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The Rational World of Defense Intellectuals—Revisited

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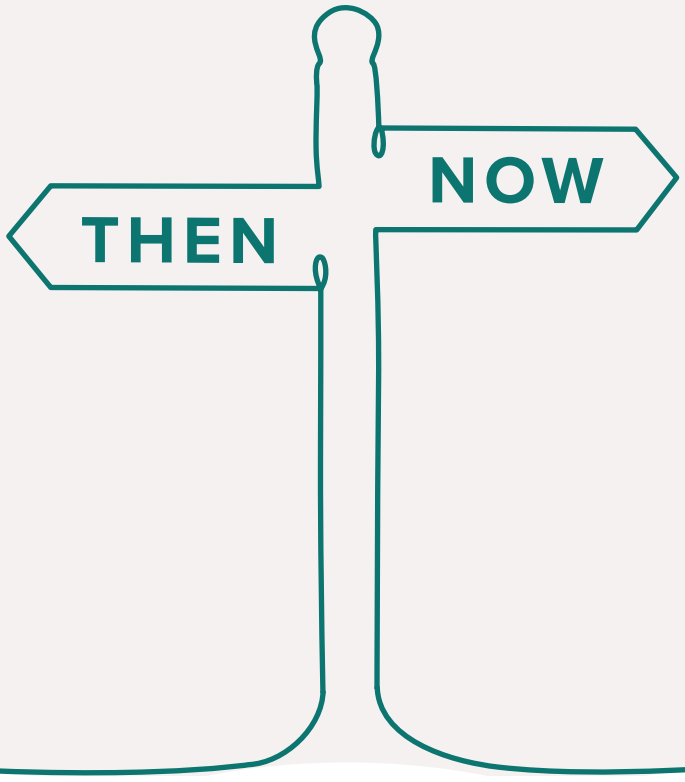

IGCC THEN AND NOW

At a time of profound uncertainty, IGCC looks back to influential ideas and initiatives from our past to explore what they have to say about the present and how they might shape the future.

Background

In August 1987, IGCC hosted the First Annual Conference on Discourse, Peace, Security, and International Security in Ireland. The conference produced a provocative working paper, *Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals*, which provided a critical analysis of the nuclear strategy community's use of specialized language. That language, argued author Carol Cohn—both euphemistic and chauvinistic—allowed intellectuals to put off grappling with the deadly consequences of nuclear weapons while maintaining a façade of masculine control over an otherwise uncontrollable domain. This groundbreaking paper gained wide influence, calling into question intellectuals' claims of rationality and piercing the veil of how language shapes not only what nuclear strategists do, but how they think.

Four decades later, IGCC postdoctoral fellow in technology and international security Colleen Larkin reflects on how her first encounter with Sex and Death as an undergraduate student shaped her forays into the world of defense intellectuals. Larkin discusses how the paper influences her current research on the formation of strategic narratives and examines how Cohn's Cold War-era insights are still highly relevant to today's new nuclear age.

About the Author

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Chapter 1: The Encounter

My close encounter with the paper started in the winter of 2016. I first read Carol Cohn's *Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals* *as* a sophomore at Wellesley College, in a nuclear politics class. Even mere days into the course, I knew I had encountered nuclear strategy in the most unusual of circumstances—at a historically women's college, in one of the few rooms anywhere in the world where conversations about nuclear politics took place entirely among women. The professor opened the class with a disclaimer that the technical language of nuclear strategy often involved euphemisms for, frankly, killing people—but we would read one author who would critique this practice.

This course was the beginning of my own journey of "obsession" with the world of nuclear weapons. As a child of the 1990s, the atomic bomb primarily existed as a distant memory in AP U.S. history class and a MacGuffin in many a James Bond and Mission Impossible movie. In my college political science classes, however, nuclear weapons stood out as uniquely important and terrifying. Reading works like John Hersey's *Hiroshima*—a harrowing account of the bombing based on interviews with survivors—brought new gravity and tangibility to nuclear destruction. That the world could not only move on from such unthinkable destruction, but also make these weapons a central tool of world politics, seemed more than a little insane.

But back to Cohn. It is certainly not every day that an academic article makes you sit up straighter in your chair. Cohn's piece was thrilling—peeling back a curtain where you never noticed there was one. Behind that curtain was a whole world. There was nuclear politics as bombs and planes and missiles, yes, but there was also the messier reality of the human beings who have to think about the unthinkable consequences of nuclear warfare.

Chapter 2: The Language

In *Sex and Death*, Cohn, founding director of the Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights and lecturer in women's studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston, guides the reader through her journey into the minds of nuclear strategists, a journey that started when she participated in a seminar about nuclear strategy in 1984. In Stage 1, "Listening," she describes hearing the abstract, highly gendered, often sexual language with which her male colleagues calmly described unspeakably graphic destruction. Take, for instance, the metaphor of the "clean bomb," weapons that use a different type of nuclear reaction to produce lower levels of radioactive fallout than "normal" nuclear bombs. With this label, the bombs seem tidy, manageable, unintrusive. But this label masked the uneasy truth that such weapons could still result

in mass death and societies razed to the ground. Or consider the overt graphic language used to describe weapons capabilities. Lecturers boasted about certain aircrafts' "thrust-to-weight ratios" (the ratio of the thrust produced by the engine to the aircraft's weight) and "deep penetration capabilities" (the ability to get past enemy defensive weapons). As an outsider, Cohn was initially shocked.

Yet behind the crude imagery of throw weights, deep penetration, and "patting" missiles, Cohn came to detect, was an elaborate system of domination. This was a system that allowed participants (ostensibly) to gain "mastery over the unmasterable" and remove themselves from the real-world consequences of nuclear weapons—death, environmental degradation, and economic collapse. Through abstract, sexual, and domesticated language, nuclear war evoked a board game, the missiles and warheads its pawns. Abstraction shielded nuclear strategy participants from "emotional fallout," thinking too deeply about the lives at stake in a nuclear war. Gendered language reduced strategy to a contest in male sexual prowess, rather than a deadly competition in arms. And the pervasive language of domestication—the "football" that launches nuclear war, the "footprint" where missiles land, the "shopping list" of planned weapons—seemed a slightly perverse attempt to tame unfathomable destruction.

This language of mastery over nuclear weapons was not without its contradictions, yet it still seemed to create a shield around the community of nuclear strategists. Cohn was particularly struck by the religious imagery in nuclear language. The telling of the bomb's origin story echoes the story of Creation; the nuclear strategists refer to themselves as the "nuclear priesthood." This reverence for the divine would seem to contradict the hard-headed rationality that strategists use to justify nuclear targeting. Yet this contradiction between the religious and the rational, I think, also protects the strategists. This priesthood worships a bundle of supposedly rational concepts for nuclear war, concepts which have become such an article of faith as to be untouchable. Questioning the concepts would be tantamount to heresy. "Sex and Death" highlighted not only the "irrationality" of language within the nuclear strategy community, but also how it served to insulate the community from scrutiny.

Cohn found this language, understandably, an easy target for feminist critique. But Stage 2, "Learning to Speak the Language," details the thornier aspects of her encounter in the world of nuclear strategy. As she began to speak the language of this "nuclear priesthood"—wielding the snappy nicknames and endless acronyms with ease—she found that it was *fun*. The language was the key that unlocked access to an exclusive club. This was Stage 3: "Dialogue." Once she knew the words, she could be *listened* to, no longer relegated to sitting on the margins of nuclear strategy discussions. She too could claim mastery over an unmasterable technology and find camaraderie in the secret knowledge.

But learning the language also removed her from the reality of nuclear weapons. Here, Stage 4, "Terror," began to set in. Cohn realized that mastery of the language ushered a deeper transformation in the way she thought about nuclear war, regarding it now as something distant, abstract, removed from human lives. Ultimately, however, she did not blame or ascribe some ulterior motive to the individual strategists who used the language (whom she described as "unusually endowed with charm, humor, intelligence, concern, and decency"). Rather, she blamed the system of nuclear language writ large. The language, with its rational calculations and sterile abstractions, legitimized wars of "such grotesque dimensions as to defy rational understanding." Its inaccessibility to the average outsider perpetuated its dominance—strategists could use this language to shut down arguments from outsiders, such as arguments against living with nuclear weapons. Cohn called on scholars and activists to challenge the hegemony of the overall system to propose visions of possible futures that decreased reliance on nuclear weapons.

Chapter 3: The Challenge

Cohn's piece was one of the foundational works that catalyzed my scholarly career in nuclear strategy. I too wanted to know how strategists could think this way, and why they talked the way they did in this cloistered and foreign world. I was somewhat repulsed, knowing what I knew about nuclear weapons effects and radiation. The article also made it clear that anyone seeking to gain entry into the nuclear strategy club would need to master the system, which was somewhat intimidating. But I was also intrigued—nuclear weapons seemed to occupy a realm of politics and strategy entirely their own, where nuclear strategists spent their days trying to think about the unthinkable prospect of nuclear war. I wanted to understand their pathologies, but I too wanted to enter that world of abstraction.

I would be lying if I didn't admit that I saw the vocabulary of nuclear strategy in part as a dare—perhaps not Cohn's intent, but certainly relevant for competitive 19-year-olds. The article suggested that language constituted a barrier to entry in the nuclear field, and that to compete with the boys you would have to master this language on their terms. I was up for the challenge, and I would *win*.

Chapter 4: The Fallout

Decades after it was first published, nuclear politics scholars still love *Sex and Death*, and not just because of the provocative title. They assign it on their syllabi and rave about their students' engagement with it. Cohn's work was ahead of its time in bringing a critical and even constructivist lens to nuclear politics nearly a decade before these perspectives became more widely accepted in the field. Cohn showed that the abstract

language of nuclear strategy was a subject worthy of study, paving the way for the rich constructivist work on nuclear weapons, which has shown the importance of discourse, norms, symbols, metaphors, and culture in shaping ideas about nuclear strategy in the absence of experiences using these weapons in war.

Yet, Cohn's legacy in nuclear scholarship is complicated. Despite its glowing reviews on their syllabi, American scholars of nuclear politics have a tendency to relegate constructivist and critical perspectives to the margins. Perspectives like Cohn's sometimes seem less central to scholarly debate than those adopting the more "rationalist" approaches, which take the principles of deterrence and nuclear warfare as a given. This is ironic, given that Cohn's work pointedly observed the absurdity of nuclear policymakers—these scholars' object of study—positioning themselves as the pinnacle of rationality, arguing that this is one of their key tools to generate legitimacy around nuclear strategy. But it seems that many still take policymakers at their word. In the most prominent academic journals in international relations, articles centering constructivist theoretical approaches to nuclear strategy are few and far between. I often find myself bending over backwards to justify the value of my own research, wondering if the song and dance would be easier if I had picked a different approach.

Chapter 5: The Transformation

In that nuclear politics class at Wellesley, we entered a kind of covenant to learn this language, and not to be intimated by the masculine nuclear strategy world outside. As I became more enamored with nuclear politics, this language mastery came to be a career necessity—the required qualification to continue studying nuclear strategy at a higher level. But this endeavor, as I was to learn, did not make me immune to the socialization that came with learning the language.

Indeed, although Cohn directs her critique at the enterprise of nuclear policy, her warnings about the transformational power of nuclear language also ring true for scholars. As I came to learn, one of scholars' workplace hazards is to become too adept at wielding the language of nuclear warfare. We assimilate into the tribe by necessity, not because we are any more bloodthirsty than those on the policy side.

We do it because some compartmentalization is probably necessary—lest we end up like Cillian Murphy at the end of Oppenheimer, staring gloomily into the void amid visions of nuclear warhead launches. But Cohn cautions against getting dragged down into nuclear strategy's logic without some reflection. Behind the weapons and strategies are human lives worth considering. Scholars also might have more latitude to question and push back against the abstraction—when we say these terms, what do they really mean?

That reflection, though, it easier said than done. As I have progressed from being an undergraduate learning the ropes, to graduate student decamped in the library stacks to read every nuclear strategy book ever published, to postdoc regularly conversing with nuclear scholars and practitioners, I have become inoculated to the nuclear language. Sometimes, I have caught myself frustrated in nuclear spaces when "outsiders" (women, participants coming from other policy areas)—in recoiling from the everyday nuclear jargon—take a backseat in the conversations. I think Cohn would call for a bit more self-scrutiny, and probably an ego check. Shying away from the language of nuclear destruction is probably the most normal response to it; my disdain comes from my own indoctrination into the nuclear strategy world. The "outsiders" have perspectives worth listening to, even if they don't speak the same language. If anything, they may be more attuned to the human consequences that nuclear discourse seeks to erase.

But this brings me back to the central dilemma of the nuclear strategy world, which Cohn so piercingly describes but cannot resolve: speaking the language is required for entry, but with entry comes a particular way of thinking about nuclear weapons and a set of blinders to other perspectives. In fact, this language, which once seemed like a thrilling challenge, has started to reveal itself to be a game where everything is made up and the points don't matter. This is not to say that the language is useless, far from it—any field of study has its own insider language. It is also not always used for nefarious purposes; the vast majority of people working in the nuclear field would like to reduce nuclear dangers and avoid nuclear wars.

Rather, it is easy to get wrapped up in the tidy, made-up world conjured by technostrategic language. Its slippery abstraction sometimes conceals more than it reveals. What, for instance, would a "limited" nuclear war actually look like? "Stability" seems a reasonable goal for nuclear strategy, but what does it really mean? To be clear, this abstraction has only made me more fascinated with the topic—there are endless concepts to unpack and reevaluate in new international circumstances. But it also seems that the points in this game—mastery of the language—sometimes add up to greater complicity in the system, sticking to the same familiar grooves of nuclear strategy debates.

My solution, thus far, has been to proceed with caution. My obsession continues. But with this experience, I've also become more sympathetic to nuclear policymakers past and present. I don't wonder how they could think this way, I *know*—they too are ordinary people grappling with an extraordinary technology. They have the added burden of actually making decisions about these weapons. But the takeaway from Cohn for scholars, I think, is that we may unintentionally shape nuclear pathologies just in the ways we talk about nuclear weapons. So long as nuclear war remains an abstract proposition, scholars and policymakers alike will need to wield this power wisely.

Chapter 6: The Return

I have returned to this article frequently both for my research and to reflect on my own position as I plunge deeper into the nuclear strategy world. Cohn's work showed me that the language of nuclear warfare was worthy of investigation; its abstraction was not to be taken for granted, but perhaps the result of a political process. I try to investigate these processes in my work unpacking the narratives policymakers constructed, historically, around nuclear weapons, and how those stories informed strategy.

Cohn's work also continues to raise promising questions for future research: how exactly does this technostrategic "gloss" distort decisionmaking and policy? Might this sanitized language make decisionmakers more willing to use nuclear weapons? What happens when outsiders encounter the world of nuclear strategy and have to start making decisions about it? How did this language come about in the first place? How do countries with individual systems of technostrategic language communicate with one another?

Chapter 7: Then and Now

Today, we live in a tumultuous nuclear world. Pakistan and North Korea have joined the nuclear club since Cohn wrote her article. Amid new wars and heightened global tensions, other countries are considering developing their own nuclear programs. Arms control agreements have run out, their future uncertain. And new technologies, like smaller, highly accurate "tactical" nuclear weapons for use on the battlefield, may increase the risk of future nuclear use. Moreover, with greater distance from the Cold War, the realm of the "nuclear priesthood" has become more hermeneutically sealed than ever, as fear of nuclear weapons recedes in the public consciousness. *The New York Times* even launched a project last year to educate broader audiences on nuclear weapons and threats, noting how attention to the issue had waned.

In our new world, Cohn's call to challenge the cool-headed rationality of nuclear concepts rings as true as ever. Even as technologies become more sophisticated, the dirty reality of nuclear weapons' effects have not altogether disappeared. I saw the closest thing to a fistfight among nuclear policy professionals during a discussion of the moral consequences of the civilian casualties that might still result from a so-called "limited" nuclear exchange. The moral and emotional aspects of nuclear weapons have not disappeared, and while uncomfortable, they may act as a guard against the most reckless nuclear policies.

The challenges of our nuclear present also suggest these concepts are not immutable. Ideas change as the world changes, and today's upheavals may present opportunities to reevaluate these terms—limited strikes, stability, superiority—as policymakers hash out their meanings for this new nuclear age. Cohn encourages this discomfort and welcomes the challenge—the less we treat existing nuclear concepts as sacred texts, the better.

We ignore these perspectives at our own peril. Peeking behind the curtain is essential. If language constitutes and sustains the system of nuclear strategy, then scholars cannot understand the whole system without taking it seriously.