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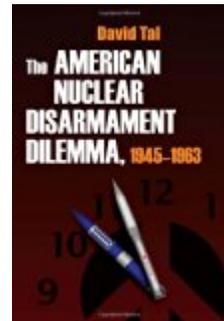
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Tal. *The American Nuclear Disarmament Dilemma, 1945-1963*. Syracuse Studies on Peace and Conflict Resolution Series. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008. xv + 328 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-3166-8.

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The Same Old Story

In this comprehensive account, David Tal examines state intentions with respect to arms control and disarmament negotiations in the initial stages of the Cold War. The book focuses on U.S. policymaking from the invention of the atomic bomb through the 1963 signing of the Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT), which outlawed nuclear weapon testing in the atmosphere, outer space, and underwater but not underground. This time period encompasses the presidential administrations of Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy.

In the introduction, Tal frames the book as an exploration of the reasons why disarmament has failed. Why, he asks, have so many people over the course of human history put so much time and effort into the pursuit of disarmament? “And why was it all in vain” (p. xii)? His answer is simple and sweeping: disarmament negotiations failed because no one wanted them to succeed. In particular, the three U.S. presidents who are the focus of this study did not want to achieve nuclear disarmament because they believed the United States needed to retain nuclear weapons for security against the Soviet Union. Hence, successive U.S. administrations deliberately adopted positions that were intended to ensure the failure of disarmament talks.

This appears to be a provocative thesis, but it quickly becomes apparent that there is less to Tal’s argument than meets the eye. Tal accepts the now standard distinction between arms control and disarmament. Disarmament eliminates all weapons, while arms control involves partial measures, such as numerical limits on certain types of weapons. According to conventional wisdom, disarmament is a utopian fantasy sought by idealists, while realists recognize that arms control is a feasible and useful tool of statecraft. When Tal claims the U.S. government did not want disarmament, he means this literally. He does not mean to imply that U.S. presidents also wanted nuclear arms control to fail; quite the opposite. Tal’s book is a detailed description of how, after an initial attempt at nuclear disarmament under Truman, U.S. policy shifted under Eisenhower to embrace the pursuit of arms control rather than disarmament, leading under Kennedy to the first nuclear arms control treaty. This is indeed what happened, but it is hardly news. The necessity of shifting from disarmament as a policy goal to arms control has been the central thesis of most scholarly work on arms control since at least the 1970s. Although Tal sometimes writes as though he has discovered something new and surprising, his book actually reaffirms the long-standing conventional wisdom in arms control studies. Nearly all histories of this period describe disarmament talks as little more than a propaganda exercise that neither side seriously expected to succeed.

The initial framing question of why disarmament has failed is hence a red herring. The real puzzle lies in Tal’s other introductory question: if everyone expected disarmament talks to fail and would have preferred to avoid them, then why did such talks continue for so long and

take up so much government attention? The United States participated in talks on “general and comprehensive disarmament” (GCD)—involving conventional as well as nuclear weapons—from the late 1940s through the early 1960s. Moreover, as Tal makes clear, successive U.S. administrations devoted a lot of time to internal deliberations over how best to approach these talks. This is where the “dilemma” of the title comes in. U.S. leaders knew disarmament talks would be a waste of time and did not want them to succeed in any event, but they nevertheless continued to go through the motions of negotiating disarmament. Tal convincingly explains this seeming contradiction in terms of two factors. First, and most important, the U.S. government was highly concerned about international opinion. As long as the Soviet Union put forward new disarmament proposals, U.S. officials felt they could not simply reject those proposals. To maintain the support of allies and prevent neutral countries, especially in the developing world, from supporting the Soviet Union, the United States had to give the appearance it was pursuing disarmament, since that goal had appeal for much of world opinion. Second, America’s own self image constrained it. Given the tradition of Wilsonian idealism, U.S. leaders found it hard to admit that they actually had no interest in disarmament.

The book’s greatest strength is its thoroughness. Tal has done extensive primary source research, as is reflected by the fact that the endnotes and bibliography cover some seventy pages. Tal goes into such extensive detail that the reader sometimes feels like the proverbial fly on the wall, witnessing the back-and-forth internal debate over how to respond to the latest Soviet proposal or scientific breakthrough. This comprehensiveness, however, is also a liability. The writing sometimes gets bogged down in all the detail and becomes repetitive. Because Tal summarizes meeting after meeting, the book sometimes recounts the same officials expressing the same disagreements only to reach the same conclusions.

The American Nuclear Disarmament Dilemma also rescues from obscurity some now largely forgotten negotiations in this time period. Most histories focus primarily on nuclear arms control talks while treating other negotiations as not much more than a historical footnote. Because Tal is concerned with disarmament and not just arms control, he pays great attention to several other lines of negotiation besides the talks over a nuclear test ban. This includes the many rounds of fruitless GCD talks as well as the aftermath of Eisenhower’s Atoms for Peace and Open Skies proposals. Tal gives particular promi-

nence to discussions in 1956–60 about creating limited inspection zones. The basic idea was to identify pieces of territory in both Soviet and Western bloc countries in which to experiment on a trial basis with on-site inspection. The idea created tensions between the United States and its allies, especially West Germany, and never led to an agreement. Yet Tal argues persuasively that these talks were important. They represented the first serious U.S. effort to negotiate a partial agreement that might be acceptable to the Soviet Union. As such, they helped change the dynamic of the arms talks, thereby helping pave the way for the LTBT.

Tal also deserves credit for restoring to prominence the role played by Harold Stassen. In 1955, President Eisenhower appointed Stassen to be his special advisor on disarmament, with cabinet rank. Stassen, a former governor of Minnesota and Republican presidential candidate, clashed repeatedly with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and frequently exceeded his negotiating instructions, leading Eisenhower to request his resignation in early 1958. While Stassen served in the administration, however, he was the primary intellectual force behind the shift from disarmament to arms control as a policy objective. He also did a great deal to convince Eisenhower to negotiate seriously and be flexible in seeking a proposal that could be acceptable to the Soviets. Tal paints a nicely rounded portrait of Stassen, noting his personal flaws while also giving him due credit for helping engineer a major change in the direction of U.S. policy.

Tal’s account, while broadly accurate, nevertheless contains several flaws. First, he makes some claims without making clear what the supporting evidence is and in general tends to overstate his case. This is most problematic in his treatment of the Baruch Plan. This U.S. proposal, made at the United Nations in June 1946, would have created an international agency to control all aspects of atomic energy that have potential military applications. Once international control had been established, atomic weapons would be outlawed and the United States would give up its existing arsenal. This proposal represents the only time the United States might have been serious about seeking nuclear disarmament and is hence important for Tal’s thesis. The prospects for an agreement would have been slender in the best of circumstances, because it is unlikely the Soviet Union would have agreed to forswear nuclear weapons in a situation that would have left the United States as the only country with the proven know-how to produce the atomic bomb. Whatever slight chances existed for outlawing the bomb were dashed, however, by changes made to the initial

U.S. plan by the chief U.S. negotiator, Bernard Baruch (for whom the plan is named). The relation between Baruch's actions and Truman's intentions is hence a critical issue.

Baruch was well known to the public as a wealthy investor and philanthropist. At the recommendation of Secretary of State James Byrnes, Truman asked Baruch to lead the delegation that would negotiate the administration's atomic disarmament proposal at the United Nations. According to most accounts, Truman appointed Baruch because he believed Baruch's conservative credentials and good reputation would improve the chances of getting Congress to approve any deal reached with the Soviet Union. The initial version of the U.S. proposal, known as the Acheson-Lilienthal Report, had been developed by a State Department panel advised by atomic scientists, including Robert Oppenheimer. Baruch objected to being handed a finished product, however, and insisted on the right to modify the plan. He added to the original proposal several changes that made the plan much more objectionable to the Soviets. He added a provision for automatic punishment of any violations, and, to help ensure this, he also insisted that the plan eliminate the veto power enjoyed by permanent U.N. Security Council members with respect to Security Council discussions of possible violations. The Soviet Union, not surprisingly, adamantly rejected any plan that would eliminate its UN veto. The Soviet counterproposal, dubbed the Gromyko Plan after the Soviet ambassador Andrei Gromyko, called for eliminating atomic weapons first before putting in place any international safeguards that could verify compliance. This was completely unacceptable to the United States, and thereafter the negotiations quickly devolved into a fruitless exercise in which both sides only sought to score propaganda points, exactly as Tal depicts them.

If there was any moment when the United States took seriously the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament, the Baruch Plan was that moment. It is thus vital to ascertain whether or not President Truman really wanted Baruch to turn the original State Department proposal into a plan guaranteed to be rejected. Tal claims this is exactly what Truman intended. He contends that, in addition to paving the way for possible Senate ratification of any deal reached, Truman had "another reason for choosing Baruch"—he knew Baruch would modify the Acheson-Lilienthal proposal in ways that would prevent any possibility of agreement, hence ensuring the United States would retain its atomic arsenal (p. 16). Tal does not see a contradiction between these two motivations, but if Truman wanted to prevent any agreement from being negotiated, why would he care whether his appointee

could help secure congressional ratification? More important, Tal presents no evidence that directly supports his contention that Truman wanted all along for nuclear disarmament talks to fail. He does not quote or reference any archival source or Truman's diaries. The endnotes that immediately precede and follow this assertion contain references to memoirs by Dean Acheson, Byrnes, and Truman, none of which say that Truman appointed Baruch because he knew he would wreck any chances for an agreement. There is evidence, moreover, that Truman may not have fully agreed with Baruch's actions. According to both John Lewis Gaddis and Gregg Herken, Truman and Byrnes tried to persuade Baruch to back off from some of his proposed changes, but he got them to relent by threatening to resign.[1] This could be a sign the president and secretary of state were serious about wanting a deal and calculated it was more important to keep Baruch on board than to overrule him on the plan's wording. Byrnes reportedly called Baruch's appointment "the worst mistake I have ever made," while Truman's memoir describes Baruch in rather derogatory terms as a self-serving publicity hound.[2] This is not normally the way people would describe an appointee who had effectively carried out their wishes. Tal's assertion that top U.S. officials never wanted the Baruch Plan to be negotiable is the only time his thesis of a lack of interest in disarmament is at all controversial. The fact that he provides no overt supporting evidence for this claim is hence puzzling.

A second problem area involves the book's comparative treatment of the United States and the Soviet Union. Tal sometimes casts U.S. motivations in a fairly negative light while taking Soviet positions in the same negotiations at face value. Although his starting premise is that no one wanted disarmament, in practice, he often applies this thesis only to U.S. leaders while assuming Soviet leaders were sincere, at least in wanting nuclear disarmament. In discussing Soviet peace offensives in the late 1940s, Tal declares that "Soviet disarmament plans could not be regarded as mere propaganda.... It seems that, indeed, [Joseph] Stalin was ready to give up nuclear weapons if the United States followed suit" (p. 42). After describing a proposal offered in late 1957 by the then Soviet prime minister, Nikolai Bulganin, Tal writes that, without access to the inner circles of Soviet decision making, "We can only assume that the Soviet government was ready to pledge itself to the points he was making" (p. 121). In June 1960, after a summit meeting and hopes for a test ban treaty had collapsed in the aftermath of the U-2 incident, Nikita Khrushchev revised the

Soviet GCD proposal to incorporate some Western positions. Tal asks whether Khrushchev really wanted complete disarmament. “According to his son, yes he did” (p. 160). Tal cites no other source in support of this conclusion and considers no other possible explanation for why Khrushchev, after turning his back on a real opportunity to reach a test ban deal with outgoing President Eisenhower, would have wanted to switch the focus to comprehensive disarmament talks.

Tal rightly points out that U.S. leaders were often excessively mistrustful of the Soviet Union. He notes, again persuasively, that this sometimes led the United States to reject out of hand Soviet proposals on which genuine negotiations leading to a compromise agreement might have been possible. But he overstates Soviet willingness to accomplish nuclear abolition. There are good reasons to believe that Stalin would not have given up the Soviet right to have nuclear weapons during the period when the United States had an atomic advantage. Nor were Stalin’s successors as pure in their interest in disarmament as Tal sometimes portrays them. In rejecting the assumption of many U.S. leaders that Soviet intentions were almost wholly malign, it is not necessary to adopt the opposite position and describe their motivations in the most benign light. The Soviets were well aware that nuclear issues could drive a wedge between the United States and allied and neutral countries, and both sides tended to treat arms talks as an extension of their Cold War competition. At the same time, there is abundant evidence that Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Khrushchev all grasped quite clearly how horrific nuclear war would be and all sought ways to avoid being dragged into a nuclear nightmare. In short, both sides had mixed and conflicting motivations. Because Tal only looks in detail at internal deliberations in the United States and not in the Soviet Union, his book presents an unbalanced portrait of the two sides. Readers see all the evidence for internal debates and hidden agendas in the U.S. government, but the behind-the-scenes considerations that were surely at work in the Soviet government as well do not receive the same attention.

The problem was not that one side wanted nuclear disarmament and the other did not. Rather, both sides saw the reasons to try to get rid of nuclear weapons but both mistrusted the other so much that neither was willing to make the sorts of concessions necessary to induce the other to sign an agreement. In particular, as Tal ultimately recognizes, inspection was the real obstacle to an agreement. The United States wanted more extensive on-site inspection to verify any agreement than the So-

viet Union would accept. The United States did not insist on inspections simply to scuttle any possibility of agreement. U.S. leaders would have accepted an agreement with adequate verification, but what the United States deemed necessary was more than the closed, secretive Soviet government could tolerate.

As a third flaw in its account, the book is too dismissive of public opinion. Tal notes some occasions on which political leaders were willing to defy, at least for awhile, the majority preference and other times when, without any clear evidence of what the public wanted, government officials cited public opinion as a reason for advocating policies they already favored for other reasons. He overgeneralizes from these observations, however, averring that public opinion had no influence on U.S. arms control policy. Yet Tal’s own account belies this sweeping generalization. He describes several instances when public opinion shaped policy. In spring 1958, for example, Secretary of State Dulles abandoned his long-standing opposition to a moratorium on nuclear testing. Tal concludes, “The reason for the change ... was [world] public opinion” (p. 128). Eisenhower similarly cited domestic opposition to testing on more than one occasion. Tal tries to dismiss this on the grounds “there was no solid public opinion in the United States against the *bomb*” (p. 110, emphasis added). But this is a non sequitur. The absence of public demands for disarmament does not equate to an absence of demands to halt testing. Opinion against *testing* did exist, and it was to this Eisenhower was responding. So too did other leaders. Even Tal ascribes the position of British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan almost entirely to the strong public opposition to nuclear testing in Britain.

Moreover, even though Tal has an extensive bibliography, he does not include references to studies that have focused explicitly on assessing the role of allied and world opinion or U.S. domestic opinion. Tal tends to reduce public opinion solely to polling data; if there is no correlation between an opinion poll and policy, Tal assumes there is no public influence. Sometimes, however, the public opinion that matters more is the portion of the public that can be mobilized into public protest. This reviewer, for example, has shown that antinuclear weapons protest had an impact on U.S. arms control policy at several points during the Cold War. Most relevant for the time period Tal deals with, my work shows that Eisenhower did not really see a test ban as a valuable arms control measure and would have preferred to continue pursuing the ideas he first broached in his Atoms for Peace and Open Skies proposals. It was the test ban movement,

both in the United States and worldwide, that persuaded the Eisenhower administration to elevate nuclear test ban talks to the top of the U.S. arms control agenda.[3]

Looking back over this time period, Tal concludes, “In the end, realism prevailed over idealism” (p. 243). But his analysis does not fully support this conclusion. In the United States, the most prominent foreign policy realists generally believed that nuclear arms control would be in the national interests of both sides and that verification measures good enough to deter Soviet cheating could be achieved. Yet, as Tal amply demonstrates, time and time again U.S. officials refused to pursue possible compromises because their mistrust of the Soviet Union led to inordinate fears the Soviets would find a way to cheat. As Tal himself describes it, the belief that the Soviets would take advantage of any possible opening to cheat was more a matter of faith than evidence, to the extent that Kennedy’s Central Intelligence Agency director did not bother to keep up with the most recent technological developments relevant to detecting clandestine nuclear tests. Tal accurately depicts the impact of this overwhelming mistrust, but when it precluded the United States from reaching feasible and mutually beneficial arms control agreements it can hardly be described as the triumph of realism. It would be more accurate to describe U.S. policy as the triumph of one strand of liberal ideology over another. Anticommunism and a more general suspicion of undemocratic regimes overwhelmed the disarmament impulse of Wilsonian idealism. U.S. arms control and disarmament policy in 1945-63 was really a battle taking place inside America’s liberal soul.

Ultimately, Tal’s stance of realist cynicism is too pessimistic. General and comprehensive disarmament is surely a pipe dream, and we are unlikely to see anything like the GCD talks of the early Cold War again any time soon. Disarmament accords covering particular categories of weapons are possible however. There are conventions that prohibit both chemical and biological weapons, and in the 1990s negotiations on a treaty to ban anti-personnel landmines were completed in a remarkably short period of time. None of these treaties have brought about complete elimination of the weapons in question, but the number of countries holding onto these weapons is much lower than it would be otherwise and the existence of these weapons bans has also increased

the inhibitions against using these types of weapons. Some disarmament proposals, provided they do not aim too broadly, can succeed.

For those who have not previously learned about arms control and disarmament efforts in the early part of the Cold War, *The American Nuclear Disarmament Dilemma* provides a readable and thorough historical account of these interesting and important attempts to reduce the dangers of war. The book will also be of interest to scholars who specialize on this subject. The comprehensiveness of its recounting of developments in these years, and especially its extensive references to archival sources, make this book an invaluable reference for students of arms control. In recent years, there have been renewed expressions of interest in abolishing nuclear weapons, including by prominent former U.S. government officials.[4] For those interested in such policy debates, Tal’s book serves as a useful object lesson. Achieving nuclear disarmament has so far proven to be beyond human ingenuity, but more modest arms control measures have sometimes been practically obtainable and quite valuable. Hopes for eventual nuclear abolition should not lead us to neglect shorter term opportunities for arms control. As an old adage states, we should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

Notes

[1]. John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 334; and Gregg Herken, *The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Bomb in the Cold War, 1945-1950* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 169.

[2]. Byrnes quoted in Gaddis, *United States and the Origins of the Cold War*, 334; and Harry S. Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, vol. 2, *Memoirs* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1956), 10.

[3]. Jeffrey W. Knopf, *Domestic Society and International Cooperation: The Impact of Protest on U.S. Arms Control Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), see esp. chap. 5.

[4]. George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, “A World Free of Nuclear Weapons,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007.

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