

Summary

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oiiip Österreichisches Institut
für Internationale Politik
Austrian Institute for
International Affairs

Heinz Gärtner Lecture

Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran

What Americans Really think about Using Nuclear Weapons and Killing
Noncombatants

Event held in cooperation with the Embassy of the United States of America and the
Department at Political Science Vienna

Summary by: Steven Dahlinger

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Intro & Chair:

Dr. Caspar Einem

President of the Austrian Institute for International Affairs, oiip

Lecturer:

Prof. Dr. Scott D. Sagan

The Caroline S.G. Munro Professor of Political Science

The Peter and Mimi Haas Fellow in Undergraduate Education

Senior Fellow, Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC)

Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies

Date and Time:

Monday, 27 November 2017

7 pm

Venue:

Aula am Campus der Universität Wien

Spitalgasse 2, Hof 1 Stiege 11

1090 Vienna

Summary

Many scholars and political figures have cited the decline in American public opinion support for the dropping of the atomic bombs in 1945 as evidence that there is a widespread "nuclear taboo" or "noncombatant immunity norm." New survey experiments, however, demonstrate that a large majority of the U.S. public approves of the use of nuclear weapons against Iran today in conditions that resemble the strategic situation the U.S. faced in 1945. These findings highlight the limited extent to which the U.S. public has accepted the principles of just war doctrine and suggest that the public is unlikely to be a serious constraint on any president contemplating the use of nuclear weapons in the crucible of war.

Viele Personen aus Wissenschaft und Politik haben den Rückgang der Unterstützung für die Atombombenabwürfe von 1945 in der amerikanischen Öffentlichkeit als Beweis dafür gewertet, dass es ein weit verbreitetes „nukleares Tabu“ oder eine Norm über die Immunität von Nichtkombattanten gibt. Neue Umfrageuntersuchungen haben allerdings ergeben, dass eine Mehrheit der amerikanischen Öffentlichkeit heute dem Einsatz von Atomwaffen gegen den Iran unter Bedingungen, die die strategische Situation von 1945 widerspiegeln, zustimmen würde. Die Ergebnisse zeigen eindringlich, wie unzureichend die amerikanische Öffentlichkeit die Prinzipien des gerechten Krieges akzeptiert hat, und dass öffentliche Meinung vermutlich keine wirkliche Barriere darstellen würd, sollte ein US-Präsident im Kriegsfall den Einsatz von Nuklearwaffen erwägen.

The Creation of the Heinz Gärtner Lecture Series



After a warm welcome and introduction by Caspar Einem, Prof. Sagan thanked the oiiip for the invitation to give this very first Heinz Gärtner Lecture, which was launched to honor Heinz Gärtner's decades-long high-quality research on transatlantic relations. Prof. Sagan first pointed out that what he was going to present were his and

others' disturbing findings relating to US publics' lack of nuclear aversion under conditions that mirror those of 1945 when the Truman-Administration used nuclear weapons against Japan.

The State of Nuclear Aversion to Nuclear Weapons since 1945

In 1945, 85 percent of Americans said that Harry Truman did the right thing when he opted for using nuclear weapons. Today, when confronted with the same question, 45 percent still agree to the bombings. Many scholars, such as Nina Tannenwald, Thomas Schelling, Stephen Pinker and Neta Crawford have argued that there is a strong taboo against using nuclear weapons and that something like a "noncombatant immunity norm" has formed. But has nuclear aversion really increased? Or is it just a matter of context? According to Prof. Sagan, when conducting such polls, it is absolutely necessary to consider the setting of 1945 when the choice was one between sending an invasion force or putting a hostile government in check by using nuclear weapons. So, by simulating a similar situation and confronting those polled with the same choice, we can more accurately measure if there really is a nuclear taboo or not.

Surveys Design and Results

With a set of representative samples of the American public, Prof. Sagan and others conducted a survey experiment, where the participants were confronted with a fictional scenario and then had to respond to a set of questions. The participants faced a hypothetical situation in which Iran violated the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In response to that violation, the US Government sanctioned Iran. In a following air strike by the Iranian military, a US carrier was sunk in the Persian Gulf, killing 2402 Americans. This number was picked on purpose to resemble the situation of 1945, however, not informing the participants that it was the exact same number of people that died at Pearl Harbor. In a counterattack, the US military then destroyed Iran's nuclear infrastructure and their air force, and the US president ordered a ground invasion. Now, to win the war and defeat Iran, the participants were confronted with two options. They could either choose to deploy more ground troops, putting the lives of 20,000 American soldiers at risk or drop a nuclear weapon on the second largest city of Iran to shock the Iranian government into surrender. Three samples were tested with slightly varying parameters. In the first one, the civil death toll on the Iranian side would be 100,000, in the second one 2,000,000. For the third sample, there would also be 100,000 fatalities, but through conventional weapons. These variations were aimed at testing nuclear aversion and the attitudes toward killing non-combatants. After thoroughly checking that the participants had read and understood the scenario, the following questions were asked: What would you prefer? And what would you support if the president chose this particular option? Prof. Sagan stated that the results we're not only surprising, but also very disturbing.

55 percent preferred using nuclear weapons to marching into Iran, which 60 percent approved. 47 percent preferred a nuclear attack even if the result would be killing 2,000,000 civilians, and also here 59 percent approved. When using conventional weapons, the numbers go up to 67 percent for choosing the airstrikes killing 100,000 civilians, 63 percent would approve if the president decided as such. So there might be a tiny bit of nuclear aversion, but not much aversion to killing 100,000 or even 2,000,000 noncombatants. These results suggest a strong notion that there is not much of a nuclear aversion or of a noncombatant immunity norm.

Breakdown of Influencing Factors



Republicans and older people were significantly more likely to go for a nuclear option. College education and race, on the other hand, didn't make much of a difference. As very surprising and interesting Prof. Sagan pointed out the fact that females were not less likely to go for the nuclear option than males, since polling in the past always suggested women were more dovish than men. An equal share of men and women supported the option that would kill 100.000 Iranians. Shockingly, in the second

sample where 2.000.000 Iranian noncombatants would die, approval rates by men went down while they remained the same for women. Prof. Sagan points out that one possible explanation is that women valued the protection of 20.000 American soldiers much higher than the lives of Iranian noncombatants out of the same instincts that usually lead them to be more dovish.

Retroactive Culpability

There is also a shocking connection between support for the death penalty and backing given to dropping nuclear bombs. Some recent research by Peter Liebermann discussed the retribution beliefs of Americans. If you think that execution is a just form of retribution, it also makes you more likely to go for a nuclear strike option. Shocking in this regard is the sense of culpability, since the strike would not solely hit a government but also noncombatants, in this case Iranian civilians. Prof. Sagan also talked about the rationalization of evil done. They found evidence that the feelings towards Iran changed in a different way after killing 2.000.000 or 100.000 people.

The rationale or reasons behind the decision to approve a nuclear attack on Iran varied. While the majority stated that they wanted to end the war quickly, there were also some shocking statements. These ranged from arguments according to which the Iranian public was to blame for the nuclear attack, because they had not overthrown their own government, to immensely racist or dehumanizing statements (e. g.: "Wipe out the capital, wipe it clean every living thing!").

Thinking of Alternatives: A Diplomatic Option?

In one more experiment, Prof. Sagan and others tried to test the behavior of the participants, when they were given a third, namely diplomatic option. Again, an effort was made to mirror the conditions of 1945 when the US demanded an unconditional surrender, which the Japanese wouldn't accept because the abdication of the emperor, who had a god like status. Creating a scenario in which Iran surrendered and held democratic elections, with Ayatollah Khomeini keeping his position as the spiritual leader of the country, those participating in the poll were given another non-nuclear option. This had an overall positive impact on the results. . At least 41 percent of the public now supported the diplomatic option. However, 40 percent still wanted to drop the bomb. Most of the people who supported the diplomatic option would also have supported deploying more ground troops before.

What's next?

Concluding the shocking survey results, Professor Sagan also elaborated on what could be done next to further explore the issue. From his perspective, conducting similar surveys in other countries, such as the UK, Israel and France would be greatly beneficial and illuminating. Furthermore, additional work is required to explore the role played by factors such as gender, retributive beliefs, retroactive culpability, the race and origin of targets, as well as pre-informing participants of legal, environmental and long term strategic effects of using nuclear weapons might have on the survey results. As the survey was conducted with a civilian sample, it would also be interesting to figure out potential differences in attitudes held by elite civilians and military personnel.