the practical implications of my admonition for cautiousness in conflict so as to avoid precipitous escalation. His is a fair criticism: the necessary specifics are always context dependent. But Bell also asks specifically whether the current US response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine exemplifies a cautious approach or, by contrast, the nuclear brinkmanship that I warn against in my book. I address the

Ukraine situation directly in the book to show both the difficulty of avoiding escalatory dynamics and to demonstrate nonetheless that the United States can communicate its interests and stand firm in a confrontation while also avoiding actions that could push Russia into a corner (104-105). My admonitions about cautiousness, however, pertain more to an ill-advised reliance on coercive tactics, such as risk manipulation, in order to offset the limited actual stakes that the United States might possess in a conflict. In that regard, I think that US success—thus far, in Ukraine—owes in large part to the *strong interest* that the United States, and its NATO allies, maintain in taking a strong stand in Ukraine to deter Russian aggression elsewhere in Europe.

Fuhrman maintains that the implications for nuclear superiority of my two main cases—the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and 2015 Iran nuclear deal—remain undeveloped in my book. I believe I provide strong reasons to doubt that the Cuban Missile Crisis constituted a "win" for US nuclear superiority. After all, the United States would likely have easily won a conventional military conflict in the Caribbean. Other factors also impugn the validity of the superiority thesis in the Cuban case. These factors include that the Soviets believed they: a) could place nuclear weapons in Cuba despite the overwhelming US nuclear advantage; b) could gain a meaningful nuclear advantage by placing missiles in Cuba; c) could still launch warheads against NATO targets in a nuclear conflict; d) would need to back down visibly if conceding to US demands to withdraw missiles from Cuba, and e) were the "injured party" given US nuclear weapons on the Soviet periphery (153-155). I note also that President John F. Kennedy was gravely concerned about the escalatory potential of the conflict, and that neither Kennedy nor his civilian advisers expressed a faith that US nuclear advantages would press the Soviets to back down or were comforted by a belief that the United States could ultimately "win" a nuclear war with the Soviet Union (chapter 7). To the contrary, Kennedy took measures to head-off a military confrontation and ultimately made concessions to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to persuade him to remove his missiles from Cuba.

But I highlight the Cuban Missile Crisis for two other reasons. First, I allude to the crisis to show that it was not a win for US "resolve" (chapter 6). Second, I use the crisis to exemplify the dangers of option-based thinking in a crisis (chapter 7). Through an analysis of the transcripts of National Security Council meetings in the critical days of the US-Soviet confrontation, I show that US decision-makers consistently focused on US military options at the expense of US and Soviet intentions that governed the stakes of the confrontation. As I put it, in such confrontations a party "might defer, then, to salient (perhaps, prepackaged) options with little insight, or effort to gain insight, into the adversary's goals or the conditions that could cause a conflict to spiral beyond control." Thus, the Cuban Missile Crisis serves as a cautionary tale: salient military options could loom large as decision-makers seek a favorable resolution of a conflict: "officials latched onto conventional options—in particular, airstrikes—with little thought to how they might spark a nuclear conflagration. For that matter, despite alleged US nuclear superiority in the period, US policymakers gave no attention to whether, or how, a nuclear advantage would permit a favorable resolution of the crisis" (178).

I agree with Fuhrman that, compared to the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Iran case more directly pertains, by my telling, to the limits of nuclear superiority. Overwhelming US nuclear advantages did not deter the

Iranian pursuit of a nuclear weapon; and US policymakers—especially US policy hawks—expressed grave concerns about the consequences should Iran acquire but a single nuclear weapon. Yet I also intended the Iran case to demonstrate the liabilities of capability-based reasoning by revealing the challenges of defining the levels at which the Iran nuclear program represented a threat. Thus, US policy hawks consistently read threats into what Iran *could do*—discerning malign Iranian intent in all potential openings and allowances within the negotiated nuclear deal—with little consideration given to what Iran *would do*, much less the consequences of forgoing a deal altogether.

I confess that I gave cursory attention, as Fuhrman notes, to additional cases that speak potentially to the utility of US nuclear advantages for coercive purposes. I favorably cite existing research—including Fuhrman's important work[3]—that is better designed to assess whether US nuclear advantages yielded favorable resolutions in those cases. Perhaps, as Fuhrman observes, the many (thirty-nine!) implications of my arguments that I list in the book will provide fodder for future research on these and other cases.

As for Fuhrman's regret that I did not more explicitly situate my work within the context of Cold War-era works on the nuclear revolution, I hope that readers will recognize that, as in chapter 1, I lament the current neglect of the voluminous social-scientific contributions that we associate with the "third wave" of theorizing about nuclear weapons.[4] I stand on the shoulders of giants in the field—higher still, on the shoulders of Robert Jervis—and stress that the roots of my thinking about current nuclear challenges reside in his seminal contributions.[5] Although the book expresses a point of view, I tried to give opposing arguments their due. Critical readers will have the ultimate say on whether I do so.

Finally, Rost Rublee leaves me with little reason to push back given her praise of the book. She favorably contrasts the book's substance and approach with quantitative and other research on nuclear weapons that, in her view, receives unwarranted attention. That research is notable for its strong conclusions that bely the weakness of the underlying methodologies. I obviously share Rost Rublee's dissatisfaction with works that trumpet the value of "superiority" (by that or some other label), as I reveal at great length in the book. I agree, further, that quantitative researchers (myself, included) often neglect the limits of their underlying data, make heroic assumptions to operationalize variables, and ignore the restrictions that statistical methods impose on analysis. I note, however, that quantitative researchers are not alone in working largely, if not exclusively, within their given research traditions—and offering bold conclusions with insufficient evidentiary or logical support.

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[3] Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrman. *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).
[4] On the various "waves" of theorizing, see Robert Jervis, "Deterrence Theory Revisited," *World Politics* 31(2): 289-324. See also Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Johns Hopkins University, 1985), and Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management: A Dangerous Illusion* (Cornell University Press, 1987).
[5] Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1976); and "Deterrence and Perception." *International Security* 7:3 (Winter 1983/83): 3-27.