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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

A Double Standard on Nuclear Weapons?

Hugh Gusterson

MIT Center for International Studies

There has long been a widespread perception among U.S. defense intellectuals, politicians and pundits that, while we can live with the nuclear weapons of the five official nuclear nations for the indefinite future, the proliferation of nuclear weapons to nuclear-threshold states in the Third World, especially the Islamic world, would be enormously dangerous. This orthodoxy is so much a part of our collective common sense that, like all common sense, it can usually be stated as simple fact without fear of contradiction. It is widely found in the media and in learned journals, and it is shared by liberals as well as conservatives.

For example, just as Kenneth Adelman, a senior official in the Reagan administration, said that “the real danger comes from some miserable Third World country which decides to use these weapons either out of desperation or incivility,”² at the same time Hans Bethe—a physicist revered by many for his work on behalf of disarmament over many decades—said, “There have to be nuclear weapons in the hands of more responsible countries to deter such use” by Third World nations.³

Western alarmism about the dangers of nuclear weapons in Third World hands was particularly evident when India and Pakistan set off their salvos of nuclear tests in May 1998. Many analysts had already identified South Asia as the likeliest site in the world for a nuclear war. Soon after India’s tests, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan said on The Charlie Rose Show, “If Pakistan tests the bomb, we are on the edge of nuclear warfare.” Three days later, following Pakistan’s tests, Senator John McCain said that the world was “closer to nuclear war than we have been any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis.”⁴ Speaking

Center for International Studies

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Building E38-200
292 Main Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

T: 617.253.8093
F: 617.253.9330
cis-info@mit.edu

web.mit.edu/cis/
web.mit.edu/cis/acw.html

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Hugh Gusterson is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Science and Technology Studies at MIT. His most recent book is *People of the Bomb: Portraits of America's Nuclear Complex* (UC Press, 1996).

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to Reuters, David Albright, president of the liberal Institute for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., opined, "I don't think they [India and Pakistan] are up to the task of preventing a conventional conflict from accidentally slipping into a nuclear exchange."⁵

Nuclear Orientalism

According to the anthropological literature on risk, shared fears often reveal as much about the identities and solidarities of the fearful as about the actual dangers that are feared. The immoderate reactions in the West to the nuclear tests conducted in 1998 by India and Pakistan, and to Iraq's nuclear weapons program earlier, are examples of an entrenched discourse on nuclear proliferation that has played an important role in structuring the Third World, and our relation to it, in the Western imagination. This discourse, dividing the world into nations that can be trusted with nuclear weapons and those that cannot, dates back, at least, to the Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1970.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty embodied a bargain between the five countries that had nuclear weapons in 1970 and those countries that did not. According to the bargain, the five official nuclear states (the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France, and China) promised to assist other signatories to the treaty in acquiring nuclear energy technology as long as they did not use that technology to produce nuclear weapons, submitting to international inspections when necessary to prove their compliance. Further, in Article 6 of the treaty, the five nuclear powers agreed to pursue "negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament." One hundred eighty-seven countries have signed the treaty. Saying it enshrines a system of global 'nuclear apartheid,' Israel, India, and Pakistan have refused. North Korea has withdrawn from the treaty.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty has become the legal anchor for a global nuclear regime that is increasingly legitimated in Western public discourse in racialized terms. In view of recent developments in global politics—the collapse of the Soviet Union, two wars against Iraq, and international crises over the nuclear weapons programs of North Korea and Iran—the importance of this discourse in organizing Western geopolitical understandings is only growing. It has become an increasingly important way of legitimating U.S. military programs in the post-cold war world, where "rogue states" have supplanted the old evil empire in the imaginations of American war planners.

The dominant discourse that stabilizes this system of nuclear apartheid in Western ideology was labeled "Orientalism" (albeit in a different context) by Edward Said. According to Said, orientalist discourse constructs the world in terms of a series of binary oppositions that produce the Orient as the mirror image of the West: where "we" are rational and disciplined, "they" are impulsive and emotional; where "we" are modern and flexible, "they" are slaves to ancient passions and routines; where "we" are honest and compassionate, "they" are treacherous and uncultivated.⁶ While the blatantly racist orientalism of the high colonial period has softened, more subtle orientalist ideologies endure in contemporary politics and are applicable here.

Four Common Arguments Against Proliferation

Following are four arguments about nuclear proliferation that are integral to this orientalist common sense. I contend that all four are based on an assumption that "we" can be trusted with nuclear weapons while "they" cannot—an assumption that cannot be sustained when the evidence from nuclear history is examined more closely.

1. *Third World Countries Are Too Poor to Afford Nuclear Weapons*

It is often said that it is inappropriate for Third World countries to squander money on nuclear weapons when they have such pressing problems of poverty, hunger, and homelessness on which the money might more appropriately be spent. For example, when India conducted its "peaceful nuclear explosion" on May 18, 1974, one Washington official, condemning India for having the wrong priorities, was quoted as saying, "I don't see how this is going to grow more rice."⁷ Similar comments were made after the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests of 1998. Mary McGrory, for example, wrote in her column in the *Washington Post* that "two large, poor countries in desperate need of schools, hospitals, and education are strewing billions of dollars for nuclear development."⁸

Such statements are not necessarily wrong, but read with a critical eye, they have a recursive effect that potentially undermines the rationale for military programs in the West as well. First, one can interrogate denunciations of profligate military spending in the Third World by pointing out that Western countries, despite their own extravagant levels of military spending, have by no means solved their own social and economic problems. The United States, for example, which at the time of India's nuclear tests in the mid-1990s allotted 4 percent of its GNP to military spending against India's 2.8 percent,⁹ has for almost all of the past twenty-five years financed its military budget by accumulating debt. Meanwhile, in the United States, advocates for the homeless estimate that two million Americans have nowhere to live, and another thirty-six million Americans live below the official poverty line.¹⁰

Second, American taxpayers have consistently been told that nuclear weapons are a bargain compared with the cost of conventional weapons. They supposedly give "more bang for the buck." If this is true for "us," then surely it is also true for "them": if a developing nation has security concerns, then a nuclear weapon ought to be the cheapest way to take care of them. Third, critics of U.S. military spending have been told for years that military spending stimulates economic development and produces such beneficial economic spin-offs that it almost pays for itself. If military Keynesianism works for "us," it is hard to see why it should not also work for "them."

2. Deterrence Will Be Unstable in the Third World

During the cold war, Americans were told that nuclear deterrence prevented the smoldering enmity between the superpowers from bursting into the full flame of war, saving millions of lives by making conventional war too dangerous. When the practice of deterrence was challenged by the antinuclear movement of the 1980s, Pentagon officials and defense intellectuals warned that nuclear disarmament would just make the world safe for conventional war. Surely, then, we should want countries such as Pakistan, India, Iraq, Iran and Israel also to enjoy the stabilizing benefits of nuclear weapons.

Western security specialists and media pundits have argued, against this, that deterrence as practiced by the superpowers during the cold war may not work in Third World settings. One of the main reasons given is that Third World adversaries tend to share common borders. As one commentator put it: "While it would have taken more than a half-hour for a Soviet-based nuclear missile to reach the United States—time at least for America to double-check its computer screen or use the hotline—the striking distance between India and Pakistan is no more than five minutes."¹¹ However, this formulation focuses only on the difference in missile flight times while ignoring the fact that the missiles deployed by the two superpowers were, by the end of the cold war, MIRVED and extraordinarily accurate. (MIRVed missiles—equipped with Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicles—carry several warheads, each capable of striking a different target). Some arms controllers worried

in the 1980s that the two superpowers were entering a destabilizing "use-it-or-lose-it" situation where each would have to launch its missiles immediately if it believed itself under attack. Thus, once one adds accuracy and MIRVing to the strategic equation, the putative contrast between stable deterrence in the West and unstable deterrence in South Asia looks upside down, even if we were to grant the difference in flight times between the cold war superpowers and between the main adversaries in South Asia.

But there is no reason to grant the alleged difference in flight times. Michael Lev says that it would have taken "more than half an hour" for American and Russian missiles to reach their targets during the cold war. While this was true for land-based ICBMs, it was not true for the submarine-launched missiles the superpowers could move in against each other's coasts. Nor was it true of the American Jupiter missiles stationed in Turkey, right up against the Soviet border, in the early 1960s. Nor was it true of the Pershing IIs deployed in Germany in the 1980s. When the antinuclear movement claimed that it was destabilizing to move the Pershings to within less than ten minutes' flight time of Moscow, the U.S. Government insisted that anything that strengthened NATO's attack capability strengthened nuclear deterrence. Here again we see a double standard in the arguments made to legitimate "our" nuclear weapons.

"If one reviews the U.S. nuclear safety record, the comforting dichotomy between a high-tech, safe 'us' and low-tech, unsafe 'them' begins to look distinctly dubious."

3. Third World Governments Lack the Technical Maturity to Handle Nuclear Weapons

The third argument against horizontal proliferation is that Third World nations may lack the technical maturity to be trusted with nuclear weapons. The *Washington Post* quotes an unnamed Western diplomat stationed in Pakistan, who, worrying that India and Pakistan lack the technology to detect an incoming attack on their weapons, said the United States has "expensive space-based surveillance that could pick up the launches, but Pakistan and India have no warning systems. I don't know what their doctrine will be. Launch when the wind blows?"¹²

If one reviews the U.S. nuclear safety record, the comforting dichotomy between a high-tech, safe "us" and low-tech, unsafe "them" begins to look distinctly dubious. First, the United States has not always made use of the safety technologies at its disposal. Over the protests of some weapons designers, for example, the navy decided not to incorporate state-of-the-art safety technologies into one of its newest weapons, the Trident II, and it ignored the recommendation of an expert panel that the Trident II be redesigned to make it safer.¹³ Second, if one looks more closely at U.S. early-warning systems, one finds that they create risks of their own. For example, it was the high technology Aegis radar system, misread by a navy operator, that was directly responsible for the tragically mistaken U.S. decision to shoot down an Iranian commercial jetliner on July 3, 1988. Similarly, and potentially more seriously, in 1979, the U.S. military began prepara-

tions for nuclear war after a mistakenly inserted training tape led personnel in the strategic command apparatus to think a Soviet attack was underway. American interceptor planes were scrambled and air traffic controllers were told to bring down commercial planes before U.S. military commanders detected the error.

As for the American safety record in transporting and handling nuclear weapons, there is more cause for relief than for complacency. There have, for example, been at least twenty-four occasions when American aircraft have accidentally released nuclear weapons and at least eight incidents where U.S. nuclear weapons were involved in plane crashes or fires.¹⁴

In other words, the U.S. nuclear arsenal has its own safety problems related to its dependence on highly computerized warning and detection systems, the cold war practice of patrolling oceans and skies with live nuclear weapons, and large stockpile size. Even where U.S. scientists have developed special safety technologies, they have not always been used. The presumption that Third World countries lack the technical competence to be trusted with nuclear weapons fits our stereotypes about those countries' backwardness, but it distracts us from asking whether we ourselves have the technical infallibility the weapons ideally require.

The discourse on proliferation assumes that the superpowers' massive arsenals of highly accurate, MIRVed missiles deployed on hair-trigger alert were stable and that the small, elemental arsenals of new nuclear nations would be unstable, but one could quite plausibly argue the reverse. This leaves one wondering whether prejudices about the weapons' owners are not masquerading as technical concerns about weapons configurations and safety protocols.

4. Third World Regimes Lack the Political Maturity to Be Trusted with Nuclear Weapons

The fourth argument concerns the supposed political instability or irrationality of Third World countries. Security specialists and media pundits worry that Third World dictators free from democratic constraints are more likely to develop and use nuclear weapons, that military officers in such countries will be more likely to take possession of the weapons or use them on their own initiative, or that Third World countries are more vulnerable to the kinds of ancient hatred and religious fanaticism that could lead to the use of nuclear weapons. These concerns bring us to the heart of orientalist ideology.

In the words of Richard Perle, a prominent neoconservative, nuclear weapons are "one thing in the hands of governments animated by rational policies to protect national interests and a normal regard for human life. They are quite another in the hands of a brutal megalomaniac like Saddam who wouldn't blink at the mass destruction of his enemies."¹⁵ Similarly, but on the other end of the political spectrum, Senator Edward Kennedy warned that "nuclear weapons in the arsenals of unstable Third World regimes are a clear and present danger to all humanity. ... Dictators threatened with attack along their borders or revolutions from within may not pause before pressing the button. The scenarios are terrifying."¹⁶

The presumed contrast between the West, where leaders are disciplined by democracy, and the Third World, where they are not, does not hold up so well under examination. The governments of Britain, France, and Israel, not to mention the United States, all made their initial decisions to acquire nuclear weapons without any public debate or knowledge. Only in India was the question of whether or not to cross the nuclear threshold an election issue. Pakistan also had a period of public debate before conducting its first nuclear test.

And how safe are the official nuclear powers from coups d'état, renegade officers, or reckless leaders? France came perilously close to revolution as recently as 1968, and in 1961 a group of renegade French military officers took control of a nuclear weapon at France's nuclear test site in the Sahara desert.¹⁷ Britain, struggling to repress IRA bombing campaigns, has been engaged in low-level civil war for most of the time it has possessed nuclear weapons. The United States has, since it acquired nuclear weapons, seen Presidents John F. Kennedy assassinated, Gerald Ford threatened with an empty gun by a member of the Manson family, and Ronald Reagan wounded by a gunman.

There also have been problems with U.S. command and control. During the Cuban Missile Crisis a group of military officers at Malmstrom Air Force Base jerry-rigged their missiles so that they could launch their nuclear weapons independently of the national command and control structure and outside of normal procedures requiring multiple officers to enable a launch.¹⁸ During the 1950s some senior U.S. military leaders drew up plans for and advocated preemptive nuclear attacks on the Soviet Union. One of these, Curtis LeMay, was by 1954 provoking the Soviets by sending U.S. reconnaissance flights over the USSR—technically an act of war—despite President Truman's orders not to do so.

A New Discourse

I do not want to minimize the potential dangers of nuclear proliferation. But these dangers should not be represented in ways that obscure both the dangers inherent in the continued maintenance of our own nuclear arsenals and the fact that our own actions are often a source of the instabilities we so fear in Third World nations.

Where does this leave us? There are three different discursive positions on proliferation, each pointing in the direction of a very different global security regime, that do not embody the "orientalist" double standard. The first, a position of *exclusion*, is based pragmatically in the conventions of realpolitik. It involves the candid declaration that, while nuclear weapons may be no more dangerous in the hands of Muslims or Hindus than in those of Christians, they are a prerogative of power, and the powerful have no intention of allowing the powerless to acquire them. This is a position that, in its rejection of easy racism and phony moralism, is at least honorable in its frankness.

The second position, *participation*, is based on Kenneth Waltz's argument that all countries benefit from acquiring nuclear weapons.¹⁹ This position may have more appeal in certain parts of the Third World than in the West. It is the position of India, Israel,

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Amy Tarr (atarr@mit.edu, 617.253.1965).

Center for International Studies

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Building E38-200
292 Main Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

T: 617.253.8093
F: 617.253.9330
cis-info@mit.edu

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and Pakistan, for example, which have, like the older nuclear nations, sought to maximize their power and freedom by acquiring a nuclear capability. These countries pursued nuclear weapons in search of greater security vis-à-vis regional rivals and out of a desire to shift the balance of power in their client relationships with the superpowers.

The third position, *renunciation*, breaks down the distinctions we have constructed between “us” and “them” and asks whether nuclear weapons are safe in anyone’s hands. “What-must-on-no-account-be-known,” says Salman Rushdie, is the “impossible verity that savagery could be concealed beneath decency’s well-pressed shirt.” Our orientalist discourse on nuclear proliferation is one of our ways not to know this. This position has been nicely articulated by the late George Kennan:

I see the danger not in the number or quality of the weapons or in the intentions of those who hold them but in the very existence of weapons of this nature, regardless of whose hands they are in. ... I see no solution to the problem other than the complete elimination of these and all other weapons of mass destruction from national arsenals; and the sooner we move toward that solution, and the greater courage we show in doing so, the safer we will be.²⁰

article footnotes

1 This article is adapted from Hugh Gusterson, “Nuclear Weapons and the Other in the Western Imagination,” *Cultural Anthropology* 14(1):111-143.

2 Adelman made this comment in a speech to the San Francisco Commonwealth Club on June 9, 1988.

3 Bethe was quoted by Larry Bernard, “Atomic Bomb Saved Lives in WWII, Bethe Says,” *Cornell Chronicle*, April 14, 1994. Quoted in Jo Ann Shroyer, *Secret Mesa: Inside the Los Alamos National Laboratory*. New York: Wiley and Sons, 1998, p. 24.

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