

# THE MORALITY OF NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Policy Primer

**Center for Global Security Research**  
LAWRENCE LIVERMORE NATIONAL LABORATORY

## Policy Primer

### The Morality of Nuclear Deterrence

Center for Global Security Research

Prepared By: Anna Péczeli

#### Key Topics:

1. The origins of the debate
2. The Catholic Church and the bomb
3. The bomb in other religions and cultures
4. Practitioner perspectives
5. Disarmament perspectives
6. On the legality of nuclear deterrence

---

*The views and opinions of authors expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the United States government or Lawrence Livermore National Security, LLC, and shall not be used for advertising or product endorsement purposes.*

## 1. The origins of the debate

Oppenheimer, Robert J. "Physics in the Contemporary World." Arthur D. Little Memorial Lecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, November 25, 1947.

"Despite the vision and farseeing wisdom of our wartime heads of state, the physicists have felt the peculiarly intimate responsibility for suggesting, for supporting, and in the end, in large measure, for achieving the realization of atomic weapons. Nor can we forget that these weapons, as they were in fact used, dramatized so mercilessly the inhumanity and evil of modern war. In some sort of crude sense which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose."

Oppenheimer, Robert J. "Dr. Oppenheimer Interview with Martin Agronsky." CBS Evening News, August 5, 1965.

"Well, I don't want to speak for others because we're all different. I think when you play a meaningful part in bringing about the death of over 100,000 people and the injury of a comparable number, you naturally don't think of that as—with ease. [...] Long ago I said once that in a crude sense which no vulgarity and no humor could quite erase, the physicist had known sin, and I didn't mean by that the deaths that were caused as a result of our work. I meant that we had known the sin of pride. We had turned to [affect] ... the course of man's history. We had the pride of thinking we knew what was good for man, and I do think it had left a mark on many of those who were responsibly engaged. This is not the natural business of a scientist."

Russell, Bertrand, and Albert Einstein. "The Russell-Einstein Manifesto." Caxton Hall, London, July 9, 1955. <https://pugwash.org/1955/07/09/statement-manifesto/>

"There lies before us, if we choose, continual progress in happiness, knowledge, and wisdom. Shall we, instead, choose death, because we cannot forget our quarrels? We appeal, as human beings, to human beings: Remember your humanity, and forget the rest. If you can do so, the way lies open to a new Paradise; if you cannot, there lies before you the risk of universal death. We invite this Congress, and through it the scientists of the world and the general public, to subscribe to the following resolution: In view of the fact that in any future world war nuclear weapons will certainly be employed, and that such weapons threaten the continued existence of mankind, we urge the governments of the world to realize, and to acknowledge publicly, that their purpose cannot be furthered by a world war, and we urge them, consequently, to find peaceful means for the settlement of all matters of dispute between them."

## 2. The Catholic Church and the bomb

National Conference of Catholic Bishops. "The Challenge of Peace, God's Promise and Our Response – A Pastoral Letter on War and Peace." United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, May 3, 1983. <https://www.usccb.org/resources/challenge-peace-gods-promise-and-our-response-may-3-1983>

In this Pastoral Letter, Catholic bishops argue that keeping the peace in the nuclear age is a moral and political imperative. They argue that deterrence is not an adequate strategy as a long-term basis for peace, and call for a general agreement about progressive disarmament and a ban of all nuclear weapons. They state that under no circumstances may nuclear weapons be used for the purpose of destroying population centers or other predominantly civilian targets. They also add that the deliberate initiation of nuclear war, on however restricted a scale, cannot be morally justified, and states need to resist the urge to use nuclear weapons in response to non-nuclear attacks. Therefore, a serious moral obligation exists to develop non-nuclear defensive strategies as rapidly as possible.

Pope Francis. "Message to the first Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons." June 21, 2022.

<http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2022/documents/20220621-messaggio-armi-nucleari.html>

In his letter, the Pope argued that a world free from nuclear weapons is both necessary and possible. In a system of collective security, there is no place for nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. He noted that nuclear deterrence is not a deterrent to most of the world's serious problems, including terrorism, cyber attacks, environmental catastrophes and poverty. He also reminded of the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences that would follow from any use of nuclear weapons, with devastating, indiscriminate and uncontrollable effects, over time and space. In his view, nuclear weapons are a costly and dangerous liability, and they represent a 'risk multiplier' that provides only an illusion of a 'peace of sorts.' He reaffirmed that the use of nuclear weapons, as well as their mere possession, is immoral.

Reichberg, Gregory M. "The Morality of Nuclear Deterrence: A Reassessment." In Mathias Nebel and Gregory M. Reichberg. *Nuclear Deterrence—An Ethical Perspective*. Chambésy: The Caritas in Veritate Foundation, 2015. [www.fciv.org/downloads/WP6-Book.pdf](http://www.fciv.org/downloads/WP6-Book.pdf)

The doctrine of nuclear deterrence holds that nuclear weapons are possessed, not for direct use on the battlefield, but solely as a means to dissuade, by threat of retaliation, a would-be enemy from mounting a first strike. But, according to the author, this doctrine is not morally sustainable, for several reasons: (1) These weapons have no military use that would not trigger wide civilian casualties. The hovering threat of accruing tremendous loss will never be proportionate to the perceived military advantage these weapons may give; (2) The deterrence threat created by these weapons is vulnerable to actors who don't share the "rational fear" of annihilation and death; (3) These weapons maintain a dangerous frozen state of total war rather than peace since the omen of a

nuclear holocaust is always on the horizon. For these and many other reasons the moral legitimacy of the possession of nuclear weapons is gone. Accordingly, the only moral, realistic, prudential and wise path is the one that seeks an international ban on all nuclear weapons and calls for nuclear disarmament.

Colby, Elbridge A. "Keeping the Peace." *First Things*, January 2011.

<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2011/01/keeping-the-peace>

In this article, Colby takes issue with the blunt statements of Catholic leaders insisting on the imperative of near-term nuclear disarmament. According to him, these statements have revealed a disturbing inattention to important aspects of how nuclear weapons would be used and, more broadly, to the profound and beneficial implications of nuclear weapons for international stability. Even thoughtful advocates of a world without nuclear weapons admit that the conditions necessary to allow abolition do not currently exist and would require fundamental transformations in the world order. In the meantime, nuclear deterrence continues not only to deter aggression but also to remind all that investments in military power are of decidedly limited value. Those who defend nuclear deterrence do so not from evil intent or in an unreflective way but because they value peace and stability and because they fear a world in which violence can again be a more attractive tool of statecraft.

### 3. The bomb in other religions and cultures

Adamsky, Dimitry. *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019.

In his book, Adamsky argues that a nuclear priesthood has arisen in Russia. From portable churches to the consecration of weapons systems, the Russian Orthodox Church has been integrated into every facet of the armed forces to become a vital part of Russian national security, politics, and identity. This extraordinary intertwining of church and military is nowhere more visible than in the nuclear weapons community, where the priesthood has penetrated all levels of command and the Church has positioned itself as a guardian of the state's nuclear potential. According to Adamsky, the Orthodox faith has merged with Russian national identity as the Church continues to expand its influence on foreign and domestic politics. The Church both legitimizes and influences Moscow's assertive national security strategy. As a result, Russian nuclear orthodoxy rests on the collective belief that to preserve its Orthodox character, Russia must be a nuclear power, and to guarantee its nuclear status, Russia must be genuinely Orthodox.

The Church of England. "The Ethics of Nuclear Deterrence." Prepared for the General Synod of the Anglican Church of England, York, July 2018: 1.

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/GS%202095%20-%20The%20Ethics%20of%20Nuclear%20Weapons.pdf>

The document examines whether Britain should sign the 'Ban Treaty' and take more purposeful steps to dismantle its nuclear arsenal. It acknowledges that this is an issue on which Christians have in good faith found themselves on both sides of the argument. It makes the case, however, that there is widespread agreement amongst Christians that nuclear weapons are, as a class, uniquely terrible and that there is a legal and moral obligation upon the international community to take all practical and prudent steps towards achieving a situation in which none remain in existence anywhere. Whether the 'Ban Treaty' offers the best means to secure a world without nuclear weapons remains a matter of debate, but as this report makes clear the Treaty is a remarkable diplomatic achievement reflecting the views of the majority of UN member states which the British Government and other Nuclear Weapon States should engage with.

Krepon, Michael. "Islam and the Bomb." *Arms Control Wonk*, November 25, 2015.

<https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/1200516/islam-and-the-bomb/>

The author highlights that the concept of deterrence is implied in the Quran. But while a majority of Islamic jurists hold that the acquisition of nuclear weapons for deterrence is permissible, they also hold that their first use can never be justified. However, it remains uncertain whether or not the use of nuclear weapons in retaliation is allowed. This lack of clarity stems from an inherent tension in the classical Islamic principles between the protection of non-combatants and the retaliatory use of force. But even when force is used justifiably, classic Islamic principles call for Muslims to adhere to limitations on the use of force, i.e., force is only allowed to be used to the extent necessary to achieve military objectives. Islamic jurists have inferred that, in general, Muslims must not use any non-discriminatory methods in war. But these means become permissible, or even necessary, in defense if the enemy initiated their use. Unfortunately, the Muslim debate on deterrence has yet to develop beyond this level, and crucial questions remain unanswered about issues such as targeting policy.

Yuan, Jing-Dong. "Culture matters: Chinese approaches to arms control and disarmament." *Contemporary Security Policy* 19, no. 1 (1998): 85–128.

Chinese strategic culture is rooted in two main traditions. The first one is the Confucian-Mencian world-view that essentially sees the world as harmonious, orderly and hierarchically structured. Conflicts are regarded as largely deviant phenomena rather than the nature of things and should/can be managed through means other than the use of brute force. The other theme is what has come to be called *parabellum* or *realpolitik* view of the world, which holds that conflicts are perennial and zero-sum, and which regards the use of force as the only effective means to ensure security, stability and peace. The way in which Chinese decision-makers define their national security interests remains strongly influenced by both of these traditions. However, the dichotomy

between these two schools have very often created a gap between declared Chinese principles and actual policies. These gaps result from a tendency to ‘declare policy beyond its capability and willingness to implement.’ While the realpolitik conceptualization of international relations as conflictual, zero-sum and ultimately self-help seems to underline Beijing’s overall views of security, peace and stability, China’s nuclear policy also bears elements of the Confucian-Mencian world-view that is often expressed through excessive moralizing. China has long insisted on the complete prohibition and destruction of nuclear weapons as the ultimate goal of nuclear disarmament and the only effective way to prevent nuclear war. Chinese leaders also believe that as the danger of nuclear war threatens the entire human race, every country has the equal right to participate in the discussion and settlement of the question of nuclear disarmament.

#### 4. Practitioner perspectives

Gottemoeller, Rose. “Remarks by NATO Deputy Secretary during a panel discussion on Perspectives for a World Free from Nuclear Weapons at Vatican City.” *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, November 10, 2017. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_148789.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_148789.htm)

In her remarks, Gottemoeller noted that NATO has just recently reaffirmed its resolve to seek a safer world for all and to create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons. NATO’s concern is that the ban treaty won’t contribute to the elimination of nuclear arsenals, instead the treaty risks undermining years of steady progress under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Importantly, the ban treaty disregards the security conditions and nuclear challenges that we face, most prominently today the emergence of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles in North Korea. In essence, the U.S. nuclear umbrella made the NPT possible. It gave U.S. allies and partners in Europe and Asia the confidence to put aside their own nuclear weapons research and to become non-nuclear weapons states. Effective disarmament did follow in the wake of the NPT. The international community and indeed the NATO alliance needs to carry this agenda forward by seeking to address the underlying conflicts that drive nations toward nuclear weapons, and working harder on disarmament efforts between the United States and the Russian Federation.

Roberts, Brad. “Nuclear Ethics and the Ban Treaty.” In Bård Steen, Olav Njølstad. *Nuclear Disarmament – A Critical Assessment*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, April 2019. <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/Nuclear-Disarmament-A-Critical-Assessment.pdf>

Roberts argues that the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) has many foreseeable results, both intended and unintended, that are damaging to the international order and to the nuclear order. These effects include weakening the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and undermining U.S. extended nuclear deterrence, which would increase the vulnerability of U.S. allies to coercion and possible attack and encourage challenges by adversaries. As a consequence, the TPNW could actually harm the prospects of nuclear disarmament. In the meantime, treaty advocates do not show

interest in creating the conditions for disarmament, casting it as a delaying tactic. According to Roberts, in light of these foreseeable results, the balance sheet of the TPNW tips towards the negative side, and there is a moral obligation to oppose the Ban and to work to mitigate its consequences.

Nye, Joseph. *Nuclear Ethics*. New York: The Free Press, 1988.

According to Nye, the destructive potential of nuclear weapons poses an unprecedented challenge to our physical and moral lives. He believes that deterrence can be “just,” but only under certain conditions. In his book, he approaches nuclear weapons with utmost restraint and sets out principles for avoiding nuclear war. These principles include the acknowledgement that the only acceptable reason for possessing a nuclear deterrent is self-defense, accepting that nuclear weapons will never be “normal” weapons, declaring that the purpose of any nuclear strategy must be to minimize harm to innocents, working to reduce the risks of war in the short term, and reducing reliance on nuclear weapons in the long run. Nye also proposes several practical steps as the fundamental approach to nuclear ethics, and making the case for the conditional acceptance of nuclear deterrence.

Quinlan, Michael. *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons*. London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies, 1997.

In this essay, the author argues that like any other human activity, policies about nuclear weapons must be accountable at the bar of morality. The extraordinary character of nuclear weapons has strained the boundaries of traditional structures of thought about the morality of war, just as about military significance and utility and about international law. According to Quinlan, it is possible to devise final-sanction nuclear-strike plans that might at the extreme—and that is all that legitimate possession for deterrence strictly requires—be tolerable within the spirit of the just-war tradition. The central idea in such plans would be to inflict disabling damage upon the aggressor state as a state, so as to remove or emasculate its ability and disposition to persist as an evil force against others, while keeping as low as possible (appallingly grave though that would probably still be) the harm done to its innocent citizens.

Ogilvie-White, Tanya. *On Nuclear Deterrence: The Correspondence of Sir Michael Quinlan*. London: Routledge, The International Institute for Strategic Studies – Adelphi Series, 2011.

Quinlan spent much of his time defending UK and NATO nuclear strategy through the notion of practical morality. He had an unshakable belief that there was no acceptable alternative to nuclear deterrence in the Cold War era: without nuclear weapons, Western Europe could be forced to succumb to Soviet totalitarianism; with them, the prospects for Western Europe to retain its freedom and independence increased exponentially. In Quinlan’s eyes, nuclear weapons were a terrible necessity; they posed the gravest of risks and appalling ethical dilemmas, but at the same time they provided the only assurance that Western freedoms could be protected. This fundamental belief in the need and responsibility to defend basic freedoms from the horrors of totalitarianism helped keep his moral doubts at bay.



Perkovich, George “The Diminishing Utility and Justice of Nuclear Deterrence.” In Bruno Tertrais. *Thinking About Strategy—A Tribute to Sir Michael Quinlan*. Paris: Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, November 2011. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/11/30/diminishing-utility-and-justice-of-nuclear-deterrence-pub-46261>

The author seeks to extend the dialogue between the imperatives of war prevention—specifically the role of nuclear deterrence in it—and justness. The article draws on research in evolutionary biology, psychology and politics to widen the meaning and importance of justice, while reflecting on recent developments in international security that narrow the utility of nuclear weapons in deterring war. Perkovich suggests that these new perspectives add weight and feasibility to the imperative to work toward a world without nuclear weapons. According to the author, Quinlan was unable to make a convincing moral case why a handful of states should possess nuclear weapons and everyone else should not. Strategic and legal arguments can be validly made on this issue, but such arguments do not overcome the feelings of injustice that this double standard arouses in many observers and non-nuclear-weapons states. The only sustainable way to resolve these multiple tensions would be to create an order in which no one possesses nuclear weapons and confidence is high that no one could cheat and acquire such weapons. This would meet all the conditions of justice in the nuclear domain.

## 5. Disarmament perspectives

Obama, Barack. “Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize.” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, December 10, 2009. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>

In his speech, President Obama reminded of the hard truth that we will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations—acting individually or in concert—will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified. He made this statement mindful of what Martin Luther King Jr. said in the same ceremony years ago: “Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones.” But President Obama also added that “as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler’s armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda’s leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.”

Kmentt, Alexander. "Avoiding the Worst: Re-framing the Debate on Nuclear Disarmament." *European Leadership Network*, June 24, 2014.

<https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/avoiding-the-worst-re-framing-the-debate-on-nuclear-disarmament/>

The author notes that the threat of complete destruction through nuclear weapons is necessary to believers of nuclear deterrence to equalize real or perceived military imbalances. Consequently, nuclear weapons allow for a notion of global stability that is not only acceptable for nuclear weapons possessors but also virtually impossible to overcome. However, it is a circular concept. Nuclear weapon states feed on each other's threat perceptions. In so doing, they provide the rationale for one another to retain nuclear weapons. Nuclear disarmament and a world without nuclear weapons will never be achieved unless this vicious cycle is broken. The humanitarian conferences provide an outlet for the latest research looking at the consequences of nuclear weapons explosions on the environment, climate, health, social order, human development and global economy. The research makes a compelling case that these consequences are even greater than we previously understood. According to Kmentt, the need to prevent such a humanitarian disaster ever occurring should unite us in urgent action to move beyond nuclear weapons.

Sauer, Tom, and Joellen Pretorius. "Nuclear Weapons and the Humanitarian Approach." *Global Change, Peace & Security* 26, no. 3 (2014): 233–250.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2014.959753>

The authors argue that the traditional arms control approach is very slow in dismantling nuclear arsenals. In the meanwhile, the humanitarian approach points to the consequences of the use of nuclear weapons for individual human beings, and recommends forbidding this category of weapons, which are undeniably the most destructive, indiscriminate and inhumane weapons of mass destruction. The step-by-step approach is replaced by a principled approach, which holds that nuclear weapons are too destructive to be used. Those nuclear weapon states that are not eager to eliminate their nuclear weapons will come under growing pressure from worldwide public opinion as well as their own public opinion to follow the logical extension from the accepted norm that nuclear weapons are too destructive to be used and therefore should be banned. It is this stigmatizing effect of nuclear weapons as inhumane and therefore unusable that may bring all states to pursue global zero.

Fihn, Beatrice. "The Logic of Banning Nuclear Weapons." *Survival* 59, no. 1 (February-March 2017): 43–50. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00396338.2017.1282671>

The author argues that banning nuclear weapons is not primarily motivated by the frustration of the non-nuclear weapon states within the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), instead, it is about deciding which weapons are unacceptable for the international community. It reflects a shift in security and development policies towards a more central role for humanitarian concerns and humanitarian law. The case for prohibiting nuclear weapons is clear: they are by nature inhumane and indiscriminate. Negotiating a

treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons will codify the stigma against causing such inhumane consequences. Weapons that cause unacceptable harm to civilians cannot remain legal or be considered legitimate options for states in warfare.

Williams, Heather. "Why a Nuclear Weapons Ban is Unethical (For Now)." *The RUSI Journal* 161, no. 2 (2016): 38–47. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2016.1174481>

The Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons Initiative and ongoing tension between NATO and Russia have put the morality of nuclear weapons back under the spotlight. The new strategic environment suggests an opportunity to revisit principles of nuclear ethics, including the connection with security and the responsibility to pursue arms control and disarmament. Williams argues that a nuclear-weapons ban at this time, though well intentioned, would ignore states' security concerns and has the potential to undermine other disarmament efforts. To ignore security realities is to be ethically irresponsible. For many states, the utility of nuclear weapons has not gone away. Just as the experiences of the victims of nuclear weapons cannot be ignored, neither can the concerns of states relying on nuclear weapons to protect their populations in the event of an existential threat. One should not be subordinate to the other: both must be heard. For NATO, that means strengthening nuclear deterrence and assurance in the face of Russian aggression. For the Humanitarian Impacts Initiative, that means abandoning the specious notion that a nuclear weapons ban is a practical step towards disarmament. Rather, it is an unethical waste of time.

Valentino, Benjamin A. and Scott D. Sagan. "The nuclear weapons ban treaty: Opportunities lost." *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July 16, 2017. <https://thebulletin.org/2017/07/the-nuclear-weapons-ban-treaty-opportunities-lost/>

The authors argue that with not a single nuclear weapons state signing up as a member to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), even the treaty's strongest proponents acknowledge that it is largely an aspirational document designed to promote disarmament by delegitimizing nuclear weapons. However, the treaty does not really "outlaw" or make nuclear weapons "illegal" under international law, because any state that is not a member of the treaty is not bound by its terms. In their view, the treaty rather stands as a symbol of problematic arguments and missed opportunities. First, the ethical and legal foundation for the treaty's stigmatization of nuclear weapons is fundamentally flawed. Second, the ban is likely counterproductive when it comes to increasing compliance with existing laws of war. And third, there is simply no evidence to suggest that the ban's approach to stigmatizing nuclear weapons will be an effective path to disarmament. In the meanwhile, the ban movement missed an important opportunity to educate the public about the dangers of nuclear weapons. Ironically, that was exactly what the humanitarian impact movement initially set out to do.

Gibbons, Rebecca Davis. "The humanitarian turn in nuclear disarmament and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons." *The Nonproliferation Review* 25, no. 1-2 (2018): 11–36. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10736700.2018.1486960>

The adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was the culmination of the work of a global network of states and grassroots activists that emphasized the devastating humanitarian consequences of nuclear-weapons use in order to delegitimize their possession. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) played a key role in the adoption of the TPNW. From its founding in 2006, ICAN's goal was clear: "To mobilise an irresistible groundswell of public opinion around the world that will compel leaders to start and conclude negotiations on a comprehensive legal agreement to abolish nuclear weapons before they are used again." The ban treaty may not be the comprehensive treaty ICAN leaders originally sought, but the ban is a tool intended to help them sway public opinion against nuclear weapons to pressure nuclear states and their allies. It remains to be seen if this treaty will be an effective tool to delegitimize nuclear weapons among the public. Today, the public pressure for nuclear disarmament is small compared with the nuclear-freeze movement in the 1980s, in part because there is less cognizance and less fear surrounding nuclear weapons.

Hassner, Pierre "Ethical Issues in Nuclear Deterrence: Four National Debates in Perspective (France, Great Britain, the United States, and West Germany)." In Pierre Hassner. *Violence and Peace: From the Atomic Bomb to Ethnic Cleansing*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 1997: 99–136.

The author reminds that ethics and strategy meet in the twin dilemmas of deterrence and defense, and threat and use. If one believes that discrimination and control are the answer to both, that the policy which is the most credible for deterrence is also the most moral for use if deterrence fails, the only problem is how much priority one should give to the means of this policy. If, however, one believes that in all nuclear deterrence there is a complicated relationship between the horrifying nature of a threat and the plausibility of its execution, and in particular, that the policy which is likely to be best for deterrence is also the one which may lead to the greater evil if deterrence fails, then one encounters not only the strategic and ethical dilemmas but also the dilemma between ethics and strategy. Among the United States, Great Britain, France and West Germany, there is an overwhelming commonality of interests and values: no country has an interest in war, nuclear or otherwise, nor in totalitarian domination; all have an interest in limiting damage and stopping war, if it occurs, and are faced with the ultimate dilemmas mentioned before. However, within this common framework, there are differences of attitudes and priorities, based on difference of geopolitical situation, of political structure, of historical experience, of cultural tradition.

Caldicott, Helen. *Missile Envy: The Arms Race and Nuclear War*. Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1986.

In Caldicott's book, the term "Missile envy" partly refers to the illusion that the bigger weapon is the better, but it also touches the macho element in society: The only way to forestall the enemy is to be bigger and tougher than he is, which inevitably leads to an arms race. Larger Soviet missiles create missile envy among men, who respond with a fascination for throw-weight and numbers. As a physician, she explores the human element that plays its part in the danger of nuclear accidents—the drugs, the boredom of isolated outposts, the feeling of machismo. Caldicott reminds that in this society anybody who contemplates murdering a single individual is considered either mentally unstable or a potential criminal. But people in leadership positions are making statements about nuclear war that contemplate the death of hundreds of millions of human beings. The same moral and legal restraints should be applied to these people as to ordinary citizens who contemplate the death of only one human being. Caldicott rejects the idea that peace can be achieved with more weapons. Instead, she argues that disarmament is the only viable path to peace, and it is a moral imperative.

Schell, Jonathan. *The Fate of the Earth and the Abolition*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000.

According to Schell, the problem with deterrence is not that it doesn't work, but that we must pay an inconceivable price if it fails. The invaluable lesson of deterrence theory is that in the nuclear age the use of force is self-canceling. We actually rely on the doomsday machine to serve another end: the preservation of our sovereignty. We exploit the peril of extinction for our political ends. The first part of the book describes the consequences of nuclear war, forces even the most reluctant person to confront the unthinkable: the destruction of humanity and possibly most life on Earth. Schell notes that we have always been able to send people to their death, but only now has it become possible to prevent all birth and so doom all future human beings to uncreation. In light of these dangers, Schell encourages thinking deeply about our moral obligation to future generations as a way to eventually disarm.

Biggar, Nigel. "Living with Trident." *Scottish Review*, May 2015.

Biggar reminds that nuclear weapons are much more destructive than any single weapon deployed in the second world war. But that does not necessarily mean that it would be immoral ever to use them. Some sub-strategic nuclear weapons could be used without incurring any civilian casualties at all—for example, against incoming missiles or submarines. In the case of strategic weapons, it's most unlikely that these could be used without causing hundreds of thousands civilian deaths, but neither ethics nor law prohibit the causing of such deaths as such. They only prohibit them when they are indiscriminate. To kill indiscriminately doesn't mean simply to fail to avoid killing civilians; it means to positively desire to kill them—to deliberately target them—say, to terrify an enemy government into submission. Accordingly, a policy of counter-city strikes, where nuclear weapons are deliberately aimed at population centers in order to maximize

civilian casualties, would be immoral; whereas a policy of aiming weapons of the minimum necessary power at vital military objectives, with the foreseeable side-effect of probably or certainly massive civilian casualties, would not be. Arguably, much targeting policy during the Cold War was indiscriminate and therefore immoral. But if that was so then, it is so no longer. Nuclear weapons are now far more accurate than they were in the 1970s, and are therefore able to destroy their objectives more efficiently and with less explosive force. Thus, there's nothing immoral about nuclear deterrence as such.

## 6. On the legality of nuclear deterrence

International Court of Justice. "Advisory Opinion on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons." July 8, 1996. <https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/95>

In their advisory opinion, the Court concluded that the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law; however, in view of the current state of international law, the Court cannot conclude definitively whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be lawful or unlawful in an extreme circumstance of self-defense, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake. The Court also noted that a threat or use of nuclear weapons should be compatible with the requirements of the international law applicable in armed conflict, particularly those of the principles and rules of humanitarian law, and there exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament.

Highsmith, Newell L. "On the Legality of Nuclear Deterrence." *Livermore Papers on Global Security* No. 6, Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (April 2019). <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/CGSR-LivermorePaper6.pdf>

The author argues that while an undeniable tension exists between nuclear deterrence strategy and the principles of international humanitarian law (especially the principle of proportionality and the obligation to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants), nuclear deterrence is legally reconcilable with these principles, at least with regard to the primary objective of deterring nuclear attack by an adversary. Highsmith also notes that the only realistic means of eliminating nuclear weapons is a verifiable treaty, but, as a practical matter, the international security environment must undergo significant changes before states possessing nuclear weapons will contemplate joining such a treaty. Until those changes occur, nuclear deterrence is not only legal but essential. Indeed, under the current international security environment, the primary objective of nuclear deterrence might even be considered morally compelling.

Sagan, Scott D. "Just and Unjust Nuclear Deterrence." *Ethics and International Affairs* (forthcoming article in the 2023 Spring issue)

Sagan argues that the new conditions of today's security environment require a fundamental rethinking of nuclear deterrence. He proposes five steps to achieve a more just nuclear deterrence. First, the U.S. and all nuclear states should sever the link between deterrence and the mass killing of civilians. Second, the U.S. should adopt "the nuclear necessity principle." Third, the U.S. should reject targeting of civilian populations under any circumstances. Fourth, the U.S. should get rid of the policy of "calculated ambiguity." And fifth, the U.S. should work to develop credible, but de-escalatory, plans to respond to any nuclear attack. According to Sagan, an ethical approach to nuclear deterrence must also include efforts to walk the walk, not just talk the talk, of nuclear disarmament. Working in good faith for nuclear disarmament is the law of the land, it supports non-proliferation, and it also reduces the risk of nuclear war by accident or through misperception. Since nuclear disarmament is a long-term goal with many bumps in the road, we must work hard to maintain just nuclear and conventional deterrence along the way. And because nuclear deterrence is inherently risky, we must work hard in good faith toward the distant disarmament goal.



Center for Global Security Research  
Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory  
P.O. Box 808, L-189 Livermore, California 94551  
<https://CGSR.llnl.gov>

This work was performed under the auspices of the US Department of Energy by Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory under Contract DE-AC52-07NA27344. LLNL-TR-843725