The Nuclear Taboo

BY THOMAS C. SCHELLING

Thomas C. Schelling is Co-Recipient of the 2005 Nobel Prize in Economics. He is Distinguished University Professor at the University of Maryland’s School of Public Policy. He may be contacted at tschelli@umd.edu
The most spectacular event of the past half century is one that did not occur. We have enjoyed 60 years without nuclear weapons exploded in anger.

What a stunning achievement—or, if not achievement, what stunning good fortune. In 1960, the British novelist C. P. Snow said on the front page of *The New Y ork Times* that unless the nuclear powers drastically reduced their armaments, thermonuclear warfare within the decade was a “mathematical certainty.” Nobody appeared to think of Snow’s statement as extravagant.

We now have that “mathematical certainty” compounded more than four times, and no nuclear war. Can we make it through another half-a-dozen decades?

The first time that nuclear weapons might have been used after World War II was in 1950. U.S. and South Korean forces had retreated to a perimeter at the southern town of Pusan, and it was not clear that they could either hold out or evacuate. The question of nuclear defense arose, and the British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, flew to Washington with the announced purpose of persuading President Truman not to let nuclear weapons be used. The successful landing at Inchon removed the danger, and we cannot know what might have happened if Inchon had failed. Nuclear weapons again went unused upon the disastrous assault by Chinese troops in the north of Korea.

Succeeding Truman, President Eisenhower saw NATO facing a hugely superior military adversary, and elevated nuclear weapons from last resort to first resort. Shortly after inauguration, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles said, in the National Security Council, “Somehow or other we must manage to remove the taboo from the use of these weapons.” A few weeks later, the President approved the following statement: “In the event of hostilities, the United States will consider nuclear weapons to be as available for use as other munitions.” Six months later, the U.S. position was that nuclear weapons “must now be treated as in fact having become conventional.”

The Johnson administration shows a striking contrast. In September 1964, Johnson said publicly, “Make no mistake, there is no such thing as a conventional nuclear weapon. For 19 peril-filled years no nation has loosed the atom against another. To do so now is a political decision of the highest order.”

I interpret this as Johnson’s belief that 19 years without nuclear war was an investment to be treasured.

Nixon did not use nuclear weapons in Vietnam. Golda Meir, Israeli prime minister in 1973, did not authorize nuclear weapons against Egyptian armies that had successfully crossed the Suez Canal and were perfect targets for nuclear attack, there being no civilians in the vicinity.

Margaret Thatcher did not consider nuclear weapons against naval vessels in defending the Falkland Islands against Argentina.

And most astonishingly, the Soviet Union fought a long, bloody, and disastrous war in Afghanistan without recourse to nuclear weapons.

The prospect of nuclear weapon development in Iran and among radical terrorist organizations poses a grave threat to an over 60-year-old taboo.

The tradition may survive, however, as rogue nations and groups begin to find deterrent power in their new weapons.
Even the Russians were awed, apparently, by Johnson’s 19 “peril-filled years,” which by then had stretched to four decades.

Those 19 years have stretched to 60. The taboo that Ike appeared to denigrate, or pretended to denigrate, but that awed President Johnson a decade later, has become a powerful tradition of nearly universal recognition.

An immediate question is whether we can expect Indian and Pakistani leaders to be adequately in awe of the weapons they now both possess. There are two helpful possibilities. One is that they share the inhibition—appreciate the taboo—that I have been discussing. The other is that they will recognize, as the United States and the Soviet Union did, that the prospect of nuclear retaliation makes any initiation of nuclear war nearly unthinkable. The risk is that one or the other may confront the kind of military emergency that invites some limited experiment with the weapons, and there is no history to tell us, or to tell them, what happens next.

The next threats from nuclear weapons may emerge from Iran, North Korea, or possibly some terrorist bodies. Is there any hope that they will have absorbed the nearly universal inhibition against the use of nuclear weapons, or will at least be inhibited by the recognition that the taboo enjoys widespread acclaim?

Part of the answer will depend on whether the United States recognizes that inhibition, and especially on whether the United States recognizes it as an asset to be cherished, enhanced, and protected, or, like John Foster Dulles in Eisenhower’s cabinet, believes that “somehow or other we must manage to remove the taboo from the use of these weapons.”

There is much discussion these days of whether or not “deterrence” has had its day and no longer has much of a role in America’s security. There is no Soviet Union to deter; the Russians are more worried about Chechnya than about the United States; the Chinese seem no more interested in military risks over Taiwan than Khrushchev really was over Berlin; and terrorists can’t be deterred anyway—we don’t know what they value that we might threaten, or who or where they are.

I expect that we may come to a new respect for “deterrence.” If Iran should, despite every diplomatic effort to prevent it, acquire a few nuclear weapons, we may discover again what it is like to be the deterred one, not the one doing the deterring (I consider us—NATO—as having been deterred from intervening in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.). I also consider it crucial that Iran learn to think, if it hasn’t already learned to think, in terms of deterrence.

What else can Iran accomplish, except possibly the destruction of its own system, with a few nucle-
ar warheads? Nuclear warheads should be too pre-
cious to give away or to sell, too precious to “waste”
killing people when they could, held in reserve,
make the United States, or Russia, or any other
nation, hesitant to consider military action. What
nuclear weapons have been used for, effectively, for
60 years has neither been on the battlefield nor on
populations; they have been used for influence.

A potential serious difference between Iran's
nuclear thinking and that of India and Pakistan is
that for many decades, Indians and Pakistanis have
been participating in an international nuclear dia-
logue—at the Aspen Institute, at the Institute for
Strategic Studies in London, at think tanks and con-
fferences around the world. I never saw an Iranian,
let alone a North Korean. Indians and Pakistanis,
of course, read and comprehend English fluently
and have had access to publications in English from
institutes and publishing houses in Sweden, Italy,
Germany and, of course, England and America. I
believe a way must be found to make some Iranian
participation in nuclear discourse legitimate.

What about terrorists? Any organization that
gets enough fissile material to make a bomb will
require at least six, probably more, highly qualified
scientists and numerous machinists and technolo-
gists, working in seclusion away from families and
occupations for at least weeks, maybe months,
with nothing much to talk about except what the
“bomb” might be used for, by whom. They are
likely to feel justified, by their contribution, to
have some claim in deciding the use of the nuclear
device (The British Parliament in 1950 considered
itself, as a partner in the development of the atomic
bomb, qualified to advise Truman on possible use
of the bomb in Korea.).

They will discover, over weeks of arguing, that
the most effective use of the bomb, from a terror-
ist perspective, will be for influence. Possessing a
nuclear device, if they can demonstrate posses-
sion—and I believe they can, if they have it, with-
out detonating it—will give them something of
the status of a nation. Threatening to use it against
military targets, and keeping it intact if the threat
is successful, may appeal to them more than ex-
pending it in a destructive act. Even terrorists may
consider destroying large numbers of people and
structures less satisfying than keeping a major na-
ton at bay.

The United States was slow to learn, but even-
tually learned (in 1961), that nuclear warheads
demand exceptionally secure custody—against
accident, mischief, theft, sabotage, or a “Strange-
love-like” unauthorized attack. There is always the
dilemma: Reward violators of the Nonprolifera-
tion Treaty by offering the technology to keep the
warheads secure? At least we can try to educate the
new members of the nuclear club about what we
didn't appreciate for our first 15 years.

I know of no argument in favor of the Com-
prehensive Test Ban Treaty, which the U.S. Senate
rejected in 1999, more powerful than the potential
of that treaty to enhance the nearly universal revul-
sion against nuclear weapons. The symbolic effect
of some 170 nations ratifying the Treaty, which is
nominally only about testing, should add to the
convention that nuclear weapons are not to be used,
and that any nation that does use nuclear weapons
will be judged the violator of a hard-earned tradi-
tion of non-use. When the Treaty is again before
the Senate, as I hope it will be, this major benefit
should not go unrecognized.

The most critical question about nuclear
weapons for the United States Government under
George W. Bush or under anyone else is whether
the widespread taboo against nuclear weapons, and
its inhibition on their use, is in our favor or against
us. If it is in our interest, as I believe is obvious,
advertising our continued dependence on nuclear
weapons and our need for new nuclear capabili-
ties and probably new nuclear tests—let alone ever
using them against an enemy—has to be weighed
against the corrosive effect on a nearly universal at-
titude that has been cultivated through universal
abstinence for over 60 years.