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# BOOK REVIEW

## NUCLEAR POLITICS

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Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age*. Cornell University Press, 2012. 224 pages, \$35.

Francis J. Gavin's *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* is a rigorous historical analysis of the influence that nuclear weapons exerted over US and international politics throughout the Cold War. It is also a study of how important political considerations proved in shaping US nuclear strategy—a challenge to traditional security theorists who subscribe to the view that strategy is the product of rational calculations and deterrence logic.

Gavin's research leads him to the inescapable conclusion that US nuclear policy is not and has never been determined by the kind of formal constructs of state behavior, like rational deterrence, that strategists promote. *Nuclear Statecraft* indicts the whole edifice of Cold War security studies for an excessive preoccupation with arcane and abstract theoretical debates that, in his view, not only misconstrue history, but also impede our ability to understand or redress current security dilemmas.

*Nuclear Statecraft* is a provocative and fascinating book. The writing is lucid, the analysis tightly woven and sophisticated, and the book's core conclusion—that much of what is said and thought about nuclear policy today remains hobbled by a pervasive ignorance of history (even, or perhaps especially, among nuclear policy experts)—is well argued and compelling. This book makes a significant contribution to the body of scholarly research about the evolution of US nuclear policy and, perhaps because Gavin is a skilled historian, is written in a style devoid of the usual jargon-laden obscurantism that plagues the nuclear field.

Reviewing a meticulously researched book like this one poses a peculiar sort of challenge. One is reminded a bit of Leo Tolstoy's observation that whereas unhappy families are each unhappy in their own way, happy families are all the same. Could this also be said about very good books? I was tempted at first to just say that *Nuclear Statecraft* is exceptional work of nuclear scholarship, recommend that readers buy it, and leave it at that. But while Gavin offers up no obvious errors of interpretation or opinionated rants that might make this reviewer's task easier, *Nuclear Statecraft* turns out to be about far more than it first appears.

Some people might ask why anyone would want to read, let alone write, another history of US nuclear strategy. What could one possibly add to this vast body of knowledge that hasn't already been carefully parsed and documented by scholars like

Mark Trachtenberg, Robert Jervis, or Richard Betts? But *Nuclear Statecraft* is a deceptively complex book, offering bold and original propositions that are bound to spark wider debate.<sup>1</sup> As a meticulous work of historical research, it contains important substantive contributions, adding to our empirical understanding of key nuclear events. More than that, it sets out an ambitious conceptual framework intended to shake up just about everybody—strategic theorists, policy practitioners, even historians.

This book is a courageous attempt to reform how experts and policy makers think and talk about the Cold War legacy of nuclear weapons. Gavin's conviction that strategists and policy makers can learn from a rigorous study of history sets him apart from his main target—e.g., international relations theorists—but it also distinguishes him from traditional American historians whose profession, as Gavin describes it with a quote from Harvard University historian Jill Lepore, "...defines itself by its dedication to the proposition that looking to the past to explain the present falls outside the realm of serious historical study."<sup>2</sup>

Gavin is definitely not a nuclear wonk, a blessing in so many respects. One of the more interesting revelations about this book (buried almost as an aside in the introduction) is that he was inspired to write *Nuclear Statecraft* after he stumbled upon archival documents about the formation of the US policy of "flexible response" while doing research for a book about US international monetary policy. Gavin was struck by documents showing how successive presidents had sought to redress the US balance of payments deficit of the 1950s and 1960s by pressing for the withdrawal of US troops from Europe. What surprised him is that these decisions were being made at the exact same time that the United States was heralding a new nuclear doctrine of "flexible response," described as a bold and carefully conceived innovation away from reliance on "massive retaliation," the implementation of which depended on *strengthening* the US forward presence in Europe, among other things. For Gavin, the idea that presidents would give short shrift to what was needed to operationalize a new nuclear strategy doctrine prompted him to look further into possible other contradictions between the rhetoric and reality of US strategic planning.

Gavin really nails the point. For decades after its inception, the policy of flexible response lacked operational grounding, including the kind of "limited" nuclear attack options required to execute a stated strategy of "graduated escalation." Limited options (including the use of tactical nuclear weapons against conventional aggression by the Soviet Union in Europe) would also have required significant amendment of existing US nuclear war plans, including the Strategic Air Command's preference for centralized, massive attack options—not something any civilian leader seemed to have the time or inclination to request until many decades later. As has been noted by other nuclear scholars, the targeting options embodied in the Single Integrated Operational Plan bore little resemblance to the stated requirements of civilian policy innovations. An enduring disconnect between so-called "declaratory" and "operational" nuclear doctrine is even formally recognized in US strategic planning, granting wide latitude to policy makers to manage the politics of declaratory strategy while allowing military planners to handle the hardcore operational details of targeting and war execution behind the scenes.

Gavin's revelation that the strategy of flexible response proved far more rhetorical than operational in character will not come as news to nuke wonks, but his nuanced assessment of this and several other historical episodes of nuclear decision making offer excellent insights into the political calculations and competing geopolitical priorities that policy makers pursued under the guise of managing nuclear strategy. Gavin offers example after example of the complicated political, economic, and context-dependent considerations that were brought to bear in the decisions reached by policy makers when setting nuclear priorities, including the many multilateral accommodations required to assuage friends and allies that ultimately subordinated US strategic objectives to more immediate and expedient interests.

Gavin is determined to debunk what he considers to be myths about the role nuclear weapons played in US Cold War statecraft. Mythological thinking, in his view, has so infused the conventional wisdom about nuclear weapons that it prevents us from understanding modern nuclear challenges—to say nothing of making prudent decisions to resolve them. His case studies of US nuclear policy making (including, *inter alia*, the 1948 Berlin crisis, the evolution of nonproliferation policy, and concepts of nuclear parity and extended deterrence under the Richard Nixon administration) raise many questions about the “received wisdom,” but focus in particular on a common fallacy espoused by strategists that nuclear strategy derives from rational military calculations that are somehow immune from politics. The conclusion Gavin reaches again and again is that concerns about the details of nuclear strategy are at best a secondary consideration among senior decision makers, and that the choices made about nuclear priorities at any given time cannot possibly be understood in isolation from their broader political contexts.

Though he is tactful, Gavin suggests that the masters of strategic thought (including many international relations, or IR, professors who have been teaching successive generations of young scholars) are not just badly misinformed, but are a real hindrance. Gavin wants his IR colleagues to respectfully understand that their arcane preoccupations are more than a harmless or eccentric indulgence. By dominating the field and the conversation, these scholars are impeding enlightened discourse and the quest for a safer world.

Gavin's indictment of deterrence theorists may not persuade his target audience but many will welcome his effort to emphasize the importance of empirical research in a field that seems so often hobbled by abstract (and obscure) methodological debates, and which its own practitioners say has fallen prey to “a cult of irrelevance.”<sup>3</sup> Everyone can agree that the study and formulation of nuclear strategy is not like art history or ornithology, for example, both important fields of detailed inquiry but not subjects that involve the risk of global annihilation. The threats posed by the spread of nuclear weapons deserve to command the full attention of America's best and brightest, an objective that cannot be well served if its leading intellectuals are getting embalmed in parochial disputes.

Decision makers will also need to rid themselves of their attachment to the obfuscating and anachronistic baggage of Cold War thinking. The nuclear policy field is inundated with vague and unexamined concepts inherited from the past, notions like “bipolarity” or “tipping points.” A distrust (or ignorance) of historical analysis has

encouraged reliance on these kinds of simplistic generalizations about the world, including efforts to quantify state behavior and predict threats—as if measuring megatonnage could accurately predict complex events. Caricatures of the international system inherited from the Cold War continue to influence (Gavin says distort) how policy makers perceive modern challenges. The popular notions that the Cold War consisted of a “bipolar” system in which the two rival superpower arsenals upheld a stable and predictable international order, for example, or that nuclear proliferation will invariably be subject to a domino effect that is bound to spark dozens of new nuclear states are both obviously unfounded but remain very much part of the current vernacular.

For Gavin, allowing these kinds of misconceptions to remain unchallenged will only fuel the giant intellectual muddle that plagues current and contentious nuclear policy debates about issues such as the desirability of a world without nuclear weapons, and prevents us from making smart choices. A closer examination of history, he submits, can go a long way to redressing ideological schisms and widespread ignorance.

The revelation that US nuclear strategy does not necessarily flow from a disciplined military calculus may seem unremarkable to anyone who has worked in the field and witnessed this sausage factory up close. It may also not seem that provocative or interesting if you are not familiar with the intellectual conventions of security studies. But the message that Gavin conveys is methodologically and substantively important. *Nuclear Statecraft* launches a principled, passionate assault on the flawed logic and entrenched orthodoxy of a very powerful school of thought. More than that, it is a call to action, urging experts and policy makers from across disciplines to transcend their limitations and work harder to develop empirically grounded—and useful—policy insights. Gavin doesn’t just want to set the record straight; he wants us to recognize that there are real threats on the horizon that we need to take far more seriously.

Gavin’s work makes an eloquent case for “historical sensitivity” as a way to help us understand how we arrived at where we are and, as he explains, to infuse a bit of humility into a debate that is not particularly well known for its civil discourse. The nuclear debate has always incited polarization about core convictions and a particular kind of intellectual arrogance among segments of the nuclear intelligentsia that can make consensus elusive. Gavin offers a quote from Sir Michael Howard that we might all take to heart:

People, often with masterful intelligence, trained usually in law or economics or perhaps political science...have led their governments into disastrous calculations because they have no awareness whatever of the historical background, the cultural universe of foreign societies with which they have to deal. It is an awareness for which no amount of strategic or economic analysis, no techniques of crisis management or conflict resolution...can provide a substitute.

If US nuclear policy is really based on myths, as Gavin suggests, we are left to puzzle over which of these most distort US perceptions of pending challenges. How do we go about extracting the real meaning of our nuclear legacy from the many false narratives that have arisen? What, in other words, is reality when it comes to nuclear weapons and how can we answer this question when the whole architecture of strategic thought—from the meaning of deterrence to the episodic aspirations for disarmament—rests on disputes

over hypotheticals and formal fiction? Gavin offers us a disciplined way to discuss these extremely difficult conceptual puzzles. We should thank him for doing so.

## NOTES

1. As of this writing, this book was already extensively reviewed by other historians as part of a roundtable review convened by H-Diplo, <[www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XV-1.pdf](http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XV-1.pdf)>. One hopes it receives attention from an even wider audience.
2. Jill Lepore, "Tea and Sympathy: Who Owns the American Revolution?," *New Yorker*, May 3, 2010, quoted in Gavin, p. 2.
3. Stephen M. Walt, "The cult of irrelevance," *Foreign Policy* blog post, April 15, 2009, <[http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/15/the\\_cult\\_of\\_irrelevance](http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/15/the_cult_of_irrelevance)>.