

Taking an Iran Option Off the Table

President Obama's repetitious warning to Iran that "all options are on the table" carries with it the implicit threat of a nuclear strike against a non-nuclear state, a violation of previously declared principles and a provocation that encourages Iran to build an atomic bomb, as Tad Daley explains.

By Tad Daley

March 15, the Ides of March on the Roman calendar, was the anniversary of the assassination of Julius Caesar. On that date 2,057 years later Western media outlets reported that President Barack Obama had flourished a dagger of his own.

In an interview broadcast on Channel Two in Israel, on the eve of his first presidential visit to the country, Obama said that regarding his efforts to dissuade Iran from crossing the nuclear Rubicon, "I continue to keep all options on the table. The United States obviously has significant capabilities." Those words, "all options," are the same ones used repeatedly by both Obama and his predecessor, George W. Bush.

Of course, the most fearsome of those American capabilities remains the nuclear option. Nobody's been talking about that much recently (assuming that Obama and Bush were referring to America's still-terrifying "conventional" arsenal of weapons). But if you think that an American nuclear first strike on Iran is not one of those "options on the table," then you haven't been listening very closely.

Nearly a half century ago, when the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) was under negotiation, the non-nuclear states made a simple request. In return for their promise to remain non-nuclear, they asked that the nuclear states promise not only to pursue universal nuclear disarmament, but also to promise never to threaten them or to attack them with nuclear weapons.

This, said the late Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and U.S. Ambassador Thomas Graham, Jr., "could be the most reasonable request in the history of international relations." But the nuclear states refused, insisting that such a promise would intolerably constrain their "military flexibility."

The issue arose again 25 years later, shortly before the 1995 NPT Review Conference. Under intense pressure from several non-nuclear states that were seriously threatening to withdraw from the treaty, France, Russia, Britain and the United States issued "harmonized security assurances," declaring that they would neither use nor threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear

states. (They included one caveat regarding nuclear retaliation against non-nuclear states aiding and abetting any kind of attack by a nuclear state.)

On April 11, 1995, they incorporated this promise into U.N. Security Council Resolution 984. And in the final document adopted by the Review Conference a few weeks later, the signatories noted their hope that someday it might “take the form of an internationally legally binding instrument.”

That tortuous process was certainly not as good as if such an unambiguous promise had made it into the original text of the NPT itself (or been added later as an amendment). Nevertheless, most international legal experts now agree that the promise neither to threaten nor to launch a nuclear attack against non-nuclear states has become an integral part of the NPT bargain.

Bush’s Warning

Flash forward a single decade. George W. Bush’s administration, completely disregarding the 1995 agreements, issued formal nuclear policy documents that explicitly envisioned attacking non-nuclear states with nuclear weapons. These materials even named seven particular non-nuclear states as possible targets of an American nuclear attack.

Moreover, both *The Washington Post* and Seymour Hersh in *The New Yorker* revealed in 2006 that the administration was at that moment considering an American nuclear first strike upon Iran. When President Bush was asked directly by a reporter, in a televised White House press conference, whether this was in fact true, he replied, “All options are on the table.”

Just a few months after he took office, in Prague on April 5, 2009, President Obama captured the imagination of many when he declared to an adoring crowd, “I state clearly and with conviction America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.”

Even though some of that enthusiasm diminished when he added that the abolitionist objective “will not be reached quickly perhaps not in my lifetime,” it was nevertheless by all accounts a significant component in the Norwegian committee’s decision to award the President the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize.

But flash forward again, this time only a single year. During a press conference at the Pentagon on April 6, 2010, announcing the Obama administration’s new “Nuclear Posture Review” (NPR), Defense Secretary Robert Gates said that the document pledged that now the United States unlike under the Bush administration would not launch nuclear attacks against non-nuclear states.

So far so good. But then, Gates indicated that states “not in compliance with

the NPT” had been placed in an entirely different category, and were not exempt from American nuclear attack. It was an entirely new principle, never before contemplated in any way as part of the NPT bargain.

Then, for good measure, he specifically named two states – North Korea and Iran. For these countries, said Secretary Gates, “there is a message if you’re going to play by the rules, if you’re going to join the international community, then we will undertake certain obligations to you. But if you’re not going to play by the rules, if you’re going to be a proliferator, then all options are on the table in terms of how we deal with you.”

What Iranians Hear

The “options on the table” phrase has been uttered so often by Western leaders that it has become commonplace for the Western media to pay no attention to it at all. Not so Iranian leaders. Shortly after the 2010 Pentagon press conference, Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei told his senior military commanders that these direct threats to unleash nuclear arms against Iran “are very strange and the world should not ignore them. The head of a country has threatened a nuclear attack. In recent years the Americans made many efforts to show that the Islamic Republic of Iran is unreliable in the nuclear issue. It is now clear that the governments that possess atomic bombs and shamelessly threaten to bomb others are the unreliable ones.”

The speaker of Iran’s parliament, Ali Larijani, emphasized that any kind of nuclear threat against Iran directly violated the agreements of the NPT. And President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad weighed in as well, declaring, “I hope these published comments are not true. ... He has threatened with nuclear and chemical weapons those nations which do not submit to the greed of the United States. Even Bush did not say what Obama is saying.”

Similarly, after President Obama’s statement on Israeli television, Revolutionary Guard Brigadier General Masoud Jazayeri declared, “Mr. Obama, do not make a mistake: we too have all our options on the table.” Which doesn’t seem to indicate that using the phrase is doing anything to defuse the situation.

It’s difficult to imagine, since President Obama’s most recent pronouncement on the subject used the exact same phrase, that it does not in fact mean the exact same thing. It’s also difficult to escape the towering irony even if only a hypothetical possibility that one country might employ nuclear weapons to demonstrate that it’s unacceptable for another country even to possess nuclear weapons.

And it's difficult finally to suppose that a nuclear hypocrisy of such towering proportions could lead to anything other than a relentless determination, on the part of Iran and the many other nuclear have-not nations, for decades to come, to join the nuclear club.

Imagine the positive outcomes that might emerge on multiple fronts if the President were to make an alternative pronouncement, which said instead something like this:

"I am announcing today that the time has come to take one option off the table. The nuclear option. There are no circumstances under which the United States will attack a non-nuclear armed Iran with nuclear weapons.

"Indeed, I can imagine no situation where it would be appropriate for any nuclear-armed nation to launch a nuclear attack on any state which does not possess nuclear weapons. The promise not to do so has become a fundamental part of the NPT bargain. So just as we expect Iran to fulfill its NPT commitments, we declare today that we will fulfill this NPT commitment of our own.

"Both the United States and Israel are fully capable of protecting our national security with our conventional forces alone. The only conceivable purpose for possessing nuclear weapons is to deter the use of nuclear weapons by others. And as I indicated in Prague four long years ago, someday we hope to eliminate that purpose, by eliminating every last nuclear weapon from the face of the Earth thereby fulfilling another of the commitments we made under the NPT several long decades ago.

"Iran must know that until it rejects the false seductions of nuclear security, for us, all options but one must remain on the table. But Iranians should also be assured that we do not expect them to endure a nuclear double standard forever until the end of time. We invite them to join us, now, on the road to abolition."

Such a statement could transform the nuclear policy debate overnight. It would, in a stroke, delegitimize the "employment doctrines" manifested by each of the nine nuclear-armed nations. It would express as a bedrock American principle that the nuclear weapons deployed by us remain only to prevent nuclear weapons from being used against us and would put enormous pressure on the other nuclear states to declare likewise.

It could go a long, long way to persuading Iran, North Korea, and perhaps others to abjure the nuclear course. And it might even give a substantial kick start to the long-stalled abolitionist project, and move the international community to begin discerning and negotiating a universal, verifiable, and enforceable

Nuclear Weapons Elimination Convention. And bringing us a nuclear weapon-free world.

Who knows? Perhaps, even, within Barack Obama's lifetime.

Tad Daley, author of *APOCALYPSE NEVER: Forging the Path to a Nuclear-Weapon Free World* from Rutgers University Press, directs the Project on Abolishing War at the Center for War/Peace Studies in New York. [See: www.apocalypsenever.org, www.abolishingwar.org.]

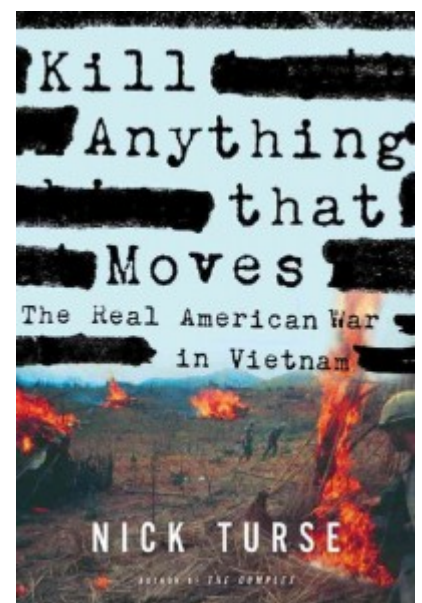
Facing Up to US War Crimes

By glorifying or sanitizing war, U.S. officials and a complicit news media may insist they are shielding "the troops" from unfair criticism. But real democracy and simple human decency require that citizens know the full and often ugly truth, as Michael True notes in this review of Nick Turse's *Kill Anything That Moves*.

By Michael True

The title of Nick Turse's brilliant history, *Kill Anything That Moves*, was a commanding officer's response to a soldier's question, "Are we supposed to kill women and children?"

In contrast, an army criminal investigator's response to a veteran, who revealed that American soldiers were abusing and killing Vietnamese civilians, was: "The United States has never condoned wanton killing or disregard for human life."



Turse's readable, indispensable, and, yes, deeply disturbing book may be the most important among thousands of books about the Vietnam War. A major achievement is its explaining how and why "atrocities perpetrated by US soldiers have essentially vanished from public memory." In authenticity and power, it compares favorably with earlier accounts, such as Tim O'Brien's novel, *The Things They Carried*, and Bruce Weigl's poems, *Song of Napalm*.

Titles of chapters of Turse's book convey a general sense of the grim and tragic accounts of the war: "A System of Suffering," "Overkill," "A Litany of Atrocities," and "Unbound Misery." In the process, the author documents a commander's standard operating procedure, including burying bad news, concealing violations of military law, and papering over miscarriages of justice. In training before going to Vietnam, soldiers were taught to regard the Vietnamese as inferior, even inhuman, referring to them not as "the enemy," but as "gooks" or "dinks." This practice reflected the contempt with which the country was regarded by President Lyndon Johnson, who called Vietnam "a piddling piss-ant little country," as well as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who referred to it as a "backward nation."

In a representative account of civilians victimized by the troops, a mother returning home came upon the bodies of her son and two others riddled with bullets. They had been tending the family ducks, while their mother was away for a brief period. Encouraged to raise the body count in this way, one soldier amassed an estimated 1,500 "enemy killed-in-action," by planting Chinese communist grenades on bodies so that they would be counted as enemy dead.

A particularly chilling, though not unrepresentative, account of an "industrial-scale slaughter" involved a two-star general. As field commander in the Mekong Delta, he "made the killing of civilians into standard operating procedure." In an early briefing, he announced his plan "to begin killing 4,000, then 6,000 a month of these little bastards" then went on from there. As an associate said of another officer, for him, "body count was everything."

Reasonable estimates account for 3.8 million violent war deaths, combatant and civilian, according to reports by Harvard Medical School and an Institute for Health Metrics and Education report. An official 1995 Vietnamese government report estimated more than 3 million deaths, a million of them civilians. Civilian victims of the war included 8,000-16,000 South Vietnamese paraplegics, 30,000-60,000 South Vietnamese left blind, and 83,000 to 166,000 South Vietnamese amputees. These estimates do not include the tens of thousands of Americans and North Vietnamese dead and wounded.

Some information about atrocities, though "prematurely closed and buried," was assembled by "Conduct of the War in Vietnam," a task force established by the

top commander in Vietnam and later Army Chief of Staff, General William Westmoreland. In what Turse describes as a “whitewash of a report,” it concluded that “criminal acts that occurred during General Westmoreland’s tenure in Vietnam were neither wide-spread nor extensive enough to render him criminally responsible for their commission.”

More recently, other government officials have re-branded or dispatched the Vietnam War to the dustbin of history. Their re-writing of history perpetuates misleading accounts by reporters and irresponsible editors who ignored or withheld essential information from the beginning of American involvement in 1965.

In spite of efforts to silence them and to deprive the public of an accurate account of the war, many veterans, at considerable risk, gave detailed accounts of their own involvement and the policies that led to various war crimes. In 12 years of research, reading files and interviewing witnesses, Turse documented their testimonies. It included Jamie Henry’s testimony, at a press conference in 1970, that the murders at My Lai was only one of similar incidents that occurred “on a daily basis and differ from one another only in terms of numbers killed.”

The perspective that Turse brings to this history is truly a gift to public discourse. “Never having come to grips with what our country did during the Vietnam war,” he says, “we see its ghost arise anew with every successive intervention.”

In the conclusion, he asks questions that offer a means to our understanding its full implications, and other wars that followed: “Was Iraq the new Vietnam? Or was that Afghanistan? Do we see ‘light at the end of the tunnel’? Are we winning ‘hearts and minds’? Is ‘counterinsurgency’ working? Are we applying ‘the lessons of Vietnam’? What are those lessons anyway?”

An obvious answer to these questions might be that those responsible for U.S. foreign policy never met a war they didn’t like. In spite of that fact, as Andrew Bacevich said, the Pentagon hasn’t won a war since 1945.

One wishes that every American citizen might read *Kill Everything That Moves*, and take to heart its account of a brutal, unnecessary war and the evil that we were responsible for. Sadly, we continue to be lied to about the full implications of U.S. foreign policy that undermine democratic governance.

Michael True is emeritus professor, American literature, Peace, Conflict, and Nonviolence Studies, Assumption College, and is syndicated by PeaceVoice.
