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978-0-521-81886-5 - The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945

Nina Tannenwald

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The Nuclear Taboo

Why have nuclear weapons not been used since Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945? Nina Tannenwald disputes the conventional answer of “deterrence,” in favor of what she calls a nuclear taboo – a widespread inhibition on using nuclear weapons – which has arisen in global politics. Drawing on newly released archival sources, Tannenwald traces the rise of the nuclear taboo, the forces that produced it, and its influence, particularly on US leaders. She analyzes four critical instances where US leaders considered using nuclear weapons (Japan 1945, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War 1991) and examines how the nuclear taboo has repeatedly dissuaded US and other world leaders from resorting to these “ultimate weapons.” Through a systematic analysis, Tannenwald challenges conventional conceptions of deterrence and offers a compelling argument on the moral bases of nuclear restraint as well as an important insight into how nuclear war can be avoided in the future.

NINA TANNENWALD is Associate Research Professor of International Relations at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University.

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This book had its origins in what seemed to me a disconnect between how ordinary people, including many policymakers, have viewed nuclear weapons and how academic deterrence theory has approached the analysis of such weapons. In college I had been involved in the nuclear freeze movement, aimed at halting the US–Soviet nuclear arms race. Most people in this movement shared a deep sense of revulsion at the tremendous destructive power of nuclear weapons, and held their use to be immoral and irrational.

Later, in graduate school, I studied academic deterrence theory. It focused on the cold, hard calculus of making credible threats of massive destruction. These game-theoretic analyses, I found, had little to say about issues of revulsion and morality. Further, when I studied how we managed to avoid nuclear war during the Cold War, it increasingly appeared to me that deterrence was not the whole story. Deterrence could not explain, for example, why nuclear weapons had not been used when the other side did not possess such weapons. I found it hard to avoid a sense that a powerful revulsion associated with nuclear weapons had played a role in inhibiting their use.

If indeed a nuclear taboo exists, how do we know, and how exactly did this taboo emerge? How has it influenced leaders? I decided to find out. This book is the result.

Although this book is primarily a work of historical analysis, I hope that, in shedding light on how we survived sixty years without using the bomb, it provides some insights for the future. Nuclear weapons no longer pose the threat of immediate annihilation of the planet that they once did. Yet, the risk of their use remains. Use of even a single bomb would be catastrophic. In a world where deterrence is less relevant, power is more asymmetric, and nuclear weapons are

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increasingly spread around the globe, the nurturing of normative inhibitions on use may be crucial to surviving the next sixty years.

In its long process of development, this book has accumulated many debts. My greatest debt goes to Peter Katzenstein, who, in one of my moments of crisis, reminded me that we do not slay dragons single-handedly. His intellectual guidance and unwavering support gave me the confidence to pursue this study. He provides a model of scholarship and mentorship to which I can only aspire. Richard Ned Lebow's cogent critiques of deterrence theory inspired my own thinking on the subject. Lawrence Scheinman's deep knowledge of the nuclear non-proliferation regime and international law helped me to refine my interpretations in this area. Henry Shue's insights strengthened my understanding of the role of ethical norms in international affairs. I could not have asked for a better group of advisors.

I am also especially grateful to Scott Sagan and Lynn Eden, who offered crucial encouragement early on and challenged me to sharpen my arguments. They and their colleagues at Stanford's Center for International Security and Arms Control provided, more than once, a wonderful environment for doing so. Halfway around the world from Stanford, Harald Muller made possible my research on arms control at the Frankfurt Peace Research Institute. His foundational work on security regimes has inspired and deeply influenced my thinking. A fellowship at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard, made possible by Joseph Nye, immersed me in a stimulating intellectual environment and plunged me more deeply into US nuclear policy. At the University of Colorado at Boulder I benefited from some wonderful colleagues and the opportunity to try out my ideas on students. In recent years, my intellectual home has been at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown. I am grateful to Thomas Biersteker for creating such a vibrant intellectual community there.

Many additional individuals have provided important feedback. William Burr read numerous chapters closely and saved me from egregious historical errors. He brought his prodigious knowledge of archival sources to bear and was extraordinarily generous with both his time and his documents. Daniel Ellsberg, Raymond Garthoff, James Blight, and Peter Hayes provided valuable comments on the Vietnam chapter. Alexander Wendt, David Dessler, Hein Goemans, and Mark Suchman provided extensive comments on the theoretical chapters. Scott Sagan read an early version of the entire manuscript.

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Numerous knowledgeable archivists at the National Archives made research there a pleasure. David Haight, archivist at the Eisenhower Library, and John Wilson, archivist at the Johnson Library, were indispensable in digging up ever-blacked-out nuclear weapons documents and assisting with declassification requests. I thank George Bunn for sharing with me his extensive personal files on no first use. William Arkin, many years ago, when he was still at Greenpeace, let me make use of his extensive clippings files on the 1991 Gulf War. Peter Hayes of the Nautilus Institute generously shared newly released documents on Vietnam.

For able research assistance I am grateful to Jeffrey Dillon, Cathryn Cluver, Stephan Sonnenberg, Emily Patton, Emily Kanstroom, and Joseph Nagle.

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I would not have made it through this project without the companionship, counsel, and encouragement of numerous friends along the way: Jeremy Adelman, Doug Blum, Chuck Call, Cathleen Fisher, Bobby Herman, Paul Kowert, Barbara Little, Anne Nolin, Steve Rauch, Andrew Tauber, Jeremy Telman, and Alex Wendt. Sarah Mendelson and Wendy Schiller knew when to drag me out for a drink and when to make sure I stayed in my seat.

My parents were wonderfully supportive throughout the process, although they began to worry that a nuclear bomb would get used before I finished the book. My stepfather, Kenneth Ford, an award-winning science writer and my favorite copyeditor, sharpened my prose in numerous chapters. My mother, Joanne Ford, remained ever encouraging. This book is dedicated to my parents – all three of them (my father, Peter Tannenwald, in memoriam).

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Finally, I thank my husband and fellow traveler, Mark Suchman, who undoubtedly has heard more than he ever expected about the nuclear taboo. He has been a constant source of support, tough critiques, good humor, two-by-two typologies, and, in the last three years, child care. Not only would this book not have been completed without him, it would not have been nearly as much fun, either.

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Abbreviations

ABM	anti-ballistic missile
ACDA	Arms Control and Disarmament Agency
AEC	US Atomic Energy Commission
DDEL	Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS
DDRS	Declassified Documents Reference System
ENDC	Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee
FRUS	<i>Foreign Relations of the United States</i>
GA	United Nations General Assembly
GPO	Government Printing Office
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JFDP	John Foster Dulles Papers
JFKL	John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, MA
LBJL	Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, TX
NA	National Archives, Washington, DC
NSA	National Security Archive, Washington, DC
NSC	National Security Council
NSF	National Security Files
NPMP	Nixon Presidential Materials Project, College Park, MD
NPT	Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty
PALs	permissive action links
PNE	peaceful nuclear explosion
PNW	Preventing Nuclear War (treaty)
PP	Pentagon Papers, Senator Gravel edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971–72).
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitation Talks
SGML	Seeley G. Mudd Library, Princeton, NJ
VN	Vietnam