

The Taboos, Secrets, and Hidden History of Nuclear Weapons

Robert Norris began with a brief history of nuclear weapons, pointed out that the history is difficult to research due to secrecy and questioned whether all the secrecy was necessary or desirable. Norris explains that he looks at four different policies concerning nuclear weapons to form an overall assessment. These policies are: declaratory, acquisition, employment, and deployment.

- Declaratory policy is the one addressed in public. It discusses why nuclear weapons are developed and retained. Usually the answer is deterrence. This policy also tries to decrease the dangers of nuclear weapons using arms control treaties and notification of testing.
- Acquisition is about money and allocation of resources, it focuses on how to develop nuclear weapons and the cost of doing so. Decisions are made about what weapons will be acquired and whether the technology will be purchased or produced.
- Employment entails how the nuclear weapons are to be used in real war plans. These plans are secret. Employment also deals with command and control issues; who is authorized to order the use of the weapons?
- Deployment policy deals with the nuclear order of battle. Where are the weapons located? These locations are secret. Information regarding some these locations has been disclosed due to accidents and treaties.

Norris concludes by looking at two diagrams. The first shows how much is known about the nuclear programs of the various countries. The second diagram reveals which countries have shared technology with which other countries.

Lynn Eden discussed key findings from her book, *Whole World on Fire: Organizations, Knowledge, and Nuclear Weapons Devastation*. She posed the questions of how and why the government underestimated the damage of nuclear weapons when developing plans for their use. She asserts that the fire damage needs to be taken into account along with the blast damage. She continued by looking at the magnitude of the underestimated damage using Hiroshima as an example where the blast damage radius was about one mile whereas the damage from fires was 4.4 square miles. This damage from fires was ignored in U.S. strategic plans.

Eden next looked at why fire damage has been overlooked. Three groups examined the damage of nuclear weapons. The first one examined only the blast damage. The second looked at fire damage but was unable to develop a system of determining fire damage. The third looked at a combination of the two and was able to determine the blast damage and fire damage effects of a nuclear weapon but in 1992 the fire-blast system was not adopted and to this day the United States does not take fire damage into consideration when looking at the effects of nuclear weapons.

Nina Tannenwald spoke about the origins and implications of the taboo around nuclear weapons. She asked why nuclear weapons have not been used in the last 60 years and how we can assure that they will not be used in the next 60 years. Deterrence could be the answer but why are nuclear power countries not using nuclear weapons on non-nuclear power countries? Tannenwald believes that it is because of the taboo and revulsion associated with nuclear weapons.

She points to Truman as the starting point for differentiating nuclear weapons from conventional weapons due to the level of destruction. Furthermore, in 1946 the tasking of the UN to move towards disarmament led to an anti-nuclear weapons sentiment and the taboo took root. The grassroots movement was also critical to instilling the taboo with the idea that it is unacceptable for a civilized country to use nuclear weapons.

Today, however, the situation seems to be changing. The U.S. and Russia are returning to nuclear weapons, North Korea and Iran are pursuing nuclear weapons, and the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Conference failed. Moreover the absence of a grassroots movement has led to a lack of accountability by the Bush administration. Here Tannenwald asks a key question, “Does the U.S. administration believe that taboo is in U.S. interests?”

To assure that nuclear weapons are not used in the next 60 years, Tannenwald produced three measures:

- decreasing the role of nuclear weapons in security policies, specifically declaring a no first-use policy,
- bureaucratic institutionalization and internalizing the taboo, and
- posing questions to the administration, namely, is the taboo in U.S. best interests.
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And according to Tannenwald, if the taboo unravels, non-proliferation may not last.

In the Q&A session, Tannenwald’s idea of taboo was challenged by Amy Woolf of the Congressional Research Service. Woolf contended that it is a nuclear threshold that exists, not a taboo and that the threshold is diminishing. She argued that decisions about nuclear weapons are based upon a cost benefit analysis and that public outrage and grassroots have no effect on the planning process.

Summary by Jacqueline Honda, Georgetown University, MSFS 2005