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## Bedeviled by a Paradox: Nitze, Bundy, and an Incipient Nuclear Norm

Reid B. C. Pauly

### ABSTRACT

This article explores how two influential American policy makers—Paul Nitze and McGeorge Bundy—wrestled with the idea of a norm against the use of nuclear weapons. Existing scholarship has overlooked how both Bundy and Nitze came to understand the idea of nuclear non-use, especially related to the credibility of threats to use nuclear weapons. Using documentary evidence from their personal papers, this article illuminates the thinking of Bundy and Nitze, finding that both engaged with the idea of a norm of non-use of nuclear weapons in their strategic writing and thought.

### KEYWORDS

history; US policy; non-use; no-first-use; deterrence; strategic stability; nuclear strategy; Cold War

On October 28, 1999, perennial government official and Cold War hawk Paul Nitze published his last op-ed for the *New York Times*. He wrote: “I see no compelling reason why we should not unilaterally get rid of our nuclear weapons.”<sup>1</sup> Before his death in 2004, Nitze had somehow reconciled his years of experience in nuclear policy making with an argument for disarmament.<sup>2</sup>

Nitze was not the only cold warrior to revise his views throughout his life and career.<sup>3</sup> Leaders sometimes change their beliefs to reflect new contexts or ideas.<sup>4</sup> These changes, whether conscious or unconscious, provide a window through which scholars can examine ideas over time.

In this article, I explore the thinking of Paul Nitze and McGeorge Bundy, two American policy makers, throughout their careers to assess their understanding of non-use of nuclear weapons as a norm. I argue that Nitze and Bundy, two of the most engaged minds of the nuclear era, wrestled with and came to appreciate the idea of a norm of nuclear non-use in their strategic writing and thinking. How did these two influential thinkers understand the idea of such a norm, and how did they reconcile this with their views on nuclear strategy?

The methodology of this article is informed by existing literature on the evolution of ideas, and the tradition of intellectual history.<sup>5</sup> Attributing the influence of ideas is a challenging research enterprise, given the potential of misinterpretation through the imposition of inauthentic connections between ideas and events, and the hubris to presume to know what someone was thinking. “There is a constant danger of turning a life event into an explanation for an idea, thereby creating an ‘aha!’ moment,” veteran biographer Richard Reeves writes. “These connections are deliciously tempting to the biographer, since they validate our entire enterprise. Sadly, it is rarely possible to connect life event A with idea B with any degree of plausibility.”<sup>6</sup> Tracking a history of ideas requires

the researcher to be alert to subtle clues, perceiving any coded language or implicit assumptions. The best place to start is with a new lens to examine the work of prominent thinkers who have left detailed records of their ideas. The two characters central to this analysis were chosen to leverage diverse historical sources and cover a breadth of intellectual and policy ground. Both were active at key moments of deliberation during the Cold War, and both left detailed records of their thinking.<sup>7</sup> Before engaging with each of these thinkers in turn, the next section will first define the competing intellectual camps that explain nuclear non-use.

## The Puzzling Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons

The non-use of nuclear weapons since 1945 is one of the most astonishing legacies of the nuclear age. As Cold War bipolar competition waxed and waned, new nuclear weapon states emerged, and limited wars intensified escalatory pressures, the non-use of nuclear weapons remained a constant in international relations. In some ways, their continued non-use has become more puzzling with each passing crisis. Contemporary political science has failed to develop a consensus explanation for the enigma of nuclear non-use—incentives to study dependent variables with actual variation in outcome lead most scholars to overlook puzzling status quo aspects of international relations. Nonetheless, the most promising line of research on the issue rests with normative explanations for the non-use of nuclear weapons. If one exists, a norm against the use of nuclear weapons is one of the strongest normative prohibitions on state behavior.

Three schools of thought characterize contemporary explanations of the non-use of nuclear weapons since 1945.<sup>8</sup> First, social constructivists argue that decisions to use or not to use nuclear weapons demonstrate the workings of a logic of appropriateness, in which normative conceptions of appropriate behavior, such as moral or ethical considerations, drive decision makers toward non-use. The “nuclear taboo” argument developed by Brown University’s Nina Tannenwald leads this camp. She conceives of a moral prohibition against the use of nuclear weapons that can restrict not only the decisions of policy makers but also the options they consider.<sup>9</sup> Second, the military utility school sees decisions about the use of nuclear weapons as driven by a logic of consequences, in which policy makers weigh the utility of military means to strategic ends. The non-use of nuclear weapons thus would be best explained by this school as a product of the inherent inefficacy of nuclear weapons in contingencies short of total war and the overwhelming logic of mutually assured destruction. Third, rational-functionalists see decisions on the use of nuclear weapons as similarly motivated by a logic of consequences, but with an appreciation of the longer-term impact of using nuclear weapons on a state’s own security. Nuclear weapon states do not wish to set a precedent on the legitimacy of the use of nuclear weapons for fear that they may be the victim of nuclear attack in the future; or they foresee a more dangerous and volatile world if nuclear weapon use were more common. Moreover, they fear the public censure that would come from breaking a “tradition of non-use.”<sup>10</sup> Thus policy makers are willing to forego the marginal military benefit of using nuclear weapons in exchange for maintaining the tradition of non-use and realizing long-term security benefits.

Neither Paul Nitze nor McGeorge Bundy fit neatly into one intellectual camp or another. Yet existing scholarship fails to note how both Bundy and Nitze wrestled with

the idea of nuclear non-use, especially as it related to the credibility of threats to use nuclear weapons. Without making a causal argument about the influence of norms on US policy, this article seeks to illuminate the thinking of Bundy and Nitze.

### **The Operator: Paul Nitze**

A seasoned Washington operator, Paul Nitze worked for nearly every presidential administration from Harry S. Truman to Ronald Reagan. Although not the most profound strategist of his generation, Nitze was a deft advisor. His views on nuclear weapons changed many times throughout the Cold War, circuitously evolving from a staunch hawk to nuclear disarmament advocate by the end of his life. Some of the fluctuations in Nitze's beliefs are consistent with his career moves in and out of government, befitting his reputation as an operator.<sup>11</sup> But there is also evidence to suggest that Nitze was truly wrestling with the impact that a norm of nuclear non-use might have on the credibility of US threats to use nuclear weapons. Through several vignettes, I present a non-traditional picture of Nitze the operator, pointing out contradictions but also consistencies in his thinking.

### ***Not an Absolute Weapon***

After World War II, Nitze headed the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS). His task was to assess the effectiveness of Allied bombing campaigns in Europe and Japan. Nitze's final report for USSBS concluded that the atomic bombs had not been decisive in bringing about the Japanese surrender. "Based on a detailed investigation of all of the facts, and supported by the testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders involved," wrote Nitze, "it is the Survey's opinion that certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated."<sup>12</sup> This was a surprising conclusion that reflected the opinion of a man who had assessed, first-hand, bombed-out cities for damage in terms of physical, industrial, and psychological effects. Above all, Nitze's conclusion rested on his assessment that the atomic bomb was not an "absolute weapon" and that Japan could have continued its war effort even after the bombings. Most notably he was struck by Japan's ability to have the trains in Nagasaki up and running within forty-eight hours after the explosion.<sup>13</sup> Overall, Nitze's experience in Hiroshima and Nagasaki led him to believe that nuclear weapons were no more than large conventional bombs.

### ***A New Kind of Bomb***

As nuclear technology advanced, however, Nitze began to change his mind. When called upon by Secretary of State Dean Acheson in 1949 to provide advice to a special committee (dubbed "Z") debating the creation of a hydrogen bomb, Nitze's thinking was less cavalier. Though he ended up supporting the decision to build the hydrogen bomb, Nitze qualified his thinking in a December 19, 1949, memo for the Z-Committee.<sup>14</sup> He clarified that he supported continuing research to determine the feasibility of creating a fusion reaction, though not necessarily constructing a weapon, should the experiments succeed. Moreover, he recommended a thorough re-examination of US policy in the Cold War, including

stating that “the possible employment of weapons of mass destruction, in the event of a hot war, is detrimental to the position of the U.S. in the Cold War.”<sup>15</sup>

How far did Nitze’s thinking about this re-examination go? In a surprising turn for a reputed Cold War hawk, there is some evidence that he wrestled with the possibility of articulating a doctrine of no-first-use. McGeorge Bundy, who was not in government at the time of the hydrogen bomb decision, reflected on it in an article for the *New York Review of Books* on May 13, 1982, called “The Missed Chance to Stop the H-bomb.” The article studied the decision-making process and mentions that Paul Nitze actually proposed that a de facto policy of no-first-use be considered by the administration. Referring to the policy recommendations, Bundy wrote: “... even Paul Nitze, in early 1950, thought that the State Department should probably press the case for [this policy]. But this policy, which we would now call ‘no-first-use,’ was never proposed by anyone to Truman, and it vanished later that winter as the military pressed its insistent conviction that usable nuclear superiority was both indisputable and attainable.”<sup>16</sup>

### ***Korea and Taiwan***

Nitze’s aversion to nuclear use manifested itself in other episodes during the Cold War, when he tied the use of nuclear weapons to reputational concerns. On November 4, 1950, Nitze wrote a memo to Secretary Acheson about considerations for using atomic weapons in Korea. He concluded that, if a bomb were to be used for tactical purposes, and only on military targets, the civilian damage would be minimal and it would prove effective for the UN mission.<sup>17</sup> However, Nitze urged against nuclear use in Korea because of his understanding of the reputational and normative implications of US actions. Given that the US military was in Korea under the auspices of the United Nations, Nitze understood that using the bomb would have “world-wide repercussions” and perhaps “leave us in a disadvantageous moral position.”<sup>18</sup>

Later, Nitze also objected to the use of atomic weapons to defend the islands of Quemoy and Matsu from Communist China. In 1958, after President Dwight D. Eisenhower had backed away from a plan to use nuclear weapons to defend Taiwan, Nitze attended a meeting with Senator Bill Fulbright (Democrat of Arizona), who turned to Nitze at one point and said, “You know, Paul, I wish the President had stayed with his decision to use the nuclear weapons.” “Good God, Bill,” replied Nitze, “you can’t really be serious about that!”<sup>19</sup> Around the same time, Nitze told Acheson, then-former secretary of state, that it was an “asinine” idea to use nuclear weapons to defend Taiwan.<sup>20</sup>

### ***NSC-68***

One of the main reasons for Nitze’s hawkish reputation was his drafting of National Security Council memorandum number 68 (NSC-68) in 1950, while director of the State Department Policy Planning Staff. In perhaps its most quoted sentence, NSC-68 laid down a policy of initiating “a substantial and rapid build-up of strength in the free world ... to support a firm policy intended to check and roll back the Kremlin’s drive for world domination.”<sup>21</sup> It called for a dramatic increase in military spending from the

proposed \$13 billion in 1951 up to \$35 or \$50 billion annually over the next few years.<sup>22</sup> As a re-examination of US policy in the Cold War, NSC-68 reflected three important aspects of Nitze's thinking: his deep distrust of the Soviet Union; his rejection of preventive war; and his concern for the credibility of asymmetric escalation. Many historians have overlooked the latter two points, which go unnoticed next to the document's vaulting rhetoric. But Nitze's hawkish stance actually opens up room for an argument *against* employing nuclear weapons.

Granted, NSC-68 sometimes reads like a paranoid tirade: "The fundamental design of those who control the Soviet Union," wrote Nitze, "... calls for the complete subversion or forcible destruction of the machinery of government and structure of society in the countries of the non-Soviet world. ... When it calculates that it has sufficient atomic capability to make a surprise attack on us ... the Kremlin might be tempted to strike swiftly and with stealth."<sup>23</sup> While the embellished prose of NSC-68 demonstrates Nitze's distrust of the USSR, it also reflects his willingness to use dramatic language to articulate a point and sway opinions.<sup>24</sup> "The task of a public officer seeking to explain and gain support for a major policy is not that of a doctoral thesis," Acheson once reflected on NSC-68. "Qualification must give way to simplicity of statement, nicety and nuance to bluntness, almost brutality, in carrying home a point."<sup>25</sup> But cutting through the hyperbolic language, the purpose of NSC-68 becomes much clearer. It was intended in part to counter arguments in favor of preventive war.<sup>26</sup> By increasing military spending on both conventional and nuclear forces, NSC-68 effectively undercut those within the government who argued that the United States should wage a preventive nuclear war against the USSR before Washington lost its nuclear superiority.

Nitze was also concerned about the credibility of the US threat of asymmetric escalation to atomic warfare. In NSC-68 he wrote:

The only deterrent we can present to the Kremlin is the evidence we give that we may make any of the critical points which we cannot hold the occasion for a global war of annihilation [(read: asymmetric nuclear escalation)]. The risk of having no better choice than to capitulate or precipitate a global war at any of a number of pressure points is bad enough in itself, but it is multiplied by the weakness it imparts to our position in the cold war.<sup>27</sup>

While it is unclear exactly what motivated Nitze's concern for the credibility of the US nuclear deterrent, a developing norm against the use of nuclear weapons may have been a contributing factor. If, as Nitze believed by 1950, nuclear war is distinct from conventional war, and the use of nuclear weapons would be "detrimental to the position of the United States in the Cold War" and "leave us in a disadvantageous moral position," then an adversary is less likely to find a threat to use nuclear weapons credible.<sup>28</sup> In other words, if some normative barrier exists to the use of nuclear weapons, then convincing an adversary that the United States would break that barrier is easier if escalation were more gradual.

Not everyone agrees with this interpretation. For example, Marc Trachtenberg of the University of California, Los Angeles, argues that NSC-68 "was not a defensive-minded, status quo-oriented document."<sup>29</sup> Yet Trachtenberg and others underemphasize Nitze's explicit rejection of preventive war. NSC-68, while packed with aggressive and hyperbolic language, was a balance between hawkish and status-quo policies, and reflected an author wary of the credibility of the American threat to use nuclear weapons.

### *Superiority, Surprise Attack, and Retaliation*

Nitze's fervent distrust of the Soviet Union also led him to believe in inherent Soviet inhumanity. He assumed that it was the Soviet Union, and never the United States, that would start a nuclear war.<sup>30</sup> Such sentiments likely drove his preoccupation with first-strike incentives, although University of Pennsylvania's Bruce Kuklick suggests that Nitze's prior study of crisis stability in World War I may have contributed as well.<sup>31</sup> Nitze's "Atoms, Strategy, and Policy," published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1956, is revealing on this front. Working outside of government at the time, Nitze was freer to speak his mind, and publicly opposed the doctrine of massive retaliation. Nitze favored graduated deterrence, a policy of "limiting wars (in weapons, targets, area and time) to the minimum force necessary to deter and repel aggression."<sup>32</sup> According to Nitze, a proper nuclear doctrine would ensure perpetual nuclear superiority for the United States—a superiority that would be possible to maintain indefinitely if Washington used its geographic advantage effectively. The article highlights the tension in Nitze's thinking between the importance of nuclear superiority to eliminate any incentive for a Soviet first strike, and his desire to meet aggression without nuclear force whenever possible.<sup>33</sup> If Paul Nitze grew to appreciate the existence of a norm against the use of nuclear weapons, he did not want it to undermine the credibility of the US deterrent (thus graduated deterrence); but he likely never felt that it was strong enough to regulate the behavior of the Soviet monolith (thus the necessity of superiority).

Nitze's oral history transcripts amplify these themes. In the 1980s, Nitze met several times with Steven Rearden and Ann Smith to prepare his memoir.<sup>34</sup> In one such meeting, Smith questioned Nitze on the chances of nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Nitze replied that the likelihood of such a war was never more than 50 percent, and was closer to 10 percent most of the time.<sup>35</sup> Still, Nitze focused on the incentives for a nuclear first strike by evaluating the Russian civil defense system and imagining a doomsday scenario in which the Soviet Union had launched a devastating first strike on the United States. Puzzled, his interlocutors asked what incentive the USSR had to launch a surprise attack. Nitze responded: "To win a war."<sup>36</sup> He further explained that a Soviet first strike would be for the purpose of knocking out most of the United States's offensive nuclear capabilities, leaving the United States with a painful choice between retaliation and surrender. Left with a few bombers from airborne alert and a fleet of submarines awaiting orders from mobile command, the United States would face an agonizing choice.<sup>37</sup> Is it acceptable for the United States to retaliate and invite a second round of strikes? Nitze's interlocutor responded: "If I were the president and still alive and somebody had just essentially blown the United States off the face of the map, I think I'd hurt them as badly as I could." But Nitze took issue with this sentiment. "I would think it perfectly obvious that it is not [an acceptable outcome]," he declared, "... if you have to stop it after the first round, why go the first round. Why not stop it right away. In which event they get off scot free."<sup>38</sup> With this, Paul Nitze admitted that his own practical decision in such traumatic circumstances would likely be not to launch in response to Soviet aggression.

Overall, Nitze's inconsistent thinking reflected his struggle with an emerging norm against the use of nuclear weapons. There were inklings during the early Cold War of his concern for the use of nuclear weapons by any nation, which may have provided a foundation for his surprising support for disarmament at the end of his life.<sup>39</sup>

## The Strategist: McGeorge Bundy

In contrast with Nitze, McGeorge Bundy never came to believe that disarmament was possible. Despite his passion for arms control, Bundy concluded that, as long as nuclear weapons existed, some form of nuclear deterrent was required. Instead of advocating superiority, Bundy coined the term “existential deterrence”—the notion that by their mere existence, nuclear weapons deterred their use by others. Bundy’s requirements for stable deterrence were thus much lower than Nitze’s. Bundy thought deeply about the credibility of nuclear threats and about strategies for preventing and mitigating nuclear war. In the process, he acknowledged a norm against the use of nuclear weapons, but never placed faith in it as a substitute for nuclear deterrence.<sup>40</sup> Despite Bundy’s recognition of the existence of a norm against the use of nuclear weapons, it did not have much of an impact on his strategic thought for two reasons: (1) Bundy believed that credible deterrence was not hard to achieve in the first place, and (2) he also believed that non-deterrent nuclear threats were ineffective. Bundy’s public writings and his private papers at the John F. Kennedy Library provide evidence for each of these beliefs.

### *Achieving Credible Deterrence*

McGeorge Bundy served as national security advisor to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. Known for his role in escalating the Vietnam War, Bundy also continually engaged with nuclear strategy, struggled with the concept of nuclear superiority, and came face-to-face with the limits of US nuclear threats in Vietnam. He also had a fruitful academic career outside of government, which provided him ample opportunity to reflect on US foreign policy and nuclear strategy.

On the back of the 1976 summer issue of *International Security*, Bundy wrote a note on the paradox of nuclear weapons: “Thinking about nuclear strategy has never been easy. The problem is bedeviled by a basic paradox: on the one hand a necessary major object of policy is that these weapons should not be used; but in order to achieve this object it is ineluctably required that all nuclear powers have some view of the characteristics that their weapons systems, and their believable will to use them, should have in the eye of an adversary.”<sup>41</sup> Years earlier, however, Bundy had already solved this paradox.

In the October 1969 edition of *Foreign Affairs*, Bundy published his famous article entitled “To Cap the Volcano.” Commenting on the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty debate and lessons for the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, he lamented the way policy makers blindly followed the proponents of technological development without considering the actual nuclear arsenal requirements for security. Bundy believed that credible deterrence, the sole purpose of nuclear forces, was relatively easy to achieve. Being “ahead” or having “superiority” meant nothing; it is a stalemate either way. “In light of the certain prospect of retaliation,” he wrote, “there has been literally no chance at all that any sane political authority, in either the United States or the Soviet Union, would consciously choose to start a nuclear war.”<sup>42</sup> For Bundy, contemplating the consequences of nuclear war would compel any leader to avoid the edge of the nuclear cliff. This contrasts with noted economist and game theorist Thomas Schelling’s theories of brinksmanship, which supposed a competition of risk taking near the edge of the cliff.<sup>43</sup> Believing in minimal requirements for stable deterrence, Bundy argued at a congressional hearing in 1983 that investments in



the US nuclear arsenal need not be dictated by the acquisition policies of the Soviet Union. The United States could scrap the MX missile, the B-1 bomber, and “take a far more cautious approach to the whole uncharted sea of the cruise missile.”<sup>44</sup>

While Bundy appreciated the uniqueness of nuclear weapons, credible deterrence was a much more important contributor to non-use than some regulative norm. His concept of “existential deterrence”—the notion that deterrence is strong by virtue of the existence of the weapons alone and distinct from “anything based on strategic theories or declared policies or even international commitments”—set a low bar for the credibility of deterrence.<sup>45</sup>

### *The Inefficacy of Non-Deterrent Nuclear Threats and “The Least Bad Thing”*

Bundy believed that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons was to deter their use by an adversary. He came to appreciate this having learned in Vietnam the limits of nuclear threats for any other purpose.<sup>46</sup> Writing in 1988, he argued that both superpowers learned from their respective experiences in Vietnam and Afghanistan that “nothing in their nuclear arsenals permits or supports foreign adventures or expansion by the great powers.”<sup>47</sup> Nuclear weapons, therefore, yielded “no political dividend.”<sup>48</sup> In an April 1984 speech at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Bundy articulated this view in terms of credibility: “If the United States could not threaten the use of nuclear weapons even in such a long and painful contest as Vietnam,” Bundy questioned, “in what case was such a threat possible? The answer today is that outside the special cases of Korea and Western Europe no such threat [to use nuclear weapons] is remotely credible except in the broad sense that any prospect of a direct confrontation between United States forces and those of the Soviet Union does contain an intrinsic possibility of escalation to the nuclear level.”<sup>49</sup>

In the unlikely circumstance of a failure of deterrence and the beginning of a nuclear war, Bundy believed that the “the least bad thing that the combatants can do is to stop.”<sup>50</sup> Bundy, the strategist dove, was deliberating the logic of nuclear war prevention and mitigation. In his folder of notes for the final chapter of his 1989 memoir, *Danger and Survival* (the chapter that includes a discussion of the tradition of non-use), Bundy kept a copy of his November 22, 1983, testimony before an “Ad Hoc Hearing on Nuclear Danger in the House of Representatives.” In his testimony, Bundy centered his strategic thinking on President Ronald Reagan’s famous line: “nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” He then engaged with the hypothetical failure of deterrence, much like Nitze did in his oral history. “The question [of deterrence failure] is so terrible,” said Bundy, “that the right way to begin almost suggests itself: it must be the object of policy to reduce the number of cases in which we rely on any use of nuclear weapons whatever.”<sup>51</sup> For Bundy, this meant adopting a policy of no-first-use. But Bundy did not stop there; he argued for a second principle of “no second use until,” meaning that retaliation should not be in the manner of launch-on-warning, but follow a careful deliberative process of confirming the nature of the attack and considering the best response aimed at ending the nuclear war as quickly as possible.<sup>52</sup> This, he recognized, was counterintuitive to a conventional war-fighting mentality that aimed at the end goal of victory. Nonetheless, it followed from Reagan’s famous phrase that a nuclear war by definition could not be won, so a different intuition must apply, one aimed at the rapid cessation of violence, rather than victory.

Bundy consequently argued for intense efforts at communication with the adversary, and if that failed, a *limited* nuclear response. Such a response, aimed at bringing a nuclear war to a rapid conclusion, should be “clearly and substantially smaller than the initial attack” (emphasis in original) so as to prevent escalation. This principle of “less than equal response,” Bundy suggested, “can make the enemy amply sorry and at the same time offer him a fresh chance to be safe.” Bundy also argued against decapitation strikes, believing that in order to bring about an end to a nuclear war you would need an adversary with whom to communicate. Eliminating the adversary’s leadership would force you to fight against a “mindless enemy” leading to “mindless escalation.” Therefore, there was “wisdom in sparing Moscow.”<sup>53</sup>

Bundy readily deliberated the ethics of nuclear weapons. However, his thinking did not lead him to conclude that nuclear weapons must be eliminated. He appreciated the role that small arsenals could play in preventing the use of nuclear weapons, and how arms control could be used to manage the risks of a nuclear world.

### *Acknowledging the Norm*

His 1988 memoir, *Danger and Survival*, acknowledges a tradition of non-use of nuclear weapons. He noted that the “forces arrayed against breaking the tradition” had been strengthened throughout the Cold War to the point that “no government is now unaware of the enormous political cost of using them.”<sup>54</sup> Bundy also recognized the role of the United States in strengthening the tradition of non-use. In Bundy’s personal notes for *Danger and Survival* that reflected on the lessons of Quemoy and Matsu, he wrote that “the net effect of the two [Taiwan] crises was to reduce the likelihood of easy reliance on nuclear weapons. The President never changed his doctrine, but his behavior changed his level of persuasiveness, and the choices he successfully avoided made a similar avoidance by his successors much more likely.”<sup>55</sup> Bundy meant that Eisenhower strengthened the tradition of non-use, impacting the decisions of future leaders.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, Bundy acknowledged a norm of non-use in a co-authored 1982 *Foreign Affairs* article supporting the adoption of a no-first-use policy by NATO.<sup>57</sup> Bundy and his co-authors recognized that the changing weapons capabilities of both superpowers had made it “more difficult than ever to construct rational plans for any first use of these weapons by anyone.”<sup>58</sup> In rather coded language, they seemed to acknowledge the utility of a norm against the use of nuclear weapons, discussing the credibility of a no-first-use policy, and its “firebreak” potential—the way in which it could effectively prevent an all-out nuclear showdown: “The one clearly definable firebreak against the worldwide disaster of general nuclear war,” wrote Bundy and his co-authors, “is the one that stands between all other kinds of conflict and any use whatsoever of nuclear weapons. To keep that firebreak wide and strong is in the deepest interest of all mankind.”<sup>59</sup> This is a rational-functionalist argument in favor of a no-first-use policy, which they argued could strengthen the firebreak. Their concerns regarding credibility are apparent in their arguments that NATO’s Article V collective security guarantee (a guarantee that historically has been backed by US and UK nuclear weapons) had become less credible than a simple conventional guarantee with a policy of no-first-use. Indeed, they argued that “such a policy [of no-first-use] is the best one available for

keeping the Alliance united and effective,” and questioned the seriousness with which earlier policy makers had actually considered the use of nuclear weapons.<sup>60</sup>

Bundy and his co-authors also made an argument foreshadowed by Nitze. They wrote: “It is hard to see how any [limited use of nuclear weapons] could be taken without the most enormous risk of rapid and catastrophic escalation, but it is a fair challenge to a policy of No First Use that it should be accompanied by a level of conventional strength that would make such plans unnecessary.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Nitze made this argument in NSC-68—a military must be conventionally strong in order to have the option not to use nuclear weapons.

For Bundy, the tradition of non-use existed as a rational-functionalist restriction on the use of nuclear weapons, but was unreliable as a means of preventing their use. Deterrence was the only way. He therefore considered doctrines that would lead to the most stable balance of terror and policies that could de-escalate crises. Any norm against the use of nuclear weapons was not strong enough to reassure Bundy. Although Bundy’s views changed during the Cold War, they did so to a lesser extent than did Nitze’s. For Bundy, since credible deterrence was not hard to achieve in the first place, and other nuclear threats were not credible anyway, a strengthening norm against the use of nuclear weapons posed less of a dilemma to his strategic thinking.

## Conclusion

This article explored how two influential American policy makers and intellectuals thought about a norm of non-use of nuclear weapons. In doing so, it has exposed the challenges of conducting research on the history of ideas. A norm against the use of nuclear weapons may have far-reaching policy implications that go unobserved because the norm is endogenous to strategic logic. If a norm exists, it should be harder to signal resolve and make credible threats, because an adversary will recognize that violation of the norm carries additional costs to carrying out the threat. In this sense, a threat that adheres to norms is also a more credible threat. Alternatively, if a logic of appropriateness is operating, a more moral threat is also a more credible threat. Rarely are these considerations made explicit, but policy makers seem to discuss them in other terms, such as the “political costs” of nuclear use, the “uniqueness” of nuclear weapons, discussions of morality, or general concerns for credibility. This obscures the ideas in coded language and the context of other strategic considerations. For the researcher, there is a thin line between speculation and discovery. The papers of Bundy and Nitze are not the first place one would think to look to find a discussion of a norm of non-use of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, assessing the documentary evidence through a new lens, I find that the central players of this analysis did engage with the idea of a norm of non-use.

Nitze the operator held inconsistent views throughout the Cold War. Eventually he concluded that there was a norm of non-use, but quite late in life. Given Nitze’s inconsistency, were he alive today, it would not be inconceivable that he would change his views again. He was a Washington insider, an operator of great effectiveness. There was a reason that he was the negotiator for arms control agreements, unlike Bundy, who was the brains behind negotiations. Still, there are inklings of Nitze wrestling with an evolving norm against the use of nuclear weapons as far back in his writings as NSC-68. Nitze was concerned about the credibility of threats by the United States to use nuclear weapons in light

of an incipient norm of non-use. Yet nuclear non-use was his aim. Scholars have overlooked this normative weight on Nitze's mind.

Bundy the strategist charted another course. Although he recognized the existence of a tradition of non-use of nuclear weapons, Bundy seriously deliberated the credibility of nuclear threats and strategies for preventing and mitigating nuclear war. In the process, he acknowledged a norm against the use of nuclear weapons, but never placed faith in it as a substitute for nuclear deterrence.

Researchers should not fear approaching well known writings on nuclear strategy with new lenses. Scholarship on ideational history is ripe for further exploration by social scientists, especially when aiming to assess the influence of norms on the beliefs and ideas of policy makers. Finding evidence of the impact of norms on policy outcomes is challenging, but finding evidence of norms in beliefs is a more fruitful avenue of research.<sup>62</sup> More research needs to be done on what makes threats credible, how norms affect threat credibility, and how policy makers have perceived the effect of norms on credibility in the past. Indeed, ideas matter to nuclear policy. To paraphrase Columbia University's Robert Jervis, our intuitions often fail us when examining the puzzling nature of nuclear weapons. What makes threats credible is not intuitive; and in a sense, it does not matter what we think is credible, it matters what we think they think.<sup>63</sup> Ideas matter, and it is worthwhile exploring the ideas of policy makers and intellectuals to enrich our understanding of the ever-perplexing nuclear age.

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## Notes

1. Paul H. Nitze, "A Threat Mostly to Ourselves," *New York Times*, October 28, 1999, <[www.nytimes.com/1999/10/28/opinion/a-threat-mostly-to-ourselves.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1999/10/28/opinion/a-threat-mostly-to-ourselves.html)>.
2. Nitze also discussed bilateral nuclear disarmament during arms control negotiations in Reykjavik in 1986. See Nitze Memoir Interviews with Steven Rearden and Ann Smith, 1982-88, Paul Henry Nitze Papers, box 120, folder 6, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
3. Notably, a quartet of former senior statesmen has published a series of op-eds in the *Wall Street Journal* (January 13, 2007, January 4, 2008, January 19, 2010, March 7, 2011, and March 5, 2013) in support of nuclear disarmament. See George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, "Wall Street Journal Op-Eds," Nuclear Security Project, <[www.nuclearsecurityproject.org/publications/wall-street-journal-op-eds](http://www.nuclearsecurityproject.org/publications/wall-street-journal-op-eds)>.
4. See Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane, "Ideas and Foreign Policy: An Analytical Framework," in Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane, eds., *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 3-30.
5. On writing a history of ideas, see Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003); Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); and John Lewis

- Gaddis, Philip Gordon, Ernest May, and Jonathan Rosenberg, *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy Since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). On the role of ideas in foreign policy, see Goldstein and Keohane, eds., *Ideas and Foreign Policy*.
6. Richard V. Reeves, "Writing about a Life of Ideas," *New York Times*, May 19, 2014, <[http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/19/writing-about-a-life-of-ideas/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/19/writing-about-a-life-of-ideas/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0)>.
  7. This article draws on primary and secondary sources, including the published works of Nitze and Bundy, as well as their biographies. These sources were supplemented with the private papers of Bundy and Nitze. The personal papers of McGeorge Bundy are housed in the JFK Library in Boston, Massachusetts, and are available to researchers, while the papers of Paul Nitze are accessible by permission of the Nitze family at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.
  8. For a more detailed breakdown of these schools, see Daryl G. Press, Scott D. Sagan, and Benjamin A. Valentino, "Atomic Aversion: Experimental Evidence on Taboos, Traditions, and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons," *American Political Science Review* 107 (February 2013), pp. 188-206.
  9. Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
  10. T.V. Paul, *The Tradition of Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
  11. University of Pennsylvania's Bruce Kuklick notes that Nitze found the Soviet threat more bounded and manageable when he was a government official as compared to his more apocalyptic notions of the Soviet menace when not in government. See Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 46.
  12. Nicholas Thompson, *The Hawk and The Dove: Paul Nitze, George Kennan, and the history of the Cold War* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2009), p. 66.
  13. See Thompson, *Hawk and Dove*, p. 66; and Paul Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision* (New York, NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989), p. 42.
  14. "Memorandum by the Deputy Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Nitze)," December 19, 1949, US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: National Security Affairs; Foreign Economic Policy, 1949* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1976), pp. 610-11.
  15. *Ibid.*
  16. McGeorge Bundy, "The Missed Chance to Stop the H-bomb," *New York Review of Books*, May 13, 1982, <[www.nybooks.com/articles/1982/05/13/the-missed-chance-to-stop-the-h-bomb/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1982/05/13/the-missed-chance-to-stop-the-h-bomb/)>. I do not find other evidence to corroborate this claim, but Bundy's observation is plausible.
  17. "Memorandum by the Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Nitze)," November 4, 1950, US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Korea, 1950* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1976), p. 1042.
  18. *Ibid.*
  19. Nitze Memoir Interviews with Steven Rearden and Ann Smith, 1982-1988, Paul Henry Nitze Papers, box 118, folder 9, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
  20. *Ibid.*
  21. "A Report to the National Security Council – NSC 68," April 12, 1950, President's Secretary's File, Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, <[www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/coldwar/documents/sectioned.php?documentid=10-1&pagenumber=1&groupid=1](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/sectioned.php?documentid=10-1&pagenumber=1&groupid=1)>.
  22. Paul Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989), p. 137.
  23. "A Report to the National Security Council – NSC 68," April 12, 1950, President's Secretary's File, Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, p. 6, p. 38. Nitze extrapolated on his suspicion of the Soviet Union in a short manual for students of US foreign policy published in 1955. See Paul Nitze, *United States Foreign Policy 1945 – 1955* (New York, NY: Foreign Policy Association Headline Series, 1956), pp. 15-16.
  24. Kuklick, *Blind Oracles*, p. 47.
  25. Fred Kaplan, *Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983), p. 140.

26. Preventive war against the Soviet Union was discussed at high levels of the US government between 1947 and 1949. Moreover, in 1951, Stuart Symington, chairman of the National Security Resources Board, proposed an alternative plan to NSC-68 called NSC-100. In his proposal, he recommended that the United States use atomic weapons in Korea and launch an immediate nuclear attack against the USSR to avoid losing its nuclear advantage. Symington's proposal was rejected. Seven years later, the report of the Security Resources Panel of the President's Science Advisory Committee—known as the "Gaither Report" after its chairman, Horace Rowan Gaither—was published and explicitly rejected the policy of preventive war by the United States. Nitze was a member of the Gaither Committee and supported the conclusions of the report. Nonetheless, it appears Nitze had already come to these same conclusions about preventive war as early as 1950. See Paul, *The Tradition of Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons*, p. 44; and "Gaither Report of 1957," Paul Henry Nitze Papers, box 102, folder 6, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
27. "A Report to the National Security Council – NSC 68," April 12, 1950, President's Secretary's File, Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, pp. 35-36.
28. This is language Nitze used in other memoranda, not NSC-68. The first quotation is from "Memorandum by the Deputy Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Nitze)," December 19, 1949, US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: National Security Affairs; Foreign Economic Policy, 1949* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1976), pp. 610-11. The second quotation is from "Memorandum by the Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Nitze)," November 4, 1950, US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Korea, 1950* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1976), p. 1,042.
29. Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 109.
30. One of Nitze's biographers, Nicholas Thompson, makes the argument that Nitze believed in the inhumanity of the Soviet Union. If true, the idea that only "subhuman" people would start a nuclear war suggests the workings of a normative logic of appropriateness. See Thompson, *The Hawk and the Dove*, p. 262.
31. Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles*, pp. 81-82.
32. Paul Nitze, "Atoms, Strategy, and Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 34 (January 1956), p. 187.
33. Nitze made the following recommendations for a policy on use of atomic weapons by the United States: (a) We should endeavor to meet aggression and restore the situation without the use of atomic weapons wherever possible; (b) We should extend hostilities to other areas only if there is no other way effectively to restore the situation; (c) Even if it becomes necessary to engage the USSR in atomic warfare, we should limit ourselves to military objectives, primarily to those which are necessary to achieve control of the air. We should not initiate the bombing of industrial or population centers; (d) We should attempt to build non-atomic elements of strength and to encourage our allies to do likewise so that the residual reliance which must be placed upon atomic weapons for our common security is reduced as far as may be feasible. These policy recommendations would not be indicative of a recalcitrant hawk. Paul Nitze, "Atoms, Strategy, and Policy," p. 196.
34. Nitze Memoir Interviews with Steven Rearden and Ann Smith, 1982-1988, Paul Henry Nitze Papers, box 120, folder 12, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Nitze framed a similar question in a 1956 article, writing "The side which has lost effective control of the intercontinental air spaces will face a truly agonizing decision. It may still have the capability of destroying a few of the enemy's cities. But the damage it could inflict would be indecisive and out of all proportion to the annihilation which its own cities could expect to receive in return." Paul Nitze, "Atoms, Strategy, and Policy," p. 193.
38. Ibid.
39. Nitze's support for nuclear disarmament was also rooted in a belief that precision-guided conventional weapons had made using nuclear weapons to destroy certain hardened targets unnecessary.

40. Bundy seemed to understand that the strength of a norm of non-use affected the credibility of nuclear threats. In *Danger and Survival*, he wrote: "As the tradition of nonuse grows stronger, the role of atomic diplomacy necessarily shrinks." Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, p. 597.
41. Bundy handwritten notes on *International Security* journal, McGeorge Bundy Personal Papers, box 158, folder: "Background Subject Files: Arms Control Back Up, 1985: McGB writings and notes," John F. Kennedy Library.
42. McGeorge Bundy, "To Cap the Volcano," *Foreign Affairs* 48 (October 1969), p. 9. Bundy began to develop this view as early as the 1950s, possibly through his conversations with Robert Oppenheimer on the limits of the use of nuclear weapons or from his experience in the Berlin Crisis, when he witnessed Dean Acheson balk at the prospect of using nuclear weapons to defend Berlin. See Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy: Brothers in Arms* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1998), pp. 207-208.
43. Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966).
44. Bundy testimony at an "Ad Hoc Hearing on Nuclear Danger," November 22, 1983, McGeorge Bundy Personal Papers, box 165, folder: "Working Files: Chapter XIII August (1 of 2)," John F. Kennedy Library.
45. McGeorge Bundy, "The Bishops and the Bomb," *New York Review of Books*, June 16, 1983, p. 4. Bundy also expounded upon this thinking in "Existential Deterrence and Its Consequences," in Douglas MacLean, ed., *The Security Gamble: Deterrence Dilemmas in the Nuclear Age* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984).
46. Bundy made rationalist-functionalist and reputational arguments in opposing the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam. If not in explicit acknowledgement of a norm of non-use, he at least recognized the logic. See T.V. Paul, *The Tradition of Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 69.
47. Bundy on "The Influence of Perestroika," McGeorge Bundy Personal Papers, box 165, folder: "Working Files: Chapter XIII August (1 of 2)," John F. Kennedy Library.
48. Bundy remarks at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, April 1984, McGeorge Bundy Personal Papers, box 162, folder: "Working Files: Chapter V Revisions: Alternatives to the H-Bomb, 1955," John F. Kennedy Library.
49. Ibid.
50. Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, p. 604.
51. Bundy testimony at an "Ad Hoc Hearing on Nuclear Danger."
52. Bundy attributes the origin of this phrasing to former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara.
53. Bundy testimony at an "Ad Hoc Hearing on Nuclear Danger."
54. Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, p. 588.
55. Handwritten notes by Bundy, McGeorge Bundy Personal Papers, Box 169, Folder: "Working Files: Quemoy-Matsu Crisis: Late Papers: Letters and Notes," John F. Kennedy Library.
56. For analysis of Eisenhower's thinking, see Andrew Erdmann, "'War No Longer Has Any Logic Whatever': Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Thermonuclear Revolution," in John Lewis Gaddis, et al., eds., *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy Since 1945*, pp. 87-119.
57. McGeorge Bundy, George F. Kennan, Robert S. McNamara, and Gerard Smith, "Nuclear Weapons and the Atlantic Alliance," *Foreign Affairs* 60 (Spring 1982), pp. 753-68.
58. Ibid.
59. Indeed, the authors suggest that a no-first-use declaration would strengthen the "firebreak" through rational functionalist means: "To renounce the first use of nuclear weapons is to accept an enormous burden of responsibility for any later violation. The existence of such a clearly declared common pledge would increase the cost and risk of any sudden use of nuclear weapons by either side and correspondingly reduce the political force of spoken or unspoken threats of such use." Bundy, Kennan, McNamara, and Smith, "Nuclear Weapons and the Atlantic Alliance," pp. 753-68.
60. "The original American pledge, expressed in Article 5 of the Treaty, was understood to be a nuclear guarantee. It was extended at a time when only a conventional Soviet threat existed, so a readiness for first use was plainly implied from the beginning." Ibid.
61. Ibid.

62. Interestingly, given that Nitze and Bundy both came to appreciate a norm of non-use of nuclear weapons over the course of their careers may suggest a new path of nuclear norm development. That is, rather than a bottom-up development of a “nuclear taboo” rooted in social movements, nongovernmental organizations, and public opinion, instead it may have been policy makers themselves that embraced a norm after their experiences of nuclear diplomacy. Further research could develop this idea with a comparative analysis of norm development.
63. Robert Jervis, “Ruina Lecture,” MIT Security Studies Program, Cambridge, MA, March 4, 2014.