

CHAPTER 3

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At All Costs: The Destructive Consequences of Antiproliferation Policy

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Over the decades, analysts of nuclear proliferation have separated themselves, or have been separated by others, into two camps.¹

Proliferation alarmists constitute the vast majority, occupying a prominent position in what Bernard Brodie once called “the cult of the ominous.”² They argue that proliferation is a dire development that must be halted as a supreme policy priority. Thus, Graham Allison argues that “no new nuclear weapons states” should be a prime foreign policy principle, and Joseph Cirincione insists that nonproliferation should be “our number one national-security priority.”³ Of late such alarmism has been sent into high relief by the apparent efforts of Iran to move toward a nuclear bomb capacity. In the presidential campaign of 2008, candidate Barack Obama repeatedly announced that he would “do everything in [his] power

1. Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed, Second Edition* (New York: Norton, 2002).

2. Bernard Brodie, *Escalation and the Nuclear Option* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 93.

3. Graham Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: Times Books, 2004), Ch. 7; and Joseph Cirincione, “Cassandra’s Conundrum,” *National Interest*, No. 92, (November–December 2007): 15.

to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon—everything,” while candidate John McCain insisted that Iran must be kept from obtaining a nuclear weapon “at all costs.”⁴ Neither bothered to tally what “everything” might entail and what the costs might be, and both continue to make the same kinds of pronouncements.

The other camp, which is quite tiny, consists of proliferation sanguinists who maintain that, on balance, a certain amount of proliferation might actually enhance international stability by deterring war or warlike adventures.⁵

However, there is another possible approach to the proliferation issue that might be called irrelevantist. People in this near-empty camp stress two considerations:

First, it really doesn’t bloody well *matter* whether the bomb proliferates or not: proliferation has been of little consequence (except on agonies, obsessions, rhetoric, posturing, and spending), and no country that has possessed the weapons has found them useful or beneficial, nor have those who abandoned them suffered loss because of this. Thus, the consequences of such proliferation that has taken place have been substantially benign: those who have acquired the weapons have “used” them simply to stoke their egos or to deter real or imagined threats.

Second, alarmed efforts to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons have proved to be very costly, leading to the deaths of more people than perished at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.

4. Barack Obama, Remarks at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee’s Annual Policy Conference, Washington, DC, June 4, 2008, available from www.nytimes.com/2008/06/04/us/politics/04text-obama-aipac.html?pagewanted=all&r=0; and Tim Reid and Tom Baldwin, “Nuclear Iran Must Be Stopped at All Costs, Says McCain,” *Times* (London), January 26, 2006.

5. For example, Kenneth Waltz, “Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean More Stability,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, No. 4 (July/August 2012), available from www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137731/kenneth-n-waltz/why-iran-should-get-the-bomb.

This chapter evaluates these two irrelevantist considerations.⁶

The Benign Consequences of Proliferation

Although we have now suffered through two-thirds of a century characterized by alarmism about the disasters inherent in nuclear proliferation, the substantive consequences of proliferation have been quite limited.

Military Value

Although the weapons have certainly generated obsession and have greatly affected military spending, diplomatic posturing, and ingenious theorizing, the few countries to which the weapons have proliferated have for the most part found them a notable waste of time, money, effort, and scientific talent. They have quietly kept them in storage and haven't even found much benefit in rattling them from time to time.

There has never been a militarily compelling—or even minimally sensible—reason to use nuclear weapons, particularly because of an inability to identify suitable targets or ones that could not be attacked as effectively by conventional munitions. And it is difficult to see how nuclear weapons benefited their possessors in specific military ventures. Israel's presumed nuclear weapons did not restrain the Arabs from attacking in 1973, nor did Britain's prevent Argentina's seizure of the Falklands in 1982. Similarly, the tens of thousands of nuclear weapons in the arsenals of the enveloping allied forces did not cause Saddam Hussein to order his occupying forces out of Kuwait in 1990. Nor did possession of the bomb benefit America in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan; France in

6. This chapter draws on ideas and approaches presented in John Mueller, *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Algeria; or the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.⁷

Domination

Proliferation alarmists may occasionally grant that countries principally obtain a nuclear arsenal to counter real or perceived threats, but many go on to argue that the newly nuclear country will then use its nuclear weapons to “dominate” the area. That argument was repeatedly used with dramatic urgency before 2003 for the dangers supposedly posed by Saddam Hussein, and it has also been frequently applied to Iran.

Exactly how that domination business is to be carried out is never made clear.⁸ But the notion, apparently, is that should an atomic Iraq (in earlier fantasies) or North Korea or Iran (in present ones) rattle the occasional rocket, other countries in the area, suitably intimidated, would supinely bow to its demands. Far more likely, any threatened states will make common cause with each other and with other concerned countries against the threatening neighbor. It seems overwhelmingly likely that if a nuclear Iran brandishes its weapons to intimidate others or to get its way, it will find that those threatened, rather than capitulating to its blandishments or rushing off to build a compensating arsenal of their own, will ally with others to stand up to the intimidation—rather in the way they coalesced into an alliance of convenience to oppose Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

It is also argued that nuclear weapons embolden a country to do mischief with less fear of punishing consequences. However, coun-

7. For an extended discussion, see Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, especially Chapters 4 and 5.

8. On this issue, see in particular Stephen M. Walt, “Containing Rogues and Renegades: Coalition Strategies and Counterproliferation,” in Victor A. Utgoff, ed., *The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Interests, and World Order* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 191–226.

tries like Iran already seem about as free as they need to be to do mischief (from the U.S. standpoint) in the Middle East and rogue states like the USSR, China, and North Korea do not seem to have stepped up their mischief after gaining nuclear weapons.

Deterrence

Although there are conceivable conditions under which nuclear weapons could serve a deterrent function, it is questionable whether they have yet ever done so. In particular, it is far from clear that nuclear weapons are what kept the Cold War from becoming a hot one.

The people who have been in charge of world affairs since World War II have been the same people or the intellectual heirs of the people who tried assiduously, frantically, desperately, and, as it turned out, pathetically, to prevent World War II, and when, despite their best efforts, world war was forced upon them, they found the experience to be incredibly horrible, just as they had anticipated. On the face of it, to expect these countries somehow to allow themselves to tumble into anything resembling a repetition of that experience—whether embellished with nuclear weapons or not—seems almost bizarre. The people running world politics since 1945 have had plenty of disagreements, but they have not been so obtuse, depraved, flaky, or desperate as to need visions of mushroom clouds to conclude that another world war, nuclear or non-nuclear, win or lose, could be decidedly unpleasant.⁹

Moreover, each leak from the archives suggests that the Soviet Union never seriously considered any sort of direct military aggression against the United States or Europe. Thus, Robert Jervis: “The Soviet archives have yet to reveal any serious plans for unprovoked aggression against Western Europe, not to mention a first

9. John Mueller, *Quiet Cataclysm* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), Ch. 5; and Idem, *Atomic Obsession*, Ch. 3.

strike against the United States.” Vojtech Mastny: “The strategy of nuclear deterrence [was] irrelevant to deterring a major war that the enemy did not wish to launch in the first place....All Warsaw Pact scenarios presumed a war started by NATO.” Stephen Ambrose: “At no time did the Red Army contemplate, much less plan for, an offensive against West Europe.” According to Bernard Brodie, “It is difficult to discover what meaningful incentives the Russians might have for attempting to conquer Western Europe.” And George Kennan: “I have never believed that they have seen it as in their interests to overrun Western Europe militarily, or that they would have launched an attack on that region generally even if the so-called nuclear deterrent had not existed.”¹⁰

As Kennan suggests, given the Soviets’ global game plan, which stressed revolutionary upheaval and subversion from within, not Hitlerian conquest, and given their experience with two disastrous world wars, another such experience scarcely made any sense whatever. That is, there was nothing to deter.

Status Symbols

Moreover, the weapons have not proved to be crucial status—or virility—symbols. French President Charles de Gaulle did opine in 1965 that “no country without an atom bomb could properly consider itself independent,” and Robert Gilpin concluded that “the possession of nuclear weapons largely determines a nation’s rank

10 . Robert Jervis, “Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, No. 1 (Winter 2001): 59; Vojtech Mastny, “Introduction,” in Vojtech Mastny, Sven G. Holtsmark, and Andreas Wenger, eds., *War Plans and Alliances in the Cold War: Threat Perceptions in the East and West*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006, 3; Stephen E. Ambrose, “Secrets of the Cold War,” *New York Times*, December 27, 1990; Bernard Brodie, *Escalation and the Nuclear Option*, 71–72; George F. Kennan, “Containment Then and Now,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 65, No. 4, Spring 1987, 888–889; and also Robert H. Johnson, *Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After*, New York: St. Martins, 1994, 29.

in the hierarchy of international prestige.”¹¹ In Gilpinian tradition, some analysts who describe themselves as “realists” have insisted for years that Germany and Japan must soon come to their senses and quest after nuclear weapons.¹²

As Jervis has observed however, “India, China, and Israel may have decreased the chance of direct attack by developing nuclear weapons, but it is hard to argue that they have increased their general prestige or influence.”¹³ And, as Jenifer Mackby and Walter Slocombe note:

Undoubtedly some countries have pursued nuclear weapons more for status than for security. However, Germany, like its erstwhile Axis ally, Japan, has become powerful because of its economic might rather than its military might, and its renunciation of nuclear weapons may even have reinforced its prestige. It has even managed to achieve its principal international objective—reunification—without becoming a nuclear state.¹⁴

11. Charles de Gaulle, “The Thoughts of Charles de Gaulle,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 12, 1968, 103; and Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 215.

12. Christopher Layne contended in 1993 that Japan by natural impulse must soon come to yearn for nuclear weapons. Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise,” *International Security* 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993): 5–51. And three years earlier, John Mearsheimer argued that “Germany will feel insecure without nuclear weapons.” John Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War,” *International Security* 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990): 5–56.

13. Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 4. For an assessment of this issue, see Jacques E.C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 211–212.

14. Jennifer Mackby and Walter Slocombe, “Germany: A Model Case, A Historical Imperative,” in Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss, eds., *The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear*

How much more status would Japan have if it possessed nuclear weapons? Would anybody pay a great deal more attention to Britain or France if their arsenals held 5,000 nuclear weapons, or would anybody pay much less if they had none? Did China need nuclear weapons to impress the world with its economic growth? Or with its Olympics?

Pace of Proliferation

These considerations help explain why alarmists have been wrong for decades about the pace of nuclear proliferation. Dozens of technologically capable countries have considered obtaining nuclear arsenals, but very few have done so. Indeed, as Jacques Hymans has pointed out, even supposedly optimistic forecasts about nuclear dispersion have proved to be too pessimistic.¹⁵ Thus, in 1958 the National Planning Association predicted “a rapid rise in the number of atomic powers ... by the mid-1960s.”¹⁶ A few years later C. P. Snow sternly predicted, “Within, at the most, six years, China and several other states [will] have a stock of nuclear bombs” while U.S. President John Kennedy observed that there might be “ten, fifteen, twenty” countries with a nuclear capacity by 1964.¹⁷

Choices (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 210.

15. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation*, 5.

16. NPA Special Project Committee on Security through Arms Control, *1970 without Arms Control*, Planning Pamphlet No. 104 (Washington, DC: National Planning Association, 1958), 42.

17. C.P. Snow, “The Moral Un-Neutrality of Science,” *Science* 133, No. 3448, (January 27, 1961), 259; and John F. Kennedy in Sidney Kraus, ed., *The Great Debates: Kennedy vs. Nixon, 1960* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1962), 394. Kennedy reportedly considered a Chinese nuclear test “likely to be historically the most significant and worst event of the 1960s.” William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson, “Whether to ‘Strangle the Baby in the Cradle’,” *International Security* 25, No. 3 (Winter 2000-01): 61. Actually, that designation should probably go instead to Kennedy’s decision to send American troops in substantial numbers to Vietnam largely to confront the Chinese “threat” that was

Such punditry has gone astray in part because the pundits insist on extrapolating from the wrong cases. A more pertinent prototype would have been Canada, a country that could easily have had nuclear weapons by the 1960s but declined to make the effort.¹⁸ In fact, over the decades, a huge number of countries capable of developing nuclear weapons have neglected even to consider the opportunity—for example, Canada, Italy, and Norway—even as Argentina, Brazil, Libya, South Korea, and Taiwan have backed away from or reversed nuclear weapons programs, and Belarus, Kazakhstan, South Africa, and Ukraine have actually surrendered or dismantled an existing nuclear arsenal.¹⁹ Some of that reduction is no doubt due to the hostility of the nuclear nations, but even without that the Canadian case seems to have proved to have rather general relevance. Its experience certainly suggests, as Stephen Meyer has shown, there is no “technological imperative” for countries to obtain nuclear weapons once they have achieved the technical capacity to do so.²⁰

deemed to lurk there.

18. For a discussion of the relevance of the Canadian case, concluding from it that the issue of nuclear proliferation—then often known as the “Nth country problem”—was approaching “a finite solution,” see John Mueller, “Incentives for Restraint: Canada as a Nonnuclear Power,” *Orbis* 11, No. 3 (Fall 1967): 864–884. For some early commentary suggesting that alarm about nuclear proliferation was unjustified, see Richard N. Rosecrance, “International Stability and Nuclear Diffusion,” in Richard N. Rosecrance, ed., *The Dispersion of Nuclear Weapons: Strategy and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 293–314.

19. William M. Arkin, “The Continuing Misuses of Fear,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 62, No. 5 (September–October 2006): 45; Mitchell Reiss, *Bridled Ambition: Why Countries Constrain Their Nuclear Capabilities* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995); and T.V. Paul, *Power versus Prudence: Why Nations Forgo Nuclear Weapons* (Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2000).

20. Stephen M. Meyer, *The Dynamics of Nuclear Proliferation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984); see also Hymans, *Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation*, 2–12. On the very limited impact of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, see Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, Ch. 9.

In consequence, alarmist predictions about proliferation chains, cascades, dominoes, waves, avalanches, epidemics, and points of no return have proved to be faulty. Insofar as most leaders of most countries (even rogue ones) have considered acquiring the weapons, they have come to appreciate several defects: nuclear weapons are dangerous, distasteful, costly, and likely to rile the neighbors. Moreover, as Hymans has demonstrated, the weapons have also been exceedingly difficult to obtain for administratively dysfunctional countries like Iran.²¹

Potential Dangers

Even if nuclear weapons so far have had little impact, there is an array of potential (or imagined) dangers that, alarmed antiproliferators suggest, might come about.

Crazy Leaders

It is sometimes said, or implied, that proliferation has had little consequence because the only countries to possess nuclear weapons have had rational leaders. But nuclear weapons have proliferated to large, important countries run by unchallenged monsters who, at the time they acquired the bombs, were certifiably deranged: Josef Stalin, who in 1949 was planning to change the climate of the Soviet Union by planting a lot of trees, and Mao Zedong, who in 1964 had just carried out a bizarre social experiment that resulted in an artificial famine in which tens of millions of Chinese perished.²²

21. Jacques E.C. Hymans, *Achieving Nuclear Ambitions: Scientists, Politicians, and Proliferation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Idem, "Crying Wolf about an Iranian Nuclear Bomb," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 17, 2012, available from thebulletin.org/crying-wolf-about-iranian-nuclear-bomb.

22. On Stalin's mental condition, see John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 123; On Mao,

It is incumbent on those who strongly oppose an Iranian bomb to demonstrate that the Iranian regime is daffier than these.

Atomic Terrorism

Thus far, terrorist groups seem to have exhibited only limited desire and even less progress in going atomic. That lack of action may be because, after a brief exploration of the possible routes, they—unlike generations of alarmists—have discovered that the tremendous effort required is scarcely likely to be successful.²³

In the wake of 9/11, however, concern about the atomic terrorist surged even though the attacks of that day used no special weapons. By 2003, United Nations Ambassador John Negroponte judged there to be “a high probability” that within two years al-Qaeda would attempt an attack using a nuclear weapon or other weapon of mass destruction. In that spirit Graham Allison published a book in 2004—over ten years ago—relaying his “considered judgment” that “on the current path, a nuclear terrorist attack on America in the decade ahead is more likely than not.”²⁴ Allison has quite a bit of company in his unfulfilled alarmist conclusions. According to Robert Gates, former secretary of defense, every senior government leader is kept awake at night by “the thought of a terrorist

see Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962* (New York: Walker, 2010).

23. For an extended discussion, see Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, Ch. 12–15.

24. John D. Negroponte, “Letter Dated 17 April 2003 from the Permanent Representative of the United States of America to the United Nations addressed to the chairman of the Committee,” United Nations Security Council, document S/AC.37/2003/(1455)/26, April 22, 2003, available from www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2003/n0335167.pdf; and Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism*, 15. He had presumably relied on the same inspirational mechanism in 1995 to predict that “in the absence of a determined program of action, we have every reason to anticipate acts of nuclear terrorism against American targets before this decade is out.” Idem, “Must We Wait for the Nuclear Morning After?” *The Washington Post*, April 30, 1995.

ending up with a weapon of mass destruction, especially nuclear.”²⁵ And in 2010, President Barack Obama held the atomic terrorist to be “the single biggest threat to U.S. security.”²⁶

One route a would-be atomic terrorist might take would be to receive or buy a bomb from a generous, like-minded nuclear state for delivery abroad. That route is highly improbable, however, because there would be too much risk—even for a country led by extremists—that the ultimate source of the weapon would be discovered. As one prominent analyst, Matthew Bunn, puts it, “A dictator or oligarch bent on maintaining power is highly unlikely to take the immense risk of transferring such a devastating capability to terrorists they cannot control, given the ever-present possibility that the material would be traced back to its origin.”²⁷ Important in this last consideration are deterrent safeguards afforded by “nuclear forensics,” which is the rapidly developing science (and art) of connecting nuclear materials to their sources even after a bomb has been exploded.²⁸

Moreover, there is a very considerable danger to the donor that the bomb (and its source) would be discovered before delivery or that it would be exploded in a manner and on a target the donor would

25. Quoted in, Bob Graham, Chairman, *World at Risk: The Report of the Commission on the Prevention of WMD Proliferation and Terrorism* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 43.

26. White House Press Office, “Remarks by President Obama and President Zuma of South Africa before Bilateral Meeting,” Blair House, Washington, DC, April 11, 2010, available from www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-and-president-zuma-south-africa-bilateral-meeting.

27. Matthew Bunn, *Securing the Bomb 2007* (Cambridge, MA, and Washington, DC: Project on Managing the Atom, Harvard University, and Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2007), vi; see also William Langewiesche, *The Atomic Bazaar* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 20; and Brian Michael Jenkins, *Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2008), 198.

28. For an excellent discussion of nuclear forensics, see Michael A. Levi, *On Nuclear Terrorism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 127–133.

not approve of—including on the donor itself. Another concern would be that the terrorist group might be infiltrated by foreign intelligence.²⁹

In addition, almost no one would trust al-Qaeda. As one observer has pointed out, the terrorist group's explicit enemies list includes not only Christians and Jews but also all Middle Eastern regimes; Muslims who don't share its views; most Western countries; the governments of Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, and Russia; most news organizations; the United Nations; and international nongovernmental organizations.³⁰ Most of the time, al-Qaeda didn't get along all that well even with its host in Afghanistan, the Taliban government.³¹

There has also been great worry about "loose nukes," especially in post-communist Russia—weapons, "suitcase bombs" in particular, that can be stolen or bought illicitly. A careful assessment conducted by the Center for Nonproliferation Studies has concluded that it is unlikely that any of those devices have been lost and that, regardless, their effectiveness would be very low or even nonexistent because they (like all nuclear weapons) require continual maintenance.³² Even some of those people most alarmed by the prospect of atomic terrorism have concluded, "It is probably true that there are no 'loose nukes,' transportable nuclear weapons missing from their proper storage locations and available for purchase in some

29. Robin M. Frost, *Nuclear Terrorism after 9/11* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2005), 64; Jenkins, 143; and Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "Why States Won't Give Nuclear Weapons to Terrorists," *International Security* 38, No. 1, (Summer 2013): 80-104.

30. Peter Bergen, "Where You Bin? The Return of Al Qaeda," *New Republic*, January 29, 2007, 19.

31. Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 230-231, 287-288.

32. Center for Nonproliferation Studies, "*Suitcase Nukes*": *A Reassessment* (Monterey, CA: Monterey Institute of International Studies, 2002), 4 and 12; Langewiesche, 19; and Jenkins, 149-150.

way.”³³

It might be added that Russia has an intense interest in controlling any weapons on its territory because it is likely to be a prime target of any illicit use by terrorist groups, particularly Chechen ones with whom it has been waging a vicious on-and-off war for decades. The government of Pakistan, which has been repeatedly threatened by terrorists, has a similar interest in controlling its nuclear weapons and material—and scientists. As noted by Stephen Younger, former head of nuclear weapons research and development at Los Alamos National Laboratory, “Regardless of what is reported in the news, all nuclear nations take the security of their weapons very seriously.”³⁴ Even if a finished bomb were somehow lifted somewhere, the loss would soon be noted and a worldwide pursuit launched.

Moreover, finished bombs are outfitted with devices designed to trigger a non-nuclear explosion that would destroy the bomb if it were tampered with. And there are other security techniques: Bombs can be kept disassembled with the components stored in separate high-security vaults, and security can be organized so that two people and multiple codes are required not only to use the bomb but also to store, maintain, and deploy it. If the terrorists seek to enlist (or force) the services of someone who already knows how to set off the bomb, they would find, as Younger stresses, that “only few people in the world have the knowledge to cause an unauthorized detonation of a nuclear weapon.” Weapons designers know how a weapon works, he explains, but not the multiple types of signals necessary to set it off, and maintenance personnel are trained in only a limited set of functions.³⁵

33. Anna M. Pluta and Peter D. Zimmerman, “Nuclear Terrorism: A Disheartening Dissent,” *Survival* 48, No. 2 (Summer 2006): 56; and Stephen M. Younger, *The Bomb: A New History* (New York: Ecco Press, 2009), 152.

34. Stephen M. Younger, *Endangered Species* (New York: Ecco Press, 2007), 93; and Younger, *The Bomb*, 152–153.

35. *Ibid.*, 153–54. On triggers, see Jenkins, 141. On disassembled parts, see

There could be dangers in the chaos that would emerge if a nuclear state were to fail, collapsing in full disarray—Pakistan is frequently brought up in this context and sometimes North Korea as well. However, even under those conditions, nuclear weapons would likely remain under heavy guard by people who know that a purloined bomb would most likely end up going off in their own territory; would still have locks (and in the case of Pakistan would be disassembled); and could probably be followed, located, and hunted down by an alarmed international community. The worst-case scenario in that instance requires not only a failed state but also a considerable series of additional permissive conditions, including consistent (and perfect) insider complicity and a sequence of hasty, opportunistic decisions or developments that click flawlessly in a manner far more familiar to Hollywood scriptwriters than to people experienced with reality.³⁶

Accidental or Inadvertent Detonation

A common concern has been that the weapons would somehow go off, by accident or miscalculation, devastating the planet in the process. In 1960, a top nuclear strategist declared it “most unlikely” that the world could live with an uncontrolled arms race for decades.³⁷ And in 1979, political scientist Hans J. Morgenthau declared: “The world is moving ineluctably towards a third world war—a strategic nuclear war. I do not believe that anything can be done to prevent it. The international system is simply too unstable

Reiss, 11 and 13; and Joby Warrick, “Pakistan Nuclear Security Questioned,” *Washington Post*, November 11, 2007.

36. For a discussion of the failed-state scenario, including useful suggestions for making it even less likely, see Levi, 133–138. On the unlikelihood of a Pakistan collapse, see Juan Cole, “Obama’s Domino Theory,” *Salon*, March 30, 2009, available from www.salon.com/2009/03/30/afghanistan_7.

37. Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), x.

to survive for long.”³⁸ And Eric Schlosser remains deeply concerned about that danger today.³⁹

In a 1982 New Yorker essay and best-selling book, both titled *The Fate of the Earth*, Jonathan Schell passionately, if repetitively, argued the not entirely novel proposition that nuclear war would be terrible, and he concluded ominously: “One day—and it is hard to believe that it will not be soon—we will make our choice. Either we will sink into the final coma and end it all or, as I trust and believe, we will awaken to the truth of our peril... and rise up to cleanse the earth of nuclear weapons.”⁴⁰

As it happened, both options were avoided: Neither final coma nor nuclear cleansing ever took place. The common alarmist prognostications assuming that because the weapons exist, sooner or later one or more of them will necessarily go off has now failed to deliver for 70 years, and this suggests that something more than luck is operating.

The Costly Consequences of Antiproliferation Policies

Although the consequences of nuclear proliferation have proved to be substantially benign, the same cannot be said for the consequences of the nuclear antiproliferation quest. The perpetual agony over nuclear proliferation has resulted in an obsessive effort to prevent or channel it, and it is this effort, not proliferation itself, that has inflicted severe costs.

38. Quoted, Francis Anthony Boyle, *World Politics and International Law* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), 73; and Marc Trachtenberg, *The Cold War and After: History, Theory, and the Logic of International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 25.

39. Eric Schlosser, *Command and Control* (New York: Allen Lane/Penguin Books, 2013). For commentary, see John Mueller, “Fire, Fire,” *Times Literary Supplement*, March 7, 2014, 26.

40. Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 231.

The Costs in Iraq

The war in Iraq, with deaths that have run well over a hundred thousand (and counting)—greater than those inflicted at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined—is a key case in point.⁴¹ It is far from clear, however, what Saddam Hussein, presiding over a deeply resentful population and an unreliable army (fearing overthrow, he was wary about issuing his army bullets and would not allow it within 30 miles of Baghdad with heavy equipment), could have done with a tiny number of bombs against his neighbors and their massively armed well-wishers other than seek to stoke his ego and to deter real or imagined threats. He was, then, fully containable and deterable.⁴² The war against him was a militarized antiproliferation effort substantially sold as a venture required to keep his pathetic regime from developing nuclear and other presumably threatening weapons and to prevent him from palming off some of these to eager and congenial terrorists.⁴³ The notion that the war was designed to spread democracy in the Middle East did gain significance but, as Bruce Russett notes, only after the antiproliferation arguments for going to war proved to be empty; or, as Francis Fukuyama has put it, a prewar request to spend “several hundred billion dollars

41. For both, estimates start at around 110,000 with many ranging higher, see “Casualties of the Iraq War,” *Wikipedia*, last modified March 12, 2015, available from en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties_of_the_Iraq_War; and “The Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Total Casualties,” Atomic Archive, available from www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/MED/med_chp10.shtml.

42. See Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, 133. For ammunition, see James Fallows, “Why Iraq Has No Army,” *Atlantic*, December 2005, 72. For heavy weapons, see Maggie O’Kane, “Saddam Wields Terror—and Feigns Respect,” *Guardian*, November 24, 1998. For critical pre-war examinations of the assumption that Iraq, however armed, posed much of a threat, see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “Iraq: An Unnecessary War,” *Foreign Policy* 82, No. 1, (January/February 2003): 50–59; Brink Lindsay and John Mueller, “Should We Invade Iraq?” *Reason*, January 2003; and John Mueller, *Overblown* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 131–133.

43. Olivier Roy, “Europe Won’t Be Fooled Again,” *New York Times*, May 13, 2003.

and several thousand American lives in order to bring democracy to . . . Iraq” would “have been laughed out of court.”⁴⁴

Thus, in an influential 2002 book, Kenneth Pollack strenuously advocated a war whose “whole point” would be to “prevent Saddam from acquiring nuclear weapons,” which Western intelligence agencies, he reported, were predicting would occur by 2004 (pessimistic) or 2008 (optimistic).⁴⁵ He fully recognized the costs of the war he advocated, costs that he felt might cause thousands of deaths and run into the tens of billions of dollars. But war would be worth this price, concluded Pollack, because with nuclear weapons Saddam would become the “hegemon” in the area, allowing him to control global oil supplies.⁴⁶ The nuclear theme was repeatedly applied by the administration in the run-up to the war, most famously, perhaps, in National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice’s dire warning about waiting to have firm evidence before launching a war: “We don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.” As the Defense Department’s Paul Wolfowitz pointed out, nuclear weapons, or at any rate weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), were the “core reason” used for selling the war.⁴⁷ At a press briefing on April 10, 2003, shortly after the fall of Baghdad, White

44. Bruce Russett, “Bushwhacking the Democratic Peace,” *International Studies Perspectives* 6, No. 4 (November 2005), 396; Francis Fukuyama, “America’s Parties and Their Foreign Policy Masquerade,” *Financial Times*, March 8, 2005; John Mueller, *War and Ideas: Selected Essays* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), Ch. 7; and Jon Western, *Selling Intervention and War: The Presidency, The Media, and Public Opinion*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005, Ch. 6.

45. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2003), 418.

46. *Ibid.*, xiv, 335, 413, 418. Pollack also estimated that another \$5 to \$10 billion over the first three years would be required for rebuilding (p. 397).

47. Sam Tannenhaus, “Interview with Paul Wolfowitz,” *Vanity Fair*, May 9, 2003; and “Wolfowitz: WMD Chosen as Reason for Iraq War for ‘Bureaucratic Reasons,’” *CNN.com*, May 30, 2003, available from transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/030530/se.08.html.

House press secretary Ari Fleischer insisted, “We have high confidence that they have weapons of mass destruction. That is what this war was about and it is about.” And Karl Rove, one of Bush’s top political advisers, reflected in 2008 that, absent the belief that Saddam Hussein possessed WMD, “I suspect that the administration’s course of action would have been to work to find more creative ways to constrain him like in the 90s.”⁴⁸

For their part, Democrats have derided the war as “unnecessary,” but the bulk of them only came to that conclusion after the United States was unable to find either nuclear weapons or weapons programs in Iraq. Many of them have made it clear they would support putatively preemptive (actually, preventive) military action and its attendant bloodshed if the intelligence about Saddam’s programs had been accurate.⁴⁹

However, the devastation of Iraq in the service of limiting proliferation did not begin with the war in 2003. For the previous 13 years, that country had suffered under economic sanctions visited upon it by both Democratic and Republican administrations that were designed to force Saddam from office (and, effectively, from life since he had no viable sanctuary elsewhere) and to keep the country from developing weapons, particularly nuclear ones. Multiple, although disputed, studies have concluded that the sanctions were the necessary cause of hundreds of thousands of deaths in the country, most of them children under the age of five—the most innocent of civilians.⁵⁰

48. Sam Stein, “Rove: We Wouldn’t Have Invaded Iraq If We Knew the Truth about WMDs,” *Huffington Post*, December 2, 2008, available from www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/12/02/rove-we-wouldnt-have-inva_n_147923.html. Some still consider it “open to debate,” however, “that the war was fought primarily as a nonproliferation campaign.” Henry D. Sokolski, *Underestimated: Our Not So Peaceful Nuclear Future* (Arlington, VA: Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, 2015), 4 note 7.

49. On this issue, see also Arkin, 45.

50. Richard Garfield, *Morbidity and Mortality Among Iraqi Children from 1990*

The Costs in North Korea

The costly alarmist perspective on atomic proliferation is also evident in policies advocated toward North Korea at various times. Thus, proposed Graham Allison in 2004, if diplomacy failed, a Pearl Harbor like attack should be launched even though potential targets had been dispersed and disguised and even though a resulting war might kill tens of thousands in the South.⁵¹

Members of the Bush administration, perhaps because they had become immersed in their own anti proliferation war in Iraq at the time, were able to contain their enthusiasm for accepting Allison's urgent advice, and North Korea has since become something of a nuclear weapons state. In 2004 Allison had sternly insisted that such an outcome would be "gross negligence" and would foster "a transformation in the international security order no great power would wittingly accept." We are now in position, then, to see if his confident predictions have come true: A North Korean bomb, he declared, would "unleash a proliferation chain reaction, with South Korea and Japan building their own weapons by the end of the decade" (that is by 2009), with Taiwan "seriously considering following suit despite the fact that this would risk war with China," and with North Korea potentially "becoming the Nukes R Us for

to 1998 (South Bend, IN: Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame, 1999); John Mueller and Karl Mueller, "The Methodology of Mass Destruction: Assessing Threats in the New World Order," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 23, No. 1 (March 2000): 163, 187; Matt Welch, "The Politics of Dead Children," *Reason*, (March 2002): 53-58; Pollack, 138 and 139; Mohamed M. Ali, John Blacker, and Gareth Jones, "Annual mortality rates and excess deaths of children under five in Iraq, 1991-1998," *Population Studies* 57, No. 2 (2003): 217-226; and Andrew Cockburn and Patrick Cockburn, *Out of the Ashes: The Resurrection of Saddam Hussein* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), Ch. 5. However, for the argument, based on later intelligence, that high estimates of a half-million or more child deaths are likely exaggerated due in particular to regime manipulation of the numbers, see Michael Spagat, "Truth and death in Iraq under sanctions," *Significance* 7, No. 3 (September 2010): 116-120.

51. Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism*, 165, 171.

terrorists.”⁵²

The same mentality was shown by decisionmakers in the Clinton administration in 1994. The United States never actually sent troops into action in its confrontation with North Korea at that time, but it certainly edged threateningly in that direction when a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate concluded that there was “a better than even” chance that North Korea had the makings of a small nuclear bomb. This conclusion was hotly contested by other American analysts and was later “reassessed” by intelligence agencies and found possibly to have been overstated. In addition, even if North Korea had the “makings” in 1994, skeptics pointed out, it still had several key hurdles to overcome in order to develop a deliverable weapon.⁵³

Nonetheless, the Clinton administration was apparently prepared to go to war with the miserable North Korean regime to prevent or to halt its nuclear development.⁵⁴ Accordingly, it moved to impose deep economic sanctions to make the isolated country even poorer (insofar as that was possible), a measure which garnered no support even from neighboring Russia, China, and Japan.⁵⁵ It also moved to engage in a major military buildup in the area. So apocalyptic (or simply paranoid) was the North Korean regime about these two developments that some important figures think it might have gone to war on a preemptive basis if the measures had been carried out.⁵⁶ A full scale war on the peninsula, estimated the

52. Ibid., 166.

53. Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 307-308, 316; Selig S. Harrison, *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 213; and James Fallows, “The Panic Gap: Reactions to North Korea’s Bomb,” *National Interest*, No. 38 (Winter 1994/95): 40-45.

54. Oberdorfer, 308, 316.

55. Ibid., 318.

56. Ibid., 329; and Derek D. Smith, *Deterring America: Rogue States and the*

Pentagon, not perhaps without its own sense of apocalypse, could kill 1,000,000 people including 80,000 to 100,000 Americans, cost over \$100 billion, and do economic destruction on the order of a trillion dollars.⁵⁷ A considerable price, one might think, to prevent a pathetic regime from developing weapons with the potential for killing a few tens of thousands—if they were actually exploded, an act that would surely be suicidal for the regime.

In the next years, floods and bad weather exacerbated the economic disaster that had been inflicted upon the country by its rulers. Famines ensued, and the number of people who perished reached hundreds of thousands or more, with some careful estimates putting the number at over two million.⁵⁸ Although food aid was eventually sent from the West, there seem to have been systematic efforts in the early days of the famine in particular to deny its existence for fear that a politics free response to a humanitarian disaster would undercut efforts to use food aid to wring diplomatic concessions on the nuclear issue from North Korea.⁵⁹

Encouraging Extortion

Due to its antiproliferation fixation, the United States has often allowed itself to become a victim of extortion. North Korea has undoubtedly been the greatest winner in this somewhat tricky process when the regime accepted a \$4 billion energy package for its cooperation in 1994.⁶⁰ But Taiwan and South Korea have also es-

Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 70-71.

57. Oberdorfer, 324; and Harrison, 117, 118.

58. Oberdorfer, 399; and Andrew S. Natsios, *The Great North Korean Famine* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001), 215.

59. *Ibid.*, 147, 148.

60. Reiss, 327.

entially extorted funds from the hand-wringers by accepting funds and favors and then giving in to what is likely to be their own best interests. Israel played the game in a different way during its 1973 war. After being attacked by Egypt and Syria, Israel made it known that it might use its nuclear weapons in the conflict (it may have had 20 at the time), a move that reportedly forced the United States desperately to initiate an immediate and massive resupply of the Israel military, aiding in Israel's subsequent victory against the invading Arab armies.⁶¹

The American reputation generated by this episode for being a willing victim of extortion also had the perverse result of fueling, or supplying a rationale for, South Africa's nuclear ambitions. As one South African official put it, "We argued that if we cannot use a nuclear weapon on the battlefield (as this would have been suicidal), then the only possible way to use it would be to leverage intervention from the Western Powers by threatening to use it. We thought that this might work and the alleged Israel-USA case gave some support to our view."⁶²

Hampering Economic Development

Leonard Weiss notes that "restrictions on nuclear trade and development are important elements of a nonproliferation regime."⁶³

61. There was also a strong perception in Israel that the United States might like to see the Arabs win some ground, something that might help compel Israel to negotiate a peace treaty later. The result of Israel's atomic gambit seems to have undercut support for that approach to the degree that it existed. On these issues, see Seymour M. Hersh, *The Samson Option: Israel's Nuclear Arsenal and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Random House, 1991), 40, 139, 226–39; and T.V. Paul, *The Tradition of Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 127–128.

62. Peter Liberman, "The Rise and Fall of the South African Bomb," *International Security* 26, No. 2 (Fall 2001): 62; and Reiss, 15, 28.

63. Leonard Weiss, "Safeguards and the NPT: Early History Portended Current

Antiproliferation efforts can thus hamper worldwide economic development by increasing the effective costs of developing nuclear energy. As countries grow, they require ever increasing amounts of power. Any measure that limits their ability to acquire this vital commodity—or increases its price—effectively slows economic growth at least to some degree and thereby reduces the gains in life expectancy inevitably afforded by economic development.

In the various proclamations about controlling the proliferation of nuclear weapons, this cost goes almost entirely unconsidered. For example, one of the common proposals by antiproliferators is that no country anywhere (except those already doing it) should be able to construct any facilities that could produce enriched uranium or plutonium—substances that can be used either in advanced reactors or in bombs. The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) does specifically guarantee to signing non-nuclear countries “the fullest possible exchange of technology” for the development of peaceful nuclear power. However, as Richard Betts points out, this guarantee has been undermined by the development of a “nuclear suppliers cartel” that has worked to “cut off trade in technology for reprocessing plutonium or enriching uranium,” thereby reducing the NPT to “a simple demand to the nuclear weapons have-nots to remain so.” Under some proposals, the cartel would be extended to fuel as well.⁶⁴

Antiproliferator Allison is among those advocating the cartelization of nuclear fuel. He further suggests that nuclear states guarantee to sell the non-nuclear ones all the nuclear fuel they need (presumably in perpetuity) at less than half price, but does not attempt

Problems,” in Henry Sokolski, ed., *Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Missteps* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, forthcoming).

64. Richard K. Betts, “Universal Deterrence or Conceptual Collapse? Liberal Pessimism and Utopian Realism,” in Victor A. Utgoff, ed., *The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Interests, and World Order* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 70.

to calculate the price tag for this.⁶⁵ The 2008 Graham Commission, of which Allison was a member, repeats this demand, though it suggests that nuclear fuel be made available at market prices “to the extent possible.” It, too, eschews cost considerations.⁶⁶ There is, however, a glimmer of evidence that the economic cost of hampering the nuclear industry has been considered at least in passing by some dedicated antiproliferators. In a 2007 plea that the world be made free of nuclear weapons, four former top policy officials insisted that the use of highly enriched uranium be phased out from civil commerce and that it be removed from all the research facilities in the entire world, a costly demand that was not repeated in their 2008 version.⁶⁷

The antiproliferation obsession has also resulted in the summary dismissal of potentially promising ideas for producing energy. Thomas Schelling points out that there was a proposal in the 1970s (a decade that experienced two major shocks in the price of oil) to safely explode tiny thermonuclear bombs in underground caverns to generate steam to produce energy in an ecologically clean manner. According to Schelling, the proposal was universally rejected by both arms control and energy policy analysts at the time “without argument, as if the objections were too obvious to require articulation.”⁶⁸ On closer exploration, of course, this scheme might have proved unfeasible for technical or economic reasons. But to dismiss it without any sort of analysis was to blithely sacrifice en-

65. Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism*, 156–165.

66. Graham, *World at Risk*, xx.

67. George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, “A World Free of Nuclear Weapons,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007; and George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, “Toward a Nuclear-Free World,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 2008.

68. Thomas C. Schelling, “An Astonishing Sixty Years: The Legacy of Hiroshima,” Nobel Prize Lecture, Stockholm, Sweden, December 8, 2005, 369, available from nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/economics/laureates/2005/schelling-lecture.html.

ergy needs—and therefore human welfare—to antiproliferation knee-jerk.

Something similar may now be in the cards. Currently in the research phase, it may become possible in the future to reduce radically the cost of producing nuclear energy by using lasers for isotope separation to produce the fuel required by reactors.⁶⁹ This, of course, might also make it easier, or at any rate less costly, for unpleasant states to develop nuclear weapons. Accordingly, a balanced assessment of costs and benefits would have to be made if the technique ever proves to be feasible. But there is an excellent chance no one will ever make it: like the technology Schelling discusses, it will be dismissed out of hand. Relatedly, the antiproliferation obsession has also sometimes hampered the potentially valuable expansion of nuclear power to ships, particularly to icebreakers.

Enhancing Dependence on Foreign Oil

There is also something of a security aspect to this process. Ever since the oil shocks of the 1970s, it has become common in American politics to spy a danger to the country's security in allowing it to be so dependent on a product that is so disproportionately supplied to the world by regimes in the Middle East that are sometimes contemptible, hostile, and/or unstable. One obvious solution would be to rely much more on nuclear energy. There are a number of reasons why this has failed to happen, but the association of nuclear power with nuclear weapons and with worries about nuclear proliferation have had the result of making it much more difficult and expensive—often prohibitively so—to build nuclear reactors.⁷⁰

69. Mark Anderson, "Beware New Nukes," *Wired*, October 2008, 182.

70. On this issue, see especially Spencer R. Weart, *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

Undercutting Efforts to Prevent Global Warming

In addition, because nuclear power does not emit greenhouse gases, it is an obvious potential candidate for helping with the problem of global warming, an issue many people hold to be of the highest concern for the future of the planet. Since many of the policies arising from the nonproliferation fixation increase the costs of nuclear power, they, to that degree, exacerbate the problem.

Exacerbating the Nuclear Waste Problem

The antiproliferation focus has also exacerbated the nuclear waste problem in the United States. In the late 1970s, the Carter administration banned the reprocessing (or recycling) of nuclear fuel, something that radically reduces the amount of nuclear waste, under the highly questionable assumption that this policy would reduce the danger of nuclear proliferation.⁷¹

Encouraging Proliferation

Moreover, antiproliferation efforts can be counterproductive in their own terms. As Mitchell Reiss observes, “one of the unintended ‘demonstration’ effects” of the American antiproliferation war against Iraq “was that chemical and biological weapons proved insufficient to deter America: only nuclear weapons, it appeared, could do this job.”⁷² It is likely a lesson North Korea has drawn.

71. Richard L. Garwin and Georges Charpak, *Megawatts and Megatons: A Turning Point in the Nuclear Age?* (New York: Knopf, 2001), 144–145.

72. Mitchell B. Reiss, “The Nuclear Tipping Point: Prospects for a World of Many Nuclear Weapons States,” in Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss, eds., *The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 12.

Israel: The Potential for Self-Destruction

I am not a fan of worst case scenarios. However, one that may be worthy of consideration concerns the danger that, stoked by an obsession over atomic weapons in the hands of Iran, Israel could essentially destroy itself—that is, cease to exist as a coherent Jewish state—without a single Iranian bomb ever being developed.⁷³

There have been extreme apprehensions in Israel about atomic annihilation at the hands of Iran, and these have sometimes inspired a sense of despair and desperation—and in many quarters a loss of hope.⁷⁴ Indeed, Yossi Klein Halevi and Michael Oren observed in early 2007 that “military men suddenly sound like theologians when explaining the Iranian threat.” And some of the ponderings were downright spooky:

Ahmadinejad’s pronouncements about the imminent return of the Hidden Imam and the imminent destruction of Israel aren’t regarded as merely calculated for domestic consumption; they are seen as glimpses into an apocalyptic game plan. Ahmadinejad has reportedly told his Cabinet that the Hidden Imam will reappear in 2009—precisely the date when Israel estimates Iran will go nuclear.⁷⁵

The existential danger for Israel in this arises not so much from Iran’s capacity or potential capacity to do harm—though judicious and balanced concerns about that danger are, of course, justified—as from the consequences of the hype, at once apoplectic and apoc-

73. See also John Mueller and Ian S. Lustick, “Israel’s Fight-or-Flight Response,” *National Interest*, No. 98 (November/December 2008), 68-71.

74. Benny Morris, “Israel’s unhappy birthday,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 2008; and Ian S. Lustick, “Abandoning the Iron Wall: Israel and ‘the Middle Eastern Muck’,” *Middle East Policy* XV, No. 3, (August 2008).

75. Yossi Klein Halevi and Michael B. Oren, “Israel’s Worst Nightmare,” *New Republic*, January 30, 2007. For later, but similar, apocalyptic visions, see Ari Shavit, “The Bomb and the Bomber,” *New York Times*, March 21, 2012.

alyptic, over the prospective Iranian bomb. The problem is that, if the hysteria persists, a considerable and increasing number of Israelis may be led to conclude that since there is no way to guarantee that Iran will never be able to obtain a bomb, the situation is hopeless, that Israel is ultimately doomed, and that it is best to live elsewhere—in a place where one can bring up children free from nuclear fears.

“There is nothing more regular in Jewish history and myth than Jews ‘returning’ to the Land of Israel to build a collective life,” observed Ian Lustick in 2008, “except for Jews leaving the country and abandoning the project.” And “so far, in the twenty first century,” he continued, “more Jews have left than have arrived,” noting a survey indicating that only 69 percent of Jewish Israelis say they want to stay in the country.⁷⁶ He also cites a 2007 poll indicating that one quarter of Israelis were considering leaving the country, including almost half of all young people.⁷⁷ Jeffrey Goldberg points to another survey finding that 44 percent of Israelis say they are ready to leave if they could find a better standard of living elsewhere and notes that “the emigration of Israel’s most talented citizens is a constant worry of Israeli leaders.”⁷⁸

Thus, there is some danger that wallowing in its atomic obsession, Israel will scare itself into extinction.

Bombing Iran

Barack Obama’s administration is notable for the apparent absence of anyone (else) in a high foreign policy office who clearly and publicly opposed the war on Iraq before George W. Bush launched

76. “Israel’s Future: The Time Factor,” A Debate between Efraim Inbar and Ian S. Lustick, *Israel Studies Forum* 23, No. 1, (Summer 2008): 6, 10.

77. Lustick, “Abandoning the Iron Wall.”

78. Jeffrey Goldberg, “Unforgiven,” *Atlantic*, May 2008, 40.

his invasion.⁷⁹ However, due in considerable part to the subsequent disastrous experience in that enterprise—a disaster that continues to evolve and unfold—misgivings about the wisdom and consequences of launching a Pearl Harbor-like military strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities increased over time.

Among the considerations:

- Following from the previous discussion, if the rattled and insecure Iranian leadership was lying when it repeatedly proclaims it had no intention of developing nuclear weapons or if it were to undergo a conversion from that position (triggered perhaps by an Israeli airstrike), it would likely soon find, like all other nuclear-armed states, that the bombs are essentially useless and a very considerable waste of time, effort, money, and scientific talent.

- If Iran were to seek to develop nuclear weapons, the process, contrary to intelligence exaggerations persistently spun out, would likely take years or even decades. For example, it was in March 2010 that Doyle McManus conveyed the information that “most experts now estimate that Iran needs about 18 months to complete a nuclear device and a missile to carry it,” although it needed to overcome “technical bottlenecks, the exposure of secret facilities and equipment breakdowns.”⁸⁰ Hymans, unlike the “experts” McManus consulted, goes much deeper, stressing the administrative difficulties of developing a bomb. These require “the full-hearted cooperation of thousands of scientific and technical workers for many years.” The task is “enormous,” and

the key driver of an efficient nuclear weapons project has not been a country’s funding levels, politi-

79. John Mueller, “What Americans Get That the Foreign Policy Elite Doesn’t,” *Huffington Post*, May 30, 2014, available from www.huffingtonpost.com/john-mueller/what-americans-get-that-t_b_5420173.html.

80. Doyle McManus, “What if Iran gets the bomb? Many now argue that containment, not a military strike, is the best way to deal with Tehran’s nuclear ambitions,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 2010.

cal will, or access to hardware. Rather, the key has been managerial competence. Nuclear weapons projects require a hands-off, facilitative management approach, one that permits scientific and technical professionals to exercise their vocation. But states such as Iran tend to feature a highly invasive, authoritarian management approach that smothers scientific and technical professionalism. Thus, it is very likely that Iran's political leadership—with its strong tendency toward invasive, authoritarian mismanagement—has been its own worst enemy in its quest for the bomb.⁸¹

- Iran scarcely has a viable delivery system for nuclear weapons.⁸²

- If Iran were to develop nuclear weapons, it would most likely “use” them in the same way all other nuclear states have: for prestige (or ego-stoking) and to deter real or perceived threats.⁸³ Indeed, as Thomas Schelling suggests, deterrence is about the only value the weapons might have for Iran. Such devices, he points out, “would be too precious to give away or to sell” and “too precious to waste killing people” when they could make other countries “hesitant to consider military action.”⁸⁴ Actually, in the wake of the Iraq disaster, Iran has scarcely needed nuclear weapons for deterrence.

81. Hymans, “Crying wolf about an Iranian nuclear bomb.” See also Idem, *Achieving Nuclear Ambitions*.

82. Richard L. Garwin, “Evaluating Iran’s missile threat,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 64, No. 2 (May/June 2008): 40; and “Pentagon Appears to Downgrade Iran Strategic Missile Threat,” *Global Security Newswire*, July 11, 2014, available from www.nti.org/gsn/article/pentagon-appears-downgrade-iran-icbm-threat-assessment/.

83. For the conclusion that these would be Iran’s sole motivations, see Colin Dueck and Ray Takeyh, “Iran’s Nuclear Challenge,” *Political Science Quarterly* 122 (Summer 2007): 195.

84. Schelling.

It can credibly deter an invasion by the Americans simply by maintaining a trained and well-armed cadre of a few thousand troops dedicated to, and capable of, inflicting endless irregular warfare on the invaders.

- The leadership of Iran, however hostile and unpleasant in many ways, does not consist of a self-perpetuating gaggle of suicidal lunatics. Thus, as Schelling suggests, it is exceedingly unlikely Iran would give nuclear weapons to a substate group like Hezbollah to detonate—particularly on a country like Israel—not least because the non-lunatics in charge would fear that the source of the weapon would be detected by nuclear forensics inviting devastating retaliation.

- An Iranian bomb would be unlikely to trigger a cascade of proliferation in the Middle East. Although Joseph Cirincione has held that a nuclear Iran could readily be deterred from using a nuclear weapon against its neighbors or the United States, and although he discounts the likelihood that it might “intentionally give a weapon to a terrorist group they could not control,” he has set off on an extravagant alarmist fear cascade envisioning “a nuclear chain reaction where states feel they must match each other’s nuclear capability.” This, he concludes, “could lead to a Middle East with not one nuclear weapons state, Israel, but four or five,” and that “is a recipe for nuclear war.”⁸⁵ However, as noted earlier, if Iran were to brandish nuclear weapons, it would find itself, like Iraq in 1990, confronting a coalition of convenience made up of countries far stronger militarily.

85. Cirincione, 16, 17. Cirincione has much company. As Potter and Mukhatzhanova observe, “Today it is hard to find an analyst or commentator on nuclear proliferation who is not pessimistic about the future. It is nearly as difficult to find one who predicts the future without reference to metaphors such as proliferation chains, cascades, dominoes, waves, avalanches, and tipping points.” However, after considerable study and research on the issue, they finally became “convinced that the metaphor is inappropriate and misleading, as it implies a process of nuclear decisionmaking and a pace of nuclear weapons spread that are unlikely to transpire.” William C. Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, “Divining Nuclear Intentions,” *International Security* 33, No. 1 (Summer 2008): 159.

- The long term negative consequences for Israel from an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities either by Israel or by the United States could surpass those that developed even from such ill advised ventures as Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon and its government-induced policy to encourage settlement in occupied territories. And the casualties inflicted by an attack on Iran by direct action and by its "collateral damage" (including, potentially, induced nuclear radiation) could conceivably be considerable. Moreover, the results would most likely be counterproductive. Israel's highly touted air strike against Iraq's nuclear program in the Osirak attack of 1981, as Dan Reiter and Richard Betts have pointed out, actually caused Saddam Hussein to speed up his nuclear program 25-fold while decreasing its vulnerability by dispersing its elements—a lesson Iran has also learned.⁸⁶

- In the end, it is incumbent upon those who have advocated a Pearl Harbor-like attack on Iran to demonstrate that the rather innocuous history of nuclear proliferation over the last two-thirds of a century is irrelevant and that the regime there is daffier and more threatening than, for example, the ultimate rogue, China, in 1964.⁸⁷

Conclusion

In 1950, notes John Lewis Gaddis, no one among foreign policy decisionmakers anticipated most of the major international developments that were to take place in the next half-century. Among

86. Dan Reiter, "Preventive Attacks against Nuclear Programs and the 'Success' at Osirak," *Nonproliferation Review* 12, No. 2 (July 2005): 355-371; Ibid., *Preventive War and Its Alternatives: The Lessons of History* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2006), 4, 6; and Richard K. Betts, "The Osirak Fallacy," *National Interest*, No. 83 (Spring 2006): 22-25. Moreover, as Hymans also stresses in *Achieving Nuclear Ambitions*, the reactor the Israelis bombed was not even capable of producing weapons-grade fissile material.

87. See Francis J. Gavin, "Blasts from the Past: Proliferation Lessons from the 1960s," *International Security* 29, No. 3 (Winter 2004/05): 100-135.

these were “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.”⁸⁸

However, as discussed earlier, it could have been reasonably argued at the time that major war was simply not in the cards—that despite the huge differences on many issues, the leading countries of the world would manage to keep themselves from plunging into a self-destructive cataclysm like, or even worse than, the one they had just survived. This perspective was not, of course, the only one possible, but there was no definitive way to dismiss it. Thus, as a matter of simple, plain, rational decisionmaking, 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 from time to time 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 whole of the foreign policy establishment has taken it as a central article of faith that the proliferation of nuclear weapons is an overwhelming danger and that all possible measures, including war, must be taken to keep it from happening.⁸⁹

88. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 403.

89. Thus, it is impressive how casually the sanguinist perspective of Kenneth Waltz—a plausible line of argument, whatever my reservations—has been commonly dismissed without even much analysis or effort at refutation. As Richard Betts notes, the argument cannot simply be “brushed off,” yet that is exactly what has happened; “surprisingly few academic strategists” have tried to refute it in detail. Betts, “Universal Deterrence or Conceptual Collapse?” 64. Thus the

Concern is justified I suppose, but the experience of two-thirds of a century suggests that any danger is far from overwhelming. It would certainly be preferable that a number of regimes never obtain nuclear weapons. Indeed, if the efforts to dissuade Iran from launching a nuclear weapons program succeed, they would be doing it a favor—though, quite possibly, the Iranians won't notice.

The handful of countries that have acquired nuclear weapons seem to have done so sometimes as an ego trip for current leaders, and more urgently (or perhaps merely in addition) as an effort to deter a (supposed) potential attack on themselves: China to deter the United States and the Soviet Union, Israel to deter various enemy nations in the neighborhood, India to deter China, Pakistan to deter India, and now North Korea to deter the United States and maybe others.⁹⁰ Insofar as nuclear proliferation is a response to perceived threat, it follows that one way to reduce the likelihood such countries would go nuclear is a simple one: stop threatening them.

More generally, any antiproliferation priority should be topped

generally careful and thoughtful Mitchell Reiss worries (or did in 2004) that we are nearing a nuclear “tipping point” that could trigger a “proliferation epidemic.” Should this occur, he assures us, “few would take comfort in the assurances of some academic theorists [a double putdown if there ever was one] that ‘more may be better,’” directly quoting Waltz, but not even affording him a footnote. Reiss, “The Nuclear Tipping Point,” 4. If academics have substantially ignored the argument, policymakers have been at least as oblivious. For example, James Kurth simply dismisses the Waltz argument out of hand: “There probably has not been a single foreign policy professional in the U.S. government,” he noted in 1998, “that has found this notion to be helpful.” James Kurth, “Inside the Cave: The Banality of I.R. Studies,” *National Interest*, No. 53 (Fall 1998). But not, one strongly suspects, because any has spent any time thinking about it.

90. On China, see Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, 144. Hymans puts prime emphasis on ego—with the added proviso that only when the ego in charge has a conception of a national identity that can be considered to be what he calls “of the oppositional nationalist” variety will the country really try to get nuclear weapons. Hymans, *Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation*. For somewhat related findings, see Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). See also the discussion in Potter and Mukhatzhanova.

with a somewhat higher one: avoiding militarily aggressive actions under the obsessive sway of worst-case-scenario fantasies, actions that might lead to the deaths of tens—or hundreds—of thousands of people.⁹¹

“It is dangerous,” muses Hymans aptly, “to fight smoke with fire.”⁹² Nuclear proliferation, while not particularly desirable, is unlikely to accelerate or prove to be a major danger, and extreme antiproliferation policies need careful reconsideration. They can generate costs far higher than those likely to be inflicted by the potential (and often essentially imaginary) problems they seek to address.

91. The phrase “worst case fantasies” is from Bernard Brodie, “The Development of Nuclear Strategy,” *International Security* 2, No. 4 (Spring 1978): 68.

92. Hymans, *Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation*, 225.