Review of International Studies (2010), 36, 831–837 © *2010 British International Studies Association*
doi:10.1017/S0260210510001300

The contingent taboo

LYNN EDEN

Lynn Eden is senior research scholar and associate director for research at the Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University. Eden's *Whole World on Fire: Organizations, Knowledge, and Nuclear Weapons Devastation* won the American Sociological Association's 2004 Robert K. Merton award for best book in science, knowledge and technology.

Nina Tannenwald's *The Nuclear Taboo* is an indispensable work for understanding the thought and policies of highest-level US officials on the potential use and non-use of nuclear weapons since the end of World War II. It is well thought through, vigorously argued, sweeping in its historical coverage, and satisfying in its depth – particularly in its generous provision of evidence for a contrary reading.

First, I discuss Tannenwald's handling of the notion of taboo, not the first, but to my knowledge the most in-depth discussion of taboo in international politics. I show how Tannenwald is largely successful in meeting Scott Sagan's alternative argument that what occurred was not an increasingly robust taboo but the development of a prudential tradition of non-use. As I detail below, Tannenwald effectively shows that US political leaders were constrained by more than prudential considerations, although she engages in some argumentative overkill.

Second, I argue that Tannenwald does not give sufficient weight to US nuclear war planning that, in combination with crisis, could have led to catastrophic outcomes. In other words, Tannenwald understates the role of the military and deeply conflicting perspectives within the government, and thus just how contingent was the nuclear taboo.

Taboo

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term *taboo* was brought into English quite recently, in 1777 by Captain James Cook to describe his experience in Tonga in the South Pacific in which 'Not one of [the Tongans] would sit down, or eat a bit of any thing [. . .] On expressing my surprise at this, they were all *taboo*, as they said, which word has a very comprehensive meaning but, in general,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510001300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

signifies that a thing is forbidden [. . .] When any thing is forbidden to be eat, or made use of, they say that it is *taboo*.'[1]

What does Tannenwald say?

Tannenwald tells us that a taboo is a norm, but a particular type of norm, entailing a sense of danger and 'institutional mechanisms to localize the danger'. A taboo is 'also generally associated with [. . .] qualities such as absoluteness, unthinkingness, and taken-for-grantedness. Its authority depends on individuals not thinking in detail about it [. . . It is based] "not on considered reflection, but on revulsion"'. Tannenwald defines the *nuclear* taboo as a 'powerful *de facto* prohibition against the first use of nuclear weapons. [It] is not the behavior (of non-use) but rather *the normative belief about the behavior*'. In other words, the essence of the nuclear taboo is that policymakers *believe* that the first use of nuclear weapons is forbidden. Tannenwald says that the nuclear taboo has some, though not all, of the characteristics of taboos more generally: 'It is a prohibition, it refers to danger, [it] involves expectations of awful [. . .] consequences or sanctions if violated [. . .] It is also a "bright line" norm: once the threshold between use and non-use is crossed, one is immediately in a new world [. . .] Crossing this line has a transformative effect'.[2]

What are some differences between the nuclear taboo and taboos in general? Tannenwald says that under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, for the declared nuclear weapons states, it is *not* forbidden to have tabooed objects (although it *is* forbidden if one is a non-nuclear signatory to the treaty). And the nuclear taboo is 'more fragile than other kinds of taboos', such as paedophilia or incest, which can withstand numerous violations but lose none of their taboo quality.[3] Moreover, although Tannenwald does not explicitly make this point, with nuclear weapons, it is *not* taboo to threaten to break the taboo. In other words, it is not forbidden to threaten that which – in the words of the US Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter of 1983 – a nation may never do.[4]

What is deterrence, or at least deterrence of non-nuclear threats, but the oddly respectable threat to break the taboo and wreak unspeakable damage? We can see the difference between the taboo against nuclear use, where implicit and explicit threat is entailed in the possession of weapons, and other taboos such as cannibalism or paedophilia by imagining the kinds of serious threats made with nuclear weapons transposed to these other spheres: If you don't behave yourself Johnny, I'll eat you for dinner; or priests arguing how they may or might have sexual relationships with their minor charges, so long as they do not in fact. We can make such threats with nuclear weapons. We cannot with other taboos.

So, why should we think that there is a nuclear taboo, or, closer to Tannenwald's argument, why should we think there has been a slow emergence of a nuclear taboo, other than the fact that nuclear weapons have not been used since Nagasaki? Here Tannenwald convincingly shows that US restraint in not using

[1] *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989 edition), online, quoting James Cook, *Voyages to the Pacific* (spelling and grammar somewhat modernised).
[2] Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The US and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 10–11.
[3] Tannenwald, *Nuclear Taboo*, pp. 12, 16.
[4] National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, A Pastoral Letter on War and Peace, 3 May 1983 (Washington, DC: US Catholic Conference, 1983), p. 137.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510001300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nuclear weapons after Nagasaki was not simply a prudential *tradition* of non-use as Scott Sagan argues, that is, the fear of setting a precedent of use.[5] Tannenwald shows that more than a prudential tradition was operating for US presidents and high-level policymakers. She shows very nicely how some US presidents – Eisenhower and Nixon – felt constrained by domestic opinion and world opinion. For example, Eisenhower 'noted the need to pay attention to the sensitivities of the allies', but said that nevertheless he and Dulles agreed that '"somehow or other the taboo which surrounds the use of atomic weapons would have to be destroyed"'. Others – Truman, Kennedy, and high-level officials in the Bush I administration – went beyond a sensitivity to world opinion (and a determination to overcome it); they more thoroughly internalised a sense that nuclear weapons were 'taboo' and 'fundamentally unusable'. Thus, by the presidency of George H. W. Bush, a senior army planner said, '"You lose the moral high ground if you use one of those stupid things"'.[6]

Yet Tannenwald argues too vigorously against the implications of a second point made by Sagan: taboos are not easily broken by violation; traditions are. (Incest and sex with unrelated minors occurs with some frequency, but the taboos remain very strong). Tannenwald accepts Sagan's broad definitional point but disputes that nuclear use would necessarily break the taboo. On the one hand, she provides a nuanced and conditional argument: the nuclear taboo is 'probably more fragile' than other taboos – that is, if broken by nuclear use, it might not survive as a taboo; whether the taboo would survive would depend on the circumstances of use, specifically, was national survival at stake and on the response of the international community. Indeed, Tannenwald says 'extraordinary measures would need to be taken to restore and reconstruct the world'.[7]

On the other hand, Tannenwald reaches too far, claiming that the use of nuclear weapons might actually *strengthen* the nuclear taboo – despite having argued that the nuclear taboo is a 'bright line' norm. How can this be? Tannenwald claims that the first use of nuclear weapons might lead to such revulsion that in response the taboo would be made stronger. But what basis do we have for thinking this outcome more likely than second use in retaliation, which Tannenwald has conveniently defined as *not* part of the nuclear taboo? The example provided by Tannenwald of use that might not break the taboo is the US. If there were first use by the US, she asks 'Was US survival at stake? Were all other options exhausted?'[8] But can we really imagine first (or second) use by the US that would not break the taboo? It strains credulity to think that over a period of sixty years the first use of nuclear weapons by the US has become virtually unthinkable by highest-level policymakers, and yet that such use would not break the nuclear taboo.

Well, perhaps Tannenwald's claim is the result of some over-caffeinated evenings of writing since the thrust of the book – that the norm of non-use has greatly strengthened over time – runs counter. But here I also found myself

[5] Scott D. Sagan, 'Realist Perspectives on Ethical Norms and Weapons of Mass Destruction', in Sohail H. Hashmi and Steven P. Lee (eds), *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 73–95.
[6] Tannenwald, *Nuclear Taboo*, pp. 144–5, 299.
[7] Ibid., pp. 15–6; quotes on p. 16.
[8] Ibid., p. 15.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510001300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

analytically disturbed. The overall tenor of the book is a bit Whiggish: that is, despite disclaimers, it has a whiff of a developmental inevitability of an increasingly robust taboo. Tannenwald does convincingly argue that there has been an increasing acceptance by highest-level policymakers that nuclear weapons should not be used; the problem is that deep bureaucratic differences have been largely read out of her interpretation. And this takes me to my second point.

Nuclear war planning

Tannenwald does not drill down into the subterranean bureaucratic processes that shaped ideas and routines that could in fact have led to nuclear use. Contrary to the deterrence logic of political leaders, the logic of the military is, well, military. If, for civilians, nuclear threat is the primary 'use' for nuclear weapons, for the military, potential nuclear use has its own deep logic: in an emergency situation, to be able to destroy the enemy's capability to attack, that is, to 'limit damage' to the US or its allies, or, stated more bureaucratically, to inflict sufficient damage on enemy forces and command structure, including political leadership, so as to preclude or at least erode the enemy's ability to attack. For example, the first objective military officers were told to achieve in preparing the US nuclear war plan in 1961 'under the several conditions under which hostilities may be initiated' was 'to destroy or neutralize the Sino-Soviet bloc strategic nuclear delivery capability and primary military and government controls'.[9] This is not primarily a logic of dissuasion, though such a destructive capability may dissuade, but a logic of preparation for actual use, whether first, pre-emptive, or launching under attack. And, although over the decades, the articulation of timing has become ever less explicit, it is *not* inherently a logic of no first use.

This military logic is well understood by scholars who write about nuclear war planning, yet often glossed over by those who concentrate on the political level. But should we be confident that because civilians have ultimate authority over military operations, the military logic can be discounted? We should not for several reasons: many consequential aspects of nuclear war planning are not well understood at the political level; in an emergency, political officials would likely give much more weight to military opinion than in peacetime; and in an emergency, pre-planned military processes could likely be set very rapidly in train with formal approval, but no time for reflection, by political authorities.[10]

[9] Scott D. Sagan, 'SIOP-62: The Nuclear War Plan Briefing to President Kennedy', *International Security*, 12 (1987), p. 35.

[10] On the logic of US nuclear war planning in implicit or explicit historical context, see, in addition to Sagan, 'SIOP-62'; David Alan Rosenberg, 'The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960', *International Security*, 7 (1983), pp. 3–71; Theodore A. Postol, 'Targeting', in Ashton B. Carter, John D. Steinbruner, Charles Z. Zraket (eds), *Managing Nuclear Operations* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1987), pp. 373–406; John D. Steinbruner, 'Choices and Trade-offs', in Carter et al., *Managing Nuclear Operations*, pp. 535–54; Marc Trachtenberg, 'A "Wasting Asset": American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949–1954', *International Security*, 13 (1988/1989), pp. 5–49; Scott D. Sagan, *Moving Targets: Nuclear Strategy and National Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 10–57; Janne E. Nolan, *Guardians of the Arsenal: The Politics of Nuclear Strategy* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Bruce G. Blair, *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1993), which

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510001300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A year after Ronald Reagan had discussed abolishing nuclear weapons with Mikhail Gorbachev at Reykjavik, former commander-in-chief of the US Strategic Air Command Russell Dougherty explained the military logic. In an interview, he argued against 'the option to sit there and launch from the ashes. Why would you want to do that? See, if you do that, you're going to say I'm prepared to sit here and ride out and be cremated and then take what I can get out of the ashes.' In the name of deterrence, General Dougherty thought that presidential choices should be constrained so that he would not be tempted to 'ride out' an attack. 'As a decision-maker, you make me an easy way out, and I'll take the easy way every time. And the easy way out is not to fire [. . .] You know, if the president has to sit there and assimilate what those weapons are going to do, with blast and fire on impact, and then if he starts thinking about what the fallout's going to be, what it's going to do to the fields, and nuclear winter, the water's all bad, the crops die. You know, you can get immobilised. But [. . .] you can't do that. That's not our job to do that. Our job is to give him a capability that [slight pause] is relevant to the circumstances of the attack.'[11]

In a statement looking toward a new US presidential administration taking office in January 2009, Janne Nolan and James Holmes laid out the stakes:

> Evidence of the discrepancy between political and military conceptions of nuclear deterrence is particularly evident in the Oval Office [. . .] Most [presidents] lack the expertise about the content of nuclear war plans needed to make a decision of this magnitude [whether and when to use US nuclear forces . . .] Only the top leadership of an institution has much chance of instituting change [but] the need to exercise genuine authority and deflate potentially fatal resistance requires leaders to understand the inner workings of the institutions they hope to reform.[12]

Tannenwald does not explicate the logic of nuclear war fighting, nor explore the assumptions and routines of US military organisations where that logic is deeply entrenched, nor give proper weight to the history that could have occurred but did not. Of course, because a possible history did not occur does not, in and of itself, mean that it could have occurred with any reasonable probability. The burden in arguing for a counter-factual to be taken seriously requires showing that positions were taken or options considered at the time that could have led to an alternate history.

Indeed, against the grain of her argument, and to her credit, Tannenwald does vividly show how the military, and military-thinking civilians, again and again considered nuclear weapons to be useable. She provides especially telling evidence in the chapter on Nixon's waging of war in Vietnam. To take but the most vivid four of the dozen examples in this chapter, Tannenwald recounts how, first, in the

is, however, about more than accident; see esp. chap. 3, pp. 38–58; William Burr, '"To Have the Only Option That of Killing 80 Million People is the Height of Immorality", The Nixon Administration, the SIOP, and the Search for Limited Nuclear Options, 1969–1974', National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 173 (23 November 2005), {http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB173/index.htm}. On consequential but opaque military assumptions, see Lynn Eden, *Whole World on Fire: Organizations, Knowledge, and Nuclear Weapons Devastation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

[11] General Russell E. Dougherty (US) Air Force, retired), interview with Lynn Eden, McLean, Virginia, (30 October 1987).

[12] Janne E. Nolan and James R. Holmes, 'The bureaucracy of deterrence', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 64 (March/April 2008), pp. 40–1.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510001300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mid-1960s, US plans for escalation in Vietnam featured first use of nuclear weapons. The US Pacific Command planned extensively for the possibility of China's entry into the conflict. In such an event, US war plans mandated that 'Strategic Air Command (SAC) would strike selected targets in China using nuclear and/or non-nuclear weapons, as directed by JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff]'. Additionally, although the US never sent nuclear warheads to Vietnam, the military did stockpile them in the region and equipped troops with 'nuclear-capable' artillery. Second, convinced that conventional forces would be insufficient to repel Communist forces, Admiral Harry Felt, commander in chief, Pacific Command, argued 'that it was essential the US commanders be given the freedom to use [tactical nuclear weapons] as the contingency plans assume'.[13] Third, Seymour Deitchman of the Institute for Defense Analysis noted 'recurring talk around the Pentagon', in light of the failures of conventional bombing to disrupt North Vietnam's supply lines from Laos, of 'using tactical nuclear weapons' instead.[14] Fourth, General Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, outlined the potential role for nuclear weapons in defending the American position at Khe Sanh. On 3 February 1968, he wrote to President Johnson, '"Should the situation in the DMZ area change dramatically, we should be prepared to introduce weapons of greater effectiveness against massed forces. Under such circumstances I visualize that either tactical nuclear weapons or chemical agents would be active candidates for employment."' Moreover, despite assuring a Senate sub-committee that Khe Sanh could be defended conventionally, Wheeler also stated that if the situation severely deteriorated, the JCS would ask President Johnson to authorise the use of nuclear weapons.[15]

Nor do such instances cease later. For example, in the first Gulf War: General Norman 'Schwarzkopf may have requested a contingency plan to knock out all Iraqi electronic equipment through exploding a nuclear device high over Iraq and may also have endorsed making a nuclear threat.' Tannenwald *shows* this, but she argues otherwise: 'The seriousness of such propositions and contingency plans is always difficult to assess, however [. . .] The overall picture is thus one of no serious consideration of nuclear options by top leaders.' And note the overly careful wording by White House Chief of Staff John Sununu as recounted by Tannenwald: '"There's been no one, even from the military, that has suggested" resorting to nuclear weapons if Iraq used chemical weapons in the war.' Sununu would lead us to think that the military did not suggest resorting to nuclear weapons – but Tannenwald has shown that the suggestion to use a nuclear device was for another purpose altogether: to destroy the functioning of Iraqi electronic equipment.[16]

In sum, Tannenwald presents a double story: one emphasising the highest-level understandings of the non-usability of nuclear weapons, a history that Tannenwald convincingly shows becomes more robust over time; and another, falling somewhat outside her analytic lens, that there was considerable interest and activity on the part of the military in developing war plans in which nuclear weapons would be used.

[13] Tannenwald, *Nuclear Taboo*, pp. 193–5.
[14] Ibid., p. 219.
[15] Ibid., pp. 222–4.
[16] Ibid, pp. 302–3, 307, 312.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510001300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I would be more convinced of the account of increasing robustness of the nuclear taboo if: a) it were no longer legitimate to implicitly threaten to use nuclear weapons first, as the US government does when it refuses to explicitly take all options off the table and, b) it were not a legitimate and authorised activity of a very important government institution: the US military, whose responsibility it still is to make plans to use nuclear weapons.

All this said, the evidence Tannenwald provides for a somewhat contrary reading of her book is one of its greatest strengths. *The Nuclear Taboo* is a rich and subtle account, vigorously argued, and supported – if also challenged – by a depth and breadth of empirical research that makes this an important and provocative work of Cold War history. It is a very significant achievement.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510001300 Published online by Cambridge University Press