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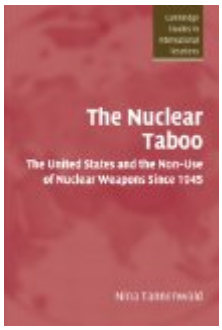
Nina Tannenwald. *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 449 Seiten $34.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-52428-5.



Reviewed by Kristina Spohr Readman

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Nina Tannenwald's massive book – some 450 pages – on the United States and global nuclear politics since 1945 is certainly a landmark study, even if the topic per se – the nuclear taboo – has been addressed from a number of angles by such eminent scholars as Janne Nolan, Peter J. Katzenstein, George H. Quester and Thomas C. Schelling before. Tannenwald's work is provocative in its argument against deterrence theory and policy as much as it is compelling in its attempt to trace how Washington's habit of non-use of nuclear weapons after the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 became internalised and expected behaviour (p. 69). Her book is ambitious in linking political theory with thorough historical, empirical research, the latter which has demanded of Tannenwald competent exploration of the complex decision-making processes and dynamics at the level of 'high politics' whilst carefully studying personal convictions and rational choices of the political elites against the background of wider international systemic developments and grassroots public opinion. And to a large extent Tannenwald succeeds: she has produced a major, very coherent and thought-provoking monograph.

After laying out the structure of her book and her rationale for undertaking this particular research project on America's nuclear taboo in her introductory chapter, Tannenwald sets out to explain the non-use of nuclear weapons on the basis of political theory in chapter 2. She briefly discusses the historiography of explanations with regard to deterrence versus non-deterrence, before elaborating in great detail her choice and use of the term "nuclear taboo". While a bit repetitive, Tannenwald, evidently seeing the need to satisfy the theoretical demands of political scientists and international relations theorists, puts great emphasis on teasing out the finer points of what is clearly this book's core concept: the notion of a nuclear "taboo", situated in the context of terms such as "norm", "tradition", "habit" and others. According to Tannenwald her concept has many facets. She defines the "nuclear taboo" as being "a de facto non-use norm with a strong moral component" which however is not universal, and

which has come about over a number of decades due to both "history and politics" (p. 59).

Chapters 3-7 form Tannenwald's empirical core as she concentrates on the Cold War period. Chapters 3, 4 and 6 focus on particular crises and wars (Hiroshima, Korea and Vietnam). Here, it is with great skill that she weaves together the numerous strands of her story and studies their interaction: political decision-making processes, the military's planning procedures and strategy, warfare, the rise of anti-nuclear grassroots movements and the voice of the public, and the development of international law under UN auspices. We learn about the individual key political actors, their personal moral convictions and perceptions (in example how anti-nuclearism or certainly serious doubts regarding the use of nuclear weapons in the case of Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson, and in some cases great interest in the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons (for instance Eisenhower, Dulles, Nixon and Kissinger), shaped political thinking and choices in crisis situations. Indeed, it is highly revealing that ultimately "non-use" prevailed even in the face of a massive, humiliating defeat, such as in Vietnam (p. 240). Washington stuck with the "de facto no-first use" norm, which the Vietnam war ultimately enhanced and consolidated. In Tannenwald's words "(…) as the willingness of the North Vietnamese to fight the United States illustrates, material power (here: nuclear power) does not make deterrence work" (p. 240). This means that considerations of the use of TNFs' (Theatre Nuclear Forces) were increasingly pushed to the sidelines. Tannenwald emphasises that the nuclear taboo increasingly mattered, and uses chapters 5 and 7 to reveal how it arose and grew stronger over time.

In these two chapters she covers much longer periods and studies the systemic factors driving the emergence and later institutionalisation of the taboo. Tannenwald identifies 1945-62 as the stage of the taboo's emergence with the post-Cuban crises decades (1960s, 1970s and 1980s) as the stage of the taboo's consolidation. She explains how nuclear weapons in the early 1950s became stigmatised due to analogies with poison gas and qualms over racism (using nuclear weapons against Asians as the Chinese, as earlier against Japanese). We learn about the impact of NATO's flexible response doctrine which re-emphasised the significance of strong conventional forces, of the onset of détente, of UN anti-nuclear diplomacy and of the Western antinuclear weapons movements. Yet how ever much stronger the taboo became, nuclear weapons were not abolished – on the contrary despite nuclear arms limitation and later reduction treaties, stockpiles remained, the possibility to engage in limited nuclear war was kept alive and deterrence as a strategy survived too. Moreover, new powers acquired nuclear weapons – even if their rhetoric pointed to purely "defensive" reasons.

It is these overview chapters that are problematic. First, the source base is much thinner (see for instance the discussion of the neutron bomb affair) than in the chapters on the crises, which could technically stand alone. We learn for instance about Soviet 'peace offensives' in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, but there is no discussion of how (or if) these were entwined with the anti-nuclear Western activists and how European national political affairs may have affected NATO's and the USA's decision-making. Second, regarding Tannenwald's criticism of deterrence strategy, it would have been important to know more about the Soviet side, and the Kremlin's internal thoughts. We do learn that the "nuclear taboo" is a concept best suited to democracies, so what did this mean for Soviet political and strategic calculations. How do we explain Moscow's peace rhetoric with SS20 build-up and the build up of biological and chemical weapons? What did treaties and agreements mean? How do we asses the NATO dual track decision?

Similarly lacking in depth is Tannenwald's analysis of the two post-Cold War decades (chap-

ter 9). She certainly makes important points regarding post-Cold War nuclear arms reduction and the impact of new, much more advanced conventional weapons which, it could be argued, have equally devastating effects as TNFs. In other words the "nuclear taboo" has simply permitted the advancement of technological developments in other weapons categories and created new "inhumane" weapons. Furthermore, while the taboo continues to exist it is now less about a potential East-West conflict, but about a North-South tension: between those who have and those who do not (yet) have these weapons, those who are 'responsible' and 'civilised' and have them and those who are 'uncivilised' and have them or want to have them. But, what Tannenwald does not address enough in her book is the problem of non-state actors, nuclear proliferation and today's fears of dirty bombs. Here surely the "taboo" concept encounters its limits. Maybe it would have made more sense to end the book with the Gulf War, the last war during which the USSR (as the US's superpower counterpart) was still intact and the first war in which both superpowers cooperated under a UN mandate, leaving the most recent past for a rather short postscript.

In her conclusion Tannenwald comes back to repeat with greater brevity and stringency what she already said in chapters 1 and 2. This raises the issue of balance. Lingering doubts hang over the length of some chapters, esp. "Korea" and "Vietnam" which get nearly twice as much space as some of the developmental chapters. This is a long book, and from a historian's perspective certainly, without losing any of the overarching framework and wider theoretical explanations and conclusions which are very thoughtfully developed, presented and stimulating, this work would have benefited from some confident editing, reducing the book's length by a quarter to a third. Moreover the language in places is somewhat repetitive, although admittedly many specific, technical expressions would be difficult to replace.

Apart from these shortfalls, whoever puts his or her mind to it and reads this volume, will be rewarded by many important insights. Tannenwald's thesis that a "nuclear taboo" has taken hold in America and elsewhere over the last sixty years or so cannot but provoke debate and evoke important questions concerning security policy decisions in the recent past and present. Looking to understand the international politics of the nuclear age, scholars and students as well as policy-makers cannot do so without seriously engaging with Tannenwald's powerful ideas, findings, and postulations.

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