



BOOK REVIEW:

THE BOMB: PRESIDENTS, GENERALS, AND THE SECRET HISTORY OF NUCLEAR WAR

BY: FRED KAPLAN

Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, New York, 2020, 384 pages

MAJ.(P) JAMES C. BOWEN

"Look. At the end of the war, if there are two Americans and one Russian, we win!"

– General Thomas Power, Strategic Air Command (SAC) Commander in 1957.

SUMMARY

In Fred Kaplan's "The Bomb", Kaplan dissects relationships between world political and military leaders through the lens of nuclear deterrence strategy. From the first use of a nuclear weapon during World War II to the Donald Trump Presidency, Kaplan examines every deterrence strategy, nuclear employment and non-proliferation treaty, and foreign policy in detail. "The Bomb" documents the perspectives and conversations of people involved, revealing very little of Kaplan's opinion on the subject, and reads like a documentary. Through hundreds of declassified conversations, documents, policies, and war plans, "The Bomb" turns over every proverbial rock attempting to uncover motives of people when dealing with the unlocked destructive power of nuclear weapons.

Starting with military and political leaders who faced the atrocities of World War II and subsequently faced the looming threat of communism, military leadership instituted nuclear weapons use doctrine and policy that were calculated and ruthless. Kaplan delves into volumes of military conversations showing the insouciant views of military leadership discussing acceptable casualties, in the millions, during nuclear war. Alongside employment strategy and casualty assessments, Kaplan investigates policies and declassified transcripts to tell the story of Generals and Admirals pursuing deterrence

theories based on their service's equities and desire to maintain control of nuclear weapons. This pursuit of equity in nuclear capabilities established the nuclear triad: the original Air Force delivery to allow for call-back authority and precision strikes, the forming of the nuclear Navy to allow for stealth and a survivable second-strike option, and the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile founding to enable prompt strikes and establishing the "nuclear sponge" for adversaries. Increases and decreases of the nuclear stockpile, establishment and decreases of nuclear weapons by service, and organizational restructuring to move strategic war planning out of Washington D.C. are all discussed. Nuclear policy through the Cold War parallels historical events like the Korean, Vietnam, and Russian-Afghanistan Wars, and Kaplan elaborates on United-States and Soviet policies, treaties, and actions (such as the Cuban Missile Crisis) surrounding those conflicts relating to nuclear weapons.

After the Cold War, Kaplan discusses denuclearization and the strategies and policies implemented to maintain strategic deterrence with fewer delivery systems. Military and political leadership continued to debate the tenebrous validity of winning a nuclear war and if the United States should institute a "no first-strike policy" regarding nuclear weapons. In addition to nuclear employment doctrine, "The Bomb" discusses the rise of

rogue threats beyond the original three nuclear powers, The United States, Russia, and the United Kingdom, and how treaties like the Non-Proliferation Treaty attempt to and fail at curtailing new state actors. He ends the book examining modern presidential policies starting with President Clinton instituting the Nuclear Posture Review (which establishes United States nuclear policy, strategy, and posture), and looks at the contrast between President Obama's attempts to minimize nuclear use against President Trump using nuclear weapons as a bargaining chip in strategic policy.

APPLICATION TO COUNTERING WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION (CWMD)

"Let's stipulate that this is all insane. But..."² – President Barack Obama.

It is important for policy makers and military leaders to understand the origins of doctrine and policies they implement. Kaplan does a phenomenal job of outlining the history of strategic deterrence policy and in doing so gives excellent examples of constructive and destructive political-military relations. Additionally, "The Bomb" gives a historical account of the reasoning behind developing the different legs of the Triad and how nuclear warfighting was previously integrated into conventional warfare. As the Army is writing doctrine integrating conventional and nuclear operations, there is a need to understand the scope of warfare that may include nuclear effects on the battlefield. This is not a concept as the Army possessed nuclear weapons on the battlefield until 1991, and there was little distinction between conventional and nuclear operations from a planning perspective.

Outside of conventional-nuclear integration, "The Bomb" looks at the greater scope of the CWMD problem, and how political-military integration attempts to counter WMD. Military doctrine focuses on the military response to nuclear effects and what a military response looks like. This perspective provides one of many tools for the Executive Branch of government to use in CWMD. Outside of military doctrine, it's important for officers to understand other governmental tools at their disposal, and Kaplan outlines many strategies the United States government attempted to use in preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

I recommend "The Bomb" to anyone with an interest in military history, political-military relationships, or professionals who deal with nuclear topics, strategic deterrence, or international policy. As an aside, Kaplan examines how international treaties and governmental policies drive military allocations and budgeting, and how they shift between Presidential administrations. Specific to military readers, this book reviews historical topics which could benefit anyone serving at a component command or higher who might coordinate across the interagency regarding Countering WMD or nuclear employment. ■

MAJ.(P) JAMES C. BOWEN

is the CWMD Advisor Course Manager at the United States Army Nuclear and CWMD Agency, HQDA G3/5/7 at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. He has a B.S in Physics from the United States Military Academy and a M.S. in Physics from the Naval Postgraduate School. He was previously assigned as a Deputy Team Chief for a Nuclear Disablement Team at the 20th CBRNE Command.

REFERENCES:

1. "The Bomb, Book by Fred Kaplan." Simon & Schuster, 2023, <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Bomb/Fred-Kaplan/9781982107307>. [Accessed 07 September, 2023].
2. Kaplan, Fred M. "The Bomb. Presidents, Generals, and the Secret History of Nuclear War." New York, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2020. Page 243-244.