CHAPTER 4

The Foundations of a New World Order

The United States and the Start of the Nuclear Era

During World War II, in the deserts of New Mexico, US and allied scientists sought to create a new kind of weapon that could single-handedly win the war. They succeeded in creating the most powerful explosives known to humankind. Having used nuclear weapons to compel Japanese surrender, the United States sat atop a new international order. Nuclear weapons would powerfully shape the way in which US elites envisaged, built, and sustained the postwar order, and they continue to profoundly affect US foreign policy and grand strategy.

The theory of nuclear opportunism anticipates that during World War II, the United States' political priority would have been to improve the US position against its enemies, and that the United States would use nuclear weapons to escalate and seek to end the war against Japan. In the aftermath of World War II, the theory anticipates that the United States would use nuclear weapons to engage in expansion—the widening of the United States' interests—and bolstering of allies as a result of the favorable geopolitical environment in which the United States found itself. Although the theory of nuclear opportunism does not perform perfectly, I argue that the theory nonetheless sheds significant light on the US case.

The case of the United States is useful for testing the theory of nuclear opportunism. First, the variables that the theory identifies as conditioning the effects of nuclear acquisition themselves changed dramatically at the end of World War II. As a result, the US case offers extra leverage in testing the theory of nuclear opportunism because the theory suggests that nuclear weapons should affect US foreign policy *in different ways* before and after the end of World War II. The US case offers an extra set of expectations with which to assess the performance of the theory: it is, in essence, two cases. Second, this means that it offers a hard case for the theory, because it is one in which a state may have acquired nuclear weapons for a particular purpose during the war but then faced incentives (if the theory is correct) to use them for a

very different set of purposes after the end of the war. If US policymakers changed the way they thought about the utility of nuclear weapons at the end of the war in the way the theory of nuclear opportunism suggests, that would provide particularly good evidence for the theory. Third, the US case is in many ways an outlier and unusual relative to subsequent cases of proliferation. The United States was the first state to acquire nuclear weapons, meaning that US policymakers lacked well-established understandings of the ways in which nuclear weapons could be used or experiences of the ways in which other countries had thought about the utility of nuclear weapons. More broadly, the United States acquired nuclear weapons under historically unusual circumstances—at the conclusion of a brutal world war that transformed international politics. Similarly, the United States acquired nuclear weapons at a point at which it occupied a highly unusual position in the international system as the most powerful state in the world by some distance. Thus, if the theory sheds light on the US case, in addition to cases in which states acquired nuclear weapons under more historically normal circumstances, that would offer significant validation of the theory.

Nonetheless, the US case also presents two important challenges because the international system saw dramatic changes with the end of World War II.

First, because the geopolitical circumstances of the United States changed dramatically, there are reasons to think that US foreign policy would have changed in important ways during this time even if the United States had not acquired nuclear weapons. This means that identifying the effects of nuclear acquisition is somewhat harder, and a simple before-and-after comparison of US behavior is likely to be less convincingly attributable to the effect of nuclear acquisition than in other cases where few other factors change simultaneously with nuclear acquisition. This concern does not invalidate the research design, but it demands that we pay particular attention to the mechanisms through which nuclear weapons affected US foreign policy, the way in which leaders thought about US nuclear weapons, and the relevant counterfactuals (that is, how the United States would have behaved in the absence of nuclear weapons) in the period after US nuclear acquisition. The availability of a rich array of documentary evidence and a vast historical literature on US foreign policy during this period means that this is feasible.

Second, in a contested and fast-changing international system, distinguishing between several of the behaviors in the typology is difficult. For example, establishing the nature of the status quo—necessary to distinguish between aggression and steadfastness—is extremely difficult in a situation of flux in which a range of political actors were seeking to define exactly what the status quo was (or should be). Similarly, defining the nature of the United States' preexisting interests—key to distinguishing between expansion and aggression—is extremely challenging, because of the vast changes in the international system that were occurring.[1] As a result, I focus less on categorizing behaviors that could plausibly be interpreted in different ways and instead

show the ways in which nuclear weapons affected these behaviors, regardless of how one labels them. In this way, the US case offers a less clean test of the theory than other cases, but nonetheless allows for a rich description of the ways in which nuclear weapons influenced the foreign policies of the United States.

When Did the United States Acquire Nuclear Weapons?

To look for changes in US foreign policy caused by nuclear weapons, we first need to know when to look. When did the United States acquire the relevant capabilities? As discussed in chapter 1, this requires that we pay attention to the ways that the United States intended to use nuclear weapons, and the particular technological and military capabilities that such uses require. This enables us to accurately identify the appropriate point in time at which to look for changes in foreign policy.

In the case of the United States, this is simple. The purpose of the Manhattan Project was to produce a usable weapon that could have an important impact on the outcome of the war and to deliver it by air to the cities of Germany or Japan. It is not surprising that US military elites found the idea of nuclear weapons attractive. The use of conventional strategic bombing—and of area bombing of cities and civilians, rather than targeting exclusively military assets—had grown in importance as the war progressed. By the time strategic bombing began in Japan, it was seen by US policymakers as a vital part of the overall US effort to force Japanese surrender.[2] The promise of nuclear weapons played into this broader enthusiasm for strategic bombing.[3] For President Franklin Roosevelt and his head of military research and development, Vannevar Bush, nuclear weapons offered primarily offensive advantages, and there was little question that the bomb would be used against America's enemies.[4] In 1944, Churchill and Roosevelt had agreed that the bomb could "be used against the Japanese, who should be warned that this bombardment will be repeated until they surrender."[5] The Interim Committee, set up to advise Secretary of War Henry Stimson and the president on the use of the atomic bomb, recommended that "the bomb be used against Japan as soon as possible" and "without prior warning."[6]

Given that the United States already had aircraft capable of reaching Japan and Germany, all that was needed was a nuclear explosive that could be dropped out of them. Rehearsals for the use of the gun-type "Little Boy" bomb that would be used on Hiroshima were completed by the end of July 1945.[7] The twenty kiloton Trinity test of July 16, 1945, demonstrated to US military and political leaders that the "Fat Man" implosion device that would be used on Nagasaki would also work successfully.[8] It is therefore in late July 1945 that we should expect that nuclear weapons would have begun to affect US strategic calculations.

The United States' Strategic Environment

What does the theory of nuclear opportunism expect to see in the US case?

As described in chapter 1, the first factor to examine is whether the United States faced serious territorial threats or was involved in a war that required the dedication of significant national resources. When the United States acquired a deliverable nuclear capability in 1945 it was in the midst of World War II. The United States did not face ongoing fighting on its own territory (although it had, of course, suffered the 1941 attack on its territory at Pearl Harbor), and by this point US victory in the Pacific was virtually inevitable (though the timing and manner of that victory were not) and victory in Europe had been achieved. Nonetheless, World War II represented a brutal war that had demanded the expenditure of significant American blood and treasure, and the United States was prepared to pay considerable further costs to achieve a complete victory should an invasion of Japan prove necessary. Because the United States was involved in an ongoing war, the other variables in the decision tree do not come into play. Under such conditions, the theory anticipates that the United States' political priority would be to improve its position against its enemies, and predicts that the United States would use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression and steadfastness. Figure 4.1 shows the application of the theory to the US case in the summer of 1945.

The theory also expects that the same logic would be reflected in elite thinking about nuclear weapons. American elites should have viewed nuclear weapons as a tool with which to improve their position against their opponents in World War II, and should have planned to use them for this purpose within the conflict. Last, the theory anticipates that because of the war the United States was engaging in, and the political priority that the United States would accord to improving its position in the war and against its enemies, the other behaviors would be less politically appealing. As a result, the theory predicts that the United States would not seek to use its nuclear weapons to facilitate the remaining behaviors in the typology: expansion, independence, bolstering, or compromise.

With the end of World War II, however, the circumstances facing the United States changed dramatically. The geopolitical situation transformed from one in which the United States was involved in a brutal and all-out war to one in which the United States was by far the most powerful state in the world and faced no serious threats. Because several of the factors identified as important by the theory of nuclear opportunism changed with the end of World War II, the theory predicts that the United States would use nuclear weapons differently in the aftermath of World War II than during the war.

Measuring the first factor—the presence of serious territorial threats or an ongoing war—is straightforward. With the passing of World War II, the United States was no longer involved in a war and faced no serious threats

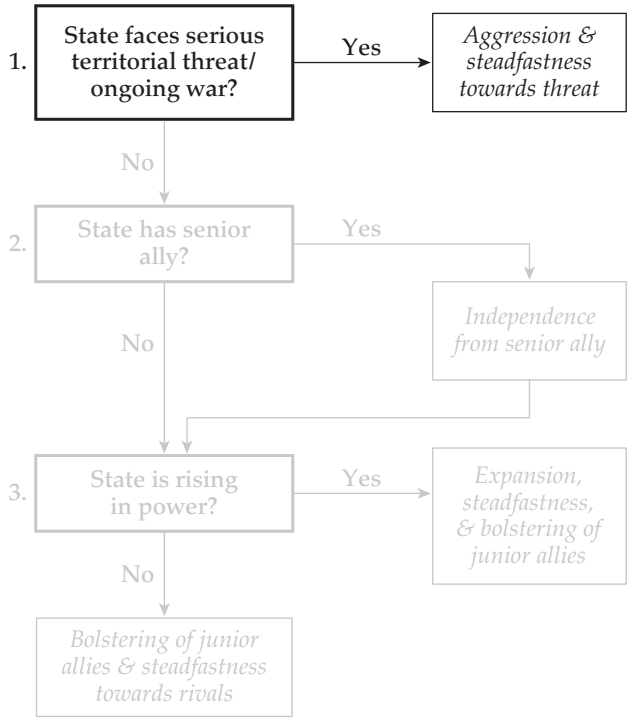

Figure 4.1. The theory of nuclear opportunism applied to the United States, wartime

to its territory. US elites were certainly suspicious of the intentions of the Soviet Union, but the Soviet Union had been decimated by war, was thousands of miles away, and had no capacity to project power against the US homeland. The United States thus emerged from World War II in an extraordinarily secure position: a hegemon in the Western Hemisphere and a state whose potential peer competitors either were under occupation or had been ravaged by the most destructive war in human history. The United States thus faced no serious threats of the kind described by the first variable.

Because the United States did not face threats of this sort, the second and third factors come into play in determining the expectations of the theory of nuclear opportunism. Measuring the second factor—whether the United States had a senior ally committed to its protection—is also straightforward. Because the United States was now by some distance the most powerful state in the world, it could not have a senior ally by definition. The third factor is whether the United States was increasing in relative power. Here, too, the coding is clear. The United States was unique among the great powers in becoming richer, stronger, and more powerful during World War II. By the end of the war, the United States had a higher standard of living and per capita produc-

tivity than any other country in the world, its gross domestic product (GDP) had risen by two-thirds, it controlled nearly two-thirds of the world's gold reserves, and it possessed the world's most potent military and power projection capabilities.[9] US gross national product (GNP) at the end of the war was three times that of the Soviet Union and five times that of the United Kingdom.[10] Finally, the United States ended World War II holding a historically unusual concentration of military power. In the historian Melvyn Leffler's words, the United States' "strategic air force was unrivaled. Its navy dominated the seas. Its aircraft carriers and marine divisions enabled it to project its power across the oceans. . . . The United States had preponderent power."[11] The claim that the United States was rising in relative power at the end of World War II is confirmed by the Correlates of War's CINC scores, which provide a measure of a state's share of global power. The United States' CINC score rose every year from 1937 until 1946. Thus, as World War II came to an end, US relative power was on an upward trajectory. Figure 4.2 shows the application of the theory to the United States in the aftermath of World War II.

As a result of this uniquely favorable geopolitical environment, the theory predicts that the United States' political priority should have been

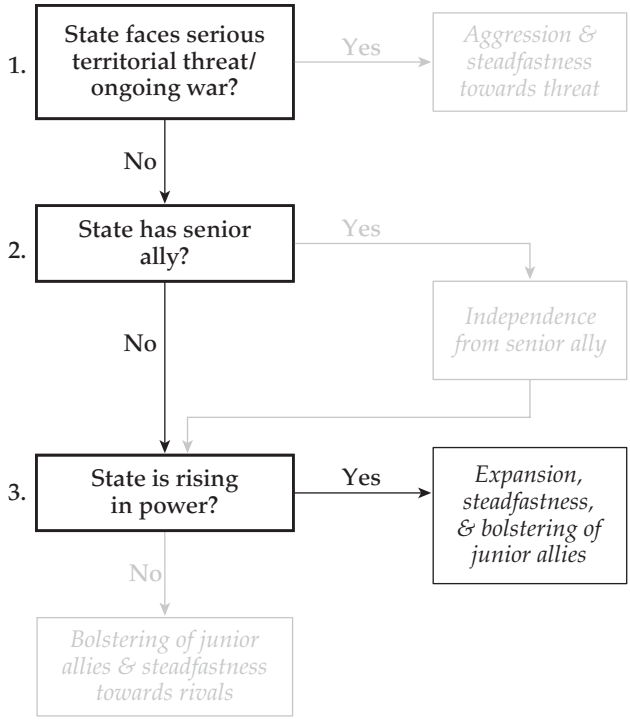

Figure 4.2. The theory of nuclear opportunism applied to the United States, postwar

to expand its influence in international politics—forming new alliances, initiating new adversarial relationships, and developing a greater ability to project power and influence—and that the United States should have used its nuclear weapons to facilitate these behaviors. States that are rising in power and in a secure environment do not face tight resource constraints, and the favorable geopolitical environment in which they find themselves affords them the latitude to expand their influence in international politics. The theory therefore predicts that in the aftermath of World War II, the United States would use its nuclear weapons to facilitate expansion, to bolster existing allies, and to stand more firmly in the face of any challenges. Additionally, the theory predicts that US elites would view nuclear weapons as useful in facilitating these behaviors.

Because of the favorable geopolitical circumstances that the United States faced, the theory anticipates that the United States would not seek to use nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression, independence, or compromise. The theory anticipates that using nuclear weapons to engage in independence would be unnecessary because the United States possessed no allies with the ability to constrain its behavior. The uniquely favorable position in which it found itself meant that the United States was already able to set an independent course in foreign policy, regardless of nuclear weapons. Similarly, states that are both rising in power and facing few threats have less need to engage in aggression. As discussed in chapter 1, rising states can afford to be patient in dealing with any threats that they face, because their permissive security environment affords them the latitude to do so. Using nuclear weapons to facilitate compromise is also unattractive because states in this position have the wind at their back: they have little reason and feel little pressure to engage in compromise.

The United States during World War II

How did nuclear weapons affect US foreign policy during World War II? The United States used nuclear weapons to escalate the war vis-à-vis Japan but used them to pursue preexisting goals—the defeat and surrender of Japan. The United States would likely have used nuclear weapons for similar purposes against Germany had the bomb been ready prior to German surrender. Although the extreme circumstances in which the United States acquired nuclear weapons make categorizing this behavior somewhat tricky, within the typology of behaviors I argue that it is best thought of as aggression. Aggression includes the escalation of a conflict through the introduction of new weapons or technologies, and the use of nuclear weapons for the first time in armed conflict represented an escalation of this sort. US policymakers understood the use of nuclear weapons in these terms. However, there are also ways in which the acquisition of nuclear weapons facilitated com-

promise. Nuclear weapons allowed the United States to avoid a long and bloody invasion of Japan that would likely have ended with little US inclination to compromise on any aspects of the terms of Japanese surrender, including the retention of the emperor. Nuclear weapons also facilitated US independence from the Soviet Union by obviating the need for Soviet assistance in a potential invasion of Japan.

AGGRESSION

On one level, it seems obvious that the United States used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression during World War II: after all, the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki continue to represent the only instances of direct use of nuclear weapons against an enemy. However, at the point of nuclear acquisition, the United States was already making maximal demands for an unconditional Japanese surrender, was engaged in a total and brutal war against Japanese forces in the Pacific, was tightening the blockade of the Japanese home islands, and was engaging in a systematic effort to destroy Japan's cities from the air. The extreme circumstances in which the United States acquired nuclear weapons make categorizing US nuclear use against Japan within the typology somewhat tricky. After all, given the way in which the United States was waging the war in the Pacific during the summer of 1945, did nuclear weapons really make the United States *more* belligerent in pursuing the defeat and surrender of Japan?

Ultimately, however, the use of nuclear weapons is best seen as an example of aggression. This is not because the United States was unable to defeat Japan without nuclear weapons. As Schelling argues, "With a combination of bombing and blockade, eventually invasion, and if necessary the deliberate spread of disease, the United States could probably have exterminated the population of the Japanese islands without nuclear weapons. . . . It would not have strained our Gross National Product to do it with ice picks."[12] However, as discussed in chapter 1, aggression can include the escalation of a conflict through the use of new tactics, forces, military doctrines, or technologies. The use of nuclear weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki meets this definition because it crossed an important technological focal point from the perspective of the United States, meeting Richard Smoke's definition of escalation as "a step of any size that crosses a saliency."[13] While the political goals that the United States was pursuing—the complete defeat of Japan—did not change with nuclear acquisition, nuclear weapons allowed the United States to introduce a significant new military technology that radically increased the efficiency with which the United States could destroy Japanese targets. The United States' Strategic Bombing Survey, conducted in the aftermath of the attacks, estimated that the single most effective night of conventional bombing—against Tokyo on March 9, 1945—killed 83,600 people using 279 planes and 1,667 bombs, while the attack on Hiroshima

killed a comparable number using a single plane and a single bomb.[14] Crucially, nuclear weapons offered a plausible path to Japanese surrender without first having to engage in a brutal effort to conquer Japanese territory: what Truman feared would be "an Okinawa from one end of Japan to the other."[15] While the incendiary bombing of Japanese cities was nothing new, the explosive power of the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was still three to four times greater than that which could be delivered in a conventional strategic bombing raid, and, of course, such a conventional attack required hundreds of bombers instead of the single bomber required for each of the nuclear attacks.

The Strategic Bombing Survey concluded that "the survivors were not aware at the time that a radically new bomb had been used. . . . Even the Government had no conception, until President Truman's announcement was broadcast, of the new principle of operation."[16] While it is reasonable to question whether the Japanese recognized the nuclear attacks to be dramatically different in scope from the attacks they had already experienced during the spring and summer of 1945, it is clear that from the perspective of the United States, nuclear weapons offered a sea change in destructive efficiency.[17] "From the U.S. perspective," Ward Wilson argues, "the atomic bomb was clearly different."[18] The United States had dedicated some $2 billion and enormous human capital to developing nuclear weapons, and US policymakers spoke about the weapon in terms that suggest they did not simply view nuclear weapons as a marginal improvement on existing capabilities.[19] In briefing the newly inaugurated Harry Truman, for example, future secretary of state James Byrnes spoke "in quiet tones which did not disguise his feeling of awe, that the explosive emerging from American laboratories and plants might be powerful enough to destroy the world."[20] Secretary of War Stimson believed that the Manhattan Project "should not be considered simply in terms of military weapons, but as a new relationship of man to the universe. . . . While the advances in the field [of military technology] to date had been fostered in the needs of war, it was important to realize that the implications of the project went far beyond the needs of the present war."[21] Truman, announcing the use of nuclear weapons, spoke in terms that indicated he considered nuclear weapons to be fundamentally different from preexisting forms of warfare, stating, "It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East."[22] Although there were always voices that sought to "normalize" nuclear weapons, in general, US officials recognized that nuclear weapons were special and that using them would represent an important escalation of the conflict. As the director of the Bureau of the Budget and future under secretary of state James Webb would write in a memo to President Truman, "The atomic bomb is no ordinary piece of ordnance."[23]

It is true that unlike in the South African case, the United States used nuclear weapons directly rather than using them to facilitate greater *conven-*

tional military aggression. But both behaviors represented—in different ways—escalation of the conflicts each state was undertaking, and both fall under the category of aggression.

Using nuclear weapons in this way was consistent with the thinking of US officials since the beginning of the Manhattan Project. Given the brutality of the war and the political importance of achieving a rapid US victory, there was little doubt that the United States would choose to use nuclear weapons once it had them in its possession.[24] Secretary of War Stimson stated after the war that "at no time, from 1941 to 1945, did I ever hear it suggested by the President or any other responsible member of the government that atomic energy should not be used in the war. . . . We were at war, and the work [of the Manhattan Project] must be done. . . . It was the common objective throughout the war to be the first to develop an atomic weapon and to use it."[25] Senior US policymakers, in Martin Sherwin's account, "asked whether it would be ready in time, not whether it should be used if it was."[26] Similarly, General Leslie Groves, who oversaw the Manhattan Project, and had initially been skeptical of the war-winning potential of nuclear weapons, wrote after the war that the Manhattan Project and potential use of nuclear weapons were subject to "basic military considerations. . . . If we were successful in time, we would shorten the war and thus save tens of thousands of American casualties."[27] Neither did the British government present any obstacles or question the wisdom of using nuclear weapons against the Japanese.[28] Three days after the bombing of Hiroshima, Truman declared that the logic of nuclear use was straightforward: "Having found the bomb we used it."[29]

Indeed, it was the assumption that nuclear weapons would be used, and the belief that using them might be decisive in the war effort, that led to the dedication of such immense resources to the Manhattan Project. In Stimson's words, "The entire purpose was the production of a military weapon; on no other ground could the wartime expenditure of so much time and money have been justified."[30] The Manhattan Project was accorded the highest priority as a result, and the rush to produce a working device was considerable. As President Roosevelt stated, "I think the whole thing should be pushed not only in regard to development, but also with due regard to time. This is very much of the essence."[31] And James Conant, the chairman of the National Defense Research Committee, argued that "if the possession of the new weapon in sufficient quantities would be a determining factor in the war," then "three months' delay might be fatal."[32] General Groves's instruction from Stimson was to produce a bomb "at the earliest possible date so as to bring the war to a conclusion."[33] The United States, therefore, built nuclear weapons with the full intention of using them and aware of the fact that to do so would cross an important threshold in destructive efficiency.

The intended target of America's nuclear weapons was both the Japanese and the Germans. There were several reasons that the United States planned

to target Japan with its first atomic attack, including the fact that German scientists would be better able to accurately analyze a "dud" explosion if it occurred and the initial absence of B-29 bombers in Europe.[34] Nonetheless, Groves reported that "President Roosevelt asked if we were prepared to drop bombs on Germany if it was necessary to do so and we replied that we would be prepared to do so."[35] Coming into the presidency after Roosevelt's death in April 1945, Truman did not challenge the assumption that the bomb would be used. Within four months of coming into office, and a week after the successful Trinity test in New Mexico on July 16, 1945, Truman authorized the dropping of nuclear weapons on Japanese cities as soon as the weapons were ready. The purpose of doing so was clear: to escalate—and end—the war. As Truman wrote, the Japanese "will fold up before Russia comes in. I am sure they will when Manhattan appears over their homeland."[36] Although Truman would later claim to have had no doubts about his decision to use nuclear weapons, there was at least some ambivalence about the course of action he had authorized. As he wrote in his diary, "It seems to be the most terrible thing ever discovered, but it can be made the most useful."[37] In short, not only did the United States use nuclear weapons in the way the theory anticipates, but it had thought about using nuclear weapons in that way since the start of the Manhattan Project.

Overall, the United States' use of nuclear weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki comes under the category of aggression. While the United States was already making maximal demands of Japan and engaged in a brutal war against its forces in the Pacific and its cities from the air, the use of nuclear weapons nonetheless represented (and was seen at the time to represent) an important escalatory step that could potentially prove decisive in ending the war.

COMPROMISE

Nuclear weapons may have allowed the United States to engage in compromise, defined as accepting less in ongoing disputes. Ultimately, the United States backed down somewhat from the demands articulated at the Potsdam conference for a completely unconditional Japanese surrender, and made modest concessions to the Japanese regarding the status of the emperor.[38] In some ways, nuclear weapons hardened the resolve of US policymakers and made them less inclined to compromise. For example, at the meeting discussing the initial Japanese offer of surrender (on terms much more favorable to Japan than those the Japanese ultimately accepted), the secretary of state asked why the United States should "go further [in offering concessions] than we were willing to go at Potsdam when we had no atomic bomb, and Russia was not in the war."[39] And as US negotiations over the terms of Japanese surrender were ongoing, the US military was preparing for a third atomic strike against Tokyo in late August on the as-

sumption that further nuclear attacks would allow the United States to drive a harder bargain rather than facilitate US compromises.

On the other hand, nuclear weapons offered the United States a tool with which it could potentially achieve Japanese surrender without fighting a bloody invasion of Japan, and do so without the assistance of the Soviet Union. This may have made the United States more willing to accept limited compromises on the status of the emperor in order to avoid US casualties and wrap up the conflict sufficiently quickly to keep the Soviet Union out of the postwar occupation. Before nuclear acquisition, the United States had anticipated requiring Soviet assistance to invade and defeat Japan. It is hard to imagine that having fought a bloody and costly invasion of the Japanese mainland, the United States would have accepted anything other than a completely unconditional surrender. Once they had acquired nuclear weapons, however, US policymakers sought to end the war before the Soviet Union could invade Japan, and thus reduce Soviet influence over the postwar settlement (as I discuss further below). US policymakers were therefore prepared to accept the modest compromises on the status of the emperor necessary to quickly secure Japanese agreement to the terms of surrender.[40] In this limited but nonetheless important way, US nuclear weapons facilitated US compromise.

INDEPENDENCE

Similarly, there are also ways in which nuclear weapons facilitated US independence—defined as taking actions that allies oppose or do not support. As discussed, before nuclear acquisition, the United States had anticipated requiring (or at least desiring) the assistance of the Soviet Union to invade and defeat Japan, and at Yalta, Roosevelt had obtained a Soviet pledge to enter the war against Japan once the war in Europe was terminated. The price of Soviet assistance, of course, was that the Soviet Union would receive a more favorable postwar settlement in the Pacific across a range of issues and territories. Roosevelt had agreed that if the Soviets would enter the war against Japan, the United States would allow them to annex southern Sakhalin and the Kuriles, establish a naval base at Port Arthur, and recover Russia's pre-1904 rights in Manchuria, including its "preeminent interests" in the region's railroads and the port of Dairen. While many US policymakers had misgivings about the Yalta agreement, they were disinclined to abandon the agreement while Soviet support might still be needed in Asia. Until US nuclear weapons had demonstrated their utility, US officials believed it would be foolish to eschew assistance from the Soviet Union that might still be required to ensure Japanese defeat.[41]

US nuclear weapons obviated this dependence on the Soviet Union by offering a path to Japanese surrender that would not require Soviet assistance. Truman believed that the Soviets "needed us more than we needed

them," that "our new weapons" meant that Soviet participation in the Pacific war was no longer needed to conquer Japan, and that the United States should no longer feel bound by the Yalta agreement. As Secretary of War Stimson argued, "They can't get along without our help and industries and we have coming into action a weapon which will be unique."[42] Instead, the United States used its nuclear weapons to end the war before the Soviet Union could invade Japan, enabling the United States to govern Japan alone in the aftermath of the war. Indeed, the Soviet Union had recognized in the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing that it would have to accelerate its intervention into the war in case the atomic bomb prompted an immediate surrender, launching an attack on Japanese forces in Manchuria.[43] It is true that the Soviet Union had supported the US use of nuclear weapons: Stalin had told Truman at Potsdam that he hoped the United States would make "good use" of nuclear weapons against Japan.[44] Nonetheless, the Soviet Union was dissatisfied with the way in which the war in the Pacific ended and the nature of the postwar settlement. Even after the United States had announced Japan's surrender, the Soviet Union continued fighting Japanese forces in Sakhalin with the intention of occupying Hokkaido, before ultimately backing off after a "firm" response from President Truman on August 18.[45] Overall, therefore, it seems fair to conclude that US nuclear weapons reduced US dependence on the Soviet Union in the Pacific, and thus that the United States used nuclear weapons to facilitate independence.

EXPANSION

The United States did not use its nuclear weapons to engage in expansion during the war, defined in chapter 1 as the widening of a state's interests. The United States' goals in using nuclear weapons against Japan were the same as they had previously been during the war: to destroy Japanese cities, demoralize the Japanese population, and achieve victory and Japanese surrender on favorable terms and with the loss of as few American lives as possible. Nuclear weapons were perceived to offer a higher likelihood of achieving these ends than continued conventional bombing, but the goals remained constant. It might be argued that the United States used its nuclear weapons against Japan to intimidate the Soviet Union and thus lay the groundwork for more expansive postwar ambitions. While most scholars agree that Truman did not choose to use US nuclear weapons against Japan in order to intimidate the Soviet Union, "he was fully conscious of its diplomatic ramifications and eager to reap its anticipated benefits."[46] However, such effects were secondary to the primary intended outcome of forcing Japanese surrender. More importantly, such aims were prospective—they sought to influence how the *postwar* world would operate. As a result, such a claim would support the argument I make below that the United States used its nuclear weapons to engage in expansion *in the aftermath* of World War II.

BOLSTERING

The United States did not use its nuclear weapons to bolster allies during the war—defined as taking actions to strengthen an existing alliance or alliance partner. While President Roosevelt had agreed with Churchill that the United States would consult with the British before using its nuclear weapons, this was not an effort to strengthen the British position but merely an acknowledgment of their shared investment in the Manhattan Project and the fact that both leaders agreed that nuclear weapons should be used (meaning that such an agreement would not in fact constrain the United States). The United States had no intention of providing Britain (and certainly not other allies) with nuclear weapons or otherwise using nuclear weapons to strengthen the British position during the war.

STEADFASTNESS

Finally, there is little evidence that the United States used nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness—defined as standing more firmly in defense of the status quo. Instead, US officials viewed nuclear weapons as a weapon that offered offensive opportunities, and intended to use them in this way during the war.[47] The theory of nuclear opportunism thus incorrectly predicts the United States would use nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness in addition to aggression. This counts as a strike against the theory. However, given the circumstances in which the United States acquired nuclear weapons, it is not necessarily surprising that the US response to nuclear acquisition would be overwhelmingly characterized by aggression rather than steadfastness. Because the United States was on the offensive in the war when it acquired nuclear weapons, it was simply not required to defend the status quo. Instead, when it acquired nuclear weapons, the United States was engaged in a more or less constant effort to *revise* the status quo and achieve victory in the war. The lack of challenges to the US position makes assessing any change in the level of steadfastness difficult, but it is clear that US officials saw nuclear weapons as offering primarily offensive rather than defensive advantages. This goes against the expectations of the theory of nuclear opportunism.

The United States after World War II

Assessing the role that nuclear weapons played in US foreign policy in the aftermath of World War II is a complicated task. The sheer breadth of US foreign policy activity, the unstable and changing nature of international politics in the postwar period, and the contradictory and complex ways in which the United States acted in the aftermath of World War II make isolating the

effect of any single factor on US foreign policy challenging. This is particularly true with respect to nuclear weapons, a technology that had only just been invented and the implications of which were not well understood by US policymakers. In addition, the vast historiographical debate surrounding the origins of the Cold War and the many plausible historical interpretations of particular events in the early Cold War mean that any conclusions drawn from this case are necessarily tentative. Nonetheless, the theory of nuclear opportunism makes clear predictions about the behaviors that should be expected, and it is reasonable to assess whether they seem to be realized in the historical record.

The theory of nuclear opportunism predicts that the United States—a hegemon in the Western Hemisphere and a state whose potential peer competitors were all either defeated and under occupation or ravaged by the effects of the most destructive war in human history—should have used nuclear weapons to bolster its junior allies and to expand its interests in international politics. Consistent with the theory of nuclear opportunism, I argue that there is good evidence that the United States did use nuclear weapons to bolster its allies, expand its interests, and respond steadfastly to challenges. However, the United States also used nuclear weapons to engage in foreign policy behaviors that can be reasonably characterized as aggression, against the expectations of the theory.

The extent to which the United States expanded its interests, engaged in aggression, or merely defended the status quo in the aftermath of World War II has been the subject of a vast historiographical debate. During the 1960s and 1970s, disputes between "orthodox" and "revisionist" historians generated considerable heat on the question of whether the United States or the Soviet Union was the more belligerent and expansionist power and thus primarily responsible for the onset of the Cold War.[48] Over thirty years after John Lewis Gaddis claimed to identify a "post-revisionist synthesis" that recognized that the United States was neither the ideal form of the "Leninist model of imperialism" nor "naive and innocent" in its conduct of the Cold War, historical debates over US motivations and behavior in the immediate postwar period continue.[49]

This historiographical debate combines with (and perhaps results from) the extraordinarily complex and contested postwar international environment to make analyzing the effect of nuclear weapons on postwar US foreign policy challenging. In particular, distinguishing between several of the behaviors identified in the typology is harder than in previous cases. For example, identifying the status quo is critical to distinguishing between aggression and steadfastness. However, in the immediate postwar period, what constituted the status quo in the Soviet-US relationship was open to significant disagreement. Similarly, distinguishing between "preexisting" and "new" interests—crucial to distinguishing between expansion and aggression—in

the context of an international environment characterized by extraordinary upheaval is extremely tricky.

Instead of trying to categorize US foreign policy into the behaviors in the typology, I examine four interconnected and crucially important aspects of US foreign policy in the immediate postwar period: the institutionalizing of an unprecedented global network of alliances, the United States' installation of a worldwide peacetime network of overseas bases, US interactions with the Soviet Union, and the use of economic power for political ends. In each case, I show the ambiguity of these behaviors and the different ways these behaviors could be categorized. I do not seek to conclusively assign a label to each behavior. However, regardless of the label one assigns to each behavior, I argue that each behavior was facilitated in important ways by nuclear weapons. The United States thus offers a less clean test of the theory than the other cases in which the international environment was more stable and distinguishing between the behaviors in the typology is easier. Nonetheless, the case reinforces the view of nuclear weapons implied by the theory of nuclear opportunism: as useful tools of political statecraft that can facilitate a range of foreign policy behaviors.

STRENGTHENING ALLIANCES AND INITIATING NEW ONES

In the aftermath of World War II, the United States eschewed its traditional skepticism of entangling alliances in favor of establishing a globe-spanning network of alliances. In this section, I show the important role that nuclear weapons played in supporting and sustaining these alliances. This shift in US foreign policy is best seen as a combination of both bolstering and expansion. Many of the security treaties that the United States signed and alliances that the United States entered into in the aftermath of World War II were entirely new (such as that with Japan) and are perhaps better considered as examples of expansion, which includes the initiation of new alliance relationships. However, many of the alliances that the United States entered into represented the formalization of existing and long-standing relationships (such as with the United Kingdom) and thus fall under the category of bolstering—the strengthening or formalizing of existing allies or alliances.

The motivation behind this shift in US foreign policy is much debated among historians and political scientists. In one view, the United States aimed to build up its allies in Europe (and elsewhere) so that they could ultimately take the lead in providing for their own defense. In this view, the United States' commitment to Europe would be temporary, and the United States would ultimately seek to reduce its defense commitments over time and withdraw from Europe and Asia.[50] For example, Mark Sheetz argues that "post-war [American] leaders engaged in strenuous efforts to avoid a permanent military involvement in Europe."[51] Similarly, Brendan Rittenhouse

Green writes that "the United States aimed to establish an independent European pole of power that could contain the Soviet Union with minimal U.S. aid."[52] In another view, however, US alliances had a more hegemonic, suppressive character and aimed to maintain the United States' position in Europe indefinitely.[53] For example, Christopher Layne argues that soon after World War II, the United States "intended to remain in Europe permanently, even if the threat of Soviet aggression disappeared."[54] Similarly, Francis Gavin notes that Washington's alliances in the nuclear era "appear to be permanent [and] to persist regardless of threat."[55]

Regardless of the ultimate motivations underlying US actions, however, in the aftermath of World War II, the United States entered into, and then formalized, a series of alliance commitments to prop up the economies and military capabilities of countries sympathetic to the United States. In 1949, the United States signed the North Atlantic Treaty with eleven countries (Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and the United Kingdom). This was followed in 1951 by the ANZUS agreement with Australia and New Zealand and a bilateral security treaty between the United States and Japan, the expansion of NATO to Greece and Turkey in 1952, the Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and South Korea in 1953, and the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan and the expansion of NATO to West Germany in 1955. Within ten years of the end of World War II, therefore, the United States had built a globe-spanning alliance network underpinned by US military power and a willingness to play an active role in the defense of each of its alliance partners. Secretary of State Acheson remarked that this amounted to "a complete revolution" in the foreign policy of a country that had traditionally eschewed potentially entangling alliances.[56]

This alliance network was being built up, however, in the context of the demobilization of the US armed forces that occurred in the aftermath of World War II. Despite concerns expressed by military leaders about the dangers associated with too quickly degrading US military capabilities, President Truman and other elected officials demanded a swift demobilization in response to powerful domestic political demands to bring US military forces home. US carriers were converted into giant passenger ships to transport US service personnel overseas back to the United States, and in January 1946 thousands of US soldiers rioted in an effort to hasten their return to civilian life.[57] US military personnel fell from over 12 million in 1945 to around 1.5 million in 1947, and military expenditure fell by around a factor of six (after adjusting for inflation) over the same period.[58] Even after this fall in capabilities, US military personnel and expenditure were around five and thirteen times higher, respectively, than they had been in 1937, but sustaining US alliances with a vastly reduced military force nonetheless presented a critical challenge for US policymakers in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Even in West Germany, for example, the United States had

only two divisions present, and those forces were dispersed throughout the country in order to administer the occupation. The conventional balance was so precarious that Secretary of State George Marshall requested that the secretary of defense not make the details of the military balance public, to avoid demoralizing the Europeans because "the picture which this presents is one of such hopelessness."[59]

Nuclear weapons offered a solution to this quandary. Nuclear weapons allowed the United States to maintain, strengthen, and extend US alliance commitments while US conventional military capabilities declined. The role of nuclear weapons was most explicit in Western Europe, although the same logic was implicit elsewhere as well. The crucial role that nuclear weapons played in facilitating America's alliances in Europe had been recognized by US policymakers even in the immediate aftermath of World War II. In 1946, George Kennan wrote that "it is important that this country be prepared to use them . . . for the mere fact of such preparedness may prove to be the only powerful deterrent to Russian aggressive action."[60] A 1947 CIA report argued that a key reason why the Soviet Union would not "resort to overt military aggression" despite its "overwhelming preponderance of power" was that "the USSR would be exposed to early long range air bombardment with conventional and atomic bombs."[61] A 1948 National Security Council (NSC) report stated that "if Western Europe is to enjoy any feeling of security at the present time . . . it is in large degree because the atomic bomb, under American trusteeship, offers the present major counterbalance to the ever-present threat of the Soviet military power."[62] According to Secretary of Defense James Forrestal, nuclear weapons were "the only balance we have against the overwhelming manpower of the Russians."[63]

Such was the impact of nuclear weapons on US strategy in Europe that George Kennan ultimately worried that the United States was placing too much reliance on them. As he wrote in 1949, "We are so behind the Russians in conventional armaments, and the attraction of the atomic bomb to strategic planners has been such that we are in danger of finding our whole policy tied to the atom bomb."[64] Nonetheless, the trend of increasing reliance on nuclear weapons continued. In 1950, NSC-68 made the reliance on nuclear weapons to compensate for conventional military shortcomings explicit, and embraced a policy of using nuclear weapons first in a conflict to make America's alliance commitments credible: "In our present situation of relative unpreparedness in conventional weapons, such a declaration [of no first use] would be interpreted by the USSR as an admission of great weakness and by our allies as a clear indication that we intend to abandon them."[65] If US nuclear use was not credible, and a war in Europe had to be fought with conventional forces only, the consequences were simple: "an early Soviet conquest of Western Europe."[66]

Similarly, once the Soviet Union had developed its own nuclear weapons, the same logic dictated the development of tactical nuclear weapons.[67] In the

words of a memo to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Atomic weapons used tactically are the natural armaments of the numerically inferior but technologically superior nations. They are the natural answer to the armed hordes of the Soviet Union and its satellites."[68] Marc Trachtenberg summarizes the role nuclear weapons played in facilitating US alliance commitments to Europe in the absence of large conventional forces: nuclear weapons meant that "the United States did not have to maintain a massive military establishment, or deploy forces in western Europe capable of defending that area on the ground. The West could settle for a tripwire strategy. Very powerful, and very expensive, forces in being—in particular, ground forces in Europe—were not absolutely essential."[69] In Wilson Miscamble's words, by 1949 "American conventional forces were deemed capable of defending only the Western Hemisphere and the main Japanese Islands and perhaps of retaining communication lines to some bridgeheads in Great Britain, the Iberian Peninsula, and North Africa. The Americans depended on the deterrent quality of their atomic monopoly."[70] In short, nuclear weapons were the only way that the United States could make credible commitments to Europe—and beyond—without the kind of conventional deployments that had quickly become politically unacceptable after World War II.

US plans were certainly not ideal from the European perspective: as a *Newsweek* article from 1948 claimed, "The temporary overrunning of Europe by the Red Army is taken for granted."[71] In the words of one 1948 assessment sent to the president, "If war should come within the next few years, this could result in the loss of the bulk of our ground forces in Europe, heavy casualties to the naval and air units employed in evacuation, capture of most, if not all, of our heavy equipment and all ground installations there, and the detention of American civilian personnel."[72] In short, US war plans were essentially that Europe would be lost in the event of a Soviet invasion, but that this would be followed by an inevitable and sustained US campaign of nuclear attacks.[73] Even US war plans that dryly acknowledged that "atomic bombing will produce certain psychological and retaliatory reactions detrimental to the achievement of Allied war objectives" nonetheless concluded that "the advantages of its early use would be transcending" and recommended the "prompt and effective delivery of the maximum numbers of atomic bombs."[74] Despite the grim nature of a potential European conflict that US plans implied, a reliance on nuclear weapons was the only politically feasible option for US policymakers. As Secretary of State Marshall argued, "The country could not, and would not, support a budget based on preparation for war," and the United States was therefore unable "to build up U.S. ground forces for the express purpose of employing them in Western Europe."[75] Relying on nuclear weapons to sustain US alliance commitments was, in short, the only game in town in the immediate aftermath of World War II.

Given the importance of nuclear weapons in sustaining US alliance commitments, it is unsurprising that even while the United States was undergoing a substantial conventional military demobilization, it was dedicating considerable resources to expanding its nuclear arsenal. The Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1947 called for an enlargement of the US nuclear arsenal, and substantial effort was dedicated to overcoming production problems and building up both the nuclear weapons stockpile and the B-50, B-36, and B-29 bombers necessary for their delivery.[76] Similarly, it is unsurprising that the Berlin crisis of 1948 triggered internal discussions about who controlled US nuclear weapons during crises, as well as limited US nuclear signaling in an effort to deter further Soviet actions.[77] Three days after the Soviet Union shut off ground access into Berlin, the Strategic Air Command was placed on alert, and by the middle of July the US government announced the deployment of two B-29 squadrons (explicitly described as "atomic capable") to the United Kingdom at the request of the British government. These bombers were not in fact equipped to deliver nuclear weapons, but those B-29s in the United States that had been modified to deliver nuclear weapons were placed on a twenty-four-hour alert.[78] The fact that the United States agreed to Britain's request for nuclear signaling of this sort despite Truman's concern that "this is no time to be juggling an atomic bomb around" is further evidence of the role that nuclear weapons played in bolstering US allies in the immediate aftermath of World War II.[79]

From shortly after the end of World War II, therefore, the United States used its nuclear weapons to underwrite a host of new and existing alliances. By using nuclear weapons as a substitute for conventional forces, the United States avoided having to choose between a return to its traditional foreign policy of isolationism, on the one hand, and retaining a large standing army and an economy dedicated to large-scale war fighting, on the other. Without nuclear weapons, the United States would have been forced to confront this dilemma directly, sacrificing either the postwar demobilization of the US military or the United States' new forward position in the world.

OVERSEAS BASES

US policymakers had concluded during the war that US dominance of the Western Hemisphere was no longer sufficient to guarantee US security, and that the United States required a permanent and extensive network of overseas bases for both offensive and defensive operations. The attack on Pearl Harbor, the rise of strategic bombing as a tactic of great power war, and the possibility of other states using nuclear weapons against the United States all pointed in the direction of a more forward defense and an extensive system of overseas bases. Such bases would allow the United States both a greater chance of interdicting attacks on the homeland and a greater ability to project power against potential adversaries. As the Joint Chiefs of

Staff argued, in the aftermath of World War II, "neither geography nor allies will render a nation immune from sudden and paralyzing attack should an aggressor arise to plague the peace of the world."[80] As Army chief of staff George Marshall stated, "It no longer appears practical to continue what we once conceived as hemispheric defense as a satisfactory basis for our security. We are now concerned with the peace of the entire world."[81] As the US envoy to Moscow had informed Stalin in 1945, "The interests of the United States were worldwide and not confined to North and South America and the Pacific Ocean."[82] In 1943, defense officials therefore started to examine the number of overseas bases that the United States would need in the aftermath of victory. In November 1945, months after the Japanese surrender, the Chiefs of Staff provided the secretary of state with a list of thirty-five bases deemed "essential" or "required."[83] As Leffler summarizes the outcome of the process: "After extensive discussion, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) defined a set of primary, secondary, and minor base sites. The primary areas stretched to the western shores of the Pacific, encompassed the polar air routes, and projected U.S. power into the Eastern Atlantic as well as the Caribbean and the Panama Canal zone. Dozens of additional sites were denoted as secondary and minor base areas." In short, US "military planners [had] redefined the U.S. strategic perimeter."[84]

Putting in place a globe-spanning network of overseas bases could be plausibly interpreted either as aggression, expansion, or steadfastness. Certainly, these bases were part of a broader US strategy to play a larger role in world affairs and increase the US ability to project power. Compared with any previous period of peace, they represented a significant expansion of US interests. In Layne's words, in planning for a peacetime network of overseas bases, "American policymakers were laying the grand strategic foundations of a post-war international system in which U.S. power would be predominant."[85] General Groves encouraged the United States to take advantage of its predominant power to expand its position: "We are now in a favorable position. . . . We should get our bases now and plan not for 10 years but for 50–100 years ahead."[86] However, an argument could be made that such behaviors represented aggression: the United States was generating greater offensive capabilities to guarantee a long-standing interest—the ability to protect the US homeland—from developing threats and the increasing power projection capabilities of adversaries. Certainly many US documents framed the importance of overseas bases in such terms. For example, a 1946 report stated that "unless warfare itself is abolished or atomic warfare is effectively prohibited, it will be necessary for the United States to maintain . . . forward bases from which attacks against the United States could be intercepted and counter-attacks could be delivered against possible enemies." The report concluded that "our armed forces must seize upon these new developments and utilize them fully."[87] A 1949 report for the NSC on Japan argued that "United States control of Japan . . . will not only deny

to the USSR an extremely important strategic base . . . it will provide us with staging areas from which to project our military power to the Asiatic mainland and to USSR islands adjacent thereto."[88] Similarly, if one views these bases as simply allowing the United States to respond more quickly to acts of aggression by others, the creation of the US base network could also be viewed as an instance of steadfastness.

Regardless of whether establishing a permanent peacetime network of overseas bases constituted an instance of aggression, steadfastness, or expansion, nuclear weapons played an important role in facilitating this behavior. Of course, plans for overseas bases had been initiated before the United States acquired nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, the relationship between nuclear weapons and a more extensive basing system went in both directions and was mutually reinforcing. In other words, an expanded basing system increased the potency and deliverability of US nuclear capabilities, and US nuclear capabilities increased the utility of an expanded basing system. As a 1945 report argued: "[The] advent of the atomic bomb . . . greatly increase[s] the importance of [advance] bases. This is true both offensively and defensively. Offensively, it is essential to transport the bomb to the internal vital areas of the enemy nation. The closer our bases are to those areas, the more effectively can this be done. . . . All of this points to the great importance of expanding our strategic frontiers in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and to the shores of the Arctic."[89]

Similarly, a 1947 report on the broader military implications of nuclear weapons recommended the "establishment of a system of strategically located overseas bases from which all our offensive weapons may be employed, thus enhancing our security by extending the range of those weapons."[90] Nuclear weapons may not, therefore, have reduced the costs of an expanded system of overseas bases. But nuclear weapons increased the military value of such a system, making it more attractive to US military planners. Overseas bases and nuclear weapons also combined to serve the broader political imperative of postwar conventional demobilization. The way in which nuclear weapons facilitated this goal was discussed above. But overseas bases were similarly critical to minimizing the military risks associated with a rapid demobilization, and the combination of the two was particularly valuable. As a Chiefs of Staff report had described, the challenge for the United States was to balance the priority of "maintenance of the United States in the best possible relative position . . . ready when necessary to take military action abroad" with the recognition that "the United States, relative to other great powers, will maintain in peace time as armed forces only a minimum percentage of its war time potential." To do this required that US forces be "disposed strategically [so] that they can be brought to bear at the source of enemy military power, or in other critical areas in time."[91] This meant stationing US forces closer to potential theaters of military operation. Overseas bases—and the increased potency that they offered when combined with nuclear

weapons—thus allowed the United States to engage in postwar demobilization while maintaining significant power projection capabilities.

FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD THE SOVIET UNION

Nuclear weapons also facilitated the way in which the United States conducted its foreign policy toward the Soviet Union. Again, the circumstances of the immediate postwar period make it hard to unambiguously conclude whether these behaviors should be characterized as aggression, expansion, or steadfastness. The status quo was ill defined and open to conflicting interpretations, and the extent of the United States' preexisting interests was far from clear. As a result, different scholars have very different interpretations of certain US actions.

For example, was the provision of aid to the governments of Turkey and Greece—subsequently articulated as the Truman Doctrine and a core part of the early postwar effort to contain Soviet influence—an example of expansion, aggression, or steadfastness? In one view, the policy was an example of steadfastness. Gaddis argues that the provision of aid to the Turkish and Greek governments simply sought to defend the status quo. The Truman Doctrine was "the ultimate expression of the 'patience and firmness' strategy . . . that the United States could allow no further gains in territory or influence for the Soviet Union."[92] This was certainly how some US officials saw the policy. In the words of a State Department memo, the purpose of US aid was to maintain the status quo by preventing an otherwise certain "breakdown in the Greek economy . . . which would have resulted in domination of Greece by the Communists."[93] But in another light, US policy appears expansive: the Americans were shedding the last vestiges of isolationism and expanding their interests to gain increased influence in the Mediterranean and Middle East as British power waned. Stephen Xydis argues that the Truman Doctrine initiated "an authentically revolutionary phase in the nation's experience [that] ended the epoch of isolation."[94] Leffler argues that "the real problem was that there loomed gaping vacuums of power. . . . While British power foundered, the American desire for access to the airfields and petroleum resources of the Middle East mounted."[95] In another view, the policy was aggressive because it aimed to push more forcefully in pursuit of the preexisting interest of resisting and rolling back communist expansion: Howard Jones argues that the Truman Doctrine indicated "the administration's willingness to engage in the struggle against communism on all fronts—social, political, and economic as well as military."[96]

As discussed above, I do not seek to resolve these debates by affixing particular labels to these behaviors. Instead, I describe the basic features of US interactions with the Soviet Union in the immediate postwar period, and the ways in which nuclear weapons influenced them. What were the key features of US foreign policy toward the Soviet Union? I discuss three aspects

of US foreign policy: the willingness to engage in vigorous and sometimes escalatory diplomacy in response to perceived Soviet aggression, offensive covert actions aimed at undermining the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe and within the Soviet Union itself, and the prominence of thinking about preventive war in US foreign policy discourse. I argue that nuclear weapons contributed to each of these components of US foreign policy toward the Soviet Union.

First, the United States engaged in active and sometimes belligerent diplomacy in response to, and to deter, perceived Soviet aggression and misbehavior. In 1946, the United States had become increasingly angered by Soviet maintenance of troops in Iran. In Truman's words, this represented an "outrage if I ever saw one," and ultimately coerced the Soviet Union into withdrawing forces from the country.[97] Also in 1946, Truman had declared himself willing to follow "to the end" advice that recommended using "the force of American arms" in the event of any Soviet aggression in Turkey.[98] Scholars disagree over whether such Soviet intervention was in fact likely—Leffler argues that such fears were "contrived" to justify the American desire for access to the airfields and oil of the Middle East, while Mark argues that they were "sincere and justified within the context of the strategic premises that informed American foreign policy."[99] In March 1947, Truman laid out the Truman Doctrine, providing support for the Greek and Turkish governments in response to Britain withdrawing its aid to the two states.[100] And in 1948, in response to the Soviet blockade of West Berlin (which in turn was in response to the announcement of the deutsche mark) the Western allies undertook the Berlin airlift to transport food and fuel to the city's population, flying over two hundred thousand flights over the eleven months of the blockade. The Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded in October 1948 that to go to war over Berlin "would be neither militarily prudent nor strategically sound," and urged the civilian leadership to consider withdrawing from West Berlin.[101] But despite the United States' relative military weakness and the vulnerability of Berlin to Soviet military action, the United States was nonetheless prepared to engage in escalations that risked Soviet escalation.

This is not to suggest that the United States always chose to escalate conflicts in its dealings with the Soviet Union. For example, while the president had proclaimed that it was "the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation,"[102] this policy was certainly not pursued universally: the United States did not seek to oppose the Communists in Czechoslovakia in 1947, decided to withdraw from Korea in the same year, and took a "middle road" in seeking to prevent communist takeovers of Italy and Greece.[103] Nonetheless, the escalation of disputes with the Soviet Union was a key feature of US foreign policy in the aftermath of the war.

Second, the United States undertook actions aimed at undermining the Soviet Union within the eastern bloc and Soviet territory: what one report to

Truman recommended as "dynamic steps to reduce the power and influence of the Kremlin inside the Soviet Union and other areas under its control."[104] Historians are increasingly documenting the extent to which the United States used covert efforts to weaken the Soviet position within its own territory and sphere of influence.[105] Covert operations began with an effort to suppress the Communist vote and ensure a Christian Democrat victory in the Italian elections in 1947.[106] The perceived success of this effort led to the approval by Truman in 1948 of NSC 20/4, which stated explicitly that America's goals "in times of peace as well as in time of war" were to "reduce the power and influence of the USSR to limits which no longer constitute a threat," ambitions that would require the United States to "place the maximum strain on the Soviet structure of power."[107] This was accompanied by NSC 10/2, which concluded that "the overt foreign activities of the U.S. government must be supplemented by covert operations" and demanded that operations be "planned and executed [so] that any U.S. Government can plausibly disclaim any responsibility."[108] This directive provided the basis for a range of policies: broadcasting propaganda into the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the deployment of paramilitary forces to develop underground resistance movements, the attempt to disrupt Kremlin decision making, the funneling of support to East European liberation groups, sabotage and demolition, encouraging defections to the West, and attempting to provoke power struggles and personal animosity within the Communist leadership. The Office of Policy Coordination (OPC), created by NSC 10/2 and attached to the CIA, was authorized to engage in covert operations, and by 1952 its budget had grown to $82 million, with over 2,800 employees and an additional 3,142 operatives under contract.[109] The goals of these efforts were explicitly offensive: "to increase confusion, suspicion and fear among the Communist leaders" and to "encourage mass defections from Soviet allegiance and to frustrate the Kremlin design in other ways."[110] Undermining the Soviet Union's influence in Eastern Europe proved harder than US policymakers hoped: the OPC's James McCargar had anticipated that "we had only to shake the trees and the ripe plums would fall."[111] But offensive actions inside the Soviet sphere of influence were nonetheless a part of US foreign policy toward the Soviet Union.

Third, arguments for preventive war against the Soviet Union were surprisingly prevalent in the United States—both inside government and outside.[112] As the philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote at the time, "If America were less imperialistic, there would be another possibility. . . . It would be possible for Americans to use their position of temporary superiority to insist upon disarmament . . . everywhere except the United States. . . . During the next few years this policy could be enforced."[113] These ideas were not confined to philosophers and public intellectuals. As Trachtenberg documents, leading journalists, US senators, and high-ranking military officers all made preventive war arguments.[114] While such ideas were not imple-

mented for a range of practical, strategic, and normative reasons, their existence is notable.

Regardless of whether one views these features of US foreign policy toward the Soviet Union as instances of expansion, aggression, or steadfastness (or some combination of all three), what role did nuclear weapons play in facilitating them? In short, it is hard to overemphasize the importance of nuclear weapons. As a 1946 State Department report had stated, "It would be strange indeed if the perfection of such a revolutionary weapon did not have great political effects."[115] In a situation of conventional weakness relative to the Soviet Union, US nuclear weapons were the only capability that gave the United States some degree of escalation dominance, and thus facilitated the United States taking actions that ran some risk of leading to conflict. The importance of nuclear weapons in facilitating US foreign policy toward the Soviet Union was reflected in the considerable (and growing) priority accorded to atomic bombing in US war plans for potential conflict with the Soviet Union. War plan BROILER in 1947 called for 34 bombs to be dropped on 24 cities; TROJAN, approved in 1948, requested 133 bombs be used on 70 cities; while OFFTACKLE in 1949 called for 220 bombs to be dropped on 104 cities.[116] Trachtenberg summarizes the way in which nuclear weapons facilitated US foreign policy toward the Soviet Union:

> What in fact was the situation as it appeared to policymakers at the time? First, it was universally understood that if war broke out, Europe would be overrun; but then the United States would gear up and begin a sustained campaign of atomic bombardment. To be sure, the initial American atomic strike on Russia would have only a limited effect on Soviet war-making capabilities. . . . [But] Russian industry and war-making power would gradually be destroyed with bombs and bombers produced after the war had started. The United States was sure to win in the end. The Soviets would not start a war because they knew that an American victory would simply be a matter of time.[117]

Nuclear weapons were not a blank check for the United States to do whatever it wanted. The United States had to behave carefully because "even with the nuclear monopoly, American power barely balanced Soviet power in central Europe."[118] As discussed above, any war involving an extended period of US atomic bombing of the Soviet Union would have been unimaginably destructive. Nonetheless, because the United States believed that its nuclear capabilities meant it would ultimately win such a war, the United States was able to resist Soviet encroachments and escalate crises at considerably lower risk: ultimately, it was unlikely that the Soviet Union would risk the atomic bombardment that would come if a crisis escalated to war. Events that occurred reinforced this logic for US policymakers, providing evidence of the bargaining advantages that nuclear weapons granted the United States. For example, after leaving office, Truman argued that it was

the threat of nuclear use that coerced the Soviet Union into withdrawing its forces from Iran.

More broadly, however, US officials were aware that this sort of muscular diplomacy involved risks given the conventional balance: in the words of a State Department memo, US policies had to be conducted with "full realization of our military ineffectiveness" and cognizant of the dangers of "Soviet miscalculation of American intentions and potentialities."[119] Nuclear weapons allowed the United States to limit the risks of such behavior even though the conventional balance was unfavorable. Secretary of Defense Forrestal laid out the logic explicitly in 1947. He wrote in a letter to the Senate Armed Services Committee: "At the present time we are keeping our military expenditures below the levels which our military leaders must in good conscience estimate as the minimum which would in themselves ensure national security. . . . In other words, we are taking a calculated risk." He went on to argue that "certain military advantages . . . go far toward covering the risk," which he listed as the "predominance of American sea power; our exclusive possession of the atomic bomb; [and] American productive capacity. As long as we can outproduce the world, can control the sea, and strike inland with the atomic bomb, we can assume certain risks otherwise unacceptable. . . . The years before any possible power can achieve the capability effectively to attack us with weapons of mass destruction are our years of opportunity."[120] The result of the military balance, Forrestal argued in 1948, was that "it is inconceivable that even the gang who run Russia would be willing to take on war."[121] In short, nuclear weapons allowed the United States to escalate disputes with the Soviet Union with reasonable confidence that such actions would not lead to war. And while the United States did not have the conventional capabilities to engage in a large-scale offensive against the Soviet Union, US nuclear weapons meant that there was little to prevent the United States from pursuing low-cost covert actions to undermine the Soviet position. Further evidence for the role of nuclear weapons in facilitating this behavior, and in line with Forrestal's argument, is provided by the modifications made to US policy once the Soviet Union acquired high-yield nuclear weapons capable of being delivered to the United States. For example, the United States constrained some of the covert activities in which it was engaged in Eastern Europe in response to rising Soviet nuclear capabilities.[122]

Other US policymakers were also clear that US nuclear weapons granted the United States significant advantages in its dealings with the Soviet Union, even if they did not lay out the logic as fully as Forrestal. Secretary of War Stimson wrote in his diary in May 1945 about a conversation with Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy in which he recalled: "We have talked too much and been too lavish with our beneficences to them [the Russians]. I told him this was a place where we really held all the cards. I called it a royal straight flush and we mustn't be a fool about the way we play it. They can't get along without our help and industries and we have coming into action

a weapon which will be unique."[123] General Carl Spaatz stated: "Our monopoly of the bomb, even though it is transitory, may well prove to be a critical factor in our efforts to achieve first a stabilized condition and eventually a lasting peace" on American terms.[124] Secretary of State Byrnes had argued that nuclear weapons "might well put us in a position to dictate our own terms at the end of the war," and that US nuclear weapons might make the Russians "more manageable" on the question of Eastern Europe.[125]

Overall, therefore, US nuclear weapons underpinned US foreign policy toward the Soviet Union in important ways. Regardless of the particular label one attaches to this aspect of US foreign policy, the role played by nuclear weapons is significant.

ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY

Economic diplomacy—the use of the United States' enormous economic power to achieve political ends—was at the core of US foreign policy in the aftermath of World War II. Indeed, Robert Pollard argues that "American leaders used foreign economic power as the chief instrument of U.S. security from 1945 until the outbreak of the conflict in Korea."[126] Whether or not one goes as far as Pollard, there is little question that the Marshall Plan and creation of the Bretton Woods institutions were prominent parts of US efforts to achieve political ends in the immediate aftermath of World War II.[127] Again, in the highly fluid circumstances of the immediate postwar period, one could make a reasonable case that these policies constituted examples of expansion, aggression, or steadfastness. For example, one could see US foreign economic policy as "the first major attempt by the United States to restructure the world economy," or as a more status quo policy aiming simply to reduce the likelihood of another spiral into economic nationalism, protectionism, and war.[128] Instead of trying to resolve such debates, I aim to simply show that nuclear weapons facilitated these policies. Consistent with the story told above, it was the United States' ability to use nuclear weapons as a substitute for conventional forces that freed up resources to rebuild Western Europe economically while retaining the ability to deter Soviet military actions against Western Europe.

The experience of the 1930s had convinced US policymakers that economic nationalism and rivalry were destabilizing forces and causes of interstate conflict, and US policymakers feared a potential postwar economic depression.[129] During the war, US officials were planning for agreements that would ensure a more economically liberal international order, which was not only to the strategic and economic advantage of the United States but without which, a 1944 State Department report argued, the postwar world would "witness a revival, in more intense form, of the international economic warfare which characterized the twenties and thirties."[130] US worries were legitimate: Europe's economies suffered serious balance-of-payment difficulties and

production shortfalls, while the inflow of dollars resulting from increased private US foreign investment into Europe in 1946 and 1947 was canceled out by similarly increasing European investments in the United States, culminating in a severe recession in the winter of 1946–1947.[131]

The Bretton Woods agreements in 1944 (which created the International Monetary Fund [IMF] and World Bank) and the Marshall Plan (which aimed to rebuild Western Europe) were the most prominent features of this policy in the immediate postwar period. The Marshall Plan, in particular, involved enormous expenditures: $130 billion in 2016 dollars.[132] Even for an "economic giant," as Truman described the United States, these costs were significant, and congressional approval was not automatic.[133] As Acheson noted in 1947, more foreign aid requests were unlikely to be well received, since it "was understood when the British loan was made last year that no further requests for direct loans to foreign governments would be asked of Congress."[134] Indeed, achieving congressional support for the Marshall Plan ultimately required emphasizing the looming Soviet danger rather than the economic benefits for the United States, and in 1949, spending on the Marshall Plan, military aid, and other international programs was cut significantly, alongside further cuts in the US armed forces.[135]

The considerable resources that the United States wished to dedicate to economic diplomacy therefore required choices to be made.[136] That choice was essentially between rebuilding the US military and rebuilding the economies of Western Europe. US policymakers framed this choice explicitly. As Forrestal argued: by keeping defense expenditure low, "we are able to increase our expenditure on European recovery." This represented a "calculated risk in order to follow a course which offers a prospect of eventually achieving national security and also long-term world stability."[137]

Nuclear weapons, as described above, facilitated this choice between guns and butter in Western Europe by making the consequences of choosing butter less militarily worrisome. Nuclear weapons allowed the United States to retain the ability to deter the Soviet Union with only a "tripwire" of conventional forces. In short, "the Truman administration remained confident that American economic power, backed by the deterrent power of the atomic bomb as a weapon of last resort, could almost single-handedly prevent a return to the economic isolationism of the interwar years and stabilize vital regions and countries."[138] But this trade-off was fragile and dependent on the credibility of US nuclear use: as Paul Nitze pointed out in a meeting of the State Department Policy Planning Staff, if the United States could not use nuclear weapons in response to a Russian conventional assault, it would be necessary to make greater investments in "conventional armaments and their possession by the Western European nations," and that this would necessarily lead to reduced economic investment in these countries, "lower[ing] rather than rais[ing] civilian standards of living in order to produce arms as against consumer goods."[139]

Again, therefore, nuclear weapons played an important role in facilitating a key pillar of US postwar foreign policy: the use of economic power to achieve political ends.

INDEPENDENCE AND COMPROMISE

Despite the ambiguity surrounding many of the foreign policies above, it is relatively clear that the United States did not use nuclear weapons to facilitate two behaviors in the typology: independence and compromise.

The United States did not use its nuclear weapons to facilitate independence—taking actions that allies oppose. As discussed above, the United States sought to use its nuclear weapons to strengthen its alliances and draw new states into its own alliance portfolio. But the United States did not seek to use nuclear weapons to gain independence from allies. The United States did move swiftly to extract itself from the constraints of the Anglo-American wartime agreements. But US nuclear weapons played no role in the United States doing so. After all, the United States was by some distance the world's most powerful country, and the United Kingdom was dependent on US economic support to recover in the aftermath of World War II. The United States was thus able to set an independent course in its foreign policy with or without nuclear weapons, including with respect to the United Kingdom. If anything, nuclear weapons—and their prominence within US war plans—may have increased the reliance of the United States on certain allies due to the need for overseas bases to deliver them. During the Korean War, for example, Dean Acheson remarked that the United States had to pay attention to British concerns about the conduct of the war because the United States would require British bases if it wanted to use nuclear weapons: "We can bring U.S. [atomic] power into play only with the cooperation of the British."[140]

Finally, the United States did not seem to use its nuclear weapons to engage in compromise—accepting less in ongoing disputes. Certainly, the United States was not equally belligerent in all cases and could in many instances have taken more escalatory actions. However, this was a reflection of American perceptions of the limits of its conventional power rather than the result of its nuclear weapons. As George Marshall argued, US military power had to be employed selectively, and thus he was "obliged to resist pressures, however justifiable and understandable," to send US forces on missions that were beyond their capabilities. Instead, "it was necessary to conserve our very limited strength and apply it only where it was likely to be most effective."[141] Similarly, as the Joint Chiefs of Staff argued, "every effort should be made to avoid military commitment" unless it was preceded by a substantial military mobilization.[142] The United States often avoided escalation not because nuclear weapons granted it security but because of the precarious conventional military balance.

Instead, US policymakers seem to have consistently believed that US nuclear weapons granted the United States bargaining advantages that would allow it to achieve better outcomes in international politics rather than guaranteeing it the security that would facilitate it accepting less. Indeed, it is notable how *insecure* US policymakers felt in the aftermath of World War II. Despite the enormously favorable geopolitical position that the United States held at the end of World War II, US elites—perhaps unsurprisingly, given the nature of the conflict that had just concluded—remained deeply concerned about potential adversaries and the possibility of future wars. In fact, the advent of the nuclear age exacerbated these concerns, as the United States now had to consider the possibility of other states acquiring nuclear weapons and potential future nuclear attack. Nuclear weapons did not, therefore, make US policymakers feel sufficiently secure that they felt inclined to use them to facilitate compromise.

Overall, despite the difficulty in distinguishing between the various foreign policy behaviors in the complex international environment that characterized the aftermath of World War II, the theory of nuclear opportunism sheds light on the behavior of the United States. The theory correctly anticipates that US foreign policy would be profoundly affected by nuclear weapons. More specifically, as the theory of nuclear opportunism would anticipate, the United States used nuclear weapons to engage in behaviors that can be reasonably characterized as bolstering, expansion, and steadfastness and did not use nuclear weapons to facilitate independence or compromise. Nonetheless, and against the expectations of the theory, the United States also used nuclear weapons to engage in behaviors that could be reasonably characterized as aggression.

Other Explanations

How do other theories fare in explaining the US response to nuclear acquisition? The theory of the nuclear revolution predicts that nuclear weapons would make the United States more secure and that the United States would have less need to engage in aggression, expansion, or bolstering—all of which are behaviors driven by insecurity. However, the theory of the nuclear revolution predicts that states may use nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness, independence, and compromise both during and after the war. The theory does make some correct predictions. For example, as discussed, the United States did use nuclear weapons to facilitate compromise during the war (albeit in a limited way). However, the theory of the nuclear revolution performs particularly poorly in predicting US behavior after World War II.[143] The theory predicts that the United States would use nuclear weapons to facilitate steadfastness, independence, and compromise in the aftermath of nuclear acquisition but would not use them to facilitate aggression, expan-

sion, or bolstering. It is hard to argue that these predictions are realized in US conduct in the aftermath of World War II. Overall, the theory of the nuclear revolution makes fewer correct predictions than the theory of nuclear opportunism and does not anticipate the profound ways in which nuclear weapons facilitated a range of US policies that can reasonably be classified as instances of aggression, expansion, or bolstering.

S. Paul Kapur's theory of emboldenment anticipates that the United States would not have used nuclear weapons to facilitate aggression during (or after) the war. For Kapur, only conventionally weak and revisionist states use nuclear weapons to engage in aggression. While the United States was certainly a revisionist actor in World War II at the point of acquisition—seeking the overthrow and replacement of the Japanese regime—it was also an extremely conventionally powerful state that had developed unprecedented military capabilities during the war. Kapur's theory therefore performs less well than the theory of nuclear opportunism in this case. Crucially, both Kapur's theory of nuclear emboldenment and the theory of the nuclear revolution fail to anticipate the change in the way that nuclear weapons affected US foreign policy with the end of World War II.

US Grand Strategy and Nuclear Weapons through the Cold War and Beyond

Nuclear weapons thus underpinned US grand strategy in the early days of the Cold War. But did these effects endure? Did the United States continue to use nuclear weapons to support a more expansive position in the world, as the theory of nuclear opportunism anticipates? Or did these effects dissipate as other countries acquired nuclear weapons?

It is certainly true that using nuclear weapons as the foundation for an expansive US grand strategy became more complicated as the Soviet Union and other countries began to acquire nuclear weapons, threatening to neutralize America's nuclear advantage. Maintaining the credibility of US nuclear deterrence and, especially, extended deterrence in a world of multiple nuclear-armed powers became an increasingly challenging problem for US policymakers. However, the United States did not respond to these constraints by retrenching or abandoning its more expansive ambitions, or by accepting the constraints of operating in a world characterized by mutual assured destruction among the great powers. Instead, successive administrations concluded that US security demanded a more expansive grand strategy, and an expansive nuclear posture to underpin it. As Francis Gavin notes, there is a great irony in the fact that "rarely has a state had less need for the bomb to guarantee its immediate territorial integrity, sovereignty, and security [than the United States]. Yet no state has invested greater resources in developing and deploying nuclear weapons, nor has any other state relied more heavily on nuclear weapons to implement its grand strategy."[144]

Instead of accepting the condition of mutual assured destruction and the strategic stability it implies, the United States continued to strive for the nuclear superiority necessary to support its expansive ambitions in international politics.

First, at least until the mid-1960s, the United States sought to maintain *quantitative* nuclear superiority over its rivals and particularly the Soviet Union, building up an enormous nuclear arsenal and threatening massive retaliation in response to adversary actions that the United States could not deter with purely conventional means.[145] The Soviet Union, of course, was also capable of building large numbers of nuclear weapons, and by the 1970s, the United States had begun to reluctantly accept quantitative parity with the Soviet Union. Although President Richard Nixon "hated MAD, [and] believed its logic was defeatist and naive," he ultimately signed arms control treaties with the Soviet Union that acknowledged that the United States would never again possess quantitative superiority over its rival.[146]

Instead of abandoning the goal of nuclear superiority, however, the United States shifted to the pursuit of *qualitative* superiority, which, it was hoped, would play more to American advantages in technological development and scientific innovation.[147] Prominent components of this effort included designing, producing, and deploying the Pershing II, MX, and Trident D-5 missiles, while simultaneously investing heavily in missile defense and the capabilities needed to hunt and threaten Soviet nuclear submarines.[148] None of these capabilities would have been necessary had the United States merely wanted a second-strike capability or the ability to deter a nuclear attack.

Second, beyond the numbers and quality of weapons, the United States also pursued a nuclear posture that aimed to make its expansive geopolitical position credible. In an effort to maintain the credibility of US nuclear commitments, the United States invested in highly aggressive and counterforce-oriented US nuclear postures and quixotic efforts to design and build reliable missile defense systems that advocates of the nuclear revolution viewed as destabilizing and doomed to failure.[149] Such efforts, it was believed, could underpin America's ambitious geopolitical goals. For example, the only way to persuade European (or other) allies that the United States might risk its own cities to defend those of its allies was if the US nuclear posture was sufficiently powerful that it could limit its own vulnerability to retaliation: that the United States would not, in fact, have to swap Boston for Bonn. As Earl Ravenal argued during the 1980s, "America's willingness to protect its allies rises or falls with the prospective viability of counterforce and, more generally, with the United States' ability to protect its own society from nuclear attack."[150] The US desire to make nuclear use, and nuclear use on behalf of allies, credible even in a world in which such use might trigger nuclear retaliation provides at least part of the explanation for the fact that US nuclear war plans became dominated by counterforce considerations by the early 1960s.[151]

Counterforce targeting was not the only aspect of US nuclear strategy driven by a desire to maintain the credibility of nuclear use. The United States also deployed nuclear weapons on the territory of a host of allies, including Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Morocco, the Netherlands, the Philippines, South Korea, Spain, Taiwan, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and West Germany, to make nuclear use on behalf of allies more feasible and plausible.[152]

Third, the desire to maintain the credibility of US nuclear use and US freedom of action more broadly has motivated the United States to direct military, economic, and diplomatic power to prevent both allies and adversaries from acquiring nuclear weapons and to limit the consequences of proliferation when those efforts failed.[153] Indeed, nonproliferation has frequently taken priority over other important political goals. For example, the United States was willing to work cooperatively with its sworn adversary, the Soviet Union, to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, partly on the assumption that other countries acquiring nuclear weapons would itself stimulate further proliferation, constrain the United States' freedom of action, and reduce the credibility of the United States' own threats to use nuclear weapons.[154] Again, it was the United States' broad and expansive geopolitical ambitions that made these "strategies of inhibition" both desirable and viable.[155]

Indeed, the belief that nuclear weapons play a crucial role in sustaining America's alliances and expansive grand strategy continues to this day. The United States stations fewer nuclear forces on the territory of allies and has reduced the number of nuclear weapons it possesses. Nonetheless, even in a unipolar world in which the United States faces no peer competitor and possesses by far the most conventional military power of any state in the world, the US government continues to describe nuclear weapons as a "foundational capabilit[y]" critical for reassuring America's allies around the world and underpinning the US role in the world.[156] Similarly, US administrations from both political parties have often sought nuclear solutions to counter perceived military threats to allies, such as a potential Russian threat to hard-to-defend NATO allies in the Baltics and Eastern Europe. As the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* states, for example, "Expanding flexible U.S. nuclear options now, to include low-yield options, is important for the preservation of credible deterrence against regional aggression."[157] In short, the strategic thinking that emerged in the aftermath of World War II, that nuclear weapons could facilitate a far more expansive grand strategy and network of alliance commitments than the United States had ever previously considered, has continued well into the twenty-first century. Even as the international system has changed dramatically—including the collapse of the United States' only superpower rival—the United States has continued to view nuclear weapons as being a crucial component of America's position at the apex of the international system.

The evidence shows that nuclear acquisition substantially affected US foreign policy, but did so differently during World War II and in its aftermath. As a state in the midst of a brutal war, the United States first used nuclear weapons to escalate the conflict and try to win the war against the Japanese. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States faced no serious threats or challenges to its military preponderance and used nuclear weapons to substitute for conventional forces, facilitating a mix of foreign policy behaviors that contained elements of bolstering, expansion, aggression, and steadfastness. Overall, despite the difficulty in distinguishing between the various foreign policy behaviors in the complex international environment that characterized the aftermath of World War II, the theory of nuclear opportunism sheds light on the behavior of the United States and correctly anticipates that US foreign policy would be profoundly affected by nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons thus underpinned crucial portions of US grand strategy in the postwar era, and this role persisted throughout the Cold War. The international order that the United States put in place was in crucial ways built on atomic foundations. Ultimately, nuclear weapons allowed the United States to take on a vastly more ambitious role in international politics without the expense and domestic political challenges that maintaining enormous conventional military capabilities would have entailed.