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.

CONTENTS

I. THE IMPACT OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

1. Effects
2. Overstating the Effects
3. Deterring World War III: Essential Irrelevance
4. Modest Influence on History
5. Apocalyptic Visions, Worst-Case Preoccupations, Massive Expenditures

II. THE SPREAD OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

6. Arms Races: Positive and Negative
7. Proliferation: Slow and Substantially Inconsequential
8. The Limited Appeal and Value of Nuclear Weapons
9. Controlling Proliferation: Modest Success
10. Costs of the Proliferation Fixation
11. Reconsidering Proliferation Policy

III. THE ATOMIC TERRORIST?

12. Task
13. Likelihood
14. Progress and Interest
15. Capacity

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

Bloggingheads discussion of Atomic Obsession with Robert Farley, November 9, 2009 (40 min.) [html](#)

Book Forum presentation on Atomic Obsession, with comments by Michael Krepon and Jeffrey J. Lewis, Cato Institute, October 29, 2009 (80 min.) [link to video and podcast](#)

TedxColumbus presentation on Atomic Obsession, October 20, 2009 (17 min.) [link to video](#)

C-SPAN talk on Atomic Obsession, November 11, 2009 (59 min.) [link to video](#)

RELATED PUBLICATIONS, PAPERS, AND PRINT INTERVIEWS BY JOHN MUELLER


“Arms Reduction: Just Do It,” The Skeptics blog, nationalinterest.org, March 29, 2012 html also posted at Cato@liberty


“Iran: false nuclear fears cloud the west's judgment: A rational approach to preventing nuclear proliferation could avoid thousands of unnecessary deaths,” Guardian, February 17, 2010. Posted on guardian.co.uk on February 16, 2012. Also published in the Sydney Morning News html

“Embracing Threatlessness,” The Skeptics blog, nationalinterest.org, January 31, 2012 html

“Terrorism Is Not an Apocalyptic Threat,” Breakthrough Journal, No. 2, Fall 2011

“Newt Gingrich and the EMP Threat,” The Skeptics blog, nationalinterest.org, December 13, 2011. Also posted on cato@liberty blog html


“The Atomic Terrorist?” in Benjamin Friedman, ed., Terrorizing Ourselves: Why U.S. Counterterrorism Policy Is Failing and How To Fix It (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2010), 139-60

Review of Francis J. Gavin, "Same As It Ever Was: Nuclear Alarmism, Proliferation, and the Cold War," H-Diplo, March 18, 2010 pdf

"Think Again: Nuclear Weapons: President Obama's pledge to rid the world of atomic bombs is a waste of breath. But not for the reasons you might imagine," Foreign Policy, January-February 2010, pp. 38-44 html

"Exaggerating the alarm over a nuclear attack," washingtonpost.com, January 21, 2010 html

"The Atomic Terrorist?" Nuclear Proliferation Update, Cato Institute, January 2010  pdf


"Nuclear Bunkum: Don't panic: bin Laden's WMD are mythical, too," American Conservative, January 2010, pp. 20-21 html

"The Rise of Nuclear Alarmism: How we learned to start worrying and fear the bomb--and why we don't have to," www.foreignpolicy.com, 23 October 2009  html

(with Karl Mueller), "The Rockets' Red Glare: Just what are 'weapons of mass destruction, anyway?' www.foreignpolicy.com, 7 July 2009 available on the web

"The Atomic Terrorist?" Research Paper for the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, 30 April 2009


(with Ian S. Lustick) "Israel's Fight-or-Flight Response" National Interest, November/December 2008, pp. 68-73 html

"Don't want Iran to have bomb? Don't threaten Iran about bomb" Omaha World-Herald, March 8, 2008


**RELATED PUBLICATIONS OF INTEREST**


Chapman, Steve. Terrorists Can't Make the Big 1. Chicago Tribune, 7 February 2008 html

DeGroot, Gerard. Dismissing Doomsday (review of Atomic Obsession) Arms Control
Today, November 2009  html

Easterbrook, Gregg. Term Limits: The Meaninglessness of "WMD." New Republic 7 October 2002


McCandless, David. How I Learnt to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (Kinda) (calculations about how many nukes it would take to destroy the world), informationisbeautiful.net July 4, 2009 html


Seitz, Russell. Weaker Than We Think. American Conservative 6 December 2004 html


Wirz, Christoph, and Emmanuel Egger. Use of nuclear and radiological weapons by terrorists? International Review of the Red Cross, September 2005 pdf