

REVIEW ESSAY

“SIR QUINLAN: NUCLEAR ZEALOT FOR MODERATION”

Henry Sokolski

Quinlan, Michael. *Thinking about Nuclear Weapons: Principles, Problems, Prospects*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009. 184pp. \$49.95

Potentially limitless in its military destructiveness and boundless in its ability to provide carbon-free power, nuclear energy all but begs viewing through the conjectural political lenses of infinity and zero. As a result, much of what passes for sound policy and insight regarding its management is not just reckless and self-defeating but technically impracticable.

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Sir Michael Quinlan (1930–2009), with whom I had the good fortune to work, understood this. An intelligent, modest, and religiously curious man, Quinlan helped shape much of the British nuclear weapons policy. His public service spanned nearly four decades, including work as private secretary to the British chief of air staff, as director of defense policy in the British Ministry of Defence, as UK NATO defense counselor, and as permanent undersecretary of state at the ministries of Employment and Defence.

What is most refreshing about Quinlan's insights, reflected in this work, is how consistently he avoids the most current popular extremes. For example, those opposed to nuclear weapons imagine how much better the world would be without them and theorize about the challenges of maintaining a utopian state of

zero nuclear weapons. For those who back the bomb, it comprises just the opposite. They will argue that large deployments and testing have been useful historically and that to continue such practices could make us safer today.

Of course, neither state—nuclear zero nor a return to nuclear plenty—is the world in which we live, and yet most nuclear-policy experts relish supporting one or the other vision. Quinlan on the other hand, never seemed entirely comfortable in either camp.

In this book Quinlan deflates the merits of such arms control fads as declarations of no first use of nuclear weapons, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, pushing nuclear weapons force dealing beyond current levels, nuclear weapon-free zones in Southwest Asia and the Far East, U.S.-Russian nuclear reductions that focus on strategic systems but fail to include Moscow's massive numbers of tactical nuclear weapons, going to very low numbers of nuclear weapons (much less going to zero), and demanding entirely nondiscriminatory nuclear-nonproliferation schemes.

However, after warning against such "righteous abolitionist" bromides, Quinlan is just as critical of "dismissive realists." Rightly or wrongly, governments, he notes, have repeatedly promised to disarm as part of their commitments to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) bargain. Not pursuing these promises in some sensible fashion now, he concludes, risks increasing the most serious nuclear danger of proliferation.

This gives rise to what Quinlan describes as his "practical agenda": follow-on agreements that reduce nuclear strategic warheads to roughly twelve hundred warheads per side, agreements to make NATO and Russian tactical nuclear deployment numbers much more transparent, reductions in the Russian numbers in exchange for the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear deployments on European soil, increased U.S. reliance on advanced nonnuclear systems, research and development in nuclear weapons-related verification, and maintenance of existing nuclear testing and production moratoriums.

All of these ideas seem plausible. Whether their pursuit will produce the kind of international cooperation needed to prevent further nuclear proliferation is less clear. As Sir Michael notes, a key failing of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty is the limited capability of international nuclear inspections to detect illicit weapons activities. Another is the absence of satisfactory arrangements to reconcile what states believe to be their "inalienable right to peaceful nuclear energy" with the NPT imperative to avoid the "risks of facilitating clandestine and threshold weapons capabilities." As a result, even if Quinlan's "practical agenda" is implemented, it is doubtful that this along with his other modest proposals to increase the intrusiveness of international nuclear inspections would come anywhere close to resolving the dilemma.

This shortcoming is fundamental. It should also be excused. Quinlan was trying to write a brief book (of 180 pages) that would cover the key aspects of nuclear-weapons security policy. This unavoidably dragged him into such fields as nuclear power, international nuclear inspections, and energy policy, with which he was far less familiar than with nuclear weapons policy writ large. To address properly the profound dilemma that Quinlan recognized in the NPT would require far more detail regarding the history, law, and economics associated with civilian nuclear energy, on the challenges it faces besting nonnuclear energy, and on the difficulty of asserting real control over its spread than he had either the time or space to devote.

Similarly, his critique of ballistic missile defenses belies a limited and, arguably, dated focus on the use of such defenses solely against nuclear-armed ballistic missiles. This may be the right way to view them in the context of Central Europe today. But the latest trend for the most advanced armed and innovative states (e.g., the United States, Israel, Japan, and China) is toward deploying highly accurate, smart, conventionally armed ballistic missiles and unmanned drones (some of which are totally unarmed, with reconnaissance or jamming payloads), as part of an effort to produce strategic results without having to resort to nuclear war. Against this airborne tide, more rather than less missile defense (both ballistic and cruise) would seem not just likely but useful and prudent.

These qualifications, however, should be seen for what they are—quibbles. Certainly, had Sir Michael lived, he would have relished further refining his own analysis. As it is, almost all of what there is in *Thinking about Nuclear Weapons* deserves careful consideration, if only to avoid the dangerous extremes that the current debate over nuclear weapons continues to generate.