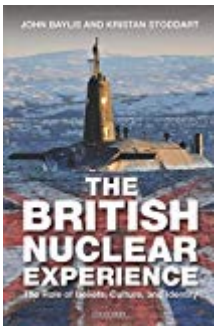
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



John Baylis, Kristan Stoddart. *The British Nuclear Experience: The Roles of Beliefs, Culture and Identity.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 312 pp. $90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-870202-3.

Reviewed by David Palkki

Published on H-War (April, 2016)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

John Baylis and Kristan Stoddart, both accomplished scholars, set out in this volume to provide a history of the development of British nuclear doctrine and policy from 1945 through the present.[1] The authors' second objective is to move away from realist accounts for why states seek and retain nuclear weapons, involving power and structure, to focus instead on constructivist explanations dealing with beliefs, identity, and culture. This study builds on and affirms earlier arguments that one must understand Britain's identity if one wishes to make sense of its views and behavior relative to nuclear weapons. Britain acquired and has retained its nuclear weapons, at least in large part, the argument goes, because British leaders have believed that Britain's identify as a great power requires possession of nuclear weapons. Baylis and Stoddart also find that nuclear weapons have been essential to Britain's "special relationship identity" with the United States and have enabled Britain to construct a "regional self-identity" as a defender of western Europe (p. 208).

The authors succinctly review key studies by political scientists on belief systems, strategic culture, and nuclear proliferation as the basis for their "theory-driven" approach to understanding Britain's nuclear behavior and doctrine. Drawing on theory to better understand history is as uncommon (and generally unrewarded) as it is appropriate. As Stephen Van Evera has questioned, "If everyone makes and tests theories but no one ever uses them, then what are they for?"[2] Familiarity with political scientists' theoretical scholarship can alert historians to new questions and causal relationships to ask of the evidence. These scholars' decision to frame their historical explanation within a school of international relations theory will presumably also increase the potential readership among political scientists. Efforts to pollinate ideas and arguments across disciplinary boundaries should be commended and encouraged.

Experts as well as newcomers to the fields of nuclear proliferation and security studies will find considerable value in this study. The authors

present good evidence that British leaders' identity of their country as a great power played a role in their nuclear decision making, including remarkable quotes by former prime ministers Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair about their decisions to keep Trident and nuclear deterrence in order to retain Britain's identity and status (pp. 174 and 190). The authors also present a wealth of supporting evidence from formerly classified documents, memoirs, interviews, and other sources to buttress their claims.

This book is important for the ground it breaks empirically, as opposed to theoretically. The authors describe the book as theory-driven, yet cite only a few studies, with which they agree, on the causes of nuclear proliferation. The authors believe that a variety of factors affected British nuclear doctrine and behavior, including security concerns, domestic politics, and norms. They are certainly correct that no monocausal explanation can account for all of the changes in British nuclear doctrine and behavior. Structural realist explanations may come up short in some areas, as the authors argue, but the inability of this body of theory to account for all of the variance in Britain's nuclear behavior is not surprising, particularly given the various critiques of neorealist explanations for nuclear proliferation that have emerged in recent years.

The authors acknowledge that traditional security explanations may be consistent with Britain's decision to develop atomic weapons, to acquire an atomic capability independent of that of the United States, to build thermonuclear weapons, to purchase Polaris and Trident missiles, and perhaps also to retain nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War era. They write that constructivist explanations provide greater explanatory power than their realist counterparts, though, readers might be forgiven for objecting, realist explanations seem not to have done terribly poorly.

Beyond any broad narrative running throughout the book, readers will appreciate the fantastic historical gems found in one chapter after the next. To cite but one example, Baylis and Stoddart provide an excellent overview of how thinking changed over time about the needs for minimal deterrence, and about how weak much of this thinking was. The authors point out that it was believed in 1947 that one thousand atomic bombs were needed for minimal deterrence, but that this assessment stemmed entirely from mirror-image analysis. Because twenty-five Soviet bombs would force Britain to sue for peace, the argument went, and since the Soviet Union was forty times larger than Britain, Britain would need a stockpile of one thousand bombs (twenty-five times forty). By 1958, British leaders thought minimum deterrence required enough atomic bombs to destroy forty-four Soviet cities. In subsequent years the number dropped from forty-four to twenty, then to ten, and then, in 1976, to five. By 1980, Britain moved away from deliberately targeting cities to focus instead on "Soviet State Power." The authors conclude that political judgment, affected by economic factors more than military strategy, "has invariably been at the heart of British nuclear planning" (pp. 212-213).

The book is well written, thoughtfully organized, and rich in evidence. It will be of keen interest to scholars and graduate students interested in the British nuclear experience, as well as to defense and foreign policy analysts on both sides of the Atlantic. I am grateful to have it on my bookshelf.

Notes

[1]. This review reflects the views of the author and not necessarily those of the Air War College, the US Department of Defense, or any other entity.

[2]. Van Evera, ***Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*** (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 4.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-war

Citation: David Palkki. Review of Baylis, John; Stoddart, Kristan. *The British Nuclear Experience: The Roles of Beliefs, Culture and Identity.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2016.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=45128