



History and Nuclear Rationality

If the past is our guide, we may want to stop worrying and love—or not hate—the bomb

John Mueller

November 19, 2012

<http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/history-nuclear-rationality-7749>



“And We Shall Conquer Drought”: Stalin plans to reshape Russia's forests and climate. Viktor Ivanovich Govorkov, 1949.

Some decades ago, Columbia University's Warner Schilling [observed](#) that “at the summit of foreign policy, one always finds simplicity and spook.”

I was reminded of this observation when I came across a passage in *George F. Kennan*, the excellent Pulitzer Prize-winning [biography](#) of the prominent foreign-policy intellectual by John Lewis Gaddis. In 1950, notes Gaddis, no one anticipated most of the major international developments that were to take place in the next half-century, among them “that there would be no World War” and that the United States and the USSR, “soon to have tens of thousands of thermonuclear weapons pointed at one another, would agree tacitly never to use any of them.”

But the absence of further world war, whether nuclear or not, was compatible with a fairly obvious observation: those running world affairs after World War II were the same people or the intellectual heirs of the people who had tried desperately to prevent that cataclysm. It was entirely plausible that such people, despite their huge differences on many issues, would manage to avoid plunging into a self-destructive repeat performance.

Thus, it could have been reasonably argued at the time that major war was simply not in the cards. Although this perspective was not the only one possible, there was no definitive way to dismiss it. Thus, as a matter of simple, plain, rational decision making, this prospect—the one that proved to be true—should have been on the table.

If *no one* anticipated this distinct possibility in 1950, the irreverent might be led ungraciously to suggest that the United States would have been better served if those at the summit of foreign policy had been replaced by coin-flipping chimpanzees who would at least occasionally get it right out of sheer luck. (The chimps would have to flip coins because the animals are all too human and would likely otherwise fall into patterns of repetitive, and probably agitated, behavior.)

We seem to be at it again. Just about the entire foreign-policy establishment has taken it as a central article of faith that nuclear proliferation is a dire security threat and that all possible measures, including even war if necessary, must be taken to keep Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

Concern is justified, but the experience of two-thirds of a century suggests that if Iran does obtain the weapons, it will use them in the same way others have: to stoke the national ego and to deter real or imagined threats. For the [most part](#), the few countries to which the weapons have proliferated have found them a notable waste of time, money, effort and scientific talent. They haven't even found much benefit in rattling them from time to time.

This was the case even when the weapons were taken on by large countries with seemingly deranged leaders. Thus, when he got nukes, the Soviet Union's Stalin was [plotting](#) to "transform nature" by planting lots of trees and China's Mao had recently launched a [campaign](#) to remake his society that created a famine killing tens of millions. It was simplicity and spook on steroids.

It is scarcely ever observed that nuclear proliferation has thus far had consequences that are substantially benign. This suggests that simplicity and spook continue to prevail up there at that foreign-policy summit. Send in the chimps.

John Mueller is senior fellow at the Cato Institute and professor of political science at Ohio State University. He is the author of *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda*; together with Mark Stewart, he wrote *Terror, Security, and Money: Balancing the Risks, Costs, and Benefits of Homeland Security*.

Links:

observed: <http://jcr.sagepub.com/content/9/3/385.full.pdf+html> Warner R. Schilling, "Surprise Attack, Death, and War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 9(3) September 1965: 389.

biography: <http://www.amazon.com/George-F-Kennan-American-Life/dp/1594203121> (quote is on page 403).

most: <http://politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/ao.html>

part: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/feb/16/iran-false-nuclear-fears>

plotting: <http://junksciencecom.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/envhisstalin-emq091-full.pdf>

campaign: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mao's_Great_Famine