

October 28, 2012

[John Mueller](#), **Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda**, published in 2009, copyright dated 2010, by [Oxford University Press](#) (The paperback edition has an improved index)

The book argues that, whatever their impact on activist rhetoric, strategic theorizing, defense budgets, and political posturing, nuclear weapons have had at best a quite limited effect on history, have been a substantial waste of money and effort, do not seem to have been terribly appealing to most states that do not have them, are out of reach for terrorists, and are unlikely to materially shape much of our future.

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Epilogue and an Inventory of Propositions

THE PROPOSITIONS

Obsession with nuclear weapons, sometimes based on exaggerations of the weapons' destructive capacity, has often led to policies that have been unwise, wasteful, and damaging

Nuclear weapons have been of little historic consequence and have not been necessary to prevent World War III or a major conflict in Europe

Militarily, the weapons have proved to be useless and a very substantial waste of money and of scientific and technical talent: there never seem to have been militarily compelling reasons to use them, particularly because of an inability to identify suitable targets or ones that could not be attacked about as effectively by conventional munitions

Although nuclear weapons seem to have at best a quite limited substantive impact on actual historical events, they have had a tremendous influence on our agonies and obsessions, inspiring desperate rhetoric, extravagant theorizing, wasteful expenditure, and frenetic diplomatic posturing

Wars are not caused by weapons or arms races, and the quest to control nuclear weapons has mostly been an exercise in irrelevance

The atomic bombs were probably not necessary to induce the surrender of the Japanese in World War II

Those who stole American atomic secrets and gave them to the Soviet Union did not significantly speed up the Soviet program; however, obsession about that espionage did detrimentally affect American foreign and domestic policy, something that led to a very substantial inflation in the estimation of the dangers that external and internal enemies presented

Changes in anxieties about nuclear destruction have not correlated at all well with changes in the sizes or the destructive capacities of nuclear arsenals

Arms reduction will proceed most expeditiously if each side feels free to reverse any reduction it later comes to regret; formal disarmament agreements are likely simply to slow and confuse the process

The economic and organizational costs of fabricating a nuclear arsenal can be monumental, and a failure to appreciate this has led to considerable overestimations of a country's ability to do so

The proliferation of nuclear weapons has been far slower than routinely predicted because, insofar as most leaders of most countries (even rogue ones) have considered acquiring the weapons, they have come to appreciate several defects: the weapons are dangerous, distasteful, costly, and likely to rile the neighbors

The nuclear diffusion that has transpired has proved to have had remarkably limited, perhaps even imperceptible, consequences

Nuclear proliferation is not particularly desirable, but it is also unlikely to accelerate or prove to be a major danger

Strenuous efforts to keep "rogue states" from obtaining nuclear weapons have been substantially counterproductive and have been a cause of far more deaths than have been inflicted by all nuclear detonations in history

The weapons have not proved to be crucial status symbols

Not only have nuclear weapons failed to be of much value in military conflicts, they also do not seem to have helped a nuclear country to swing its weight or "dominate" an area

Given the low value of the weapons and their high costs, any successes in the antiproliferation effort have been modest and might well have happened anyway

Strenuous efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation can act as a spur to the process, enhancing the appeal of-or desperate desire for- nuclear weapons for at least a few regimes, an effect that is often ignored

The pathetic North Korean regime mostly seems to be engaged in a process of extracting aid and recognition from outside, and a viable policy toward it might be to reduce the threat level and to wait while continuing to be extorted rather than to enhance the already intense misery of the North Korean people

If Iran actually does develop something of an atomic arsenal, it will likely find, following the experience of all other states so armed, that the bombs are essentially useless and a very considerable waste of money and effort

Although there is nothing wrong with making nonproliferation a high priority, it should be topped with a somewhat higher one: avoiding policies that can lead to the deaths of tens or hundreds of thousands of people under the obsessive sway of worst-case scenario fantasies

It is likely that no "loose nukes"-nuclear weapons missing from their proper storage locations and available for purchase in some way-exist

It is likely there is no such thing as a true black market in nuclear materials

The evidence of any desire on al-Qaeda's part to go atomic and of any progress in accomplishing this exceedingly difficult task is remarkably skimpy, if not completely negligible, while the scariest stuff-a decade's worth of loose-nuke rumor and chatter and hype-seems to have no substance whatever

Because of a host of organizational and technical hurdles, the likelihood that terrorists will be able to build or acquire an atomic bomb or device is vanishingly small

Despite the substantial array of threats regularly issued by al-Qaeda (the only terrorist group that may see attacks on the United States as desirable), and despite the even more substantial anguish these threats have inspired in their enemies, the terrorist group's capacity seems to be quite limited

One reason for al-Qaeda's remarkably low activity in the last years is that 9/11 proved to be substantially counterproductive from al-Qaeda's standpoint; indeed, with 9/11 and subsequent activity, the terrorist group seems mainly to have succeeded in uniting the world, including its huge Muslim portion, against its violent global jihad

Any threat presented by al-Qaeda is likely to fade away in time, unless, of course, the United States overreacts and does something to enhance their numbers, prestige, and determination—something that is, needless to say, entirely possible

The existential bombast suggesting that the United States will destroy itself in response to an atomic explosion encourages the most diabolical and murderous terrorists to investigate the possibility of obtaining one

VIDEO AND AUDIO

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