



## **BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE: Tempting Fate**

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## Summary

A review of *Tempting Fate: Why Nonnuclear States Confront Nuclear Opponents*, by Paul Avey.

Why would a state that lacks nuclear weapons choose to fight a state that has them? In this roundtable, our authors evaluate Paul Avey's explanation for this phenomenon.

# 1. Crucial Calculations: Examining the Decision-Making Behind Nuclear Use in War

*Rupal N. Mehta*

Paul Avey's new book *Tempting Fate: Why Nonnuclear States Confront Nuclear Opponents* answers one of the most important questions in grand strategy and nuclear security: Why do nuclear and non-nuclear states go to war?<sup>1</sup> Anchored in the canonical literature on the consequences of nuclear weapons proliferation and contemporaneous debates about how these weapons can change the calculus of combat in wartime, Avey employs a methodical approach that produces a range of explanations about the variables impacting conflict.<sup>2</sup> In addition to systematically addressing the limitations of existing explanations and drawing several counterintuitive conclusions, Avey clearly and persuasively details how conventionally inferior non-nuclear weapons states may possess an advantage in disputes with nuclear powers.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Avey, *Tempting Fate: Why Nonnuclear States Confront Nuclear Opponents* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Brodie, ed, *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & Co Press, 1946); Kyle Beardsley and Victor Asal, "Winning with the Bomb," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no 2, (2009), 278-301, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0022002708330386>; Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); James Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 4, no. 2 (Summer, 1995), 79-414, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706903>.

## An Essential Read

Avey uses a series of case studies that carefully trace his proposed causal mechanisms against the historical record. Strikingly, these chapter-length explorations, which include the 1948–49 U.S.-Soviet standoff over Berlin, the U.S.-Chinese conflict during the Korean War (1950–53), the October War in 1973 between Egypt and Israel, and the 1991 Persian Gulf conflict, represent some of the critical cases in conflict studies.<sup>3</sup> Avey begins by asking two important questions. First, why do states that lack a nuclear capability challenge states that have one? Second, why do leaders of non-nuclear states believe that nuclear weapons are unlikely to be used against them? To answer the first question, Avey argues that non-nuclear states can leverage a range of “strategic and material inhibitions” against nuclear states to press their claims without risking a nuclear strike.<sup>4</sup> Non-nuclear challengers to the status quo can walk right up to a red line without worrying that their nuclear-armed rivals will actually use the bomb against them. This yields an intuitive but understudied logic, one that Avey carefully elaborates and then uses to walk the reader through a variety of scenarios.

The result is a clear, powerful theory that represents a major contribution to the study of how nuclear weapons impact the international system, especially in the

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<sup>3</sup> Caitlin Talmadge, “The Puzzle of Personalist Performance: Iraqi Battlefield Effectiveness in the Iran-Iraq War,” *Security Studies* 22, no 2 (2013), 180–221, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2013.786911>; Vipin Narang *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1962* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 4.

realms of conflict and crisis bargaining. Avey's framework captures a wide range of behaviors that are also relatively easy to observe. It thus sidesteps debates over harder-to-reconcile arguments — such as whether nuclear weapons confer both deterrent and compellent advantages upon states that possess them — that might otherwise impede research on nuclear weapons and conflict.<sup>5</sup> The book incorporates seemingly disparate logics from past scholarship related to security, bargaining, and norms to generate a compelling, parsimonious, and useful theory — an especially impressive achievement given the tensions and mixed findings in the literature.<sup>6</sup> With this in mind, the book is an essential read for international relations scholars.

To answer the second question — why leaders believe that nuclear weapons will not be used in certain contexts — Avey presents an exhaustive survey of the explanations underlying nuclear weapons use and non-use. Specifically, he identifies and highlights the limitations of arguments from the literature on bargaining as well as core contentions from the scholarship on norms, taboos, and nuclear aversion.<sup>7</sup> He argues that leaders of non-nuclear states are able to examine

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<sup>5</sup> Todd Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Matthew Kroenig, "Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (Winter 2013), 141–171, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43282155>; Erik Gartzke, Jeffrey Kaplow, and Rupal N. Mehta, "The Determinants of Nuclear Force Structure," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58, no. 3 (2013), 481–508, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0022002713509054>.

<sup>6</sup> Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*; Nina Tannenwald, *Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Tannenwald, *Nuclear Taboo*.

an opponent's incentives and cost-benefit calculations and thus assess the likelihood of nuclear use.

The bulk of the book's evidence consists of case studies of America's conflicts with the Soviet Union, China, and Iraq. In addition, Avey includes a case relating to Egypt's attack on Israel in October 1973. He wisely employs two case selection strategies — within-case and cross-national variation — to maximize internal and external validity, two of the cornerstones of social science research that highlight the utility of logical consistency and generalizability. The cases are detailed, thorough, and exhaustively researched, establishing the book as a critical reference for each.

More significantly, the cases make important methodological, empirical, and theoretical contributions. First, in addition to tracing his logic with an eye toward establishing “controls” (i.e., the United States as the nuclear weapons state in three cases), Avey sidesteps some of the prior literature that focuses on a single case at a time. This literature often lacks critical points of comparison, which can obscure underlying patterns in states' behavior toward nuclear-armed opponents and the ways in which disputes between nuclear and non-nuclear states unfold. Avey's use of his theoretical framework to explicate the details of these cases highlights the most important differences among them. It also helps to reveal key similarities — especially regarding U.S. foreign policy. Taken together, the first three case studies offer an original and unified understanding of how wars can emerge in the nuclear era that is concise and compelling.

Avey's incorporation of declassified documents, memoirs, and other primary source evidence provides important, though incomplete, support for his argument.

In addition, he extends his analysis by providing some quantitative data and a number of shorter case study vignettes. Throughout the book, Avey is transparent about the potential limitations and concerns regarding the evidence he has marshaled. *Tempting Fate* provides a good example of an ideal research design for rigorous scholars designing their own projects, even as it acknowledges the shortcomings of observational research.

### **In Praise of Perspective and Nuance**

Overall, the reviewers offer high praise of Avey's book. Alexander Lanoszka argues that it "makes an invaluable contribution to our understanding of nuclear politics." Building on prior work, he commends Avey for offering new insights into key events and providing nuance for critical cases from the historical record. Reid Pauly agrees that this book breaks new ground and helps to further elucidate contemporary challenges and "contextualize a renewal of asymmetric competition under the nuclear shadow." Pauly also draws attention to the book's other major contributions — an exhaustive exploration of the theory of limited war and case studies on China and Iraq that diverge from the United States-centric scholarship in nuclear security studies. Finally, Ariel Petrovics writes that *Tempting Fate* "makes a significant contribution by questioning the accepted wisdom" about the utility and relevance of nuclear weapons, adding "nuance to the gray area" in the debate over whether nuclear weapons are too costly to use or the most powerful weapon states can possess. Lanoszka calls *Tempting Fate* a "must-read" that "gives inspiration for fresh theorizing and more empirical scholarship."

The depth of Avey's research in the book's historical case studies receives special attention from the reviewers. Pauly notes that Avey's case study examining Iraq is

“particularly rich,” as he “carefully exploits the captured records of Saddam Hussein’s mercurial deliberations with his advisers” and provides critical evidence illustrating how Iraq debated the credibility of American threats to use nuclear weapons. Petrovics also highlights Avey’s case analyses, arguing that “the case studies and key findings will be useful to students of conflict studies at all levels, providing easily approachable conclusions for newcomers to the field with sufficient detail and evidence for the more experienced readers.”

While praising Avey’s fresh perspectives and rich nuance, Lanoszka argues that the main case studies do not provide a persuasive refutation of some of the alternative explanations, namely the nuclear taboo counter argument. Similarly, Lanoszka interrogates the inclusion of Israel as a key case for Avey. Given geographic challenges, few non-nuclear states, aside from Egypt, could have posed a credible threat to the homeland of the nuclear state. Lanoszka, however, notes that Avey himself is circumspect in judging the inferences that can be drawn from this case, conceding that Avey acknowledges “that a favorable nuclear balance may not necessarily translate to operational effectiveness.”

### **Additional Questions: Going Beyond the Brink**

While I concur with much of the praise offered by the reviewers, *Tempting Fate* left me with three additional questions regarding Avey’s theoretical framework and empirical evidence. These queries highlight important avenues for theoretical extensions of Avey’s argument and offer paths for further research for those interested in examining the role of nuclear weapons in conflict.



First, Avey's approach to the question of why non-nuclear states challenge nuclear rivals limits the scope and applicability of his theoretical framework. Notably, *Tempting Fate* does not seek to examine *why* states engage in these disputes. To some degree, this is understandable. For the sake of parsimony, assuming away the reasons why states enter into conflict can help control for a variety of factors that may complicate inference. However, as the scholarship demonstrates, the strategic logic that underpins the decision to use force is important and may have critical consequences for a state's behavior in a conflict and the ultimate outcome of that conflict.<sup>8</sup> If, for example, the leader of a non-nuclear state initiates a dispute to help shore up domestic political support or to win an election, those objectives may influence that leader's behavior during the conflict. These calculations may impact a leader's beliefs about a nuclear state's willingness to use nuclear weapons and relevant red lines for action. Thus, exploring the process of "selecting into conflict" may yield some important and unforeseen implications for this framework.

Second, Avey's theory assumes perfect or near-perfect information among actors. His argument suggests that for this dynamic to work (and for full-scale nuclear war to be avoided), a non-nuclear state interested in challenging the status quo must correctly estimate its nuclear-armed adversary's threshold for nuclear use and step right up to this line without crossing it. But is it always possible to know what a state's red lines really are, especially during a crisis? It is not outside the realm of possibility that some leaders might believe the benefits of nuclear use outweigh its associated costs. At the very least, different leaders will probably

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<sup>8</sup> See James D. Fearon, "Selection Effects and Deterrence," *International Interactions* 28 (2002), 5-29, <http://slantchev.ucsd.edu/courses/pdf/fearon-ii2002v28n1.pdf>.

adopt different red lines. And these differences may not be visible to a non-nuclear challenger during a crisis—a leader’s willingness to use nuclear weapons will not always be clear.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, I finished Avey’s book hoping for a greater discussion of key cross-national trends. For example, quantitative analysis of behavior over time can have important implications for how states behave and learn from the past. From a strategic standpoint, one would expect both non-nuclear and nuclear states to learn and update their beliefs based on prior decisions to “tempt fate” and engage in brinksmanship. If this is true, one would expect to see a different set of behaviors emerge in the future. One could also imagine that third parties, having observed these dynamics, would shift their strategies and cost-benefit calculations. Avey’s empirical framework (and the inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative measures) readily lends itself to this type of investigation. I hope that he or other scholars take up the challenge.

## Conclusion

Notwithstanding these qualms, the reviewers concur that *Tempting Fate* makes an important contribution to the existing scholarship on the role of nuclear weapons in interstate relations. Lanoszka and Pauly highlight the original perspective and rigorous case analysis that Avey brings to a foundational question in nuclear

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth N. Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); William Spaniel and Rupal N. Mehta, *Atomic Uncertainty: Information Problems in Nuclear Negotiations*, (Under Review, Oxford University Press, 2020); Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War.”

security studies. Petrovics commends Avey for writing for a broader audience — experienced readers and “nuclear neophytes” should all enjoy Avey’s book. In taking a necessary step forward in rigorously examining a wide range of dyadic dynamics and challenging popular narratives about the strategy and psychology behind nuclear use, Avey adds to our collective understanding of how nuclear weapons impact warfighting and how leaders decide to challenge nuclear-armed adversaries. In what feels like an increasingly tense geopolitical environment, there can be no more important time for scholarship like *Tempting Fate*.

**Rupal N. Mehta** is an associate professor of political science at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.



## 2. The Limits of the Nuclear Shadow

*Ariel F.W. Petrovics*

Nuclear weapons are awesome expressions of military might. Conventional wisdom holds that nuclear-armed states enjoy greater security and coercive power than do non-nuclear weapon states. In fact, past research has repeatedly found that nuclear-armed states are more militarily adventurous than non-nuclear states, develop broader international goals and reach, and are better able to extract concessions from their adversaries.<sup>10</sup> However, non-nuclear states sometimes confront nuclear-armed opponents. This puzzle is the subject of Paul Avey's book, *Tempting Fate: Why Nonnuclear States Confront Nuclear Opponents*.<sup>11</sup> Avey's goal is to explain how non-nuclear states challenge nuclear-armed adversaries and why they are sometimes at least partially successful.

The phenomenon of conflict under conditions of a nuclear monopoly is not quite as rare as theories of nuclear deterrence and coercion would lead us to believe. As Avey points out, "wars in which one side holds a nuclear monopoly occur about as often as those between states where neither side has nuclear weapons. Moreover,

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); James J. Wirtz, "Conclusions," in eds. T.V. Paul, Patrick M. Morgan, and James J. Wirtz, *Complex Deterrence: Strategies in the Global Age* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Mark Bell and Nicholas Miller, "Questioning the Effects of Nuclear Weapons in Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 1 (2015), 74-92, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0022002713499718>.

<sup>11</sup> Paul C. Avey, *Tempting Fate: Why Nonnuclear States Confront Nuclear Opponents* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

the non-nuclear weapon state ... frequently starts the trouble.”<sup>12</sup> The most obvious explanation for this behavior — that non-nuclear states challenge nuclear-armed opponents because they simply do not *believe* that their more powerful opponents will actually use nuclear weapons against them — tells us very little, as it does not explain why leaders of non-nuclear states would hold such a belief. As Avey notes, a non-nuclear Soviet Union in 1948–49 and a non-nuclear China in 1950 challenged the nuclear-armed United States despite the fact that it had just demonstrated its willingness to use nuclear weapons against Japan in 1945.<sup>13</sup>

With this question in mind, Avey argues that while nuclear weapons cast a definite shadow, that shadow is limited by the potential costs of using nuclear weapons during war. They are, in other words, weapons of last resort, making them far less useful in small-scale conflicts. Non-nuclear states therefore gamble that by “not crossing [certain] red lines, the costs of nuclear use for the nuclear-armed opponent will outweigh the benefits.”<sup>14</sup> As a result, a nuclear monopoly may not prevent non-nuclear states from challenging their nuclear-armed adversaries. However, nuclear weapons do change the ways in which non-nuclear states execute that challenge.

### **Increasing Costs, Reducing Benefits**

Avey argues that a non-nuclear state looking to challenge a nuclear power will pursue a strategy aimed at increasing the costs and reducing the benefits of

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<sup>12</sup> Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 4.

nuclear use for their adversaries. Non-nuclear states can increase the costs of use by holding valuable assets at risk, inciting international diplomatic backlash, or threatening to acquire nuclear weapons themselves. Conversely, non-nuclear states can reduce the benefits of nuclear use by pursuing only limited military aims. Specifically, the non-nuclear challenger can avoid triggering nuclear use by working to ensure that the nuclear-armed adversary does not face major threats to critical assets like territorial integrity or regime stability. In addition, war between a conventionally powerful non-nuclear state and a nuclear-armed opponent should be relatively rare. A non-nuclear state with powerful conventional forces, Avey reasons, might pose a significant threat to a nuclear-armed state, which could result in nuclear use. Consequently, the conventionally powerful, non-nuclear state can be expected to avoid wars with a nuclear adversary that might turn to its nuclear arsenal in self-defense.

The implication — that conventionally powerful non-nuclear states are actually *less capable* of confronting nuclear-armed adversaries — is particularly interesting, as it contravenes accepted wisdom that more powerful states are generally more capable of achieving their goals in a conflict. However, Avey argues that when one considers the threat that conventional military capabilities may pose to an adversary's basic interests, it follows that conventional power can become a weakness for a non-nuclear state seeking to challenge a nuclear-armed opponent. Powerful non-nuclear states may have to withhold conventional capabilities, accepting early defeat rather than pushing a conventional advantage to ensure this strength does not incite a nuclear response from the latter. For example, the conventionally powerful Soviets chose to “pose a much smaller danger than they

could have to the United States, ultimately conceding rather than escalating.”<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Avey claims that during China’s confrontations with the United States in the period from 1950 to 1964, Beijing worked to limit the immediate danger the Americans faced and increased the military and international costs that Washington would suffer if it resorted to nuclear use.<sup>16</sup> Avey’s reliance on case studies is necessitated in part by the relative rarity of these types of conflicts — although they are more common than many theories would lead one to expect. Avey attempts to overcome this limitation by presenting four in-depth case studies that cover a wide range of time and space,<sup>17</sup> while also including a brief assessment of all the other nuclear monopoly conflicts in the appendix,<sup>18</sup> which together bolster his conclusions.

## Questioning the Accepted Wisdom

While Avey’s argument and theoretical logic are convincing, it is hard to rule out alternative explanations or test how generalizable these propositions are beyond the four cases he evaluates. Nearly all of Avey’s cases involve non-nuclear states

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<sup>15</sup> Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 134.

<sup>16</sup> This period immediately preceded China’s first nuclear test, during which it was a conventionally powerful but non-nuclear state. See Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 113.

<sup>17</sup> Avey achieves temporal variation within cases by tracing the process of conflict between the United States and China over eight years and between the United States and Iraq over 13 years. He achieves case and geographic variation by examining conflicts in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia, and by studying challenger non-nuclear states of varying conventional, political, and economic capabilities.

<sup>18</sup> Avey relies on Zeev Maoz et al., “The Dyadic Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) Dataset Version 3.0: Logic, Characteristics, and Comparisons to Alternative Datasets,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63, no. 3 (2019), 811-35, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0022002718784158>.

resisting a nuclear-armed United States. The one outlier evaluates a non-nuclear challenge against Israel, arguably America's closest protégé, and focuses on a conflict for which the United States directly mediated the resolution.<sup>19</sup> It could be argued that the United States is simply inept at deterring challengers or particularly unique in exercising nuclear restraint. If the latter is true, how can non-nuclear challenges to other, less restrained nuclear powers be explained? Previous research has concluded that the United States is unique due to its system of political checks and balances,<sup>20</sup> its leading role in creating the Nonproliferation Treaty and the nuclear taboo,<sup>21</sup> and its global military reach. It is therefore unclear if Avey's argument would hold for cases that do not directly involve the United States.

Nevertheless, the implications of Avey's findings and the larger questions his research poses for nuclear security have clear relevance to both scholarly and policy debates. In answering the question of why non-nuclear states challenge

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<sup>19</sup> Specifically, this case examines Egypt's challenges to Israel in the 1969-73 period, during which Israel was heavily dependent on U.S. military and economic aid. Avey notes that Egypt conducted backchannel diplomacy with the United States during this time, which raises the possibility that American normative commitments may have increased Egypt's willingness to challenge the status quo even though Israel possessed nuclear weapons. See Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 80.

<sup>20</sup> Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52, no. 4 (1998), 887-917, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2601361>; and James W. Ceaser, "The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism," *American Political Thought* 1, no. 1 (2012), 3-28, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/664595>.

<sup>21</sup> William C. Potter, "The NPT and the Sources of Nuclear Restraint," *Daedalus* 139, no. 2 (2010), 68-81, <https://www.amacad.org/publication/npt-sources-nuclear-restraint>; and Jeffrey S. Lantis, "Nuclear Technology and Norm Stewardship: US Nonproliferation Policies Revisited," *International Studies Perspectives* 16, no. 4 (2015), 423-445, <https://doi.org/10.1111/insp.12070>.



nuclear-armed adversaries, Avey engages with a broad literature on international conflict processes and sheds light on important challenges to international security today. He finds that while nuclear weapons do indeed impact the nature of conflicts between nuclear and non-nuclear states, the latter can still find ways to effectively challenge their nuclear-armed counterparts. *Tempting Fate* makes a significant contribution by questioning the accepted wisdom that contends nuclear weapons are either so costly to use that they are basically irrelevant in international relations or so powerful that they can dictate state behavior.<sup>22</sup> Avey adds useful and relevant nuance to the gray area between these two options. He finds that a nuclear monopoly cannot buy its possessor absolute security or prevent challenges from weaker states — but concludes that it does change the manner and execution of these kinds of conflicts.

*Tempting Fate* may be useful for a wide variety of audiences interested in nuclear weapons and interstate conflict processes. The theory and its novel nuances will be most interesting to experts, adding clarity that can bridge the gap between skeptics and proponents of the power of nuclear weapons in international relations. The case studies and key findings will be useful to students of conflict studies at all levels, providing easily approachable conclusions for newcomers to the field with sufficient detail and evidence for the more experienced readers. Finally, while policy practitioners and general audiences may be less interested in

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<sup>22</sup> The former argument tends to rely on theories about nuclear restraint and the nuclear taboo. For a sampling of this literature, see Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Ward Wilson, “The Myth of Nuclear Deterrence,” *Nonproliferation Review* 15, no. 3 (2008), 421-439, [https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/npr\\_15-3\\_wilson.pdf](https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/npr_15-3_wilson.pdf); and T.V. Paul, *The Tradition of Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

the exhaustive details of the substantive chapters, the general theory laid out in the introduction and the implications discussed in the conclusion are interesting and approachable for even nuclear neophytes. As a result, anyone who has wondered why the “the absolute weapon”<sup>23</sup> has “so frequently failed to impress states without it”<sup>24</sup> will find compelling arguments and useful explanations in *Tempting Fate*.

**Ariel F.W. Petrovics** is a Stanton Nuclear Security Postdoctoral Fellow in the Kennedy School of Government’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University.



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<sup>23</sup> Bernard Brodie, *The Absolute Weapon* (New York: Harcourt, 1946).

<sup>24</sup> Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 1.

### 3. What Military Confrontations Could Mean for Understanding the Nuclear Revolution

*Alexander Lanoszka*

With *Tempting Fate*, Paul C. Avey makes an invaluable contribution to our understanding of nuclear politics.<sup>25</sup> Written in clear and accessible prose, Avey explains why some non-nuclear weapons states have challenged and resisted nuclear weapons states despite the existential risks involved. Importantly, Avey never overstates his arguments — he is more willing than many writers to acknowledge the limitations of his scholarship. Moreover, his nuanced analysis helps correct potentially simplistic interpretations of key events. The result is a smart book that should interest academics and practitioners alike. The few questions I have concern the potential uniqueness of the Israel-Egypt case and the implications that Avey’s analysis has for our understandings of the so-called nuclear revolution.

Avey’s argument is straightforward: If the conventional military balance favors a nuclear-armed state to such an extent that it would not need to resort to nuclear weapons to defend itself and its vital interests, the non-nuclear state may challenge or resist it in a militarized dispute. A sort of “Goldilocks rule” is at play here. If the non-nuclear state is conventionally too *strong* vis-à-vis the nuclear state, then the latter may be tempted to use nuclear strikes to achieve favorable outcomes on the battlefield. The possibility of nuclear weapons use deters the non-nuclear state. If, however, the non-nuclear state is conventionally too *weak*

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Avey, *Tempting Fate: Why Nonnuclear States Confront Nuclear Opponents* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

vis-à-vis the nuclear state, then the former will not be able to initiate a military conflict in the first place. Avey claims that the non-nuclear state's leaders do not abide by the nuclear taboo while challenging a nuclear-armed adversary.<sup>26</sup> These leaders believe that amoral strategic reasons — and not moral misgivings — will constrain the adversary from launching nuclear weapons.

Although Avey uses a wide array of primary sources, the case studies in his book do not necessarily break new historiographical ground. The basic contours of each case will be familiar to subject-matter experts. Nevertheless, he views them through an original lens by focusing on how non-nuclear states grapple with the nuclear monopolies of their adversaries. Particularly notable are the efforts taken by these leaders to mitigate the effects of potential nuclear strikes against their countries. Iraq, for example, invested in expensive civil defense options at the time of the Gulf War.<sup>27</sup>

And yet Avey, in presenting his main case studies, does not convincingly refute the nuclear taboo counterargument. The Soviet and Chinese confrontations with the United States took place early in the Cold War when norms governing the use of nuclear weapons were still inchoate. Israel had only just developed nuclear weapons in 1969-1973, the period that Avey examines. Although Israel has never publicly acknowledged its nuclear arsenal, these weapons were acquired too recently for Israeli decision-makers to have fully internalized the nuclear taboo at the time of the October War. That leaves Iraq as the most recent case. One might

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<sup>26</sup> For the classic statement of the nuclear taboo, see Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 60.

not wish to make broad generalizations on the basis of a single case. Still, as I highlight further below, Avey is careful never to overstate his claims.

## The Unique Case of Israel-Egypt

Israel's confrontation with its non-nuclear adversary Egypt stands out as a peculiar case in the book. No other non-nuclear state that Avey examines in the substantive chapters of his book could have realistically attacked the homeland of its nuclear-armed opponent, with the possible exception of Egypt and Israel due to their geographic proximity. The geographic distance that separates the nuclear and non-nuclear states discussed in *Tempting Fate* could have created more opportunities for challenging or resisting nuclear monopolies, especially early in the Cold War when missile and bomber capabilities were more limited. The United States was able to strike Hiroshima and Nagasaki with nuclear weapons delivered by B-29 bombers in 1945. Yet the airfields that those aircraft used fell into neglect shortly after World War II. The B-52 did not enter service until 1955 and many of the early nuclear-tipped missiles would only be deployed in the years after. Even contemporary observers wondered whether the United States could hit targets in mainland China with much precision, at least in the early 1950s.<sup>28</sup> To his credit, Avey does acknowledge that a favorable nuclear balance may not necessarily translate to operational effectiveness.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Matthew Jones, *After Hiroshima: The United States, Race, and Nuclear Weapons in Asia, 1945-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 257. See also William Burr, "U.S. Cold War Nuclear Target Lists Declassified for First Time," *National Security Archive*, Dec. 22, 2015, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb538-Cold-War-Nuclear-Target-List-Declassified-First-Ever/>.

<sup>29</sup> Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 116.

Hence, looking at geographically contiguous rivals like Israel and Egypt is important because such technical constraints might be less potent as an alternative explanation. Still, I had questions with regards to Avey's case study on Israel's confrontation with Egypt. Avey writes that Egyptian leaders "believed that so long as they executed only limited campaigns, the benefits to Israel of using its nuclear weapons would be low."<sup>30</sup> Thus, "[i]n 1973, Egypt launched a limited offensive that was more expansive than in 1969-1970."<sup>31</sup> Avey admits that "while Egypt never planned to advance deep into the Sinai [Peninsula], Israel could not be expected to know that at the start of the hostilities."<sup>32</sup> Egypt sought to use backchannels to convey its limited intentions, even though Egyptian President Anwar Sadat ultimately rejected Soviet appeals for a ceasefire.<sup>33</sup> Avey's theory hinges on non-nuclear states having clear limited aims in such a conflict. In light of the unique geographical proximity that this case features, one wonders whether Israel understood that Egypt had only limited objectives when the October War (also known as the Yom Kippur War) began, not least because of the highly conflictual nature of Arab-Israeli relations at that time.

Whether Israel understood Egypt's limited aims is all the more important given that Israel had sought nuclear weapons in part because it believed its adversaries'

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<sup>30</sup> Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 63.

<sup>31</sup> Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 78.

<sup>32</sup> Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 80.

<sup>33</sup> Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 80. To be sure, Sadat sought to accommodate Israel after assuming the Egyptian presidency, but this effort failed, in part because Israel did not see his overtures as credible. See Janice Gross Stein, "Deterrence and Learning in an Enduring Rivalry: Egypt and Israel, 1948-1973," *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (1996), 143, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419608429301>.

aims were *not* limited.<sup>34</sup> Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan reportedly claimed that the surprise attack in October 1973 constituted the “end of the third temple,” a reference to both the potential collapse of Israel and its nuclear weapons arsenal.<sup>35</sup> In other words, if Dayan is to be taken seriously, Israeli decision-makers had trouble conceiving of a limited war that did not undermine Israel’s vital interests and create existential risks. A limited territorial grab could presage more threatening advances into Israeli territory, or so they feared. Fortunately for Israel, it recovered quickly and launched a successful counterattack using its formidable conventional military strength. However, one can imagine the 1973 war ending differently: The example of the Korean War indicates that success on the battlefield can push belligerents to expand beyond their initial war aims or to cross the red lines of other states inadvertently.<sup>36</sup> I wonder if the strategic logic that Avey neatly lays out truly explains Sadat’s behavior.

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<sup>34</sup> Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 9-11.

<sup>35</sup> Warner D. Farr, “The Third Temple’s Holy of Holies: Israel’s Nuclear Weapons,” *The Counterproliferation Papers Future Warfare Series No. 2* (1999), 9-15, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Apr/11/2002115467/-1/-1/0/02ISRAELSNUCLEARWEAPONS.PDF>.

<sup>36</sup> See Eric J. Labs, “Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims,” *Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (1997), 1-49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419708429321>. See also Thomas J. Christensen, “Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace: The Lessons of Mao’s Korean War Telegrams,” *International Security*, 17, no. 1 (1992), 122-154, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539160>. For an emotion-based explanation of expanding war aims, see Alexander Lanoszka and Michael A. Hunzeker, “Rage of Honor: Entente Indignation and the Lost Chance for Peace in the First World War,” *Security Studies* 24, no. 4 (2015), 662-695, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1103135>. For an alliance-based explanation, see Mira Rapp-Hooper, “Ambivalent Albion, Ambitious Ally: Britain’s Decision for No Separate Peace in 1914,” *Security Studies* 23, no. 4 (2014), 814-844, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2014.965002>.

## The Nuclear Revolution

One question that looms large in *Tempting Fate* concerns the meaning of the nuclear revolution. Robert Jervis famously argued that nuclear-armed adversaries, once armed with second-strike capabilities, face powerful incentives to be cautious and to cooperate with one another.<sup>37</sup> In recent years, the notion that nuclear weapons have revolutionized international politics has come under major criticism: As some scholars have pointed out, states armed with second-strike nuclear capabilities still seem to engage in traditional power politics by building up their alliances, acquiring potentially destabilizing armaments, and being conflictual rather than cooperative on issues of global concern.<sup>38</sup> Although I am admittedly partial to these criticisms, I still have the nagging feeling that something must have changed when nuclear weapons appeared. After all, how could international political life really have stayed the same after Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

Avey intimates a possible answer for this basic conundrum. As he writes, “a powerful NNWS [non-nuclear weapons state] must worry much more intently that nuclear weapons will be used in any war and thus is less likely to escalate a dispute.”<sup>39</sup> For its part, the nuclear state may choose not to use nuclear weapons because of various concerns about their military efficacy and the likely political ramifications. One wonders, therefore, whether this constitutes a distinct change

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>38</sup> Francis J. Gavin, “Rethinking the Bomb: Nuclear Weapons and American Grand Strategy,” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (2018), 74-100, <https://tnsr.org/2019/01/rethinking-the-bomb-nuclear-weapons-and-american-grand-strategy/>; Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

<sup>39</sup> Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 136.



in state behavior brought on by nuclear weapons. According to Jervis, having a mutual second-strike capability should induce caution among adversaries.<sup>40</sup> Avey's analysis suggests that as states approach parity in the conventional military domain, they will likely exercise similar caution even if only one of them has nuclear weapons. Of course, power politics may still occur between these rivals — unequal though they may otherwise be — through other means. The implication of Avey's theory is that war might be *more* likely to break out if it were not for that nuclear monopoly. The absence of nuclear weapons could, for example, cause greater disagreements about the military balance, as Geoffrey Blainey has argued.<sup>41</sup> Although Avey does discuss the nuclear revolution in the book's introductory chapter, there are more opportunities for deeper theorizing on the subject that are yet to be explored.

This is yet another sign that Avey has written a very good book. It gives inspiration for fresh theorizing and more empirical scholarship. Notwithstanding my questions about the nuclear revolution and the Israel-Egypt case study, Avey wisely hews close to the evidence and never overstates his arguments. *Tempting Fate* is a must-read for anyone interested in nuclear politics.

*Alexander Lanoszka is assistant professor in the department of political science at the University of Waterloo and the Balsillie School of International Affairs. His research addresses alliance politics and military strategy, with a regional focus on*

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<sup>40</sup> Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*.

<sup>41</sup> Geoffrey Blainey, *Causes of War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 122.

*Europe. His book, Atomic Assurance: The Alliance Politics of Nuclear Proliferation, was published by Cornell University Press in 2018.*



## 4. Shedding Light on Nuclear Conflict

*Reid Pauly*

In *Tempting Fate*, Paul Avey tackles a big puzzle of the nuclear age: Why do non-nuclear states sometimes initiate military conflicts against adversaries that possess nuclear weapons?<sup>42</sup> Scholars have long appreciated that states may continue to compete under the shadow of nuclear war, but such Cold War-era studies understandably focus on symmetric nuclear brinkmanship: signaling in crises short of war between nuclear powers. Instead, Avey begins from the observation that states, and especially weak states, have occasionally opted to challenge the status quo by resorting to brute force against nuclear-armed adversaries. In doing so, these states have tempted fate. According to the theory of the nuclear revolution, this is not supposed to happen. The condition of nuclear monopoly should effectively deter such attacks.<sup>43</sup>

Avey's book is the latest in a welcome new wave of scholarship questioning received wisdom in nuclear security studies.<sup>44</sup> It arrives in time to help decipher

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Avey, *Tempting Fate: Why Nonnuclear States Confront Nuclear Opponents* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

<sup>43</sup> Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>44</sup> For example, see Alexander Lanoszka, *Atomic Assurance: The Alliance Politics of Nuclear Proliferation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Nicholas L. Miller, *Stopping the Bomb: The Sources and Efficacy of U.S. Nonproliferation Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Daryl G. Press, Scott D. Sagan, and Benjamin Valentino, "Atomic Aversion: Experimental Evidence on Taboos, Traditions, and the Non-

and contextualize a renewal of asymmetric competition under the nuclear shadow. Today, Iran is finding ways to challenge a nuclear United States, the Taliban fights to outlast the American military in Afghanistan, and some non-nuclear neighbors face the prospect of battling a rising China or resurgent Russia. As Avey shows, such seemingly brazen challenges are not new.

## Explaining Challenges to Nuclear Monopoly

Avey's core argument is that there are costs to using nuclear weapons, even for nuclear monopolists. More importantly, potential challengers are aware of these costs. When confronting nuclear opponents, therefore, non-nuclear aggressors seek to raise the costs that their opponents would suffer — and limit the benefits that they would derive — from escalating to the use of nuclear weapons. Non-nuclear challengers do so, Avey argues, by pursuing limited aims below the perceived nuclear threshold, threatening the use of chemical and biological weapons, exploiting nuclear non-use norms, and, if possible, seeking third-party support.

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Use of Nuclear Weapons,” *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (February 2013), 188-206, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055412000597>; Or Rabinowitz, *Bargaining on Nuclear Tests: Washington and its Cold War Deals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Tristan A. Volpe, “Atomic Leverage: Compellence with Nuclear Latency,” *Security Studies* 26, no. 3 (2017), 517-44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1306398>; Matthew Kroenig, “Nuclear Superiority and the Balance of Resolve: Explaining Nuclear Crisis Outcomes,” *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (January 2013), 141-171, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43282155>; and Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, “Crisis Bargaining and Nuclear Blackmail,” *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (January 2013), 173-95, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818312000392>. For an important scholarly debate in this area, see also “What We Talk About When We Talk About Nuclear Weapons,” *H-Diplo/ISSF*, June 15, 2014, <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/ISSF-Forum-2.pdf>.

Avey's counterintuitive finding is that wars under the condition of nuclear monopoly are more likely to be fought when there are large power imbalances *in favor* of the nuclear-armed state. Instead of being deterred, non-nuclear states devise strategies to try to offset their opponents' nuclear advantage.

These insights yield three core contributions. First, Avey draws attention to a domain of limited armed conflict under stable nuclear monopoly. This contribution to international relations theory is an extension of the logic of the stability-instability paradox to situations of nuclear asymmetry between two states. When a weak state thinks it can neutralize a nuclear monopoly, it may be willing to fight a limited war. Second, Avey's theoretical framework provides a near-comprehensive overview of the theory on limited war; instructors will find this a useful book to assign to students. Third, Avey merges theory on the non-use of nuclear weapons much more closely with the study of nuclear deterrence. When nuclear powers express misgivings about the utility of nuclear weapons on the battlefield or the reputational costs of breaking a nuclear taboo, adversaries take note. The book's case studies on China and Iraq in particular serve as important complements to United States-centric scholarship on traditions, taboos, and normative opposition to the use of nuclear weapons.<sup>45</sup> American leaders' concerns about world opinion,

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<sup>45</sup> For important works in this literature, see Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); T.V. Paul, *The Tradition of Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Scott D. Sagan, "Realist Perspectives on Ethical Norms and Weapons of Mass Destruction," in eds. Sohail H. Hashmi and Steven P. Lee, *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 73–95. For a concise overview of this literature, see Reid B.C. Pauly, "Would U.S. Leaders Push the Button?"

reputation, and ethics are mirrored in documents from Beijing and Baghdad. Deterrent threats foundered in foreign capitals against the “pressure of world opinion” and the “prospect of [the United States] losing moral grounds.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, Avey’s history contextualizes attempts by American policymakers to fight the establishment of a nuclear taboo.

The book also effectively navigates between two hypotheses on limited means and limited aims. Do non-nuclear states pose less of a threat to nuclear states because of their limited military capabilities or their limited intentions? Each case study begins with careful assessments of the conventional and nuclear military balance to help adjudicate that question. But the two variables are often inseparable. For example, the chapter on Egyptian decision-making, especially in the 1973 October War, shows how limited capabilities signal a state’s limited aims. The defender in such cases rightly fears its conventionally weaker challenger less. Conversely, Chinese leaders, well-versed in nuclear norms but still fearing U.S. nuclear weapons, attempted to bound escalation with the United States by limiting their aims, intentionally restricting violence to the Korean theater and prioritizing Korean targets. A formidable but non-nuclear Soviet Union, which was deterred from escalating its blockade of West Berlin in 1948–49, nevertheless chose to challenge Washington below its perceived nuclear threshold. It seems that all types of challengers may attempt to limit their aims, but those with limited means are better at signaling such limits. They can push for more while posing no real threat.

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Wargames and the Sources of Nuclear Restraint,” *International Security* 43, no. 2 (Fall 2018), 161-168, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00333](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00333).

<sup>46</sup> Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 105-106.

Avey's Iraq case study is particularly rich. He carefully exploits the captured records of Saddam Hussein's mercurial deliberations with his advisers. In so doing, Avey provides a convincing corrective to the infamous episode involving U.S. Ambassador April Glaspie. Contrary to the widely held view that Glaspie signaled American indifference toward Iraqi-Kuwaiti affairs during her July 1990 meeting with Saddam, the documents suggest that Saddam perceived no "green light" from the United States for his invasion of Kuwait.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, Saddam recognized the potential for American intervention and nuclear use. But the Iraqi leader, citing the reputational costs of nuclear use and his chemical weapons reserve, was neither deterred from invading Kuwait nor compelled to depart thereafter.

## Continuing the Research Agenda

*Tempting Fate* convincingly demonstrates that even weak actors take big risks when the stakes are high. Avey helps the reader to better understand the policies of non-nuclear states when their backs are against the wall. To continue this research agenda, further scholarship should disentangle three distinct causes of coercion failure: non-credible threats, maximalist demands, and a lack of coercive assurance.

As Avey shows, Iraq and China questioned the credibility of American threats, whether implied or direct, to use nuclear weapons. But a state choosing to use force out of the belief that nuclear weapons are "paper tigers" involves a logic

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<sup>47</sup> Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 49.

quite distinct from a state taking action because it perceives that the stakes involved are existential.<sup>48</sup> Credible deterrent threats may still fail if the status quo is intolerable. Moreover, conceding to coercion (whether deterrence or compellence) is a choice and targets of deterrence need at least some reason to choose the status quo. Coercion should be expected to fail if the target state anticipates being punished regardless of its behavior. Saddam's behavior in the 1990s could fit that bill, for he may have considered himself to be bereft of favorable options in the face of superpower compellence.<sup>49</sup> Avey's book helps shed further light on what Thomas Schelling called "assurance" in coercion — how, when, and why threatened states come to believe that they will not be punished if they do comply.<sup>50</sup>

Future scholarship might also examine the efficacy of a non-nuclear state challenging a nuclear monopoly. How do the challengers actually fare? Of Avey's case studies, China was the non-nuclear contender that arguably profited most from its challenge. Egypt achieved some mixture of losses and gains: Egyptian forces were outmatched by Israel, but President Anwar Sadat ultimately reclaimed control of the Sinai Peninsula via an American-mediated political settlement. Saddam Hussein, on the other hand, was rapidly evicted from Kuwait and suffered the destruction of his armed forces. Likewise, the Soviet Union accepted political defeat when it called off the Berlin blockade. If non-nuclear challengers are willing to "tempt fate" and accept the risk of nuclear war for their political objectives,

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<sup>48</sup> Avey, *Tempting Fate*, 108.

<sup>49</sup> F. Gregory Gause, III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 121-135; Reid B.C. Pauly, "Stop or I'll Shoot, Comply and I Won't: Coercive Assurance in International Politics" (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2019).

<sup>50</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 74.



bargaining theories might predict that their demonstration of resolve should net some gains. But what did these states actually achieve?

If, as Avey convincingly shows, weak states find clever means to challenge even nuclear monopolists, then a major implication of this important book is that avoiding nuclear war requires that non-nuclear weapons states navigate these rational limits deftly. Imagine trusting the continuity of the 75-year-old tradition of nuclear non-use to the disturbed decision-making processes of Saddam Hussein's Iraq. That is not a comforting thought. Perhaps the onus should be on nuclear powers instead.

*Reid Pauly is the dean's assistant professor of nuclear security and policy in the department of political science and the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University.*

