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Ward Wilson, *Five Myths about Nuclear Weapons*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2013. Pp. 187. ISBN 978-0-547-85787-9.

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Ward Wilson (Inst. of Int'l. Studies, Monterey, CA¹) has written a valuable contribution to the literature on nuclear weapons policy. His overarching thesis is that deterrence—whether conventional or nuclear—can fail and in fact has failed. Arguing from the example of Japan, he contends that nuclear weapons may be detonated over major cities without impressing a country's decision makers much more than their devastation by conventional munitions. For this and other reasons, Wilson believes the Soviet invasions of Japanese-held Manchuria, Sakhalin Island, and the Kuril Islands, not the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, led to Japan's surrender and the end of the Second World War. If the effect of the atomic bombings has in fact been widely misunderstood, there is an urgent need to reconsider the role of nuclear weapons in war and geopolitics generally.

Five Myths about Nuclear Weapons is a historical study of the efficacy of superpower nuclear deterrence; though its period of principal interest is the Cold War, conclusions are drawn from events in World War II and other eras. Ward's ultimate purpose is to debunk key elements of the nuclear credo and argue for a global atomic weapons ban. He identifies five myths in need of revision or rejection.

I. Nuclear weapons necessarily shock and awe opponents (as they did Imperial Japan) and are therefore decisive. Wilson asks, "If Hiroshima really touched off a crisis that forced the Japanese to surrender..., why did it take them three days to sit down to discuss it? ... Lt. General Kawabe Torashiro ... wrote ... that he got a 'serious jolt' when he realized that an atomic bomb destroyed Hiroshima.... We must, he said, 'be tenacious and fight on'" (29, 40).

II. The hydrogen bomb represented a quantum leap in destructive power that translated into victory because superior destruction wins wars. Wilson counters that "Destruction does not determine who wins or loses a war.... Japan had sixty-eight cities ... destroyed without its surrendering.... Winning ... depends on whether your adversary's military is defeated, not how much damage is done to its civilians..." (64).

III. Nuclear deterrence is effective in crisis situations. But, Wilson wonders, "If fear of nuclear war prevents leaders from taking steps that might lead to nuclear war, and if Kennedy knew that blockading Cuba might result in nuclear war, then why wasn't Kennedy deterred? ... And why did Kennedy take steps that seem to meet [Michael] Quinlan's² definition of reckless lunacy? ... In the most dangerous nuclear crisis ... one leader saw the nuclear deterrence stop sign, saw the horrifying image of nuclear war ... and gunned through the intersection anyway" (71, 74).

IV. Nuclear weapons have kept the United States safe; the bomb has prevented global war. Here Wilson maintains that folk beliefs (the "Virgin in the Volcano"), the role of alliances, economic ties, international governmental agencies, and treaty obligations—not the possession of nuclear weapons alone—ensure peace among major powers.

V. There is no alternative to a world dominated by nuclear weapons; the genie is out of the bottle. To this, Wilson responds "nuclear weapons should not be included in that list of forces beyond our control... [N]uclear weapons are implements that we manage and use as we wish" (116).

1. Where he is a Senior Fellow at the James Martin Center; he is also director of the Rethinking Nuclear Weapons Project – www.miwsr.com/rd/1403.htm.

2. "Thinking about Nuclear Weapons," *Whitehall Paper* 41 (London: RUSI, 1997) 12: "Only a state ruler possessed by a reckless lunacy scarcely paralleled even in pre-nuclear history would contemplate with equanimity initiating a conflict that seemed likely to bring nuclear weapons down upon his country" – www.miwsr.com/rd/1404.htm.

Such counterarguments are refreshing intellectually, but bound by complex initial conditions. For example, in reviewing the historical background of nuclear politics, Wilson offers an unorthodox explanation of why President John Kennedy was not deterred by the Soviets from taking disproportional risks during the Cuban Missile Crisis. He writes that Kennedy was not acting on the basis of evident US strategic superiority. Rather, his decisions were made outside of any deterrence framework whatsoever, “uncoupled” (73) from the strategic situation—a startling state of affairs in a nuclear crisis. This interpretation poses grave difficulties for understanding Nikita Khrushchev’s conduct. Did nuclear deterrence cause him to pull back, or was that decision unrelated to Kennedy’s moves? That is, did Khrushchev, too, act outside the realm of deterrence relations?

In chapter 4, “Nuclear Weapons Keep Us Safe,” the author detects a logical fallacy: “If nuclear weapons keep the peace among major powers, then there will be no nuclear war after 1945. Since there has been no nuclear war among major powers since 1945, nuclear weapons keep the peace.” Logicians will recognize here the fallacy of affirming the consequent—one cannot prove the effectiveness of deterrence from the absence of nuclear war alone. Wilson suggests that nuclear deterrence only works in achieving relatively low-level objectives, as specialists in quantitative international relations work, among others, have argued. He notes that Syria and Egypt attacked Israel in 1973, despite its nuclear arsenal. So atomic weapons may not deter conventional attacks because a nuclear response would be so disproportionate as not to be a credible threat.

Wilson also usefully explores just what a minimum deterrent might look like and proposes that the United States and Russia reduce their nuclear stockpiles to a few hundred warheads. But what rationale justifies retention of hundreds of nuclear weapons, rather than, say, ten thousand, or a half dozen?

The author deserves special recognition for carefully assembling critical evidence from the diaries, correspondence, and policy statements of Japanese leaders relevant to their responses to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He argues from the timing of events that the Soviet entrance into the war in East Asia, not the atomic bombings, tipped the balance. He also believes the Japanese failure to grasp the enormity of the nuclear detonations blunted the shock-and-awe effect, however “seriously jolted” their leaders may have been.³

Wilson speculates that Japanese sources may have propagated the notion that Hiroshima was decisive in order to exonerate the Imperial government and military of serious misjudgments. Another motive may have been to tell the Americans what they wanted to hear—that Soviet actions were not decisive; this may have reduced the scope of the war crimes trials in Tokyo, which were, after all, brief.

It would be good to know more precisely just who held the beliefs Wilson debunks. He refers to the public, unspecified military leaders and specialists, and bodies of literature, arguing, for instance, that the notion that nuclear weapons’ psychological power is as great as their destructive power “is repeated again and again in congressional testimony by *military men* and *government experts* from the Defense Department” (22; my emphasis). In seeking to demythologize nuclear weapons and remove them from the realm of politico-nationalist theology, Wilson is mostly tilting at a zeitgeist rather than specific, identified individuals.

Wilson argues provocatively that thermonuclear weapons are overrated weapons of mass destruction. But even if hydrogen bombs are not pure fusion weapons, they are an order of magnitude different from a fission weapon. The related presumption that an opponent would deliberately use thermonuclear weapons in such a way as to minimize their consequences is unjustifiably complex. Why would an opponent serious enough to use a hydrogen weapon in the first place deliberately reduce its effects? Of course, destructive capacity alone does not necessarily end wars, as Wilson points out, even when directed against cities and civilians. Many other factors come into play.⁴

3. Wilson writes that Japanese historical documents may have been altered to protect the emperor; if so, how can the historian rely confidently on other Japanese evidence? And, too, he does not indicate which English translations he used; complex problems of interpretation emerge if all the translators were Americans working in wartime or the immediate postwar period.

4. See Steven Rosen, “War Power and the Willingness to Suffer,” in *Peace, War, and Numbers*, ed. Bruce M. Russett (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publ., 1972) 167–83, and Andrew Mack, “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict,” *World Politics* 27.2 (1975) 175–200.

The use of technical terms in the book—“coercion,” “deterrence,” “compellence,” “extended deterrence”⁵—sometimes lacks precision, perhaps to accommodate a nonspecialist audience. In any case, some Western deterrence theory has become so arcane as to be expressible only through integral calculus. But a, so to say, conversational treatment of deterrence entails ambiguities. The definition of “stability,” for example, is problematic, given disagreements about weapon characteristics, types of stability, and when or whether the word is actually relevant. Do all or only certain kinds of nuclear weapons promote crisis stability? And are such judgments idiosyncratic or reflections of cultural, technological, or historical constraints? What of contingencies like “launch on warning” policies or dynamic political processes like global power transitions? In short, the lexicon of deterrence is variable and context sensitive. As Carol Cohn⁶ has pointed out, defense intellectuals’ vocabulary is ill-suited to talking about peace; since peace, or at least a pause in weapons production, is precisely what Wilson wants to talk about, this causes some difficulties.

As for the claim that decision makers are not necessarily swayed by nuclear detonations over cities, this is surely dependent on context. Different consequences ensue if initial conditions—vast destruction, imminent loss of a war—are altered. A reasonable person could, for instance, well believe that a nuclear 9/11 would have elicited a different response from the United States.

One wonders, too, how Wilson squares seventy years of relative peace among major powers with the multiple, overlapping wars and genocides in the developing world, including Vietnam, Cambodia, and Yugoslavia. Some sources count 250 such conflicts since 1945. Great power geopolitics is influenced by the Third World’s wars and arming patterns. Perhaps the critical point is simply that nuclear weapons have not been detonated in war since 1945, despite many threats to use them.

The book’s examples of myths and cases of magical thinking could fruitfully be expanded to include claims that making bomb cores is safe, that running reactors is without risk, and that nuclear wastes may be securely and permanently disposed of—as Fukushima still contaminates earth and sea, and birds fly in and out of the sarcophagus at Chernobyl.

The assessment here of the stability that characterized the US-Soviet arms race of the Cold War era seems to make sense, but only from a strictly American perspective. The Soviets saw neither a simple dyadic arms race nor a state of parity in that contest; at times, they perceived a triadic relationship including China (after 1964) or a more complex one including France, England, and Israel—always to the USSR’s disadvantage. It is left unclear why this situation should be seen as stable.

The author does well to address issues of culture and worldview generally. He stresses that Israel has nuclear weapons yet does not dominate the Middle East. Why then, he asks, should a nuclear Iran pose a threat to dominate the region? The same goes for Burma or Turkey. But these are tricky equivalences, assuming common domestic and foreign policies in states with disparate governments and distinct political agendas.

Wilson’s discussion is nuanced, multifaceted, and engagingly presented. The vigor and range of his arguments will appeal to undergraduates and general readers. He has certainly captured a sense of the popular understanding of nuclear weapons in the United States and, to some extent, Europe. But the politico-military role of these weapons is rather different in places like India, Pakistan, China, and Iran. The writing is punctuated by occasional unforgettable, jewel-like observations. For example, Wilson vivifies the semantic process of assigning meaning to events with the metaphor of nerve gas: “It is a peculiar attribute of humans that we are able to infuse meaning ... noiseless, odorless, invisible, untouchable...” (121).

Five Myths about Nuclear Weapons addresses the nature of contemporary risks to nations and their populations in a cogent, diverse, and polemical brief for a nuclear “pause” similar to the Nuclear Freeze of the early 1980s, with an end to research and development and threats to use nuclear weapons. One is reminded of Admiral Noel Gayler’s aphorism: “The way to get rid of the bombs is to get rid of the bombs.”

5. On these concepts, see Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1961), and Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 3rd ed. (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

6. “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,” *Signs* 12 (1987) 687–718.