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BOOK REVIEWS

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Five Myths about Nuclear Weapons, by Ward Wilson. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013. 188 pages, $22.

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Nuclear weapons are weighty objects. Assemblages of plastic and metals—not least the very weighty substances of plutonium or uranium—they also bear an extraordinarily heavy burden of symbolism. This is why we spend so much time thinking and talking about weapons that were last employed in warfare more than sixty years ago, when they were used twice in quick succession. Scholars still dispute the precise death toll from the two explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but there is no question it was high for just two pieces of ordnance. Yet the physical destructiveness of these weapons hardly accounts for their conceptual bulkiness. (Compare them with chemical weapons, which belligerents have used repeatedly in the past century to devastating effect, and which are substantially easier to produce and deliver, and the asymmetry is remarkable.) As Ward Wilson nicely puts it in his thought-provoking book, *Five Myths about Nuclear Weapons*, these devices ''are wrapped in a shroud of sixty years of rhetoric and hyperbole.'' He seeks to transport these devices from the rarefied realm of what he calls ''myth'' and confront widespread conceptions of nuclear weapons with some sustained critical reflection. ''Nuclear weapons are not a nature-of-humans problem,'' he observes in his introduction; ''they are a practical problem.''

Practical problems demand straight talk, and Wilson takes on some central assumptions about these weapons in a vibrant, clear style. He has a particular gift for reasoning with commonplace analogies to demonstrate how some of the central concepts of nuclear thinking look peculiar, even downright odd, when stripped of grandiose formulations. Alongside the five myths advertised in the title, Wilson sprinkles the book with fascinating observations that could each merit a chapter of their own. (Why, for example, do we think of nuclear weapons as producing huge explosions when average yield has consistently gone down over the past several decades?) Anyone interested in the state of nuclear weapons today should read this slim book and ponder its conclusions. It's well worthwhile.

Before approaching the core of Wilson's argument—the book functions more as one long argument, rather than as five shorter ones—we should step back and consider why

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on earth these particular weapons are so heavy. There are, it seems to me, three possible answers. The first, and most common among the general public (and even some specialists), can be summarized as: they just *are*. There is something special about nuclear weapons, full-stop. This position is rarely articulated explicitly, and when it is, it doesn't come with a lot of analytically-rich support. This is the attitude toward nuclear weapons that Wilson most assiduously attacks.

A second view, not addressed in this volume or referenced in Wilson's (admittedly idiosyncratic) bibliography, grounds the myth-originating power of nuclear weapons not in the devices themselves but in qualities of the human mind. Historian of science Spencer Weart has recently updated his 1988 argument that the associations Western culture endows with "the nuclear"—principally, that of transmutation or transformation—strongly resonate with a collective human psychology (whether understood in Jungian terms or not), and accounts for our tendency to contemplate nuclear weapons and nuclear power as qualitatively different from their "conventional" counterparts.[1] Whether one subscribes to all the details of Weart's forceful analysis, there is no question that the solution to the riddle of nuclear myths lies not in the plutonium (or uranium) nucleus, but in ourselves. As Wilson notes, "Nuclear weapons did not create our feelings about apocalypse, but they seem to have connected with them strongly." The reason for this powerful resonance might lie in our minds, or elsewhere.

Wilson thinks the answer lies in history, the third explanation—that specific circumstances in the past have strongly shaped and constrained our understanding of nuclear weapons. This vision carries with it the balm of contingency, missing from the first two accounts. If nuclear weapons bear their mythic burden in large part because of the historical circumstances in which they were used and talked about in the past, then perhaps we can *undo* this work by exposing the many ways it could have been otherwise. Wilson builds his provocative volume around historical evidence, and submits each of his myths to the ordeal of historical scrutiny. They don't hold up well.

The myths are treated in chapters of varying length and argumentative heft, yet they cluster around one large claim: nuclear weapons are useless. Wilson identifies his target early on: "This is the first and most important idea about nuclear weapons. It is the idea on which all the others are built: Nuclear weapons have a psychological power that enables them to coerce and deter when other weapons cannot." I will take Wilson at his word and focus on this principal idea about the utility of nuclear weapons as examined through historical evidence.

If the chief myth of nuclear weapons is that they are useful, then it stands to reason that we should train our myth-busting analysis on the one moment in which they were, undeniably, *used*: the atomic bombings in August 1945. "The problem with nuclear weapons is that there is no way to concretely verify the claims that are made about their importance," Wilson writes. "There is really only one data point—Hiroshima"—and, presumably, Nagasaki, one might add—"determining their cash basis. The danger is that we have overinflated their value by misinterpreting that one event."

I certainly agree that the single most important events for evaluating the military efficacy of nuclear weapons are the destruction of those two Japanese cities, but it is just not true that those are our *only* data points. Nuclear weapons have been used scores of

times since. To see this, you only need to expand your understanding of "used" beyond the very circumscribed meaning of "military deployment in conflict" that Wilson consistently invokes. Nuclear weapons have been used in a wide variety of ways: aggressive regimes of nuclear testing, saber-rattling, threats to develop a nuclear weapon in order to blackmail the international community, and so on. The most spectacularly useful nuclear weapons on the planet today belong to North Korea, which has used them over and over to compel attention and material support from its neighbors and the broader international community. I will return to this point about the meaning of "useful" at the end of this review.

Wilson, however, emphasizes military utility, with Hiroshima as the acid test. In line with the book's spirited defense of plain reasoning and unsentimental logic, his account of Hiroshima shies away from debates over body counts or the morality of nuclear weapons: "The question here—the *only* question—is whether the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with new, more powerful bombs forced Japan to surrender. Did it, in other words, *work*?" (Emphasis in original.) The chapter on Hiroshima is the longest in the book and also the best. Wilson pointedly insists that the question about whether the Bomb triggered surrender is poorly framed. The way to demonstrate the role of the Bomb is to work backwards from the event of interest: the decision of the Japanese government to surrender unconditionally on August 14, 1945. First, we need to understand how that decision was reached, and only then can we evaluate whether the atomic bombing of Hiroshima (or, possibly, Nagasaki, although Wilson dismisses this on the reasonable grounds of timing) "worked."

Wilson is unequivocal, based on careful reconstruction of timelines and evaluations of counterfactual scenarios: the Japanese government surrendered because of the entry of the Soviet Union into the Pacific theater on August 8. His argumentation here is not wholly original, but he has successfully brought together partially-developed arguments from a range of scholars alongside under-utilized translations of primary documents to provide a forceful rendition of this explanation of the end of World War II.[2] What distinguishes Wilson's account is the relentlessness of his logic. The Japanese war council—the Big Six—considered convening a meeting to address the disturbing reports from Hiroshima, and then decided not to; the bombing of Nagasaki occurred in the middle of the meeting they *did* have on August 9, one that was demonstrably a direct response to the Soviet declaration of war the previous day. That event, Wilson persuasively argues, altered the strategic situation by removing the possibility of a Soviet mediation, as a neutral party, to ameliorate Allied surrender terms. The bombing of Hiroshima, on the other hand, did not revolutionize Japanese thinking about the war, since it was experienced in the context of the punishing firebombing campaign that had pounded the home islands since March 1945. (Wilson's tables and calculations on this point are quite impressive.)

The Japanese leadership was thus primed to interpret Hiroshima as unfortunate but, in a sad sense, more of the same. Soviet entry, on the other hand, was catastrophic. (Wilson does not address the elaborate US propaganda campaign from August 6 onward, beginning with President Harry S. Truman's announcement of the atomic bomb, to convince the Japanese that they should indeed understand this new weapon as different from firebombing.) Nonetheless, orthodox interpreters of the atomic bombings can cite

plenty of evidence from the Japanese that the atomic bomb was essential to the surrender process, not least of which was Hirohito's announcement of capitulation. Wilson sees these statements as moves in a campaign to shape the postwar world, not straightforward reflections of leaders' views in mid-August 1945: "But attributing Japan's defeat to the Bomb also served three other specific political purposes. First, it helped to preserve the legitimacy of the emperor . . . Second, it appealed to international sympathy . . . Finally, Japan's saying that the Bomb had won the war would please Japan's American victors." Baldly stated, Wilson believes that the one time that nuclear weapons were used in combat, they did not produce a militarily significant advantage, and thus arguments that assume the utility of nuclear weapons are based on a myth.

Even if one disagrees with Wilson's account of August 1945, he has made a powerful case for thinking that the atomic bombs might not have achieved their desired end of generating surrender. (It is unclear, as I have argued elsewhere, if even the Americans shared a single understanding of what work the atomic bombs were supposed to "do;" Wilson has approached this issue from the other, Japanese, side.)[3] But does this revision of the history, to put it bluntly, matter? Even if the common US conception of the end of World War II is based on an incorrect interpretation of the facts, and we have grabbed the stick by the wrong end, is accepting Wilson's account enough to allow us to "ungrab" it? Can knowledge of history do enough, or undo enough?

I have my doubts. Let us stipulate that Wilson gets the facts right, that the Soviet entry induced Japanese surrender and therefore Little Boy and Fat Man did not "work." That is only the first stage in a full revision of our conceptions. Wilson does not take the next step and ask how the myth became entrenched. The answer, unexplored in this book, surely has a good deal to do with the way the American press popularized the story of Japanese surrender, especially the journalism of William Leonard Laurence and the August 12, 1945 publication of the Smyth Report, the official history of the Manhattan Project.[4] Step two thus lies within the American context, not the Japanese. Presumably, this myth holds for completely different reasons in Russia or the People's Republic of China, and those reasons would have their own histories—which may have little to do with the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Until we come to grips with why the myth is so powerful, a straightforward debunking of the conventional history will not dissipate its hold.

Yet this is Wilson's goal: to disarm the central myth of the military utility of nuclear weapons and thus enable the world to rethink its dependence on these devices and, eventually, eliminate them. But being valueless in military combat and being generally valueless are not the same thing, which is why Wilson expands his critique of their value to the level of nuclear deterrence. In a series of historical examples, Wilson contends that the claim that nuclear weapons have deterred, that they enabled the "Long Peace" of the past sixty-odd years, is mistaken. Not only does he note that there have there been plenty of hot wars since the guns went silent after World War II, but he claims that even the most vaunted cases of nuclear deterrence are overblown. Although Wilson scores some very palpable hits with his analysis in the second half of the book, the argument is not as strong as his account of Hiroshima.

The difference stems not from his empirical arguments so much as his overly schematic approach to how deterrence works. Deterrence is often more of a psychological state than a rational calculation of the costs and benefits of engaging in aggression. If we *believe* that nuclear weapons are a reason not to initiate conflict—regardless of any fact about their military utility—then we can be said to be deterred by them. For all of his very astute insights into the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Wilson does not provide evidence that this psychological state was in fact lacking—that is, that many world leaders did and do not truly believe in the deterrent powers of nuclear weapons. Indeed, some of his own cases confirm this point. Soviet leader Joseph Stalin during the Berlin Crisis of 1948 and China's Mao Zedong in the Korean War engaged in aggression despite US nuclear weapons, but then again Stalin and Mao—perhaps sincerely, perhaps simply whistling in the dark—repeatedly claimed that they did *not* believe that nuclear weapons had the power to deter.[5] They acted according to their beliefs; while most of the world today arguably acts differently because they hold contrary views. When Wilson characterizes a view about nuclear weapons as ''psychological,'' he usually means that it is in some important way *unreal*—but surely there are cases when believing something to be the case actually makes it real for you.

This brings us back to the issue of whether nuclear weapons are actually useful. Wilson makes a compelling case that their *military* utility is, at the very least, greatly exaggerated, and he shows that even their utility with respect to the standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War is devilishly hard to demonstrate. On the other hand, if one passes to other parts of the world, the *diplomatic* utility of nuclear weapons is constantly on display, in a variety of different guises. For example, Israel uses its nuclear weapons every time it refuses to acknowledge their existence, and this has likely been enormously effective. Pakistan, in turn, uses its atomic program to generate international prestige, national pride, and deterrence (primarily of India), as well as solicitous regard from the United States. (One might debate how successful this has been.) Wilson has raised the question of the efficacy of nuclear weapons to a new salience, but he has stopped short in his definition of utility.

Ward Wilson has a true knack for explaining the intricacies of nuclear thinking, as well as a freshness of perspective all too rare in this area. In order to move the world's leaders and publics to a consideration of the uselessness of nuclear weapons, one would need to demonstrate that conventional weapons can accomplish the goals of nuclear weapons *in every way in which we use nuclear weapons now*—including bullying, blackmail, and other less unsavory activities. Wilson's powerful book has brought us to a point where we can begin to have that conversation in earnest.

NOTES

1. Spencer R. Weart, *The Rise of Nuclear Fear* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).
2. See, especially, Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005); and Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).
3. Michael D. Gordin, *Five Days in August: How World War II Became a Nuclear War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

4. See Gordin, *Five Days in August*, chapter 6. The Smyth Report remains in print: Henry DeWolf Smyth, *Atomic Energy for Military Purposes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989).
5. See, for example, the 1946 quotation from Stalin reproduced in Michael D. Gordin, *Red Cloud at Dawn: Truman, Stalin, and the End of the Atomic Monopoly* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), p. 10; and the analysis of Mao in Sean L. Malloy, ''A 'Paper Tiger?' Nuclear Weapons, Atomic Diplomacy, and the Korean War,'' *New England Journal of History* 60 (Fall 2003-Spring 2004), pp. 227–52.