

Nuclear imaginings and anticipatory politics: Exploring exceptional decisions in popular film

(Original Title: Interrogating the agency of nuclear weapon launch decisions through popular narratives in film)

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Abstract: The Cold War nuclear posturing of the United States and the Soviet Union shaped the strategic understandings that underpin modern nuclear imaginings. However, because of the contemporary dearth of real-world examples of nuclear weapon launches during conflict we must default to imagination as a tool for justifying anticipatory politics, and this includes popular movies depicting nuclear destruction. Accordingly, nuclear imaginings in pop culture have the potential to have immense significance and their potential consequence is worth knowing: my research question considers what influence popular narratives could have in understanding decision-maker agency regarding nuclear weapon launch responsibility. ‘Fictional’ storylines of global conflict and existential threats have become ubiquitous in Western pop culture, signifying something unsettling about how we interpret and reproduce narratives of nuclear danger. Connections between ‘fictional’ presentations of hypothetical dangers, real-world existential threats such as nuclear weapons, and existing positions of power are under examined in IR, and my research contributes to understanding how public ‘popular’ interpretations factor into issues of policy and knowledge (re)creation in critical security studies and IR. Combining content analysis and interpretivism, I am critiquing the use of nuclear weapons from ‘within’ the world that is performed into being through popular films depicting nuclear launch decision-making. I hypothesize that these ‘fictional’ images generate a capacity for agency, and that they are capable of creating impactful change on public impressions and understandings of nuclear weapons. This paper is an expansion on my dissertation proposal and will contribute to my introductory, literature review and methods chapters.

Introduction

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 for their contributions to a treaty banning nuclear weapons, which received 50 signatures when it opened on September 20, 2017 (ICAN 2017b, 2017a). But the current nuclear powers did not sign. Experts “estimate that there are nearly 15,000 nuclear weapons located at some 107 sites in 14 countries...[Of those,] approximately 4150 are operationally available, *and some 1800 are on high alert and ready for use on short notice*” (Kristensen and Norris 2017, 289, emphasis added). This readiness indicates that many of the nuclear states maintain strategies that incorporate deployment, despite their exceptional consequences. The “Doomsday Clock” is a symbolic representation of how close humanity is to global destruction, maintained by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. In large part because of the continued existence of nuclear weapons and the ready-alert arsenals, the reading has been maintained at two minutes to midnight for the last 2 years (Science and Security Board 2019). It was two and a half minutes in 2017 (Science and Security Board 2017).

And this threat of nuclear preparedness is growing. In the most recent report, The Bulletin concluded that, especially over the last few years, “the world's nuclear nations proceeded with programs of 'nuclear modernization' that are all but indistinguishable from a worldwide arms race, and the military doctrines of Russia and the United States have increasingly eroded the long-held taboo against the use of nuclear weapons” (Science and Security Board 2019, 2). The taboo against weapons of indiscriminate violence, like antipersonnel landmines, cluster munitions, and nuclear weapons is a huge contributor to global disarmament efforts and the decreased use of these weapons. Building a global taboo against antipersonnel landmines is credited with impacting the US's significant decrease in using them even when the state would not sign the Mine Ban Treaty. But Trump has continued to enhance the American arsenal, as did the Obama administration (Science and Security Board 2019).

Of specific concern is how nuclear weapons both define and dictate the circumstances and measures with which they must be handled, and ultimately render any state that considers their use to be operating under circumstances of exceptionality. A particular hallmark of this exceptionality is a modification of political accountability and future-leaning responsibility, when nuclear choices are encountered. The increasingly exceptional nature of nuclear weapons renders the decisions of state leaders exceptional because state ‘ownership’ of a nuclear arsenal presupposes a strategy for their use. Writing in the midst of the Cold War, political theorist Hannah Arendt recognized the immense implications of nuclear weapons, and the future-leaning qualities of the weapons’ violence; she perceived how the technology produces perpetual existential threats, claiming it “menaces the existence of whole nations and conceivably of all mankind” (Arendt 1970, 17). And so their inclusion in legitimate – and normative – security strategies generates numerous ethical and theoretical dilemmas (Doyle II 2013), particularly concerning how such exceptional ‘tools’ can only be handled with exceptional measures.

The President of the United States of America (US) is a state leader that is also the ‘Commander in Chief’ of the armed forces, and was elected to make decisions on behalf of a population for their security. Therefore, he has the decision making capacity to launch nuclear weapons on behalf of the population from which he draws legitimate authority. But there is an accepted understanding, by nuclear deterrence scholars and decision makers, that the window for responsive decision making would be incredibly narrow; upon perceiving an incoming attack,

it is expected in the US that the time to respond will be anywhere from a few to 20 minutes (Schlosser 2016). This severely affects the expectations of accountability, both between the President as the decision maker for the US, and between the US and the rest of the world that will be impacted by his choice to launch.

Much of the literature on global nuclear insecurity is focused on predicting proliferation (Bell 2016; Bitzinger 1994; Fuhrmann and Lupu 2016; Montgomery and Sagan 2009; Kroenig 2009), the legality of nuclear weapon use (Nystuen, Casey-Maslen, and Bersagel 2014; Mitchell 2015; Doyle II 2013; Sherman 2011), or the associated ramifications (Beyer et al. 1986; Dodgen et al. 2011; Caro et al. 2011; Blight 1987; Schlosser 2014). Within the literature concerning nuclear weapon usage is the work of humanitarian disarmament advocacy, much of which stems from either non-academic sources (“Canada’s Absence Betrays Its History on Nuclear Talks” n.d.; Bernard 2015; International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons 2013), or from disciplines beyond IR (MacDonald 2005; Forum on Medical and Public Health Preparedness for Disasters and Emergencies et al. 2019). What is missing in the literature is critical questioning of the strategic process of launching nuclear weapons, as the process illustrates relationships of responsibility and accountability. In pursuing this gap, I will contribute to the overarching debates of structure versus agency within IR. We can consider reviews of past decisions (Majerus 2013; Beyer et al. 1986), but they do not take into consideration the influences on a decision maker as an actor, that extend beyond the strategic.

A strong stimulus in disarmament advocacy is locating accountability, responsibility and control; with so few states wielding such globally destructive capabilities, it is imperative that we can clearly discern who *is* responsible for deciding whether to detonate a nuclear weapon. Moreover, we must understand to whom (if anyone), or to what, a responsible actor owes accountability. Finally, we must be capable of drawing a map of control over nuclear towards recommending nuclear launch. Traditional security studies theorists in International Relations (IR) do not operate on the level of individual agency but within the framework of state actors. That being the case, questions pertaining to the responsibility, accountability, and control of a nuclear decision maker is left to those who would apply a critical lens.

A critical viewing

Outside of the ‘academy’ and governments, however, more people are interacting with rhetoric and policies concerning nuclear weapons and their potential use through social media and pop culture. Accordingly, there is “an impetus to view the signifying and lived practices of popular culture (pop culture) as ‘texts’ that can be understood as political and as sites where politics takes place” (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 158). This makes it necessary to investigate both the driving force and the significance of the general public's understanding of, and involvement in this complex security issue, particularly regarding how it will contribute to issues of public policy and knowledge (re)creation in the fields of Critical Security Studies and IR.

Focusing on film, my dissertation project addresses the distinctions between and questions of decision maker control, responsibility, and accountability regarding nuclear weapons in the world today. Following research that relates public understanding of political issues as being affected by pop culture (Shrum 2012), I analyse storylines in popular American movies that depict nuclear weapons and the moral qualities assigned to characters enacting security decisions to draw

inferences about real-world nuclear understandings and likely expectations. I am treating popular films as potential sources for what I call *nuclear imaginings* – a version of playing out the anticipatory politics of nuclear security. In doing so, I hope to explore pop culture as both a reproduction of common sense security narratives in global politics and as a source for uncommon, creative future imaginings in critical security. My goal is to reveal avenues for understanding and possibly transcending the common sense narratives that serve to reinforce the weapons' political legitimacy, and locate the political power of nuclear imaginings in pop culture that serve to either reproduce or critique the use of nuclear weapons on questions of decision-maker responsibility.

Considering nuclear weapons through the lens of pop culture and IR makes visible more pathways of understanding between the topic and the audience, allowing us to ask new questions about how our relationships to the mechanisms of global politics are framed both by us and for us. To that end, my major research question asks: *What narratives of decision-maker agency are shared through popular film and how do these 'stories' compare with, reify, reproduce and/or question the historical and political expectations regarding the control of, responsibility for, and accountability to nuclear weapons, in the American context?* This project will address the distinctions between and questions of decision maker control, responsibility, and accountability regarding nuclear weapons in the world today and will combine interpretations of IR and Political Theory combined with interpretive and content analysis in order to reinforce the robust quality of my findings.

'Fictional' storylines of global conflict and existential threat have become ubiquitous in Western culture, signifying something unsettling about how the world interprets and reproduces narratives of nuclear danger. Traditional perspectives in IR perform an overreliance on structural inducement, but this offers only a partial explanation and can generate dangerous path dependencies in security strategizing. And if the worst should happen it will not be enough to look back on a launch and say that the devil made us do it. *How we construct our sense of responsibility* is imperative. We must be capable of asking if *we* made us do it, and incorporating pop culture narratives into IR and security studies involving nuclear weapons more specifically "will allow us to appreciate better what is at stake in the mutual implications of world politics and popular culture" (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 157).

The critiques I offer regarding nuclear security are made by extending or expanding the reaches of nuclear deterrence logics, which are based on nuclear history and nuclear security theory, to demonstrate the failures of these strategies and logics to survive foundationally critical analysis. Ultimately, the films considered in this project have been produced in a world accustomed and adjusted to the threat of nuclear weapons, ascribed to the narratives of deterrence theory and mutually assured destruction, and within a collective conscience informed by the visual legacies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This makes them an appropriate, though unconventional, avenue to examine, critique and understand the common sense narratives of nuclear (in)security, as they are understood by pop culture framers and consumers; and a source of examples of nuclear imaginings from the American context.

Ultimately, my goal is not only to discuss the 'image' of agency, but how these images generate a capacity for agency. They are capable of creating impactful change on public impressions and understandings of these weapons, particularly because of the dearth of real world examples of nuclear weapons being launched in a conflict – we have only one, the attack on Japan in 1945. In

the absence of anything else, we default to imagination as a tool of justifying anticipatory politics such as security strategies and traditional IR theories. Relatively speaking, then, these nuclear imaginings have the *potential* to have huge significance and their *potential* consequence is worth knowing.

This paper is still in draft form and is part of a larger proposal submission, and so I have not uploaded a full version. If you would like a copy please don't hesitate to email me at pullenrk@mcmaster.ca. I am very happy to share it with you.