
ARTICLES

Nuclear Weapons and the Vietnam War

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ABSTRACT This article analyzes why US leaders did not use nuclear weapons during the Vietnam War. To date, there has been no systematic study of US decision-making on nuclear weapons during this war. This article offers an initial analysis, focusing on the Johnson and Nixon administrations. Although US leaders did not come close to using nuclear weapons in the conflict, nuclear options received more attention than has previously been appreciated. Johnson's advisers raised the issue of nuclear weapons and threats on several occasions, and Henry Kissinger, Nixon's national security adviser, looked into nuclear options to bring the war to an end. Ultimately, however, both administrations privately rejected such options. The conventional explanation for the non-use of nuclear weapons during the Cold War – deterrence – is insufficient to explain the Vietnam case. This article analyzes the role of military, political and normative considerations in restraining US use of nuclear weapons in the Vietnam War. It argues that while military and political considerations, including escalation concerns, are part of the explanation, a taboo against the use of nuclear weapons played a critical role.

KEY WORDS: nuclear weapons, Vietnam War, nuclear taboo

Why did United States leaders not use nuclear weapons in the Vietnam War? In Vietnam, the United States chose to lose a humiliating and destructive war against a small, nonnuclear adversary while all its nuclear weapons remained on the shelf. During the ten year military commitment to South Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, the United States sustained large losses in men, money and materiel at tremendous political cost. US officials repeatedly declared that the United States could not tolerate the loss of Southeast Asia to Communism, and that the war was vital for American interests, prestige, and security.

As the war escalated, the United States was willing to maintain policies of great destructiveness. Operation 'Rolling Thunder',

begun in March 1965, continued for three years and dropped more bombs on Vietnam than had been dropped on all of Europe in World War II.¹ Starting in 1969, B-52 bomber raids demolished vast areas in North and South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. US forces employed herbicides and defoliants to obliterate croplands and forests, dropped napalm, and eventually mined Haiphong harbor. It is estimated that some 3.6 million Vietnamese, both North and South, were killed in the conflict, and 58,000 Americans.²

Had US leaders wished to use nuclear weapons in Vietnam, there was no lack of warheads nor any shortage of suitable targets. Ports, landing places, supply lines, bridges, railways and airfields could all have been hit decisively with relatively low-yield weapons. As McGeorge Bundy, national security adviser to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, later observed, such targets could have been hit with nuclear weapons 'quite possibly with human losses lower than those of the war that was actually fought'.³

Indeed, following the costs and frustrations of fighting the 'limited' Korean War ten years earlier with conventional weapons only, many thought that the United States should or would employ nuclear weapons in any subsequent similar war. One popular lesson the US Army (along with some political leaders) learned from the Korean stalemate was 'never again a land war in Asia', whose real meaning, administration insiders with access to military planning understood, was 'never again a land war against China *without nuclear weapons*'.⁴ Additionally, doctrines of limited nuclear war developed in the mid-to-late 1950s elaborated the necessity of being willing and able to employ nuclear weapons in a local or regional conflict, and in something less than an all-out nuclear exchange.⁵

Given this context, one of the remarkable features of the Vietnam War is how little serious consideration US leaders gave to nuclear options. Although they made some veiled nuclear threats, top political leaders did not come close to using nuclear weapons.

¹Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (NY: Times 1995), 174.

²James Blight (ed.), 'Missed Opportunities? Revisiting the Decisions of the Vietnam War, 1945–68', Hanoi Conference, 20–23 June 1997. Transcript. Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, April 1998, 9–10.

³McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival* (NY: Random House 1988), 536.

⁴Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (NY: Viking 2002), 63.

⁵See, for example, Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1957); Robert Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (Univ. of Chicago Press 1957); Morton H. Halperin, *Limited War in the Nuclear Age* (NY: Wiley 1963).

To date there has been no systematic study of US decisionmaking on nuclear weapons during the Vietnam War. This article offers an initial analysis. The conventional explanation for the nonuse of nuclear weapons during Cold War crises is deterrence. Yet this factor is insufficient to explain fully the Vietnam case. Bundy later testified, for example, that fear of nuclear retaliation was not a prominent concern during the war. As he recalled, 'Very little, if at all, was [the nonuse of nuclear weapons] for fear that friends of [North] Vietnam with warheads of their own, Russians or Chinese, would use some of them in reply.'⁶

Drawing on primary sources, including recently declassified documents and memoir accounts of most of the major participants, this article argues that while military and political factors, including escalation concerns, help to account for the nonuse of nuclear weapons in Vietnam, a 'taboo' against first use of nuclear weapons played a critical role. American leaders' fear of uncontrolled escalation to war with Russia or China helped to keep the war limited. Such risks were highly disputed throughout the war, however, and military and most key political leaders endorsed policies that involved risking war with China if necessary. Given this situation, political and normative constraints on the use of nuclear weapons became particularly salient. Ultimately, while nuclear weapons might have been militarily useful in the war, it was clear that, by the time the war was fought, they were *politically* unusable, and for some officials, even morally unacceptable. The constraining effects of a nuclear taboo operated powerfully for US leaders during the Vietnam War, both for the majority who shared the taboo and for the minority of those who did not.

In the rest of the article, I analyze the role of military, political and normative factors in constraining the Johnson and Nixon administrations' use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam.

The Johnson Administration and Vietnam

In his magisterial history of nuclear decision-making, published in 1989, McGeorge Bundy portrayed nuclear weapons as largely a non-issue in the Vietnam War.⁷ In reality, they were an ongoing subtext of a war that took place in a Cold War context. The issue of nuclear weapons arose under President Johnson in the context of the decision of 1964–65 to intervene militarily in Vietnam, which culminated in the 'Rolling Thunder' bombing campaign and the first major introduction of US troops in March 1965. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) then regularly pushed for major expansions of the war, including nuclear options. Both

⁶Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 536.

⁷He devoted only eight out of 735 pages to Vietnam. Bundy, *Danger and Survival*.

military and political leaders thought that tactical nuclear weapons would be militarily useful, and even necessary, if the conflict expanded to a war against China, and the Johnson administration received recommendations to use or threaten use of nuclear weapons from reputable individuals. The possible use of tactical nuclear weapons in the war was the occasional subject of public rumor and speculation, and emerged as an issue in the presidential campaigns of 1964 and 1968. The Johnson administration's most extensive discussions of nuclear weapons took place during the 1968 siege of Khe Sanh, but even these did not get far. There were two sustained critiques of the use of tactical nuclear weapons in the conflict: Undersecretary of State George Ball's famous October 1964 memo, and a recently declassified study conducted by physicist Freeman Dyson and three other scientists in 1966. Both of these papers came down strongly against the use of nuclear weapons in the war.

Background: US Nuclear Doctrine

Appalled by the Eisenhower nuclear doctrine of 'massive retaliation', President Kennedy and his advisers upon entering office had sought more 'flexible' war plans that included multiple options and greater emphasis on conventional weapons.⁸ By the early 1960s, the shortcomings of limited nuclear war doctrines, especially in the European context, were becoming apparent.⁹ It was difficult to determine in what sense such wars would actually be 'limited'. Led by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara, the Pentagon began to revise Eisenhower's Basic National Security Policy (BNSP), but the process bogged down in several dilemmas, one of which was the puzzling question of when, if at all, tactical nuclear weapons might be used. Walt Rostow, a defense 'hawk' who took over the process of revising the plan when he became head of Policy Planning in the State Department in 1962, found the role of tactical nuclear weapons 'a tough nut to crack'. It remained an unresolved dilemma because of 'differences of view in the Pentagon'.¹⁰ Thus a draft of the BNSP was simply left with a statement of the dilemma posed by tactical nuclear weapons: they were extremely important as a deterrent against massive conventional attack in Europe and elsewhere, but their actual use could produce civil and human destruction on a vast scale, in some cases (depending on locale) 'tantamount to the strategic use of nuclear weapons'.¹¹ The draft was never adopted.

⁸William W. Kaufman, *The McNamara Strategy* (NY: Harper & Row 1964).

⁹Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 2nd ed. (NY: St. Martin's 1989), Ch.8.

¹⁰Walt W. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power* (NY: MacMillan 1972), 175.

¹¹*Ibid.*

Nevertheless, US war plans for limited war continued to emphasize first use of nuclear weapons in a conflict with large Chinese forces in Asia. Pacific Command plans for a major escalation of the Vietnam War included both nuclear and nonnuclear options. Recently declassified Pacific Command histories confirm the existence of these nuclear war plans, first revealed in the *Pentagon Papers*.¹² A US response to Chinese intervention would require implementation of CINCPAC (Commander in Chief Pacific) OPLAN (Operational Plan) 39-65 and/or OPLAN 32-64.¹³ According to these plans, in the event of Chinese entry into the war, Strategic Air Command (SAC) forces would strike selected targets within China using nuclear and/or non-nuclear weapons, as directed by the Joint Chiefs.¹⁴

Although no nuclear weapons were deployed in Vietnam, they were on board aircraft carriers and stockpiled in the region and increased in number up through mid-1967.¹⁵ Additionally, when US Marines first arrived in Da Nang in March 1965, they brought nuclear-capable 8in howitzers, though they did not have nuclear warheads.¹⁶ It would thus have been relatively easy for the United States to change the character of the war to a nuclear one.

Initial Considerations

The main scenario for resort to nuclear weapons was a major ground war against Chinese and North Vietnamese troops, although other options were occasionally proposed. Both military and political leaders

¹²CINCPAC *Command Histories* for 1963, 1964, 1966. I am grateful to the Nautilus Institute for providing copies of these. Excerpts available at <www.nautilus.org/VietnamFOIA/analyses/bulletin.html#cincpac>.

¹³OPLAN 39-65, promulgated Sept. 1964, was the contingency plan for Asian Communist aggression. OPLAN 32-64, promulgated Sept. 1962, was 'CINCPAC's principal plan for the defense of mainland Southeast Asia up to the point of Gen. war.' *CINCPAC Command History* 1963, (1964) 38. OPLANS were mainly non-nuclear, but had a nuclear annex. I thank Hans Kristensen for discussion on this issue.

¹⁴*The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Dept. History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam* (hereafter *PP*), Vol. III (Boston: Beacon Press 1971), Senator Gravel Edition, 636, 639.

¹⁵By the beginning of 1963, US onshore deployments of nuclear weapons to Guam, Okinawa, the Philippines, and Taiwan grew to about 2,400, a 66 percent increase from 1961 levels. The onshore stockpile in the Pacific peaked at about 3,200 weapons in mid-1967, 2,600 of which were in Korea and Okinawa, and began to decrease after that. Robert Norris, William Arkin, and William Burr, 'Where They Were', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 55/6 (Nov./Dec. 1999), 30-31.

¹⁶Ted Gittinger (ed.), *The Johnson Years: A Vietnam Roundtable* (Austin, TX: Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs 1993), 64.

thought that use of tactical nuclear weapons in such a war would be likely, and possibly even required, to avoid defeat. Although military commanders were at times divided over whether nuclear weapons would be needed in a wider war, the Joint Chiefs did estimate that tactical nuclear weapons would be militarily useful, arguing in a memo in March 1964 that ‘nuclear attacks would have a far greater probability’ of stopping a Chinese attack than responding with conventional weapons.¹⁷ As a JCS working group put it, ‘Certainly no responsible person proposes to go about such a war [against the North Vietnamese and Chinese], if it should occur, on a basis remotely resembling Korea. ‘Possibly even the use of nuclear weapons at some point’ is of course why we spend billions to have them.’¹⁸ The Joint Chiefs essentially assumed that Eisenhower era policies remained in force – that the United States had undertaken to defend many areas on the assumption that nuclear weapons would be used as necessary and that they would be effective.

Military leaders were unsure, for example, whether conventional bombing of Chinese supply lines in North Vietnam would be sufficient and assumed that at least ground forces, and possibly nuclear weapons, would be required. Admiral Harry D. Felt, CINCPAC, believed that in the event of a major ground war, there was no possible way to hold off Communist forces on the ground without the use of tactical nuclear weapons, and that it was essential that US commanders be given the freedom to use them as the contingency plans assumed. The Chairman of the JCS, General Earle Wheeler, opposed using nuclear weapons to interdict supply lines but thought they would be necessary in a major war against China, and should be used only in extreme cases such as to save a force threatened with destruction or to knock out a special target like a nuclear weapons facility.¹⁹ However, General Maxwell D. Taylor, who had served as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and for a while as US ambassador to South Vietnam, was more doubtful about the need for nuclear weapons.²⁰

Top political leaders did not go as far as the Joint Chiefs. But during their deliberations in 1964–65 over whether to intervene in the war, political leaders raised the issue of nuclear weapons, and seemed prepared to accept that they must be ready for such use. The US Ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, raised the question of whether nuclear weapons would be needed to defend

¹⁷Memo from the JCS to the Secretary of Defense, 2 March 1964, JCSM-174-64. *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), 1964–68, Vol. 1, 115.

¹⁸*PP*, Vol. III, 623.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 238.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 175.

South Vietnam during meetings in April and May 1964.²¹ In a meeting on 27 April, Secretary of State Dean Rusk questioned whether this would provoke Soviet intervention, and also noted the Chinese Nationalist leader 'Chiang Kai-shek's strongly expressed opposition to the use of nuclear weapons'. William Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East, suggested that 'limited use of such weapons for interdiction, in unpopulated areas might be a different story'. Rusk appeared doubtful that this could be effective, although he allowed that some sort of threats might be useful.²²

In Pentagon wargames, such as one held in September 1964, to determine whether conventional firepower alone would stop a Chinese intervention in a war in Southeast Asia, the answer was probably not. However, only a minority of the wargame's American leadership voted to use nuclear weapons to destroy Chinese nuclear production facilities and execute a general nuclear attack on China.²³

In November 1964, shortly after Johnson was reelected president, an interagency task force chaired by William Bundy was formed to analyze major courses of action for the United States in Vietnam. In written comments on the draft papers laying out three options – A, B and C – Bundy asked with regard to option B, the most aggressive course of action, 'At what stage, if ever, might nuclear weapons be required, and on what scale? What would be the implications of such use?' He commented, 'This is clearly a sensitive issue. The President may want a more precise answer than appears in the papers.'²⁴

On 23 November, the JCS, in a memo to McNamara, criticized option A as inadequate and offered their own versions of options B and C which would include 'an advance decision to continue military pressures, if necessary, to the full limits of what military actions can contribute toward US national objectives'.²⁵ In the context, the Chiefs clearly meant nuclear weapons. They had argued earlier, on 10 November, that the risk of nuclear conflict should deter Chinese

²¹Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Dept. of State, Saigon, 4 May 1964, in *FRUS 1964–68*, Vol. 1, 286.

²²Memo for the Record (W. Bundy), 'Discussion of Possible Extended Action in Relation to Vietnam', 27 April 1964, Executive Secretariat Conference Files, 1949–72, Box 343, Manila (SEATO) Taipei and Saigon, 20–29 April, RG 59, NA. I thank William Burr for this document.

²³Thomas Allen, *War Games* (NY: McGraw Hill 1987), 193–206.

²⁴Memo from Chairman of the NSC Working Group (W. Bundy) to the Secretary of State, 24 Nov. 1964, *FRUS 1964–68*, Vol. 1, 941.

²⁵As quoted in David Kaiser *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press 2000), 366–7.

Communist intervention, while expressing a clear willingness to use nuclear weapons should the Chinese intervene.²⁶

During a meeting of the Executive Committee (ExCom) of the National Security Council (NSC) on 24 November to discuss the three options, someone asked whether nuclear weapons might be used. McNamara said he 'could not imagine a case where they would be considered,' but McGeorge Bundy thought that under certain circumstances there might be political and military pressure to consider their use.²⁷ However, no precise answer was forthcoming, and the *Pentagon Papers* narrative notes after one such inconclusive mention of nuclear weapons that 'again, the point was not really followed up'.²⁸ The ExCom eventually chose option C', the Chiefs' plan, with some modifications. The final 2 Dec. draft of the paper (approved by Johnson on the 7th) incorporated the Chiefs' call for an aggressive response to North Vietnamese escalation, but emphasized troop deployments and omitted the Chiefs' language committing the US to the full range of military actions.²⁹

Perhaps prompted by these discussions, in late November 1964 Rusk, responding to a study by McNamara on the role of tactical nuclear weapons in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) strategy, suggested that it was of 'vital importance' to conduct a similar study 'of the utility and limitation of the potential utilization of tactical nuclear weaponry in other areas of the globe', particularly 'the Far East where we maintain the second largest overseas nuclear arsenal and where... the prospect for a major military involvement cannot be overlooked'.³⁰ Rusk approved of McNamara's emphasis on moving NATO toward greater reliance on conventional defenses and may have sought to encourage a similar shift with respect to US war planning for the Far East.³¹ Apparently no such study was undertaken as Rusk renewed his suggestion a year later.³²

Several considerations constrained the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam, including the risk of escalation, political and normative

²⁶Ibid., 360.

²⁷PP, Vol. III, 238.

²⁸Ibid., x.

²⁹Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 378. Kaiser provides an extended analysis of the decision-making process behind this report.

³⁰Letter from Rusk to McNamara, 28 Nov. 1964, *FRUS 1964-68, National Security Policy*, Vol. X, Document # 63, at www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/johnsonlb/x/9057.htm, at 'a'.

³¹Ibid., at 'a' and 'b'.

³²Letter from Rusk to McNamara, 13 Nov. 1965, in *ibid.*, Document #105, at www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/johnsonlb/x/9061.htm >.

considerations, and perceived lack of military utility of nuclear weapons. I consider these in the next several sections.

Disagreement Over Escalation Risks

The most significant material constraint on using nuclear weapons was the risk of a wider war with China. American leaders worried that a US invasion of North Vietnam or the use of tactical nuclear weapons there could bring China into the war. Winning a war against China might itself require use of nuclear weapons. In a remote but worst-case scenario, decision makers feared this could provoke Soviet entry into the war, although most judged this unlikely. Thus the United States might be forced to use nuclear weapons first, with unpredictable, and possibly disastrous, consequences.

Political and military leaders disagreed strongly about the likelihood and consequences of escalation throughout the war, however. The JCS tended to see the risks of escalation as much lower than did political leaders, and hence were more willing to endorse aggressive policies. The Chiefs, along with commanders in the field, consistently lobbied for expanding the war and removing limitations on the fighting as the only way to achieve victory. On 22 January 1964, they told McNamara that the United States 'must be prepared to put aside many of the self-imposed restrictions which now limit our effectiveness, and to undertake bolder actions which may embody greater risks'. They advocated a vigorous bombing campaign against North Vietnam and the introduction of US combat forces in both North and South Vietnam. In response, McNamara directed them to plan a campaign of covert actions and air and sea attacks on North Vietnam up to, but not including, nuclear weapons. The JCS then complained that if China entered the war nuclear weapons might be needed, and submitted a plan culminating in a strike at the Chinese atomic production facility that would produce a bomb in October 1964. McNamara took a similar aggressive stance on this initially, but then scaled it back before presenting it to the President.³³

Former president Dwight D. Eisenhower, called in for a consultation in February 1965, shortly before the final decision supporting the first major deployment of American troops to Vietnam, found the nuclear option entirely reasonable. He told President Johnson and senior advisers that he thought the Chinese would not enter the war, but if

³³Memo from the JCS to McNamara, 22 Jan. 1964, cited in McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 107–10; Memo from SecDef to Taylor, 21 Feb. 1964; Memo from the JCS to McNamara, 2 March 1964, and Memo from SecDef to President, 16 March 1964, in *FRUS 1964–68*, Vol. 1, 97–99, 112–18, 153–67.

they did he would use ‘any weapons required’, including nuclear weapons if necessary. He recommended using carrier-based tactical nuclear weapons for ‘instant retaliation’, suggesting that they could be used on large troop formations and supply depots. In his view, this would not increase the chances of escalation. Emphasizing the utility of deterrent threats, he recommended threatening China with nuclear weapons.³⁴

Further, Eisenhower explicitly advocated challenging political restraints on the first use of nuclear weapons. The United States, he said, should not be bound by the restrictions of the Korean War, including the ‘gentleman’s agreement’ on not using nuclear weapons. This would keep the Chinese out of the war.³⁵ The former president’s statements suggest that he, like the JCS, perceived few material constraints on the use of nuclear weapons – he believed that nuclear weapons would be useful on the battlefield, perceived minimal escalation risks, and demonstrated no evident concern about long term consequences of their use. The former Allied Supreme Commander uttered no cautionary words of any kind to Johnson and his advisers. In his view, the main constraint on use of nuclear weapons was a political-normative one – the ‘gentleman’s agreement’ – which he advocated breaking. It might be argued that he was an aging General of the Army no longer in the loop, but his statements are entirely consistent with those he made when he was president.³⁶

Eisenhower’s views on the use of nuclear weapons were shared by the South Vietnamese leader General Nguyen Khanh, who had told Rusk during the latter’s visit to Southeast Asia in April 1964 that as far as he was concerned the United States could use anything it wanted against

³⁴Memo of a Meeting with President Johnson, Washington DC, 17 Feb. 1965. *FRUS 1964–68*, Vol. 2, 305.

³⁵*Ibid.* Eisenhower had earlier referred to such a gentleman’s agreement in his memoirs. When he took office in 1953, US planners were considering a military offensive to force an end to the conflict. Eisenhower wrote, ‘To keep the attack from becoming costly, it was clear that we would have to use atomic weapons.’ He decided ‘to let the Communist authorities understand that, in the absence of satisfactory progress, we intended to move decisively without inhibition in our use of weapons, and would no longer be responsible for confining hostilities to the Korean Peninsula. We would not be limited by any world-wide gentlemen’s agreement.’ Dwight Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953–56* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1963), 180. In May 1962, Eisenhower had also recommended to Kennedy the use of nuclear weapons in the Laos crisis.

³⁶David Kaiser argues that Eisenhower showed in the meeting that he had been kept well informed of the administration’s policy and its rationale. Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 403. See also Michael Jackson, ‘Beyond Brinkmanship: Eisenhower, Nuclear War Fighting, and Korea, 1953–1968’, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35/1 (March 2005), 52–75.

China.³⁷ Eager to expand the war to the North, Khanh had no objections to use of nuclear weapons, noting on another occasion that decisive use of atomic bombs on Japan had saved not only American but also Japanese lives.³⁸

Rusk, for his part, did not share Eisenhower's views on nuclear weapons, but he did endorse the former president's recommendations to institute a 'campaign of pressure' against North Vietnam. In a strong personal memo to President Johnson shortly after the meeting with Eisenhower, he wrote, 'Everything possible should be done to throw back the Hanoi-Viet Cong aggression – even at the risk of major escalation.'³⁹ At an NSC meeting in May 1964, Rusk had suggested moving a US division in Korea to Southeast Asia and making a public declaration that any attack on South Korea would be met by the use of nuclear weapons.⁴⁰ He believed that if escalation brought about a major Chinese attack, it would also involve use of nuclear arms, a risk he was willing to take. But like the military, Rusk thought the escalation risks were low. He thought that the Chinese leaders were 'practical men' who would act prudently, in part because of the US nuclear arsenal. As he noted to the Romanian foreign minister in October 1965, 'After all, Chinese nuclear capability within the foreseeable future will always be trivial as compared to that of the US.'⁴¹ Nevertheless, Rusk vigorously opposed bombing near the Chinese border, and, although he clearly found some use for nuclear threats, unlike Eisenhower, did not actually advocate use of nuclear weapons.

The military's benign views of the escalation risks were especially alarming to Undersecretary of State George Ball, who worried about a protracted ground war with China, which might produce substantial American casualties. As he wrote in a famous skeptical memo on the US conduct of the war to McNamara, Bundy, and Rusk in October 1964, 'At this point, we should certainly expect mounting pressure for the use of at least tactical nuclear weapons. The American people would not again accept the frustrations and anxieties that resulted from our

³⁷Memo of Conversation between Secretary of State Rusk and Prime Minister Khanh, Saigon, 18 April 1964. *FRUS 1964–68*, Vol. 1, 244.

³⁸Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Dept. of State, Honolulu, 1 June 1964. *FRUS 1964–68*, Vol. 1, 410.

³⁹Dean Rusk to the President, 23 Feb. 1965, 'Deployment,' Vol. 2, tabs 61–87, NSCH, Box 40, NSF, LBJL, quoted in McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 173.

⁴⁰NSC Executive Committee Meeting, Washington DC, 24 May 1964, *FRUS 1964–68*, Vol. 1, 371.

⁴¹Memo of Conversation, Secretary's Dinner for Rumanian Foreign Minister Manescu, Washington DC, 14 Oct. 1965, *FRUS 1964–68*, Vol. 3, 455–6.

abstention from nuclear combat in Korea.’ Ball worried that the fact that there was no longer any shortage of suitable nuclear warheads removed an important material constraint on their use. ‘The rationalization of a departure from the *self-denying ordinance of Korea* would be that we did not have battlefield nuclear weapons in 1950 – yet we do have them today.’⁴² Given a situation of nuclear plenitude, and the military’s benign assessment of the consequences of a wider war or using nuclear weapons, Ball worried that there were few military or material constraints on the military’s analysis of nuclear options.

Ball and others sensitive to escalation risks also worried about the uncertain Soviet reaction to US use of nuclear weapons. He wrote in his October 1964 memo, ‘While one cannot be certain, the best judgment is that the Soviet Union could not sit by and let nuclear weapons be used against China.’⁴³ Similarly, in a lengthy memo to Johnson on the same day as the meeting with Eisenhower, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who opposed the 1965 decision to expand the war, cautioned that if a war with China had been ruled out in 1952–53 when only the United States had a usable nuclear capability, it would be even harder to justify such a war now. ‘No one really believes the Soviet Union would allow us to destroy Communist China with nuclear weapons, as Russia’s status as a world power would be undermined if she did.’⁴⁴

Nevertheless, unlike in previous Cold War crises, during the Vietnam War US military leaders did not think war with the Soviet Union was imminent, and were not deterred in their conduct of the war by fear of Soviet entry into the hostilities. This was due in part to the Sino-Soviet split and the highly public animosity between the two Communist great powers by the mid-1960s. It was also due to the relative ‘detente’ between the United States and the Soviet Union in the wake of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Official US intelligence estimates consistently stated that it was unlikely either China or the Soviet Union would intervene unless the United States invaded North Vietnam with a massive show of troops, bombed China, or attacked Soviet supply ships in Haiphong harbor. A Special National Intelligence Estimate of 9 October 1964 stated that ‘We are almost certain that both Hanoi and Peiping [Beijing] are anxious not to become involved in the kind of war in which

⁴²George Ball, ‘How Valid are the Assumptions Underlying our Vietnam Policies?’ memo, 5 Oct. 1964. Reprinted in *The Atlantic Monthly* 230/1 (July 1972), 41–42. Emphasis added.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁴Memo from Vice President Humphrey to President Johnson, Washington DC, 17 Feb. 1965. *FRUS 1964–68*, Vol. 2, 311. In reality, the Eisenhower administration did not rule out war with China in 1953.

the great weight of US weaponry could be brought to bear against them. Even if Hanoi and Peiping estimated that the US would not use nuclear weapons against them, they could not be sure of this . . .⁴⁵

By mid-1965 the administration was convinced that the Soviet Union's commitment to long-term improvement of relations with the West took precedence over its support for North Vietnam. In spring 1965, after Operation 'Rolling Thunder' had begun, Chinese leader Zhou Enlai signaled to Washington through the Pakistanis and the British that Chinese forces would not become involved militarily in Vietnam if the United States refrained from invading North Vietnam or China and did not bomb the North's Red River dikes. However, should war break out, not even nuclear weapons would force them to quit, and the war would have no boundaries.⁴⁶

President Johnson was determined, even obsessed, with keeping the war restrained, a view shared by McNamara and others, who thought that even if the actual risks of a wider war were low, the consequences were unacceptable. Uncontrolled escalation could lead to possibly catastrophic outcomes. Johnson and his advisers, veterans of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, were committed to limiting as much as possible the geographical area of the conflict and the volume of force used. Johnson, in particular, was 'haunted by the ceaseless fear' of Soviet and Chinese intervention.⁴⁷ McNamara later described that he was 'appalled' by the 'cavalier' way in which the military recommended aggressive policies during the Vietnam War, which in his view raised unacceptable risks of war with China including possible US use of nuclear weapons.⁴⁸

In practice, however, the fear of defeat in Vietnam repeatedly made significant risks of escalation acceptable, as Rusk's views cited above suggested.⁴⁹ On 9 February 1965, McGeorge Bundy wrote Senator

⁴⁵Quoted in memo from Walt Rostow to Secretary of State Rusk, 23 Nov. 1964. *PP*, Vol. III, 645. See also Special National Intelligence Estimate, SNIE 50-2-64, Washington, 25 May 1964, *FRUS*, 1964-68, Vol. 1, 380.

⁴⁶Chen Jian, 'China's Involvement in the Vietnam War, 1964-69,' *The China Quarterly* 142 (June 1995), 366-7; Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 439-40.

⁴⁷George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2nd ed. (NY: Wiley 1996), 5, 46.

⁴⁸McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 160-61, 275.

⁴⁹Both Ball and McNamara later stated that they overestimated the risk of war with China. In his 1982 memoirs, Ball conceded that, in hindsight, he exaggerated the risk of the Chinese threat and possible entry into the war, but that at the time 'we knew almost nothing about what was going on in Chinese foreign policy'. George W. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs* (NY: Norton 1982), 505, fn.10. McNamara described later the 'totally incorrect appraisal of the "Chinese threat" to our security' but that it was a widely shared view among top officials. McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 218-19.

Mike Mansfield that the administration was willing to run the risk of war with China, and implied a willingness to make a sacrifice at least equal to that of the Korean War.⁵⁰ Further, US officials were not totally averse to making nuclear threats. In a not-for-attribution briefing to American reporters on 22 April 1965, just after the first deployment of US troops to Vietnam, McNamara defended US strategy there and went on to make a nuclear threat. The Johnson administration was shifting its focus to a greater effort to win the ground war. As recorded by a *New York Times* reporter, McNamara stated:

We are NOT following a strategy that recognizes any sanctuary or *any weapons restriction*. But we would use nuclear weapons only after fully applying non-nuclear arsenal. In other words, if 100 planes couldn't take out a target, we wouldn't necessarily go to nuclear weapons; we would try 200 planes, and so on. But 'inhibitions' on using nuclear weapons are NOT 'overwhelming.' Conceded it would be a 'gigantic step.' Quote: 'We'd use whatever weapons we felt necessary to achieve our objective, recognizing that one must offset against the price'— and the price includes all psychological, propaganda factors, etc. Also fallout on innocent. 'Inconceivable' under current circumstances that nuclear would provide a net gain against the terrific price that would be paid. NOT inconceivable that the price would be paid in some future circumstances McNamara refuses to predict.⁵¹

Appearing in the newspapers on 25 April, these remarks provoked concerns about the possible use of nuclear weapons. McNamara sought to quash speculations the next day.⁵² 'There is no military requirement for nuclear weapons' in the present and foreseeable situation, he said, 'and no useful purpose can be served by speculation on remote contingencies.'⁵³ Yet, as David Kaiser notes, McNamara's original threat could not have been accidental.⁵⁴

⁵⁰Letter from the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to Senator Mike Mansfield, 9 Feb. 1965, *FRUS 1964–68*, Vol. 2, 94, 96.

⁵¹'Background Briefing With Secretary McNamara,' Memo, 22 April 1965, US Policy in the Vietnam War, 1954–1968, VI01501, Vietnam Conference, June 1997, Box 3, National Security Archive. Emphasis in original.

⁵²Tom Wicker, 'President Plans No Major Change in Vietnam Policy', *New York Times*, 25 April 1965, 1, 3.

⁵³Jack Raymonds, 'McNamara Calls Hanoi Aggression More Flagrant', *New York Times*, 27 April 1965, 1.

⁵⁴Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 432.

Even McGeorge Bundy toyed with the idea of nuclear threats. In a memo to McNamara in June 1965 criticizing a vast increase in American troops that McNamara was planning, Bundy mentioned Eisenhower's nuclear threats in the Korean War and suggested that the United States 'should at least consider what realistic threat of larger action is available to us for communication to Hanoi'. He added, 'A full interdiction of supplies to North Vietnam by air and sea is a possible candidate for such an ultimatum. These are weapons which may be more useful to us if we do not have to use them.'⁵⁵ McNamara wrote later that he did not share Bundy's views on nuclear weapons and threatening their use, though he did on everything else – a recollection that is clearly inconsistent with some of his behavior at the time.⁵⁶

The nuclear threat may have been what Bundy suggested – a strategy of communicating seriousness to Hanoi and Moscow. Soviet leaders indeed got word that US officials were entertaining nuclear options, a prospect they viewed with the greatest alarm. According to historian Ilya Gaiduk, drawing on newly available Soviet documents, in the summer of 1965 Soviet leaders received regular reports that the United States might resort to nuclear weapons to suppress the insurgency in South Vietnam. In June 1965, Soviet intelligence informed the Kremlin that in a conversation with Italian Foreign Minister Amintore Fanfani, Rusk had admitted that the prospect of using tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam was on the agenda of American policymakers.⁵⁷ Although it is unclear how reliable the reporting was, or what exactly 'on the agenda' meant, the report apparently spurred Soviet leaders to consider seriously the Johnson administration's intentions in this regard.⁵⁸

There thus appears to have been some pattern of threat making, even if it was a bluff. At times during 1964–65, comments by Bundy, Rusk and other political leaders showed a willingness to run risks that might have led to nuclear war against China, much as the Chiefs were advocating. On balance, however, as is evident in the next sections, top civilian leaders of the Johnson administration strongly opposed the use of nuclear weapons in the war, not simply because of the escalation risks but also because of political and normative considerations.

⁵⁵Memo from the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to Secretary of Defense McNamara, June 30, 1965, *FRUS 1964–68*, Vol. 3, 391.

⁵⁶McNamara, *In Retrospect*, 194.

⁵⁷Ilya Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee 1996), 73.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 47.

Political and Normative Concerns

In the face of uncertainty and disagreement over escalation risks, political and normative concerns about using nuclear weapons may have become particularly salient, if not decisive, for many top officials. Johnson administration officials worried that, given world public abhorrence of nuclear weapons, their use against Asians would jeopardize the US moral and leadership position in the eyes of friends and allies. In a memo to President Johnson, Undersecretary Ball wrote: 'To use nuclear weapons against the Chinese would obviously raise the most profound political problems. Not only would their use generate probably irresistible pressures for a major Soviet involvement, but the United States would be vulnerable to the charge that it was willing to use nuclear weapons against non-whites only.'⁵⁹

Indeed, foreign leaders privately and publicly cautioned against use of nuclear weapons. President Chiang Kai-shek, leader of nationalist China, told Rusk in Taiwan during Rusk's trip to southeast Asia in April 1964 that he was 'opposed in principle' to use of nuclear weapons, 'particularly in settling the China problem'.⁶⁰ Returning to Washington, Rusk reported to the NSC that he had been impressed by Chiang's 'passionate statement' that 'nuclear war in Asia would be wrong'.⁶¹ Chiang's opposition to use of nuclear weapons undoubtedly stemmed from his concern that Taiwan would be the most likely object of a Chinese counterattack, probably overwhelming, and Chiang and his regime would be at risk. A month later, in Honolulu, Rusk noted that 'many free world leaders would oppose this [use of nuclear weapons]'.⁶² When the French ambassador to Washington suggested to Rusk in July 1964 that a nuclear threat might have a 'most sobering effect' on the Chinese, Rusk again responded that Asians were strongly opposed to use of nuclear weapons in Asia.⁶³ Other foreign leaders urging restraint included U Thant, Secretary-General of the UN, Prime Minister Lester Pearson of Canada, and British P Minister Harold Wilson.⁶⁴

⁵⁹Memo from Acting Secretary of State Ball to President Johnson, 13 Feb. 1965. *FRUS 1964-68*, Vol. 2, 255.

⁶⁰Excerpts from Secretary Rusk's Conversation with President Chiang Kai-shek, 16 April 1964. At <www.seas.gwu.edu/nsarchive/coldwar/documents>.

⁶¹528th NSC meeting, 22 April 1964. *FRUS 1964-68*, Vol. 1, 258; *PP*, Vol. III, 65.

⁶²Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Dept. of State, Honolulu, 1 June 1964, *FRUS 1964-68*, Vol. 1, 410.

⁶³Rusk meeting with Ambassador Alphonse, French Embassy, 20 July 1964. *FRUS 1964-68*, Vol. 1, 557.

⁶⁴Memo of Conversation Between President Johnson and Prime Minister Pearson, Hilton Hotel, NY, 28 May 1964. *FRUS 1964-68*, 1, 395; Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Dept. of State, Honolulu, 1 June 1964, *Ibid*, 410.

Mounting public opposition to the war gave US leaders a demoralizing foretaste of the kind of world public outrage that a use of nuclear weapons might provoke.

It was not only the concerns and abhorrence of others that played a role, however. A nuclear taboo – a normative belief that using nuclear weapons first was wrong – had taken hold among Johnson and his advisers. President Johnson, especially, was obsessed with limiting the war. Like President Harry S. Truman during the Korean War, Johnson abhorred the thought that he might ever have to consider use of nuclear weapons. His memoirs make no mention of nuclear weapons being considered in Vietnam.⁶⁵ His senior advisers have testified strongly that by as early as 1964 Johnson was clear in his own mind that he would not order a first use of nuclear weapons except perhaps in the case of overwhelming Soviet aggression in Europe. He never raised with these advisers the question of how far the American people would support a decision to use the Bomb in Vietnam.⁶⁶

Johnson had spoken out forcefully when Senator Barry Goldwater, campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination in May 1964, suggested in a speech that tactical nuclear weapons should be treated more like conventional weapons, and that they should be used in Vietnam. In a speech in Detroit on Labor Day 1964, Johnson came out strongly against Goldwater's views. Describing the catastrophe of nuclear war, he said, 'Make no mistake. There is no such thing as a conventional nuclear weapon.' He continued:

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. And it would lead us down an uncertain path of blows and counterblows whose outcome none may know. No President of the United States can divest himself of the responsibility for such a decision.⁶⁷

Johnson's statement is a powerful one and emphasizes both the 'tradition of nonuse' and the danger of uncontrollable escalation. Bundy wrote later that although there was politics in Johnson's speech,

⁶⁵Lyndon Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963–1969* (NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston 1984).

⁶⁶Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 537; Robert S. McNamara, 'The Military Role of Nuclear Weapons: Perceptions and Misperceptions,' *Foreign Affairs* 62/1 (Fall 1983), 58–80.

⁶⁷'Remarks in Cadillac Square', 7 Sept. 1964, in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963–64*, Vol. 1 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office 1965).

there was 'passionate conviction' as well.⁶⁸ Two factors appeared to be key in Johnson's thinking: the long term effect of any use of the Bomb 'on the survival of man' – a prudential consideration – and the desire not to be the first president in 20 years to use nuclear weapons, that is, to break the powerful 'tradition' of nonuse that had now developed – a taboo consideration. For Johnson, it appears, the use of the Bomb in Vietnam was quite literally 'unthinkable'.

Many of Johnson's advisers – especially Robert McNamara and Dean Rusk – already possessed a set of strongly held beliefs about nuclear weapons by this time. Cold War crises over Berlin and Laos (1961) and Soviet missiles in Cuba (1962) had already forced them to confront the possibility of using nuclear weapons. From early in his tenure as Secretary of Defense, McNamara opposed use of nuclear weapons, viewing them as morally objectionable and lacking in utility, issues he often ran together. He had been horrified by the briefing he received in early February 1961, only two weeks in office, from General Thomas Power, commander of SAC, on Single Integrated Operational Plan No. 62, the US plan for nuclear war inherited from the Eisenhower administration. It called for 'an all-out preemptive first strike on the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China, involving a million times as much explosive power as used against Hiroshima, in response to an actual or merely impending invasion of Europe by the Soviet Union that involved no nuclear weapons at all. Millions of Chinese would be destroyed for no obvious reason.'⁶⁹ Returning to Washington, McNamara ordered a review of the nuclear stockpile, which eventually resulted in a unilateral 50 percent cut in stockpile megatonnage. He also ordered an increase in nonnuclear capabilities for countering conventional aggression so that the United States would not be forced to rely on tactical nuclear weapons.⁷⁰

McNamara apparently decided very early on that the United States should never strike first with nuclear weapons. This was made clear in policy documents he sent to the JCS chairman shortly after the war plan briefing that so disturbed him.⁷¹ In later years he stated frequently

⁶⁸Ibid., 538.

⁶⁹Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (NY: Simon & Schuster 1983), 270–72. Physicist Herbert York, a weapons consultant for the government who accompanied McNamara on the trip to SAC, recalled that the visitors were 'just as impressed, awed, and even stunned' as he had been when he first heard the war plan briefing a year earlier. Herbert York, *Making Weapons, Talking Peace* (NY: Basic Books 1987) 185, 204.

⁷⁰York, *Making Weapons*, 204. William W. Kaufmann, *The McNamara Strategy* (NY: Harper & Row 1964), Ch. 2.

⁷¹McNamara to JCS Chairman, 10 Feb. 1961, Appendix A, enclosed in JCS 2101/408, CCS 3001 Basic National Security Policy (10 Feb. 1961), RG 218, NA, as cited in Marc

that he privately advised both Kennedy and Johnson never to initiate the use of nuclear weapons, and they agreed.⁷²

Daniel Ellsberg, a Pentagon planner who disagreed with McNamara's strong advocacy of bombing North Vietnam with conventional weapons and who later became famous for leaking the Pentagon Papers to the press, nevertheless felt that McNamara shared his strong personal abhorrence of nuclear weapons. Recalling a private meeting with McNamara in 1961 in which McNamara spoke with 'great passion' about the dangers of nuclear weapons and US nuclear war plans, Ellsberg wrote that 'he impressed me strongly and positively that day with his conviction that under no circumstances must there be a first use of US nuclear weapons in Europe.'⁷³ After the meeting, McNamara's assistant told Ellsberg that Johnson's thinking on this subject was 'not one iota' different from McNamara's.⁷⁴

Like McNamara, Dean Rusk, Secretary of State to both Kennedy and Johnson, found nuclear weapons abhorrent. With a background in international law, he took a strongly principled approach to diplomacy and America's role in the world. George Ball, who disagreed with Rusk's fairly aggressive views on the war, nevertheless described him as a man of 'extraordinary integrity and selflessness'.⁷⁵ According to Rusk, 'we never seriously considered using nuclear weapons in Vietnam'. He advocated aggressive uses of force but opposed use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam and elsewhere because of fallout risks, political costs, lack of good targets in Vietnam, adequate conventional alternatives, but especially because of the unacceptable killing of civilians.⁷⁶ It is clear that Rusk had been impressed by the opposition to use of nuclear weapons he had encountered during his trips to Asia. He noted that many Asians seemed to see an element of racial discrimination in use of nuclear arms. Was it something the United States would do to Asians but not to Westerners?⁷⁷ He wrote later, 'Under no circumstances would I have participated in an order to launch a [nuclear] first strike, with the possible exception of a massive [Soviet] conventional attack on West Europe', which he thought

Trachtenberg, 'The Berlin Crisis', in Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton UP 1991), 220.

⁷²McNamara, 'The Military Role of Nuclear Weapons', and McNamara, *In Retrospect*.

⁷³Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 57, 59.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 59, 60.

⁷⁵Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, 384.

⁷⁶Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (NY: Norton 1990), 457.

⁷⁷Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Dept. of State, Honolulu, June 1, 1964, *FRUS 1964-68*, Vol. 1:410.

unlikely.⁷⁸ ‘The only rational purpose of nuclear weapons is to ensure that no one else will use them against us.’⁷⁹

These are remarkable admissions from McNamara and Rusk. In effect, top US officials harbored private commitments to ‘no first use,’ in part for moral reasons, despite the fact that such views directly contradicted official US deterrence policy relying on a threat to use nuclear weapons first. McGeorge Bundy wrote later that he believed that McNamara and Rusk would have resigned if President Johnson had asked for a decision to use the Bomb in Vietnam, and that Johnson ‘quietly appreciated this’.⁸⁰

The 1964 Ball Memo: The Political Costs of Using Nuclear Weapons

The most systematic analysis of the political consequences of using nuclear weapons in Vietnam came from Undersecretary Ball in his October 1964 memo criticizing the war. In a section on ‘Pressure for Use of Atomic Weapons,’ more than a dozen paragraphs long, he focused entirely on the political costs for the United States of any use of the Bomb. Notably absent was any attention to military consequences – the risk of either retaliation or escalation to a wider war. Political, not military, consequences were the salient issue for him. In his analysis, Ball noted the lack of meaningful distinction between tactical and strategic weapons in the eyes of the public, and the ‘profound shock’ that would follow any use of nuclear weapons ‘not merely in Japan but also among the nonwhite nations on every continent’. He predicted that ‘our loss of prestige’ in the non-aligned and less-developed countries would be ‘enormously magnified if we were led to use even one nuclear weapon.’⁸¹

Most significant, however, was an analysis of the consequences of legitimizing use of nuclear weapons. If the United States used such weapons, Ball wrote,

our action would liberate the Soviet Union from the inhibitions that world sentiment has imposed on it. It would upset the fragile balance of terror on which much of the world has come to depend for the maintenance of peace. Whether or not the Soviet Union actually used nuclear weapons against other nations, the very fact that we had provided a justification for their use would create a new wave of fear. . . . The Communists would certainly point out

⁷⁸Rusk, *As I Saw It*, 248.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 366.

⁸⁰Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 537.

⁸¹Ball, ‘How Valid’, 42.

that we were the only nation that had ever employed nuclear weapons in anger. And the Soviet Union would emphasize its position of relative virtue in having a nuclear arsenal which it had never used.

The consequences of this could not be overstated, he wrote. The first use of the Bomb since August 1945 by the United States would set back all the progress made in superpower relations over the previous few years. It would also generate domestic 'resentment against a Government that had gotten America in a position where we had again been forced to use nuclear power to our own world discredit.'⁸²

Ball's concern about the dangerous precedent set by the use of even a single nuclear weapon was not primarily because it would demonstrate that such weapons were militarily useful or that it would invite Soviet retaliation. Rather, it would suggest that nuclear weapons were *legitimate*. If the US resorted to the Bomb, the Soviet Union would then feel free to use it 'against other nations'. Legitimizing the use of nuclear weapons would undermine a major normative inhibition on resorting to them in war. Such an inhibition was an important factor stabilizing successful nuclear deterrence ('the balance of terror'). In other words, a shared normative expectation of nonuse was *an essential element of*, not an alternative to, stable nuclear deterrence. Because of this, Ball wrote, the country that broke the tradition of nonuse of nuclear weapons would be stigmatized as a pariah among nations.

Ball's memo – or at least parts of it – were not well received. Rusk and McNamara entirely rejected his questioning of the administration's arguments for conventional bombing of North Vietnam. It is likely that they were quite sympathetic to his arguments about nuclear weapons, however, which accorded substantially with their own views.⁸³

Challenging the Taboo

Those who disagreed with official policy thought that normative concerns inhibited policymakers from thinking 'rationally' about nuclear options. Senator Barry M. Goldwater's public attempts during the 1964 presidential campaign to promote the notion of 'conventional nuclear weapons' ran up against the taboo. In May 1964, Goldwater argued publicly that nuclear weapons should have been used at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 to defoliate trees and that, in similar fashion,

⁸²Ibid., 42.

⁸³The memo as a whole did have an important effect on William Bundy's drafting of the options papers the following month, where option C more or less followed Ball's arguments regarding Vietnam strategy. Kaiser, *American Tragedy*.

'low-yield atomic weapons' should be used as defoliants along South Vietnam's borders. UN Secretary-General U Thant immediately criticized the idea while the Pentagon responded to 'Goldwater's folly' by describing technical characteristics of nuclear weapons, arguing that it was absurd to call them conventional weapons.⁸⁴

Goldwater's effort to blur the distinction between conventional and nuclear weapons represented an attempt to challenge a growing taboo on the use of nuclear weapons. The strong government and public reaction illustrated how anathema his view was to most people. The Johnson administration used the controversy to political advantage, and Goldwater's pro-nuclear views contributed significantly to his landslide defeat.⁸⁵ By the mid-1960s, advocating use of nuclear weapons in a campaign speech was beyond the bounds of acceptability for most people.

Samuel Cohen, a weapons physicist at the RAND Corporation who had advocated use of tactical nuclear weapons in the Korean War, and who was one of the rare enthusiasts for such an option in the Vietnam War, also ran up against the taboo mindset. As he recalled, 'anyone in the Pentagon who was caught thinking seriously of using nuclear weapons in this conflict would find his neck in the wringer in short order'.⁸⁶ He nevertheless attempted to interest Washington in the virtues of 'discriminate' nuclear weapons in Vietnam. He recalled, 'I put my mind to work on how nuclear weapons might be used to thwart the Vietcong'.⁸⁷ He gave a presentation on tactical nuclear weapons to key planners in the State Department in 1965, but it quickly became evident that however intrigued his audience was from a technical point of view, they were 'adamantly opposed to the development and use of such weapons from a political point of view'. During the talk Cohen described several hypothetical weapon systems in which low-yield nuclear weapons would be used to propel massive conventional weapons payloads to the battlefield. He expected that there might be some interest in these options, which he argued were more effective and discriminating than standard high explosive attacks. Instead, 'the opposition remained unanimous, for the simple reason that it was not

⁸⁴*New York Times*, 27 May 1964, 1; Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1964* (NY: Athenaeum 1965), 315–16.

⁸⁵Lawrence Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1954–1970* (Stanford UP 1998), 438. Johnson received 61.1 percent of the popular vote and 90 percent of the electoral vote. White, *The Making of the President 1964*, 315–16.

⁸⁶Samuel Cohen, *The Truth About the Neutron Bomb* (NY: William Morrow 1983), 95, 84.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 84.

really the nature of the effects that counted. Rather, it was the fact that a nuclear explosion was taking place over the area of theater operations.⁸⁸

Even if the nuclear explosions took place in the United States, as in another example, his audience remained adamantly opposed. These reactions impressed upon Cohen the depth of official feeling against the military use of nuclear explosives. 'By now I realized that as long as a nuclear explosive was used in anger, US policy held the type of explosive and geographical location of detonation to be absolutely irrelevant. The cardinal point was that it was the act of detonating the explosive in anger that was a political taboo.'⁸⁹ Cohen's fictitious weapons amounted to an explicit – and ingenious – device for exploring the scope and content of the nuclear taboo, which he did not personally share.

It was becoming increasingly clear that, in contrast to the Korean conflict ten years earlier, use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam was indeed increasingly 'unthinkable', with a mounting burden of proof for the use of such weapons. Not only were top officials privately opposed to use of nuclear weapons, but – consistent with taboo thinking – even the mere analysis of such weapons in the de rigueur cost-benefit fashion for which the Kennedy/Johnson team was famous was essentially taboo. On 2 Dec. 1965, McNamara referred in a telephone conversation with Johnson to certain 'very dangerous alternatives that we can't even put in writing around here, [and] certainly don't want to talk to anyone else about'.⁹⁰ One interpretation of McNamara's phone call is that there was a taboo in the Johnson administration against writing anything down on the issue of nuclear options.

The 1966 JASON Report: Assessing the Military Utility of Tactical Nuclear Weapons

Throughout 1966 and into 1967, both the Joint Chiefs and General William C. Westmoreland, the American commander in Vietnam, pressed for a more ambitious bombing program. They lobbied for major escalation of the war and more troops in 1966, after the much-criticized Christmas 1965 bombing pause. By the early summer of 1966, increasing frustrations over the inability of the 'Rolling Thunder' bombing campaign to interdict the Ho Chi Min Trail led to both public and internal pressure to reevaluate the bombing strategy.

⁸⁸Ibid., 93.

⁸⁹Ibid., 93–94.

⁹⁰LBJ, taped conversations, 1995 release, as quoted in Kaiser, *American Tragedy*, 433.

It was in this context that four civilian scientists consulting for the US government conducted the only known systematic study of the military utility of tactical nuclear weapons in the war. They were part of the JASONS – a group of some 40 young scientists who had met each summer since 1959 to consider defense-related problems for the Pentagon.⁹¹ As the war escalated in the spring of 1966, some of the scientists heard a high-ranking Pentagon official with access to President Johnson say, ‘It might be a good idea to toss in a nuke from time to time, just to keep the other side guessing.’⁹² Physicists Freeman Dyson and Steven Weinberg, along with Robert Gomer and S. Courtenay Wright, both at the University of Chicago at the time, were so appalled by this statement they decided something must be done.

Worried that nuclear weapons were not ‘unthinkable’ enough, the scientists obtained permission from the Defense Department to carry out a systematic study of the likely consequences of using tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam. They explicitly intended it to put a definitive end to any lingering thoughts that such weapons might be useful in the war.⁹³ Whereas Ball’s 1964 memo had emphasized political consequences, this study focused on the military utility of nuclear weapons in the conflict. Written in a ‘deliberate hard-boiled military style’, it sought to demonstrate ‘that even from the narrowest military point of view, disregarding all political and ethical considerations, the use of nuclear weapons would be a disastrous mistake’.⁹⁴

Recently declassified, the 55-page study makes a strong case against the utility of tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam.⁹⁵ The analysis focused on whether there would be suitable targets for the tactical use of nuclear weapons and on the effects on enemy ground operations. The report identified numerous targets against which, in principle, tactical nuclear weapons would be useful: airfields, bridges, large troop concentrations, missile sites, tunnel systems, and Viet Cong bases in South Vietnam.⁹⁶

⁹¹For more on the JASONS, see Gregg Herken, *Cardinal Choices: Presidential Science Advising from the Atomic Bomb to SDI* (NY: Oxford UP 1992), 152–56. The discussion in this section draws on Peter Hayes and Nina Tannenwald, ‘Nixing Nukes in Vietnam’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 59/3 (May/June 2003), 52–59.

⁹²Freeman Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe* (NY: Basic Books 1979), 149.

⁹³*Ibid.*, and Steven Weinberg, communication with Peter Hayes, 25 Dec. 2002.

⁹⁴Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe*, 149.

⁹⁵F. Dyson, R. Gomer, S. Weinberg, and S.C. Wright, ‘Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Southeast Asia,’ Study S-266, Jason Division, DAHC 15-67C-0011, Washington DC, March 1967 (hereafter Dyson report). Declassified Dec. 2002. I am grateful to Peter Hayes of the Nautilus Institute for providing a copy of it, and for his 19 year effort to get it declassified.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 4, 12.

Nevertheless, the analysis highlighted numerous military obstacles to effective use: the difficulty of target acquisition, and the fact that even when good targets existed, use of tactical nuclear weapons would not substantially affect enemy operations. In some cases, more effective alternatives were available. 'So long as the enemy moves men in small groups and uses forest cover, he would offer few suitable troop targets for TNW [Theater Nuclear Weapons]', the study noted.⁹⁷ Destroying Viet Cong bases with tactical nuclear strikes 'would require large numbers of weapons and an accurate location of targets by ground patrols'.⁹⁸ Using fallout from groundburst weapons to make trails impassable would require repeated use of nuclear weapons and 'would not by itself provide a long-lasting barrier to the movement of men and supplies, without endangering civilian populations at up to a distance of 200 miles'.⁹⁹ The study estimated that it would take 3,000 tactical nuclear weapons per year to interdict supply routes like the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In conducting their analysis, the authors drew in part on findings from RAND and Research Analysis Corporation nuclear wargaming studies from the late 1950s and early 1960s, as well as the 1965 Oregon Trail studies, which revealed the difficulties of timely troop target acquisition.

More problematically, US forces might become vulnerable to a Soviet-orchestrated counterattack, and first use of tactical nuclear weapons against guerillas might set a precedent that would lead to use of similar weapons by guerrillas against more vulnerable American targets.¹⁰⁰ The report came to a strong conclusion: 'the use of TNW in Southeast Asia would offer the US no decisive military advantage if the use remained unilateral, and it would have strongly adverse military effects if the enemy were able to use TNW in reply'.¹⁰¹

Although the analysis was intended to be purely technical, in fact it included strong judgments about the political costs and consequences of using nuclear weapons. In a section toward the end on 'Political Consequences,' the authors outlined escalation scenarios in response to a US use of tactical nuclear weapons, concluding that 'general war could result, even from the least provocative use of NW [Nuclear Weapons] that either side can devise'.¹⁰² Even if massive retaliation did

⁹⁷Ibid., 4, 15.

⁹⁸Ibid., 4.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 47.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 7.

¹⁰²Ibid., 49.

not result, they argued, US first use of tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam would have serious long-range consequences:

The most important of these is probably the crossing of the nuclear threshold. As Herman Kahn points out, abstention from the use of any NW is universally recognized as a political and psychological threshold, however rational or irrational the distinction between 'nuclear' and 'nonnuclear' may be. Crossing it may greatly weaken the barriers to proliferation and general use of nuclear weapons. This would be to the ultimate disadvantage of the US, even if it did not increase the probability of strategic war.¹⁰³

Whether or not the adversary or its external allies countered with use of nuclear weapons of their own, the authors argued, the effect of a US nuclear first use on world opinion in general and on America's allies in particular would be 'extremely unfavorable. With the exception of Thailand and Laos, the reaction would almost certainly be condemned even in Asia and might result in the abrogation of treaty obligations by Japan.'¹⁰⁴ The effect on public opinion in the United States 'would be extremely divisive, no matter how much preparation preceded it'. In sum, the authors concluded, 'the political effects of US first use of TNW in Vietnam would be uniformly bad and could be catastrophic'.¹⁰⁵

In short, even if the target acquisition problem could be solved (and that was not evident), for tactical nuclear weapons to be effective they would have to be used in such large quantities, and with such great frequency, that political costs would outweigh military benefits. When US vulnerability to retaliation was added in, along with the danger of the weapons spreading to guerrilla forces around the world, it amounted to a strong argument against the use of tactical nuclear weapons in the war.

A notable aspect of the report is how the four scientists, who personally found nuclear weapons morally objectionable, took pains to couch their argument against such use in purely military terms, believing that this would enhance its reception with military planners and decision-makers in the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), its most likely audience. As Robert Gomer explained later, 'It was our purpose to show that using nuclear weapons would be immoral folly, and would set an awful precedent but we realized that these arguments would cut little ice with the powers that then were.'¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³Ibid., 50.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 51.

¹⁰⁶Gomer commentary on Dyson report, Dec. 2002, at <www.nautilus.org/VietnamFOIA/report/JASONS.html#gomer>.

Weinberg, too, thought that using nuclear weapons in Vietnam would be ‘a terrible idea for a host of ethical and moral, but also possibly political reasons’. He also thought it likely that a good case could be made against it on purely military grounds and participated in the study with this expectation.¹⁰⁷ The authors viewed their report as offering a powerful critique of the utility of nuclear weapons. ‘That paper gives all the reasons why you wouldn’t use nuclear weapons in Vietnam’, observed one of its authors in a later interview.¹⁰⁸

Did the Study Have Any Effect?

The fate of this report, and its role, if any, in influencing the administration’s thinking on the role of nuclear weapons in the war, remains vague. The authors handed it to their sponsors in the Defense Department, never to hear of it again.¹⁰⁹ However, Seymour Deitchman, at the time at the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), a federally funded research center under contract to the Defense Department, and acknowledged in the report, wrote later that the report went to McNamara’s office. IDA provided administrative and technical support for the JASON group. Deitchman recalled briefings on the JASON studies of that summer to three audiences: the JASONS themselves, John McNaughton – then Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, who managed the JASON relationship with McNamara – and McNamara himself.¹¹⁰

Deitchman recalled clearly the nuclear weapons study briefing to the JASONS. ‘I remember being struck by the main conclusion, that if we started down that route [using nuclear weapons] we risked being hurt much more than the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong....’ McNamara received briefings on the JASON studies every year, and, according to Deitchman, was likely briefed in late August or early September 1966. This probably included a briefing on the nuclear weapons study, although Deitchman did not remember for sure. According to Deitchman, after the briefings, the report was never circulated.

Since the Defense Department had to sign off on the topics for the JASON studies (which were chosen by the JASONS themselves), why would it agree to a study on tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam? Here

¹⁰⁷ Author interview, Austin, TX, 2 Dec. 1998.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Jason Division: Division Consultants Who Are Also Professors are Attacked’, *Science* (2 Feb. 1973), 461.

¹⁰⁹ Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe*, 149.

¹¹⁰ Seymour Deitchman, commentary and interview on Dyson report, 25 Feb. 2003, at <www.nautilus.org/archives/VietnamFOIA/report/insider.html>.

we have only faint but intriguing outlines. Deitchman recalled recurring talk around the Pentagon that spring and summer about using tactical nuclear weapons to block passes between North Vietnam and Laos, especially the Mu Gia Pass, a key part of the supply route heading south. The pass was heavily and unsuccessfully bombed by B-52s starting in July 1966, with heavy losses for the United States.¹¹¹ Thus when the JASONs proposed the nuclear weapons study topic, McNaughton and McNamara might have found it a useful device for showing what a bad idea using nuclear weapons would be.

It thus remains unclear what effect the report had. It is likely that it had little or no influence on McNamara himself because he was already adamantly opposed to use of nuclear weapons. By this point in time, he was also increasingly skeptical that the war could be won by deploying more troops to South Vietnam and intensifying the bombing of North Vietnam (he offered his resignation to Johnson in November 1967, largely over disillusionment with the war). In a later interview, McNamara did not remember the study or the briefing, but conceded that the briefing could have happened. He said that he himself would have had no need for such a study, since he and his assistant McNaughton were already totally opposed to nuclear weapons, but that did not mean it was not useful.¹¹²

It might have, for example, helped him put an end to loose talk about nuclear options. When Deitchman returned to the Pentagon in the fall of 1966, he heard no further talk of using nuclear weapons in Vietnam. ‘Although I don’t know,’ he recalled, ‘I think it is reasonable to conclude from that that if consideration had been given to the idea before the study, Mr. McNamara simply dismissed it as something not to think about seriously, and therefore the talk simply went away.’¹¹³ The acuteness of the conclusions of the study regarding US vulnerabilities, both military and political, may bear some credit for this.

Khe Sanh

The one attempt by the Johnson administration itself to look closely at the military utility of nuclear weapons – to relieve the siege of the Marine garrison at Khe Sanh in early 1968 – aborted quickly in a public relations nightmare. This was perhaps the moment of gravest risk of the kind anticipated by the JASONs. New evidence suggests that top administration officials discussed the topic at several meetings

¹¹¹See ‘Targeting Ho Chi Minh Trail,’ at <www.nautilus.org/VietnamFOIA/background/HoChiMinhTrail.html>.

¹¹²Personal communication with author, 3 March 2003.

¹¹³Seymour Deitchman, commentary on Dyson report, 25 Feb. 2003.

throughout the tense key days of late January and early February 1968, albeit with a tone of the greatest reluctance.¹¹⁴ Johnson made clear he had no wish to face a decision on use of nuclear weapons and repeatedly sought assurance from military leaders that they had adequate conventional forces to defend Khe Sanh.

In a memo to General Wheeler on 31 January 1968, Robert Ginsburgh, Walt Rostow's deputy on the NSC and its liaison to the JCS, noted that if a desperate situation developed at Khe Sanh, where 6,000 Marines were besieged by 15,000 to 20,000 North Vietnamese troops, 'the issue of TAC NUCS [tactical nuclear weapons] will be raised'. Ginsburgh asked Wheeler whether contingency target analysis would be in order. Handwritten on the memo were notations that plans should be 'very very very closely held'.¹¹⁵ Ginsburgh and Rostow had apparently already been discussing the issue for a week or so.¹¹⁶

The next day Wheeler solicited the views of General Westmoreland and Admiral Ulysses S.G. Sharp, American commanders in Vietnam, on whether nuclear weapons should be used if the situation became desperate. Noting the perceived parallels between Khe Sanh and Dien Bien Phu, he asked whether there were suitable targets for nuclear strikes, whether some contingency planning might be in order, and 'what you consider to be some of the more significant pros and cons'. He cautioned them to 'hold this subject very closely'.¹¹⁷ Westmoreland and Sharp had apparently already discussed the need for some planning on the issue, and had already instituted it 'under the strictest need to know basis', Sharp wrote back the next day.¹¹⁸ All three military leaders thought the use of nuclear weapons an unlikely eventuality but felt military prudence alone required some such planning.¹¹⁹

As requested, Westmoreland began to convene a secret study group to analyze nuclear options. But almost immediately Washington quashed it, fearing – too late – that it would leak to the press. Johnson's political advisers reversed course, moving rapidly to forestall any request for a nuclear option from the JCS by making sure

¹¹⁴Walt Rostow Papers, Tom Johnson Papers, LBJL.

¹¹⁵Memo to Gen. Wheeler from Robert N. Ginsburgh, 31 Jan. 1968, NSF, Walt Rostow Papers, Box 7, LBJL.

¹¹⁶Memo from Walt Rostow to President Johnson, 3 Feb. 1968. NSF, Rostow, Box 7, LBJL.

¹¹⁷Gen. Wheeler to Gen. Westmoreland and Adm. Sharp (JCS 01154), 1 Feb. 1968, NS Files, NSC Histories, 'March 31st Speech, Volume 2,' Box 47, LBJL.

¹¹⁸Cable from Adm. Sharp to Gen. Wheeler (JCS 01154), 2 Feb. 1968, NSF, NSC Histories, 'March 31st Speech, Volume 2,' Box 47, LBJL.

¹¹⁹Handwritten memo to Walt Rostow from Robert Ginsburgh, transmitting copies of Wheeler cable. Undated but sometime before Feb. 10, 1968. Also Memo from Walt Rostow to the President, 10 Feb. 1968. Both in NSF, Rostow, Box 7, LBJL.

Westmoreland had all the conventional forces he needed to defend Khe Sanh. Rostow suggested in a memo to the president on 2 February that Westmoreland be offered an extra reserve division, explaining his 'desire to avoid a situation of battlefield crisis in which Westy and the JCS would ask you to release tactical nuclear weapons'. He also urged that General Wheeler be informed that it was his duty to minimize the likelihood that the Chiefs would raise the nuclear issue.¹²⁰

In a memo the next day General Wheeler sought to reassure the President, writing that 'the use of nuclear weapons should not be required in the present situation'. But he did not rule them out. 'Should the situation in the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone] 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.'¹²¹ In a memo to Johnson the same day, apparently spurred by suggestions in the press and other parts of the government that high-level considerations of nuclear weapons were under way, Rostow apologized for his blunder in raising the issue with General Wheeler and the commanders, which inadvertently created the impression that the government was thinking about using nuclear weapons. He explained that it was never his intent that any 'formal staff work' be done on the nuclear issue, adding that 'the fault, therefore, is mine'.¹²² On 11 February, Johnson ordered the termination of contingency planning on use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam.¹²³

In other words, not only should nuclear weapons not be used, nuclear options should not even be studied. No analysis should be permitted, nor even the appearance of it. The taboo qualities emerge sharply here – something that is not done, not said, not analyzed, not thought about. Johnson was later privately furious about the 'irresponsibility with respect to our planning to use nuclear weapons'.¹²⁴

Westmoreland, a consistent advocate of greater force in Vietnam, wrote in his memoirs that he thought consideration of tactical nuclear

¹²⁰Memo to the President from Walt Rostow, 2 Feb. 1968. NSF, Rostow, Box 7, LBJL.

¹²¹Memo for the President from Gen. Wheeler, 3 Feb. 1968, CM-2944-68, NSF, NSC History, 31 March speech, Vol. 6, Khe Sanh reports, A-S, Box 48, LBJL. John Prados and Ray W. Stubbe, *Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1991), 291.

¹²²Memo from Walt Rostow to President Johnson, 3 Feb. 1968. NSF, Rostow, Box 7, LBJL.

¹²³Telegram JSC 1690 to CINCPAC, 11 Feb., 1968, in NSC History, 31 March speech, Vol. 2, Tabs A-Z and AA-ZZ.

¹²⁴David M. Barrett (ed.), *Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam Papers* (College Station: Texas A & M UP 1997), 722.

options at Khe Sanh a prudent idea. The region around Khe Sanh was virtually uninhabited so civilian casualties would be minimal. He saw analogies to the use of atomic bombs in World War II to send a message to Japan, as well as to the role of US nuclear threats to North Korea which many thought had ended the Korean War. He wrote that 'use of a few small tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam – or even the threat of them – might have quickly brought the war there to an end'. If Washington officials were so intent on 'sending a message' to Hanoi, surely small tactical nuclear weapons would do this effectively. Westmoreland felt at the time and even more strongly later that failure to consider the nuclear alternative was a 'mistake'.¹²⁵

Despite the administration's efforts, rumors that it was contemplating the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam swirled nonetheless, and the resulting popular outcry illustrated the extreme sensitivity of the issue. When Senator Eugene McCarthy, campaigning for president, aired the matter publicly a few days later, the White House and Pentagon vehemently denied that nuclear weapons were under consideration.¹²⁶ General Wheeler told a Senate subcommittee that he did not think nuclear weapons were needed for Khe Sanh's defense, but if it developed that they were, the JCS would recommend to President Johnson that they be used.¹²⁷ On 9 February, testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Rusk denied the existence of any plans for use, or of stockpiles, of nuclear weapons in Vietnam, but failed to rule out use entirely. Senator William Fulbright, chairman of Committee, denounced the possibility of use of nuclear weapons.¹²⁸ Although a few members of Congress called for use of nuclear weapons if necessary to avoid a 'disastrous defeat' at Khe Sanh, they were the exception.¹²⁹ British Prime Minister Harold Wilson, on a visit to Washington during this debate, said bluntly during a television

¹²⁵William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1976), 338.

¹²⁶*Washington Post*, 12 Feb. 1968.

¹²⁷'Wheeler Doubts Khe Sanh will Need Atom Weapons', *New York Times*, 15 Feb. 1968.

¹²⁸'Fulbright and Rusk Clash on Atom Talk', *Washington Post*, 17 Feb. 1968. The Congressional inquiry was prompted in part by speculations about the reasons for sending four nuclear scientists to Vietnam. The scientists were in fact being sent to study the 'McNamara Line' – an electronic barrier to prevent North Vietnamese infiltration across the demilitarized zone separating the two Vietnams. 'Rumors on Use of Atomic Arms Stirred by "Experts" Asian Trips', *New York Times*, 11 Feb. 1968.

¹²⁹Letter to the President from Congressman Charles Bennett, 31 Jan. 1968, and Letter to Charles Bennett from Barefoot Sanders, 1 Feb. 1968. NSF, Country File, Vietnam, Box 102, Folder: Vietnam 7F (2)b, 12/67-3/68, Congressional Attitudes and Statements [1 of 2], LBJL.

interview that it would be ‘sheer lunacy’ for the United States to use tactical nuclear weapons. It would not only be ‘disastrous’ to America’s position, he said, but it would also ‘run a very, very great risk of escalation for the world’.¹³⁰

In a press statement on 9 February and again during a news conference on the 16th, President Johnson stated categorically that Rusk, McNamara, and the JCS had ‘at no time had ever considered or made a recommendation in any respect to the deployment of nuclear weapons’.¹³¹ He emphasized that any decision to use nuclear weapons rested with the President. Johnson’s categorical denial was probably somewhat overstated. It was true that the President had not received any requests for use of nuclear weapons. He had not received definite assurances from the JCS that they would never make such a request, however. Nor were the Joint Chiefs able to give Johnson the categorical assurance that Khe Sanh could be held without nuclear weapons and under bad weather conditions that hindered conventional air support.

Overall, during the Khe Sanh crisis, political leaders displayed much greater concern, and spent much more time dealing with, the public relations dimension of nuclear weapons than their actual utility at Khe Sanh. As a *Washington Post* article put it, ‘Pentagon weapons experts contended the technical problems [e.g. radioactive fallout] were *almost as large as* the political problems in using nuclear weapons.’¹³² On 9 March, the *Washington Post* editorialized that use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam would be a ‘disaster’.¹³³ When Johnson administration officials met on 25 March with the ‘Wise Men’—a group of former high officials consulting on US military options in Vietnam—to make decisions on the failing war effort in the wake of the Tet offensive, the nuclear ‘lesson’ of Khe Sanh was likely reflected. Rejecting a new troop request for 200,000 more soldiers, they also concluded, with no evident discussion, that ‘use of atomic weapons is unthinkable’.¹³⁴

Public opinion remained opposed to use of nuclear weapons in the war, even in the face of increasing American casualties in Vietnam. In the first stages of the war (1964–66), only limited support existed for using nuclear weapons—about 15 percent approved taking such a step. As the war continued, support for using nuclear weapons increased to

¹³⁰ ‘A-Arm Use Called Lunacy by Wilson’, *Washington Post*, 12 Feb. 1968.

¹³¹ *Public Papers of the Presidents: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968–69, Book I* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office 1970), 234.

¹³² *Washington Post*, 10 Feb. 1968. Emphasis added.

¹³³ ‘Use of Nuclear Weapons is an Invitation to Disaster’, *Washington Post*, 9 March 1968.

¹³⁴ Summary of Notes by M. Bundy concerning Wise Men’s meeting, 26 March 1968. Meeting Notes File, Special Advisory Group, Box 2, LBJL.

24 percent and then to 42 percent.¹³⁵ But on a question asked both before and after the winter 1968 Tet offensive about the use of 'atomic ground weapons', a Harris poll found the answer the same in both cases: about 25 percent in favor, 55 percent opposed. When the question was worded more aggressively – whether respondents would agree or disagree with the view that 'we should go all-out to win a military victory in Vietnam, using atomic bombs and weapons' – some 26 percent approved and, higher than on the Harris 'ground weapon' question, about 65 percent disapproved.¹³⁶ Thus attitudes in support of using nuclear weapons in Vietnam never reached a plurality or majority.¹³⁷

It might be argued that Johnson and McNamara were committed to using nuclear weapons if they had to, but that they avoided the dilemma (and many other dilemmas) by consistently arguing that the United States was winning without them, and thus they were unnecessary. Or, as at Khe Sanh, US leaders added more conventional forces to make nuclear weapons seem unnecessary. As Thomas Schelling has argued, however, this kind of avoidance behavior – ensuring there will be conventional alternatives – itself is powerful evidence of a taboo.¹³⁸

At a retrospective conference on the Vietnam War in 1997, McNamara denied forcefully that world public opinion constrained US use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam. He insisted instead that 'it was because it was neither militarily desirable nor morally acceptable. . . . It had nothing whatever to do with what the world might have thought about it.' He continued, 'Presidents Kennedy and Johnson made clear and concrete, unqualified decisions not to use nuclear weapons – particularly because it was considered morally unacceptable. That was also my recommendation to them. I was with each of them, on separate occasions, when they made these decisions. The use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam was never considered viable.'¹³⁹

Given the significant role that negative public opinion played in shaping American decision-making on the war more generally,

¹³⁵Thomas W. Graham, *American Public Opinion on NATO, Extended Deterrence, and Use of Nuclear Weapons: Future Fission?* CSIA Occasional Paper No. 4 (Cambridge: Center for Science and International Affairs, Kennedy School of Government 1989), 14–15.

¹³⁶John Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (NY: John Wiley 1973), 105.

¹³⁷This pattern of public attitudes toward nuclear weapons (low support for use at first, then higher, but only under certain limited conditions) fits the same general pattern found during the Korean War, although the magnitudes differ. The American public was less willing to recommend the use of atomic weapons in Vietnam than in Korea.

¹³⁸Thomas Schelling, 'The Role of Nuclear Weapons', in L. Benjamin Ederington and Michael J. Mazarr (eds.), *Turning Point: The Gulf War and US Military Strategy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1994), 112–13.

¹³⁹Blight, *Missed Opportunities?*, 88.

McNamara's strong claim might seem implausible. His statement underscores the degree to which he and others believed that using nuclear weapons was simply 'wrong;' namely that it was not a matter of appeasing other's views, rather '*we* thought it was wrong'.

Nixon and Kissinger

In stark contrast, the nuclear taboo operated primarily as an instrumental, rather than internalized, constraint on the top officials of the Nixon administration, who exhibited no such personal reluctance about exploring nuclear options. Because Nixon's papers have yet to be opened, few primary documents are available, and a full understanding of how Nixon thought about use of nuclear weapons remains for the future. What follows is a suggestive analysis based mostly on memoirs (which must be used with care), accounts by journalists, and a few newly released primary sources.

President Nixon, the archetypal anti-Communist hawk, dreamed of ending the Vietnam War with a 'knockout blow'. He believed that US nuclear threats had ended the Korean War, and expected to utilize the same threat of excessive use of force to bring victory in Vietnam. Describing his 'madman theory' to longtime aide H. R. Haldeman in fall 1968, Nixon would convince North Vietnamese leaders that he was obsessed with winning the war and willing to unleash the most ruthless violence against their country if they did not end it, implying a nuclear threat.¹⁴⁰

Nixon was a strong advocate of US nuclear superiority and, like Eisenhower, whom he had served as vice president, a believer in the efficacy of nuclear threats. Although he believed a nuclear war with the Soviet Union would be a disaster, he does not appear to have viewed nuclear weapons themselves with any particular moral compunction. In every Cold War crisis, Nixon had always urged escalation and greater use of force. As vice president in 1954 under Eisenhower, he had supported the deployment of US troops to replace French losses in Vietnam and the following year had advocated that the United States use atomic weapons to halt Chinese moves into Vietnam.¹⁴¹ In 1964 he had urged retaliatory strikes against Laos and North Vietnam. He later

¹⁴⁰H.R. Haldeman with Joseph DiMona, *The Ends of Power* (NY: Times Books 1978), 82–83. On Nixon's madman theory, see Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas Press 1998), Ch. 4.

¹⁴¹In a speech in Chicago in March 1955, Nixon 'warned the Chinese Communists in the bluntest terms that they would be met with atomic weapons if they embarked on any new aggression...[and] a war breaks out in the Pacific... Tactical atomic explosives are now conventional and will be used against the targets of any aggressive

opposed the Johnson administration's efforts to start negotiations with Hanoi as a sign of weakness. During the 1968 presidential campaign, he attacked the Johnson administration for its policy of gradualism in the use of force.¹⁴² Nixon often told aides in the early days of his administration, 'I don't intend to be the first president to lose a war.'¹⁴³

Nixon, who prided himself on being tough, stated in an interview with *Time* magazine in 1985 that he had considered the use of nuclear weapons four times during his administration, one of which was to end the Vietnam War. He told *Time* that he had rejected the bombing of dikes, 'which would have drowned 1 million people, for the same reason that I rejected the nuclear option. Because the targets presented were not military targets.'¹⁴⁴

Henry Kissinger, Nixon's national security adviser, repudiated publicly Nixon's claim that he had considered a nuclear option, however. Kissinger reported in an interview that 'I can safely say that there was never a concrete occasion or crisis in which the use of nuclear weapons was considered by the government.'¹⁴⁵ He added, 'None of these crises reached a point where there was any planning to use nuclear weapons. There was never any decision – even contingent decision – to use nuclear weapons if such a contingency should arise. And there was never any discussion of how far we would be prepared to go in these contingencies.'

These statements, and the record on Nixon's and Kissinger's attitudes toward the use of nuclear weapons more generally, are difficult to interpret. Because of Nixon's penchant for hyperbole and inflated rhetoric, and because key memoir accounts of this period are unusually ideological and selective, the available evidence often appears contradictory. According to Stephen Ambrose, a leading Nixon biographer, in Nixon's considerations of how to end the war, use of atomic weapons 'on the model of Japan in World War II' was 'out of

force ...'. Richard J.H. Johnston, 'Nixon Gives Reds Warning on Atom', *New York Times*, 18 March 1955, 16.

¹⁴²Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, 410.

¹⁴³Roger Morris, *Uncertain Greatness: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (NY: Harper & Row 1977), 154.

¹⁴⁴'What the President Saw: A Nation Coming into Its Own', *Time*, 29 July 1985, 48–53. 'Nixon Says He Considered Using Atomic Weapons on 4 Occasions', *New York Times*, 22 July 1985. The other three occasions were during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the intensification of the Soviet-Chinese border dispute (he made an implied nuclear threat), and the 1971 India-Pakistan War.

¹⁴⁵'An Interview with Henry A. Kissinger: "We Were Never Close to Nuclear War"', *Washington Post*, 11 Aug. 1985.

the question'.¹⁴⁶ It does not seem to have been entirely out of the question, and especially not for Kissinger, however, whose denial appears overstated with respect to the case of Vietnam.

During the review process of Vietnam even before his inauguration, Nixon says he considered and – with apparent regret – rejected either bombing dikes or using nuclear weapons, saying he ‘could not allow my heart to rule my head’ – his heart wanting the knockout blow, his head constrained by the public outrage he knew it would provoke. Had he chosen either of these courses of action, he acknowledged, ‘the resulting domestic and international uproar would have damaged our foreign policy on all fronts’.¹⁴⁷ He also noted it would have hampered improved relations with the Soviet Union and China. His reasoning was largely instrumental, and he never ruled out use of nuclear weapons in general.

Earlier, during both the 1964 and 1968 presidential campaigns, Nixon had come out against use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam. In August 1964, he had written in a *Reader's Digest* article that ‘I am firmly opposed to the use of nuclear devices of any sort, not only because of the disastrous effect this would have on world opinion, but because it is wholly unnecessary.’¹⁴⁸ In October 1968, running again for president, Nixon was able to make hay when General Curtis LeMay, former commander of SAC and presidential candidate George Wallace’s running mate, said in his first press conference that he would use nuclear weapons immediately in Vietnam. Nixon said he ‘disagreed completely’ and accused Wallace’s American Independent Party of irresponsible and excessively hawkish attitudes on foreign affairs.¹⁴⁹ Wallace went down to defeat with only 13.5 percent of the popular vote. Nixon’s public opposition during his campaigns to use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam appeared to be dictated largely by the instrumental needs of the campaign, since, according to his own account, once he gained the presidency, the nuclear option was one of the first things he thought about.

Nixon’s interest in exploring nuclear options as president was matched, and perhaps even exceeded, by that of his National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. Kissinger, in his former life as an academic, had written a bestselling book, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*,

¹⁴⁶Stephen Ambrose, *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician, 1962–1972* (NY: Simon & Schuster 1989), 223.

¹⁴⁷Richard M. Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (NY: Arbor House 1985), 102; Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (NY: Grosset & Dunlap 1978), 347–8.

¹⁴⁸Richard M. Nixon, ‘Needed in Vietnam: The Will to Win,’ *Reader's Digest*, Aug. 1964, 37–43.

¹⁴⁹Ambrose, *Nixon*, 193.

which advocated use of tactical nuclear weapons in limited wars.¹⁵⁰ Increasingly critical of nuclear strategies based on massive retaliation, he argued that strategies of limited nuclear war would be more useful for both warfighting and diplomacy. Since the book's publication in 1957, Kissinger had drawn back from aspects of that policy, but he continued to be a strong advocate of the development of limited nuclear options. At his instigation, one of the first goals of the Nixon White House was to revise US nuclear strategy to provide for more limited nuclear options. In 1969, with the Soviet Union approaching parity with the United States in nuclear forces, Kissinger tasked the NSC staff to develop a strategy in which the nuclear options actually seemed usable.¹⁵¹ Several years later, in a March 1976 interview in *US News and World Report*, Kissinger admitted publicly that, although non-nuclear means of responding to aggression was preferable, he would not exclude the use of nuclear weapons in certain limited situations.¹⁵²

Vietnam Contingency Planning

During this same period, planning began on more aggressive options for Vietnam. On 27 January 1969, Nixon, Kissinger, General Wheeler, and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird met to discuss military options 'which might jar the North Vietnamese into being more forthcoming at the Paris talks'. On 21 February, Laird forwarded to Kissinger a preliminary JCS report on the matter. The top secret report identified five fairly aggressive scenarios, the last one involving actual or feigned 'technical escalation' – use of nuclear, biological or lethal chemical weapons. As part of the feint, atomic and chemical warfare experts would be conspicuously sent to the Far East. The report's evaluation of this option cautioned that use of such weapons in Vietnam 'would excite very strong public and Congressional reaction', adding that 'the predictable reaction worldwide [to this scenario], particularly in Japan and Okinawa... militate against its employment'.¹⁵³

Neither Laird, Kissinger, nor Kissinger's military assistant Colonel Alexander Haig were favorably disposed toward the proposals. In transmitting the report to Kissinger, Haig commented that the plans were 'more extensive than the type you and the President visualized as

¹⁵⁰Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*.

¹⁵¹Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 117; Terry Terriff, *The Nixon Administration and the Making of US Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1995), 52–53, 54–60, 60–69.

¹⁵²*US News and World Report*, March 1976.

¹⁵³SM-71-69, Haig Special File, Vietnam Files (Jan.–March 1969), Box 1007, NSC Files, NPMP.

acceptable signals of US intent to escalate military options in Vietnam'.¹⁵⁴ Kissinger found the plans 'well conceived' but inappropriate for the 'realities' of the current domestic and international environment, and suggested more 'subtle' options.¹⁵⁵

Operation 'Duck Hook'

Shortly, however, Kissinger chose to look into the less subtle options. During the same period that the NSC was being tasked to study limited nuclear options, Kissinger was investigating nuclear contingencies with respect to Vietnam. The key case is Operation 'Duck Hook', a plan for a massive use of force against North Vietnam developed in the spring and summer of 1969.¹⁵⁶ The primary source for this account, Seymour Hersh's investigative reporting, based largely on interviews, is suggestive but cannot be considered authoritative. Developed by Kissinger and a few associates, the 'Duck Hook' operation called for massive bombing of Hanoi, Haiphong, and other key areas in North Vietnam; the mining of harbors and rivers; the bombing of the Red River dike system; a ground invasion of North Vietnam; the blockading of Sihanoukville, the destruction – possibly with nuclear weapons – of the main north–south passes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail; and the bombing of North Vietnam's main railroad links with China. A separate, even more secret study dealt with the implications of using tactical nuclear weapons on the rail lines, the main funnel for supplies from the Soviet Union and China.¹⁵⁷ According to Haldeman, Nixon's chief of staff and confidante, Kissinger had lobbied for nuclear options in the spring and fall of 1969.¹⁵⁸

In late August, Nixon reviewed 'K's contingency plan for Vietnam' but did not make a decision one way or another. In late August and into

¹⁵⁴Memo for Kissinger from Haig, 2 March 1969, and Memo for Kissinger from Laird, 21 Feb. 1969, Haig Special File, Vietnam Files (Jan.–March 1969), Box 1007, NSC Files, NPMP.

¹⁵⁵Memo for Laird from Kissinger, 3 March 1969, Haig Special File, Vietnam Files (Jan.–March 1969), Box 1007, NSC Files, NPMP.

¹⁵⁶For a discussion of what historian Jeffrey Kimball calls Kissinger's 'disingenuous chronology' of this plan's evolution in his memoirs, and a careful effort to reconstruct an accurate chronology, see Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 159–65. Kissinger implies that planning only started in 'September and October' (rather than as early as April). His support for the plan appeared to be greater than he revealed in his memoirs.

¹⁵⁷Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (NY: Summit Books 1983), 120.

¹⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 128–29. H.R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (NY: Putnam's 1994), 69–70, 83. Again, this source cannot be considered authoritative.

September, Kissinger feared that Nixon's mental resolve for a resolute stance on the war was wavering, and he took steps to urge Nixon to approve what was being referred to as the November Option – a 'savage, decisive blow' against North Vietnam to end the war. On 9 September, Kissinger met with General Wheeler to 'discuss military planning for the Duck Hook operation... and to convey to him the president's personal mandate that planning be held in strictly *military* channels', which would thereby preclude discussing the plan even with the secretary of defense.¹⁵⁹

In late August or early September, Kissinger assembled a select group of his staff to undertake a top secret study 'to explore the military side of the coin' – that is, the existing 'Duck Hook' studies.¹⁶⁰ He described it to them as a 'very, very sensitive matter'. In *White House Years*, Kissinger wrote that he told the group that what was needed was a 'military plan designed for maximum impact on the enemy's military capability' in order to 'force a rapid conclusion to the war'.¹⁶¹ These options might include the use of a tactical nuclear weapon in a single, carefully controlled situation.¹⁶² A top secret 'Concept of Operations' document of mid-September stated US resolve 'to apply whatever force necessary' to achieve basic objectives in Southeast Asia. International and domestic pressures, and the possibility of Soviet or Chinese reaction would be important factors 'but will not necessarily rule out bold or imaginative actions...'.¹⁶³ The document did note that bombing the dikes would raise 'particular problems' in the United States.

Kissinger told the group, 'I refuse to believe that a little fourth-rate power like North Vietnam doesn't have a breaking point. The Johnson administration could never come to grips with this problem. We intend to come to grips.'¹⁶⁴ When one staff member asked about the possible

¹⁵⁹William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, 'Nixon's Secret Nuclear Alert: Vietnam War Diplomacy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test, October 1969', *Cold War History* 3/2 (Jan. 2003), 113–56.

¹⁶⁰'The September Group,' as some called it, included Anthony Lake, Winston Lord, Laurence Lynn, Roger Morris, Peter Rodman, Helmut Sonnenfeldt, William Watts, Col. Alexander Haig, Col. William Lemnitzer, and Capt. Rembrandt C. Robinson. Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 163.

¹⁶¹Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown 1979), 284.

¹⁶²Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 163.

¹⁶³'Vietnam Contingency Planning: Concept of Operations', 16 Sept. 1969. I thank Jeffrey Kimball for sharing this document.

¹⁶⁴Tad Szulc, *The Illusion of Peace: Foreign Policy in the Nixon Years* (NY: Viking Press 1978), 150. According to Szulc's interviews, Kissinger went on to say: 'It shall be the assignment of this group to examine the option of a savage, decisive blow against North Vietnam, militarily. You are to start without any preconceptions at all. You are to sit down and map out what would be a savage, decisive blow. You are to examine

use of nuclear weapons, Kissinger replied that it was ‘the policy of this administration not to use nuclear weapons.’ But he did not exclude the use of ‘a nuclear *device*’ to block a key railroad pass to China if that should prove the only way of doing it. One participant recalled later that ‘I guess we were all in a sort of a mild state of shock.’¹⁶⁵ The emphasis of the scenarios was on delivering savage air blows, to be repeated at intervals. The study was conducted only on the basis of military effectiveness. Few moral or political considerations entered the picture. According to an NSC aide, ‘The whole exercise struck me as being very cool and amoral, not judging it in terms of the loss of life or in terms of the escalation of the war, but simply in terms of effectiveness.’¹⁶⁶

It remains unclear whether the special group study ever actually considered the use of a nuclear device as an option for blockading North Vietnam. Tad Szulc reports that it did not, and that Kissinger is not known to have alluded to it again.¹⁶⁷ Kissinger aide Roger Morris said that he had been shown nuclear targeting plans, but other aides later told interviewers that they did not recall encountering any evidence that Nixon and Kissinger considered using a nuclear device in the ‘Duck Hook’ operation.¹⁶⁸ Haldeman apparently opposed use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam primarily because it might hurt Nixon’s reelection chances in 1972.¹⁶⁹ This issue clearly awaits clarification when primary sources become available.

Nixon continued his threats of dramatic escalation of the war during September and October 1969. To bolster them, he ordered a secret worldwide nuclear alert, one of the largest secret military operations in US history. It began 13 October and lasted a month.¹⁷⁰ However, as massive public protests against the war scheduled for 15 October and 13–15 November in the United States loomed, Nixon cancelled ‘Duck Hook’. In his memoirs, he suggests that the world-wide furor over

the option from every angle, you are to examine every detail of how it should be executed militarily, what the political scenario would be.’ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁶⁸Hersh, *Price of Power*, 98. Winston Lord told Jeffrey Kimball in a 1994 interview that he was incredulous at the idea that nuclear weapons were considered. Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 163.

¹⁶⁹Hersh, *Price of Power*, 129.

¹⁷⁰For a full account, see Burr and Kimball, ‘Nixon’s Secret Nuclear Alert’, and Scott Sagan and Jeremy Suri, ‘The Madman Nuclear Alert: Secrecy, Signaling and Safety in October 1969,’ *International Security* 27/4 (2003), 150–83.

escalation of the war undermined his plans.¹⁷¹ An NSC staffer remembered it differently, recalling that the attack plans were narrowly defeated mainly because of 'Nixon's uncertainty about military efficiency, not because of any larger doubts rooted in concern for domestic or foreign consequences'.¹⁷² Kissinger had backed away from the plan, persuaded in part by lengthy memos from NSC aides opposing the escalation plans, in particular a scathing and detailed critique of the military operation by Lawrence Lynn, a former Pentagon official then on the NSC staff, arguing that the blockade would not work.¹⁷³

Suppose Nixon had been able to *secretly* use tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam along the lines of the secret bombing of Cambodia. There is little reason to think he would not have done so. As it was, Nixon kept the 'Duck Hook' planning secret from even his secretaries of state and defense, William Rogers and Melvin Laird. When they found out about it – only when Nixon himself leaked the plan – they urged against it, emphasizing the mounting public opposition to escalating the war.¹⁷⁴

With the notable exception of the maverick Samuel Cohen, most scientists and civilian defense analysts involved in policy advising opposed use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam, for both military and moral reasons. Daniel Ellsberg, the RAND analyst, directed a comprehensive study of US military options in Vietnam requested by Kissinger in late 1968. Ellsberg adamantly refused to consider tactical nuclear options in the study. 'I wouldn't be party to a paper that suggested in any way that nuclear weapons deserved any consideration in Vietnam', he recalled later.¹⁷⁵ Two scientists who had been asked to review the 'Duck Hook' nuclear target folders in 1969 were distressed at the nuclear option, one of them worrying that use of nuclear weapons might bring in the Chinese. They urged Paul Doty, a leading Harvard biochemist and a friend of Kissinger's, to discourage the planning, and conveyed the same views to Haldeman, an old acquaintance of one of the scientists.¹⁷⁶ Even physicist Edward Teller, one of the nation's most hawkish scientists, and a longstanding proponent of nuclear arms,

¹⁷¹Nixon, *Memoirs*, 403–5. Nixon and Kissinger later both came to regret that they backed down, holding that they should have begun aggressive bombing operations of North Vietnam much earlier, in Feb. 1969. Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 173.

¹⁷²Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 165–66. Morris was an NSC staffer who resigned in 1970 over the secret bombing of Cambodia.

¹⁷³Hersh, *Price of Power*, 128; Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 165; Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 164.

¹⁷⁴Ambrose, *Nixon*, 301; William Bundy, *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency* (NY: Hill and Wang 1998), 80.

¹⁷⁵Ellsberg, *Secrets*, 233.

¹⁷⁶Hersh, *The Price of Power*, 129.

opposed using nuclear weapons in Vietnam on the grounds that they would not be useful against guerrillas. ‘Only a few idiots – and they were really idiots – suggested using nuclear weapons in Vietnam’,¹⁷⁷ he proclaimed.

Kissinger, however, did not have much use for scientists, especially because scientists on the President’s Science Advisory Committee did not give him the advice he wanted on anti-ballistic missiles. They appeared to have little influence on his thinking on nuclear weapons.

Spring 1972: In Final Pursuit of the Knock-Out Blow

In the spring of 1972, Nixon was considering escalation options in North Vietnam that would go ‘far beyond’ an all-out bombing attack. According to newly released White House tapes, on 25 April, a few weeks before he ordered a major escalation of the war, Kissinger presented him with a series of escalation options, including attacking North Vietnamese power plants and docks. Nixon said, ‘I still think we ought to take the dikes out now. Will that drown people?’ Kissinger responded, ‘About 200,000 people.’ Nixon stated, ‘No, no, no... I’d rather use the nuclear bomb. Have you got that, Henry?’ Kissinger replied, ‘That, I think, would just be too much.’ Nixon responded, ‘The nuclear bomb, does that bother you?... I just want you to think big, Henry, for Christssake.’¹⁷⁸

According to Haldeman’s diary, Nixon, Kissinger and Haig again discussed the possible use of nuclear weapons a week later, on 2 May, as peace negotiations became intractable. The topic arose during a meeting aboard the presidential yacht *Sequoia*, shortly after Kissinger’s return from the Paris negotiations, in the context of a discussion of military options to end the war. Nixon rejected the nuclear option, as well as an invasion of the North and the bombing of Red River dikes. He favored instead the blockading of North Vietnamese ports and the expansion of bombing north of the 20th parallel, commenting that he wanted ‘that place bombed to *smithereens*’.¹⁷⁹

On 4 May, discussing his decision with Kissinger, Haig and Treasury Secretary John B. Connally, Nixon thumped on his desk as he railed ‘South Vietnam may lose. But the United States *cannot* lose.... Whatever happens to South Vietnam, we are going to *cream* North Vietnam.... For once, we’ve got to use the maximum power of this

¹⁷⁷Gregg Herken, *Counsels of War* (NY: Knopf 1985), 17.

¹⁷⁸White House Tapes, 25 April 1972, EOB Tape 332-25, NPMP.

¹⁷⁹Haldeman Diary. Quotes from White House Tapes, 2 May 1972, Oval Office conversation, 717-20, NPMP.

country...against this *shit-ass* little country...'¹⁸⁰ The next day Nixon observed to Kissinger that civilian casualties are a result of all wars. 'The only place where you and I disagree ... is with regard to the bombing. You're so goddamned concerned about the civilians and I don't give a damn. I don't care.' Kissinger responded, 'I'm concerned about the civilians because I don't want the world to be mobilized against you as a butcher. We can do it without killing civilians.'¹⁸¹

Nixon's suggestions to use nuclear weapons against North Vietnam, or to implement other drastic measures that would kill a lot of civilians, were clearly reflections of his frustration with the war. But they were not a live option. It was clear by this point in the war – as it had really been clear all along – that use of nuclear weapons was not politically feasible, in terms of either domestic or international public sentiment. Nixon clarified this himself in an NSC meeting on 8 May, when he called for a 'cold-blooded analysis' of the current situation in Vietnam. After a discussion of mining options, Nixon explained, 'Whatever we do we must always avoid saying what we're not going to do, like nuclear weapons. I referred to them saying that I did not consider them necessary. *Obviously, we are not going to use nuclear weapons* but we should leave it hanging over them. We should also leave the threat of marines hanging over them...we shouldn't give reassurance to the enemy that we are not going balls out.'¹⁸²

Thus Nixon, who clearly harbored few personal inhibitions about violating an array of important democratic norms during his presidency when he thought could get away with it, was powerfully constrained from using nuclear weapons by the abhorrence and opposition of others. Haig, a hardliner who had served in Vietnam and later became secretary of state, and who had helped plan 'Duck Hook', attributed the nonuse of nuclear weapons in Vietnam and other Cold War conflicts to normative concerns – of others. He wrote in 1992, 'On the American side, the moral argument against the use of such weapons, or even the threat of their use, took on the force of religious belief.'¹⁸³ He argued against this moral perspective and worried that such inhibitions would undermine deterrence. 'Nevertheless,' he wrote, '... the mere existence of our superior power often bailed us out of potential disaster even though we were determined, in the depths of the national soul,

¹⁸⁰White House Tapes, 4 May 1972, EOB Tape 334-44, NPMP.

¹⁸¹White House Tapes, 5 May 1972.

¹⁸²Memo for the President's files (Top Secret-Eyes Only), 'National Security Council Meeting', 8 May 1972, NPMP, NSC Files, Box 998, Haig Memcons (Jan.–Dec. 1972), 10. Emphasis added.

¹⁸³Alexander M. Haig, Jr., *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World: A Memoir* (NY: Warner Books 1992), 28.

never to use it.’¹⁸⁴ Because of such moral inhibitions, he felt that no American president would resort to nuclear weapons except in the extreme case of the defense of Europe.

Referring to something as a religious belief suggests that it is held as a matter of faith and fervor, and is unsusceptible to – or at least distinct from – ‘rational’ argument. This often characterizes a taboo.

Conclusion

The tradition of nonuse of nuclear weapons held throughout the conflict in Vietnam. During the war, three US administrations progressively upped the level of violence and engaged in tremendously controversial policies. Yet, despite the enormous costs and frustrations of the war, all drew the line at use of nuclear weapons.

Several considerations motivated nonuse of nuclear weapons in Vietnam: the possibility of inadvertent and uncontrolled escalation with the consequences this entailed for US vulnerabilities, preservation of the tradition of nonuse, and finally a taboo, a normative belief that using nuclear weapons would be wrong. For many US leaders, nuclear weapons were morally repugnant. To be militarily decisive, such weapons would probably have to have been used in large numbers, and this would have been politically and normatively unacceptable.

It thus appears that the chances the Johnson administration would have used nuclear weapons in Vietnam were nearly zero, no matter what General Westmoreland, Wheeler or Admiral Sharp thought. In contrast, for Nixon and Kissinger – less influenced by personal moral convictions – the taboo operated primarily as an instrumental constraint on resort to nuclear weapons. Although Nixon talked a tough line, and sent notes to the North Vietnamese threatening massive uses of force if they did not agree to negotiate, in the end he and Kissinger were repeatedly rolled back from their aspirations for knockout blows by anticipated domestic and world public condemnation. Nixon probably did not personally share the nuclear taboo – he did not think it was ‘wrong’ to use nuclear weapons – but he was constrained because others, including members of his own bureaucracy, held it. The value of preserving the tradition of nonuse also does not appear to have weighed heavily in his thinking.

How much did the taboo matter vis-à-vis deterrence in explaining the nonuse of nuclear weapons in Vietnam? Soviet and Chinese nuclear forces may have prevented any US military thoughts of attacking Vietnamese sanctuaries inside China, but they did not prevent thoughts of attacking southern China with nuclear weapons in any expanded

¹⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 554.

war. The degree to which the United States could escalate the fighting inside Vietnam was the most open question.¹⁸⁵ Here US leaders worried not so much about an immediate Soviet nuclear response to a US nuclear strike in Vietnam – they thought such a response unlikely – as about long-term escalation concerns and US vulnerabilities in any large-scale war. Had US leaders held no normative inhibitions about using nuclear weapons, however, it is likely that military plans for their use would have received more serious consideration given the American – and conceivably even Vietnamese – lives such use could have saved.

It would be a mistake to draw too sharp a dichotomy between the force of the taboo and the force of escalation risks, however, because they are not entirely independent. The existence of a weapons taboo helps to shape judgments of what constitutes ‘escalation’ on the battlefield. If national leaders had viewed tactical nuclear weapons as ‘just another weapon’, the latter’s escalatory effect would have been judged quite differently, as would the psychological impact of their use. The taboo, by helping to define what constituted escalation in the first place, contributed to heightening decision-makers’ perception of such risks during the war.

Even Henry Kissinger was forced to confront the normative limitations on material power. Although he had written a book extolling the use of tactical nuclear weapons, once in the White House he found to his regret that nuclear nations ‘could not necessarily use this power to impose their will. The capacity to destroy proved difficult to translate into a plausible threat even against countries with no capacity for retaliation.’¹⁸⁶ He attributed this to the awesome destructive power of nuclear weapons. But as Kissinger knew well, sub-kiloton weapons are not all that awesome. So he was being a little disingenuous. Further, as the willingness of the North Vietnamese to fight the United States illustrated, material power alone does not make deterrence work. One of the major lessons of Vietnam for students and practitioners of international relations has been the normative and political limits on material power. Nowhere was this illustrated more clearly than in the nonuse of nuclear weapons during the war.

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¹⁸⁶Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown 1979) 66–67.

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