



THE ESSENTIAL IRRELEVANCE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS: STABILITY IN THE POSTWAR WORLD (JOHN MUELLER)

BRIAN BURKE

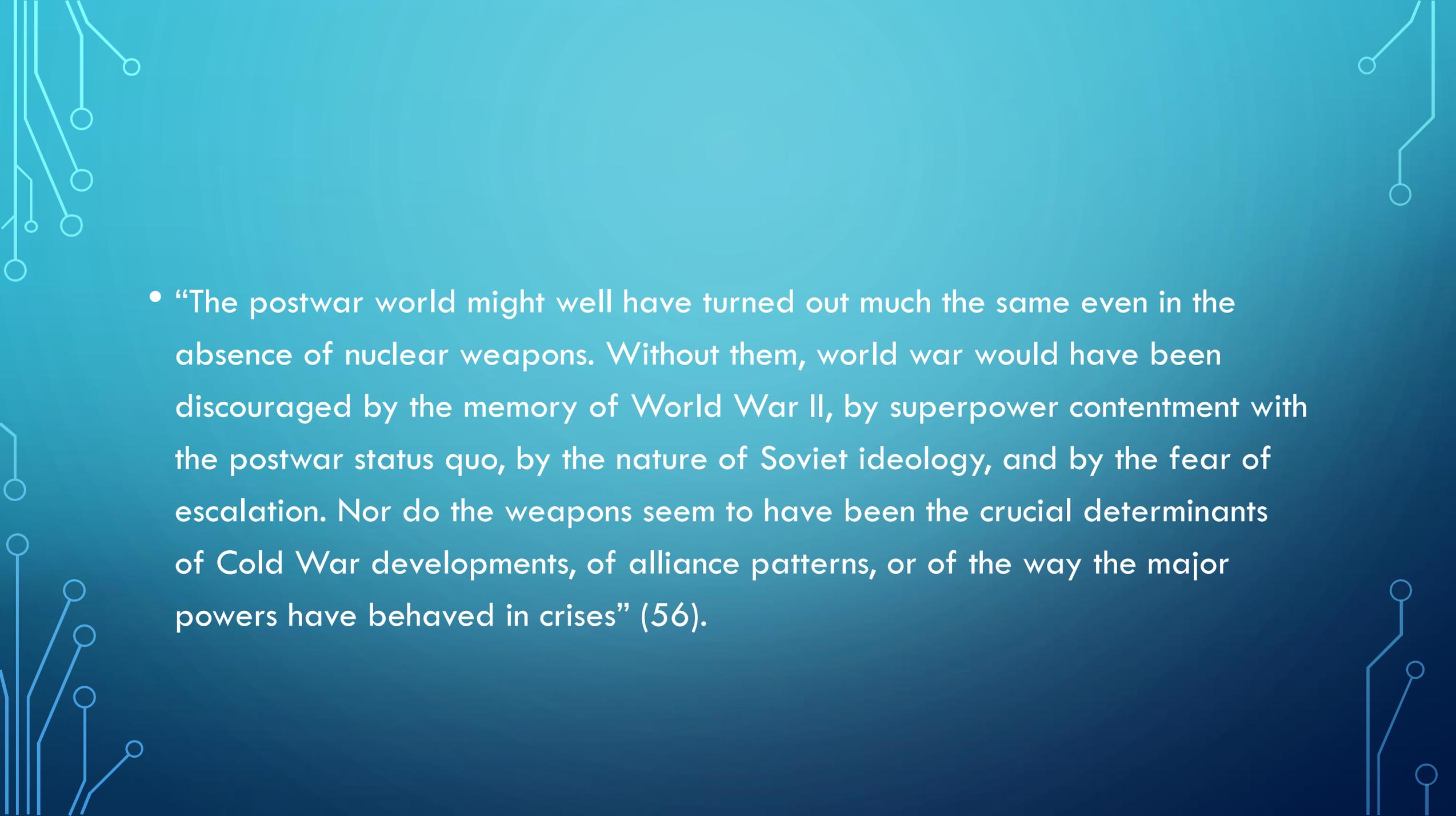
NUCLEAR POLITICS

FEBRUARY 20, 2019

RESEARCH QUESTION

- “This article... concludes that nuclear weapons neither crucially define a fundamental stability nor threaten severely to disturb it” (Mueller 55).
- Do nuclear weapons significantly impact global affairs? Do they impact stability?



- 
- “The postwar world might well have turned out much the same even in the absence of nuclear weapons. Without them, world war would have been discouraged by the memory of World War II, by superpower contentment with the postwar status quo, by the nature of Soviet ideology, and by the fear of escalation. Nor do the weapons seem to have been the crucial determinants of Cold War developments, of alliance patterns, or of the way the major powers have behaved in crises” (56).

PART I: IMPACT ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

- Deterrence
 - “The Memory of WWII”
 - Avoid another catastrophic war
 - “Postwar Contentment”
 - Grievances not dramatic enough to lead U.S. and Soviet Union into world war
 - “Soviet Ideology”
 - Emphasis on “subversion, revolution, diplomatic and economic pressure, seduction, guerilla warfare, local uprising, and civil war” over direct war with Western powers (58).
 - “The Belief in Escalation”
 - Fear that war between global powers could quickly escalate

WESTERN EUROPE & KOREA

- U.S. economic and military strength deterred Soviets from attacking Western Europe (fear of “continent-hopping war of attrition” (62)).
- Korean War
 - Soviet involvement despite U.S. having more nuclear weapons
 - American/Western intervention to prevent spread of communism



ALLIANCES AND CRISES

- “The American reaction to the perceived Soviet threat... mainly reflects pre-nuclear thinking, especially the lessons of *Munich*” (64).
- Western and Eastern alliances based on politics, ideology
- Escalation factor
 - Fear of another catastrophic world war
 - Cases of nuclear states being challenged when it is believed that conflict will not escalate dramatically
 - Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Algeria, the Falklands

PART II: STABILITY

- “The United States and the Soviet Union have been essentially satisfied with their lot and, fearing escalation to another costly war, have been quite willing to keep their conflicts limited. Nuclear weapons may well have enhanced *this stability*— *they are certainly dramatic reminders of how horrible a big war could be*. But it seems unlikely that, in their absence, the leaders of the major powers would be so unimaginative as to need such reminding” (68).
- Large scale war not in the interests of major powers.

THE HOLLANDIZATION PHENOMENON

- War no longer seen as acceptable way to settle disputes
- Low levels of warfare in developed world
- Former enemies no longer trying to fight each other (ex: France and Germany)
- Lack of civil wars in developed world since 1945 (43 civil wars in developing world were started between 1945 and 1980)

CONCLUSION

- Nuclear weapons are not the cause of stability and do not disturb the stability seen in the developed world since the end of World War II.



PICTURE CREDITS

- <https://www.trumanlibrary.org/photographs/view.php?id=588>
- <https://www.flickr.com/photos/chathamhouse/9684614521/>
- <https://www.atomicheritage.org/history/reagan-and-gorbachev-geneva-summit>
- <https://www.nato.int/>
- <https://www.newsweek.com/khrushchev-would-be-appalled-230750>