

12-4-1998

# Nuclear Psychologies: On the First Use of Nuclear Weapons and Reductions in Nuclear Arsenals

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## Recommended Citation

Editor (1998) "Nuclear Psychologies: On the First Use of Nuclear Weapons and Reductions in Nuclear Arsenals," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 22 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol5/iss22/3>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Nuclear Psychologies: On the First Use of Nuclear Weapons and Reductions in Nuclear Arsenals

Author: Editor

Volume: 5

Issue: 22

Date: 1998-12-04

Keywords: Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons, Policy, War

**Abstract.** This article describes how the psychological rationales for, and the consequences of, the same nuclear policies can be constructed very differently by different groups of nuclear policymakers. Some possible rationales for these differences are offered.

Should the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) no longer ascribe to a policy of the possible first use of nuclear weapons? Advocates of maintaining the status quo assert that a policy of possible first use was effective during the Cold War in deterring nuclear and conventional war initiated by the Soviet Bloc. They also maintain that in an analogous fashion the policy has been and would be an equally effective deterrent against the employment by adversaries of other weapons of mass destruction--e.g., chemical and biological warfare agents. Finally, they maintain that a policy of possible first use has been an integral part of security strategy since the dawning of the Nuclear Age and should remain so--an appeal to tradition.

Opponents of the status quo assert that a policy of possible first use has already resulted in one nuclear employment by the United States Government (USG) against Japan near the end of World War II--an employment (they maintain) that was not necessary to achieve USG military and political objectives of that war. Opponents also maintain that the absence of nuclear and conventional war between NATO and the Soviet Bloc had little or nothing to do with a policy of possible first use. They support this assertion by noting that the Soviet Bloc had no stated policy of possible first use and positing that this lack of possible first use policy was the salient deterrent factor. Or they note that other factors having nothing to do with a policy of possible first use were responsible for deterrence. In addition, some opponents note that a policy of possible first use must inevitably lower the threshold of actual nuclear weapons use during times of international crisis much as handguns are reputed to do in times of domestic crisis. Moreover, the very notion of possible first use as a deterrent is dependent on a so-called logical and rational calculus that may not be shared by real and potential adversaries. Finally, some opponents note that the absence of nuclear or conventional war between nuclear adversaries during the Cold War belies the many surrogate struggles that did occur--i.e., the Cold War was not so cold--or was not due to anything. This last conclusion suggests that the very human propensity to attribute meaning might be founded on the most precarious of philosophical premises.

Another nuclear policy controversy involves the push by some high-level military and civilian leaders at the Pentagon to unilaterally reduce nuclear arms below the levels mandated by the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START 1). This push seems to be founded on the notion that the USG has already agreed to reduce nuclear arms to the levels of START 2, and it is not cost-effective to maintain and rebuild assets that will be destroyed under this treaty as soon as Russia has ratified it--and so far it has been a 5-year wait.

Supporters of this push seem to agree that reductions can occur without harming the alleged deterrent capabilities of the USG arsenal. They also assert that unilateral reductions could finally induce the Russian Parliament to ratify START 2.

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Opponents of the push seem to agree that reductions cannot occur without harming the alleged deterrent capabilities of the USG arsenal. They also assert that prohibiting reductions increases pressure on the Russian Parliament to finally sign START 2.

Both the possible first use policy and unilateral reduction policy are characterized by competing psychologies that render antithetical rationales and consequences to the same actual and hypothesized events. These psychologies may suggest much more about their advocates than about the policies to which they are being applied. First, policy advocates may be too insensitive to the non-rational that has been so well-delineated by policy theorists heavily influenced by Harold Lasswell. Second, policy advocates may be too quick to claim the import of variants of bounded rationality that are so well-delineated by management theorists heavily influenced by Herbert Simon. The replacement of policy with management may have subverted the deep analysis necessary to construct a nuclear psychology supporting life against death. (See Churcher, J., & Lieven, E.V. (1983). Images of nuclear war and the public in British civil defense planning documents. *Journal of Social Issues*, 39, 117-132; Cohen, R. (November 24, 1998). Germans irk U.S., urging NATO shift atom policy. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Frank, J. (1983). Nuclear arms and prenuclear leaders: Sociopsychological aspects of the nuclear arms race. *Political Psychology*, 4, 393-408; Kull, S. (1983). Nuclear arms and the desire for world destruction. *Political Psychology*, 4, 563-591; Lasswell, H. (1930). *Psychopathology and politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Myers, S.L. (November 23, 1998). Pentagon ready to shrink arsenal of nuclear bombs. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Shenon, P. (November 25, 1998). Germany drops call to NATO on nuclear use. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Simon, H. (1960). *The new science of management decision*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall; Tyler, T.R., & McGraw, K.M. (1983). The threat of nuclear war: Risk interpretation and behavioral response. *Journal of Social Issues*, 39, 25-40; Wessells, M.G. (1995). Social psychological determinants of nuclear proliferation: A dual process analysis. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 1, 49-65.) (Keywords: Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons, Policy, War.)