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Bluffing and Calling the Bluff: The Intent to Employ Nuclear Weapons

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Abstract. This article describes the psychology of bluffing as it pertains to threatening employment of nuclear weapons.

With some apparent exceptions, the United States (US) has promulgated a public and private policy that eschews use of nuclear weapons to deter an adversary's non-nuclear threat. One apparent exception in the first years of the Cold War seems to have involved US threats of nuclear weapons employment against the Soviet Union if the latter sought to invade Iran. Another apparent exception later in the Cold War seems to have involved US threats against the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact--if the latter two entities appeared about to militarily overrun Western Europe. In the death throes of the Cold War (to some purists, immediately after), US President George Bush may have sent Iraqi President Saddam Hussein a letter threatening to use all means available to retaliate against Iraqi use of chemical and biological weapons. According to former US Secretary of State, James Baker III as reported in *The New York Times*, the US would not have actually used nuclear weapons but the letter was intended to convince the Iraqi president otherwise.

To some national security and foreign policy experts, the surfacing of the US bluff towards the Iraqis is virtually a "smoking gun" that ensures that future bluffs about nuclear weapons employment will not be believed. Yet such certitude about the loss of bluffing as a tool of conflict management discounts bluffing's psychology. Quite simply, policies can and do change with time. Specifically, this change covers policies towards nuclear weapons employment and towards the uses of bluffing. Moreover, political actors can and do act in contravention of policy. In addition, acts occur contrary to policy through luck (or lack of it), fate, accident, or the unexplained. As well, even documented cases of bluff cannot do away with concerns generated through recognizing previous US policy exceptions to constraints on nuclear weapons employment, imagining the consequences if threat is not bluff, and remembering that the US has actually employed nuclear weapons against an adversary.

Through the psychology of bluffing, one can appreciate that like the psychology of terrorism it has, is, and will be effective based on the possible and the ambiguous. Of this one can be certain. (See Miller, J. (February 5, 2000). Nuclear anxieties in a new world. *The New York Times*, p. A15; Rapee, R.M. (1997). Perceived threat and perceived control as predictors of the degree of fear in physical and social situations. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 11, 455-461; Rapoport, A., et al. (1997). Randomization and adaptive learning in a simplified poker game. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 69, 31-49; Sulfaro, V.A., & Crislip, M.N. (1997). How Americans perceive foreign policy threats: A magnitude scaling analysis. *Political Psychology*, 18, 103-126.)(Keywords: Nuclear Weapons Policy, Threat.)