

The essential irrelevance of nuclear weapons:

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Stability in the postwar world.

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## **The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons: Stability in the Postwar World**

John Mueller

International Security

The MIT Press

Volume 13, Number 2, Fall 1988

pp. 55-79

ARTICLE

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### **In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons Stability in the Postwar World | John Mueller that, for better or worse, the existence of nuclear weapons has profoundly shaped our lives and destinies. It is widely assumed that the existence of nuclear weapons has profoundly shaped our lives and destinies. Some find the weapons supremely beneficial. Defense analyst Edward Luttwak says, "we have lived since 1945 without another world war precisely because rational minds . . . extracted a durable peace from the very terror of nuclear weapons." And Robert Art and Kenneth Waltz conclude, "the probability of war between America and Russia or between NATO and the Warsaw Pact is practically nil precisely because the military planning and deployments of each, together with the fear of escalation to general nuclear war, keep it that way." Others argue that, while we may have been lucky so far, the continued existence of the weapons promises eventual calamity: The doomsday clock on the cover of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has been pointedly hovering near midnight for over 40 years now, and in his influential bestseller, *The Fate of the*

Erth, Jonathan Schell dramatically concludes that if we do not "rise up and cleanse the earth of nuclear weapons," we will "sink into the final coma and end it all."<sup>3</sup> This article takes issue with both of these points of view and concludes that nuclear weapons neither crucially define a fundamental stability nor threaten severely to disturb it. For helpful comments I would like to thank Richard Rosecrance, Karl Mueller, Robert Jervis, MacGregor Knox, Richard Betts, and the anonymous reviewers for *International Security*. This project was supported in part by the University of Rochester and by a Guggenheim Fellowship. John Mueller is Professor of Political Science at the University of Rochester. He is the author of *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War*, to be published by Basic Books in 1989.

1. Edward N. Luttwak, "Of Bombs and Men," *Commentary*, August 1983, p. 82.
2. Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz, "Technology, Strategy, and the Uses of Force," in Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz, eds., *The Use of Force* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983), p. 28. See also Klaus Knorr, "Controlling Nuclear War," *International Security*, Vol. 9, NO. 4 (Spring 1985), p. 79; John J. Mearsheimer, "Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence in Europe," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Winter 1984/85), pp. 25-26; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 213-219.
3. Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Knopf, 1982), p. 231.

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The paper is in two parts. In the first it is argued that, while nuclear weapons may have substantially influenced political rhetoric, public discourse, and defense budgets and planning, it is not at all clear that they have had a significant impact on the history of world affairs since World War II. They do not seem to have been necessary to deter World War II, to determine alliance patterns, or to cause the United States and the Soviet Union to behave cautiously. In the second part, these notions are broadened to a discussion of stability in the postwar world. It is concluded that there may be a long-term trend away from war among developed countries and that the long peace since World War II is less a peculiarity of the nuclear age than the logical conclusion of a substantial historical process. Seen broadly, deterrence seems to be remarkably firm; major war—a war among developed countries, like World War II or worse—is so improbable as to be obsolescent; imbalances in weapons systems are unlikely to have much impact on anything except budgets; and the nuclear arms competition may eventually come under control not so much out of conscious design as out of atrophy born of boredom.

**The Impact of Nuclear Weapons**

The postwar world might well have turned out much the same even in the absence of nuclear weapons. Without them, world war would have been discouraged by the memory of World War II, by...

# The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons

John Mueller

Stability in the Postwar World

It is widely assumed that, for better or worse, the existence of nuclear weapons has profoundly shaped our lives and destinies. Some find the weapons supremely beneficial. Defense analyst Edward Luttwak says, "we have lived since 1945 without another world war precisely because rational minds . . . extracted a durable peace from the very terror of nuclear weapons."<sup>1</sup> And Robert Art and Kenneth Waltz conclude, "the probability of war between America and Russia or between NATO and the Warsaw Pact is practically nil precisely because the military planning and deployments of each, together with the fear of escalation to general nuclear war, keep it that way."<sup>2</sup> Others argue that, while we may have been lucky so far, the continued existence of the weapons promises eventual calamity: The doomsday clock on the cover of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has been pointedly hovering near midnight for over 40 years now, and in his influential bestseller, *The Fate of the Earth*, Jonathan Schell dramatically concludes that if we do not "rise up and cleanse the earth of nuclear weapons," we will "sink into the final coma and end it all."<sup>3</sup>

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*International Security*, Fall 1993, Vol. 18, No. 2.  
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