

Scott D. Sagan
The Commitment Trap:
Why the United States Should Not Use Nuclear Threats to Deter Biological and
Chemical Weapons Attacks

International Security 2000

Outline:

Central argument: threats to use nuclear weapons in response to a chemical or biological attack are credible, because if CW or BW are used despite such threats, the US president would feel compelled to retaliate with nuclear weapons to maintain his international and domestic reputation for honoring commitments.

Sagan is arguing that the government's calculated ambiguity policy will increase the likelihood of nuclear weapons being used in combat.

Existing debate: (both schools are inconsistent)

Deterrence Hawks – believe nuclear threats will strongly influence potential aggressors, and that US nuclear threats will have no influence on other potential proliferants.

Nonproliferation Doves – believe that asymmetric threats are not credible (why would the US order a nuclear retaliation except in response to a nuclear attack?) and that threats are unnecessary as the mere existence of the weapons is enough to deter.

Gulf War example, not obvious that the calculated ambiguity strategy deterred Hussein from using BW and CW, could have been domestic interests. We have no evidence that the calculated ambiguity doctrine works.

Deterrence Theory and the Commitment Trap:

Basically, the strength of deterrence comes from the strength of the credibility of the state threatening. "US nuclear threats both *decrease* the likelihood that CW and BW will be used and *increase* the likelihood that US nuclear weapons will be used *if* deterrence fails" P16. The president, by threatening, is *committing* himself to retaliate.

Example of Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy tied his own hands in making a threat, then was forced to follow through.

Sagan provides examples where (possibly) non-deliberate threats were made, misstatements of US policy. Could possibly constitute a threat.

Sagan is worried because nuclear deterrence threats are good ONLY if they work 100% of the time. But nothing is certain, even believable threats can fail.

He suggests 5 ways that rational deterrence might fail, including the possibility of an accidental BW or CW attack. p25 Command and control problems, subordinate military officers in control of weapons etc.

Concludes by suggesting policy change. The calculated ambiguity doctrine should be replaced with conventional threats. Three benefits to this:

- US leaders avoid the slippery commitment trap,
- this leaves the door open for more options in retaliation,
- with no ambiguity, less chance for dangerous signals by leaders and others.

One drawback, conventional deterrence is not as costly as nuclear deterrence.