

The Nuclear Taboo

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Nothing that is vast enters into the life of mortals without a curse.

—Sophocles, *Antigone*

More than a half century has passed since the first and last use of nuclear weapons in warfare. Thomas C. Schelling suggests that over the years a convention has arisen, one which provides strong evidence that nuclear weapons are under a "curse." Schelling is hopeful that, because the nuclear arsenal is perceived as unique—in some way different from *conventional* weapons—a "nuclear taboo" has taken root over the decades and can remain secure.

It is remarkable that nuclear weapons have not been used for so long. But is it true that there exists a *taboo* on their use? Taboos may be as old as humankind itself, but some taboos are less enduring than others. It is not clear that avoidance of the use of nuclear weapons has risen to the level of a taboo or that refraining from nuclear warfare can withstand the challenges of the coming decades.

Local Taboos versus Universal Taboos

One reason to doubt the existence of a "nuclear taboo" is that it is unclear how strong the prohibition against the use of nuclear weapons actually is. Most taboos reflect local values and serve practical ends. Forbidden forms of dress or kinds of food, for example, tend to be specific to a particular place or culture. Often one can find sensible practical reasons for the prohibitions these taboos impose—to reduce the possibility of food poisoning, or to discriminate easily between sexes, for instance. Such local, culturally particular taboos also help identify and knit together the social fabric of a kin, clan, or country, distinguishing one group from all others and providing identity through exclusion.

Local taboos tend to erode over time until they become quaint vestiges of a culture's social history. The most striking example of the ephemeral nature of this sort of taboo comes from the case of Captain Cook, whose outrageous behavior occasioned importing the Polynesian word *taboo* (or, among variations, *tapu*) into

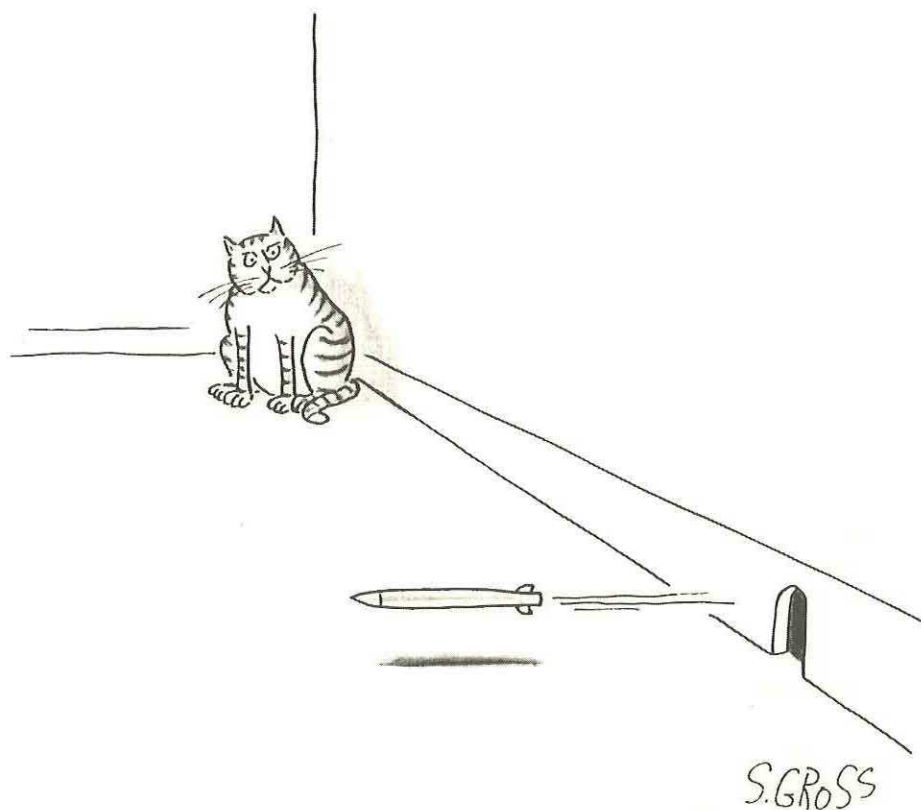
the European languages. According to one account, while in Hawaii Cook and his men dismantled several rails of a temple to use as fuel. This so appalled their hosts that they pronounced Cook, his crew, and their actions "tapu." Although the actions of Cook and his men violated local custom, one could reasonably suppose that they were unaware that their behavior was disrespectful. Further, today we can only speculate about precisely *what* transgression Cook and his men were guilty of (although one could presume that the violation was the desecration of a holy place).

Not all taboos are local, however. Some seem stronger, are applied more uniformly, and are less open to revision. While dress or dietary taboos may be local and mutable, other taboos—those against incest, public elimination of bodily waste, and disrespect or

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neglect of a human corpse, for example—seem more universal and less likely to be abandoned. As with culturally particular taboos, these more generally accepted taboos also tend to have a practical dimension. Prohibitions against incest, public elimination, and thoughtless treatment of corpses all contribute to the physical health of a community. But these more universally accepted taboos knit the fabric not just of a local community, of a kin or clan, but of humanity itself. *Human beings* are not to commit incest, relieve themselves indiscriminately in front of other people (as other animals do among themselves), or ignore or molest a human corpse. Culturally specific taboos contribute to the identity of an individual as a member of a group, but the generalized taboo unites the individual to the entire human family and helps define humanity.

These more universally recognized taboos seem self-evident and depend for their authority on individuals *not thinking in detail* about them. We are discouraged from considering whether a particular taboo is sensi-



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ble, or whether it is outmoded. We certainly are not to imagine whether the forbidden practice may be satisfying or pleasurable. People follow ordinary social proscriptions because they have thought about the inconvenient, embarrassing, or costly consequences of breaking them. But it would seem bizarre for someone to claim that he adheres to an incest taboo, for example, only after deep reflection on the consequences of its violation, or following thoughtful consideration of

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its gratifying aspects. The strength of taboos depends not on considered reflection, but on revulsion. Unlike weaker, local taboos, then, a universal taboo forbids the performance of a particular action and also restricts full consideration of the prohibition generally. If nuclear warfare is under a "curse," as Professor Schelling suggests, then one hopes the prohibition expresses a

strong, more universally recognized taboo rather than the weak, local variety.

The Nuclear Taboo and Its Doubters

The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki represents the first and *last* uses of atomic weapons. Does this provide credible evidence of a prohibition that now rises to the level of a "nuclear taboo?" Obviously, this initial use did not violate any sort of longstanding taboo against atomic weapons and, consequently, one cannot find—nor would one expect to find at the time—widespread condemnation of President Truman or others responsible for those acts. Condemnation has arisen in subsequent decades.

One might say that we have no satisfying answer to the speculation that the prohibition against nuclear warfare has risen to the level of a taboo. Certainly, conventional weapons have improved over this past half century and the means to victory via the disabling of the opposition are far more effective. Paul Nitze, for one, has argued that "smart" conventional weapons can now achieve many of the military purposes that only a nuclear warhead could have achieved twenty

years ago. Further, advances in satellite surveillance technology has made fighting a nuclear war more difficult, since they lessen the element of surprise and the possibility of a timely return strike. Perhaps the increasing effectiveness of conventional weapons has allowed us to avoid the desperate consideration of nuclear use.

If attitudes are better measured by actions not words, then nuclear policy makers have accepted no taboo on nuclear warfare. *In toto*, nuclear policies address the questions of deterrence, how it works and what makes it effective, and how to prepare for its failure. Since the 1950s, American strategists have worried not just about ensuring command and control of their nuclear arsenals, but about ensuring that the U. S. preserves its ability to retaliate after a nuclear attack. The resulting series of policies led President Eisenhower to lament, in his 1961 farewell address, that the U.S. had become a "military-industrial complex." The doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD, which relied not just on restraint but also on perfect control of the nuclear arsenal by the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.) was developed in the

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1960s, as was the first serious effort (undertaken by President Kennedy's Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara) to answer the question "How much is enough?" in building a nuclear arsenal. A decade later Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger explored the notion of "flexible" responses in nuclear warfare, and the administrations of Nixon, Reagan, and Carter developed "selected nuclear operations," which included the possibility of waging regional wars.

Finally, policy makers also exploit the purposes the *possession* of nuclear arms can serve. For example, political science professor Peter Beckman and his colleagues argue that the possession of nuclear arms declares one's status as a player on the world stage. Brandishing nuclear weapons also signals that one's vital interests have been engaged, or that one is resolute and cannot be driven from one's position. Finally, nuclear powers threaten use of their arsenals as bargaining chips and as a means to bolster alliances. As Professor Schelling points out, nuclear policies have been crafted from pragmatic considerations.

Granted, ordinary citizens *do* treat nuclear weapons as taboo, which reflects their emotional revulsion at such indiscriminately destructive power. However, Cold War policy planners adopted the language that described nuclear weapons as "different"—separate

from the "conventional" arsenal—but not because nuclear use was taboo, as the ordinary citizen might accept. Instead, policy makers recognized that, in the scenario they feared most—the crisis of a military confrontation pitting NATO allies against the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact—crossing the threshold to employ nuclear weapons would secure NATO's goals in war, but with catastrophic results. Since in this scenario even the "winner" loses, policy makers concluded that it was better not to step onto the "nuclear escalator" in the first place. Consequently, they rejected the option of first use.

Ordinary citizens may well consider nuclear weapons taboo, their "no use" stance resulting from their emotional revulsion at the prospect of nuclear warfare. But policy makers do not operate on this emotional plane. Perhaps mutual intimidation explains all the effects we now associate with those of a "nuclear taboo." The ban against nuclear warfare is based on a calculated reasoning of the costs and benefits of nuclear warfare, and at present this rational calculus has not tipped in favor of lifting the ban.

The Sanctification of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

If this is true, then it seems hope that a "nuclear taboo" belongs to the class of strong, widely held taboos must be abandoned. The nuclear taboo seems merely a weak prohibition based on pragmatic considerations. But does this mean that *no other* reasons—reasons based on principle rather than on pragmatics—have shaped and help secure the restraint against the use of nuclear weapons?

Professor Schelling asks why we should *not* consider "conventional" the nuclear bomb of no greater power than ordnance in current use. One answer he gives is of the form, "If you have to ask that question you wouldn't understand the answer," suggesting an emotional or intuitive attitude stands apart from—and is as adequate as—any rational, analytic response one would expect from a nuclear strategist.

In this intuitive acceptance of nuclear weapons as "unconventional" or "different," Professor Schelling looks for an ethical justification for the refraining from nuclear warfare, and which would warrant his optimism for a continued ban. Schelling cites Alvin M. Weinberg's 1985 editorial, written on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In 1941, Weinberg had joined the University of Chicago team whose work led to the eventual extraction of the plutonium used in the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki. Weinberg sees a "gradual sanctification of Hiroshima" following the nuclear destruction of the cities. He believes that the passage of forty years has elevated those events to the "status of a profoundly mystical event," and Weinberg

concludes that, "although I cannot prove it . . . the sanctification of Hiroshima is one of the most hopeful developments of the nuclear era."

Weinberg is right that the events at Hiroshima and Nagasaki have taken on greater significance with the passage of time and even have achieved a form of sanctification. Making holy, appreciating the value of something not properly valued before, memorializing—these are among the elements involved in sanctification.

The reason the only use of atomic weapons in warfare must be a sanctified event has everything to do with the idea of a nuclear taboo. Most understand the notion of a nuclear taboo as tantamount to agreement that nuclear warfare is prohibited. But this need not be the case. Not all taboos, whether culturally specific or more universally held—concern actions or objects that are strictly prohibited. Some actions and objects under taboo are permitted expression and use, but only in extraordinary circumstances and with a conscious—perhaps even ritualized or stylized—manner of treatment. South Sea Islanders possessed this additional sense of *taboo*, using the word to describe an object or practice that is "devoted," dedicated to a special purpose. This second understanding of a taboo commonly applies to religious practices and objects. A chalice, scroll, a fragment of black stone are used only in specific, ritualized ways by an initiated group. This small group represents the human community as it takes part in a larger (usually understood as divine) power.

There is good reason to believe that atomic weapons are taboo in this second sense. That is, some taboos reserve actions and objects for devoted use, and reflect generally shared human values. If this is so, then the "curse" of nuclear warfare could be understood as an example of a widely held (possibly universal) taboo.

Reflection on the unprecedented nuclear events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have allowed us to appreciate the overwhelming power loosed over a population and a place. No one has succeeded better than John Hersey in chronicling the destruction of Hiroshima—which began with an ordinary, "cool and pleasant morning," with "no sound of planes" until the "noiseless flash"—and in showing the finality of an act done with so little understanding of its full consequences. Generations' long reflection on the release of such vast power without full regard to the consequences has led to the respectful memorialization of all that perished and a proper awe of the destructive capability of atomic weapons.

Part of the sanctification of the events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki also may express a reaffirmation of values people want to believe all human beings share but which this particular event seemed at the time—at least momentarily—to have tossed aside. Fifty years' reflection and restriction on the use of atomic weapons

allows a measure of optimism because it seems important values have been reaffirmed, and the dedication to them strengthened.

The Nuclear Missile Defense Program

One recent strategic debate supports this notion of a taboo as the "devoted" use of power, but at the same time signals the end of the long-term stability the two Cold War superpowers crafted by their nuclear stand-off. This past July, the United States unsuccessfully tested a device that was to augur the eventual success of a \$60 billion Nuclear Missile Defense Program (NMD). The U.S. argues that the intent of its program—which relies on the coordinated efforts of a network of satellite sensors, radar-tracking devices, and missile interceptors—is to defend the continental U.S. from attack by Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) armed with nuclear warheads. The U.S. has argued that its program is "limited." Its defensive weapon arsenal would number one hundred when the program is completed—according to recent estimates, in the year 2005. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot and National Security Advisor "Sandy" Berger, among other negotiators, have argued strenuously, particularly to other nuclear powers, that the proposed program is not directed at them. Instead, the Clinton Administration insists, the defense program is designed to thwart those "states of concern" (the term "rogue states" is out of fashion) such as Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, which have increased the range of their ICBM missiles.

These reassurances have not soothed the nuclear powers. China suggests that a nuclear missile defense program will necessitate expansion of its nuclear

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weapons program and the possible arming of its ICBMs with multiple nuclear warheads. China also darkly hints that it might be driven to share its nuclear weapons technology with others who ally themselves more closely with Chinese interests. Russia also strongly opposes the U.S. pursuit of a Nuclear Missile Defense program. It argues, moreover, that the U.S. plan would destabilize mutual deterrence and undermine security. The U.S. and Russia have been working toward ratification of a second Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START II), leading to an eventual START III agreement, which would further reduce arms to approximately twenty percent of the number

held at the height of the Cold War buildup. Russia maintains that, were the U.S. to undertake plans for a Missile Defense Program, Russia would abandon START II negotiations. Without it, the possibility of a START III agreement perishes, and a new arms race could begin.

Of course, conversations among the nuclear powers concerning the possibility of a Nuclear Missile Defense system are affected by considerations of self-interest and the search for strategic advantage. Russia and China worry that successful defensive measures devalue their own nuclear arsenals and upset the balance of power established by MAD. The claim that the Nuclear Missile Defense system is "defensive" also has been contested. The U.S. insists that its interceptors would be deployed only in response to a first strike, while opposing powers point out that the program's capabilities easily can be put to offensive use.

One final worry underlies the protests against the U.S. Nuclear Missile Defense program. If it is true that the nuclear powers have accepted the "devoted" status of nuclear arms developed over the decades, then defensive measures such as the Nuclear Missile Defense program would erode the "nuclear taboo." Such initiatives take the attitude that nuclear superpowers, terrorists, and autocrats are to be treated alike. A defensive program designed to respond in the same way to an accidental launch by Russia as it would the launch of a crude device by a madman or an autocrat simply trivializes the awesome gravity of nuclear power. Such a program also seems to signal that the U.S. has resigned itself to a future in which bad actors do not accept the "devoted" nature of nuclear weapons. Finally, the U.S. itself seems willing to relax its efforts to maintain a "nuclear taboo," which was shaped over the decades as superpowers created their tense standoffs.

Conclusion

The weight of fifty years' avoidance of nuclear warfare provides good evidence that a "nuclear taboo" has indeed arisen and taken root. But it is not a taboo that prohibits use of nuclear means because atomic weapons are evil, because the possibility of nuclear warfare is inconceivable, or because the authority that decides on their deployment surely must be mad. The "nuclear taboo" exists today because possessors of atomic weapons—and their general populations—condemn those who would consider their use on any but

the most extreme occasion. Those wary of the United Nuclear Missile Defense Program may believe that it is the latest example of a policy that accepts nuclear devices as part of any nation's "conventional" arsenal and their acquisition the ambition of any madman. Critics also worry that, in initiating a nuclear missile defense program, the U.S. will simply invite all comers—who likely will have little to lose and a reputation to gain—to develop their power and maybe one day take their best shot.

The "nuclear taboo" depends for its longevity on respect, restraint and, most importantly, reflection. These days, there is much to think and talk about—the nuclear programs of states of concern, the tests conducted by India and Pakistan, and how the next president of the U.S. will approach the nuclear missile defense initiative. Much has changed in the world since the time that two nuclear superpowers maintained the tense stability that allowed the decades to pass and optimism in a "nuclear taboo" to grow.

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Thanks go to members of the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy for helpful discussion on this topic and for their suggestions on earlier drafts of the article. Sources: For useful information concerning the nature of taboos, see the seminal work of Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Penguin Books, 1966), articles in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *The Encyclopedia Mythica*, and the *Columbia Encyclopedia*. Concerning nuclear proliferation and the nuclear taboo generally: *The Nuclear Predicament: Nuclear Weapons in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Peter R. Beckman, Paul W. Crumlish, et al. (Prentice Hall, 2000); Peter Gizewski, "Managed Proliferation in South Asia: Implications for Regional Security and the Non-Proliferation Regime," *International Journal*, vol. 54 (Spring 1999); Ben Sanders, "A Short History of Nuclear Non-Proliferation," *Nuclear Law Bulletin*, vol. 62 (December 1998); Nina Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use," *International Organization*, vol. 53 (Summer 1999); Paul Nitze: "Is It Time to Junk Our Nukes?" *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 20 (Summer 1997); John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1946). For timely information concerning the United States Missile Defense Program and reaction to plans of the initiative, I relied on a number of newspaper articles, and on the four-part radio series presented by National Public Radio, aired July 10–14, 2000 (and available in its archives at www.npr.org).

