

Review - Weapons of Mass Destruction and US Foreign Policy

Written by K.P. O'Reilly

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K.P. O'REILLY, JUL 29 2014

Weapons of Mass Destruction and US Foreign Policy

By: Michelle Bentley

London: Routledge

In *Weapons of Mass Destruction and US Foreign Policy*, author Michelle Bentley examines the strategic use of language by political elites in pursuit of particular political interests focusing on the usage of the concept of “weapons of mass destruction.” As Bentley notes, these weapons and now (in)famous WMD acronym have become so ubiquitous, especially post-9/11, as to find their way into general popular culture being incorporated into the plots of numerous books, television shows, and movies.

Despite an increasing presence in U.S. foreign policy, the author highlights the subjective nature of defining what is and is not a WMD. It would seem problematic that a concept so commonplace in US foreign policy discourse remains open to interpretation, yet this conceptual uncertainty reveals the importance of language in advancing political interests. Bentley argues that the concept of WMD is neither self-evident nor essentialist. Strategic manipulation by political actors to achieve their goals is possible because of the lack of precise conceptual boundaries. U.S. officials have repeatedly avoided creating a singular, or static, definition, offering definitions depending on the government's interests at a given time and context. Herein rests her central argument — the WMD concept has no meaning absent politics and its usage by strategically motivated actors.

While attempting to logically group weapons as WMD according to allegedly shared characteristics, such as number of deaths caused, scale of destruction, nature of casualties inflicted, technological innovation, or indiscriminate killing, Bentley exposes their shortcomings in neatly capturing the types of weapons which have come to be labeled as WMD. Instead of being a pre-existing group defined by clear conceptual specifications, Bentley notes that the “armaments indentified as WMD have varied considerably” (p. 23). The label has covered various weapons including the usual suspects of nuclear, biological, and chemical, but also, radiological, i.e. dirty bombs, and even recent attempts to include the use of commercial airliners, and IEDs, like the weaponized pressure cookers used in the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing. Once classified a WMD such weapons are stigmatized, subjecting them to prohibition efforts or, as Bentley asserts in later chapters, more forceful U.S. policy actions in being cast as threats to national security.

Bentley uses a discourse analysis approach, drawing heavily on Skinner's “speech act theory,” as she delves into the development of the WMD concept tracing its historical usage since World War II in depicting the various manifestations of WMD. In closely examining these varied and even contradictory definitions, Bentley stresses “that actors can manipulate political language in order to fulfill their political ambitions” (p. 27). U.S. policy elites have, depending on the political context and interests at stake, purposely sought to either strictly limit WMD as comprising particular types of weapons or to associate them with broader threats, as in the case of Saddam Hussein's Iraq or non-state actors like al Qaeda.

The book is organized chronologically, divided into four historical periods: the immediate aftermath of World War II;

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the Cold War; the post-Cold War decade of the 1990s; and the period after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. While discussion of WMD in U.S. foreign policy post-9/11 may feel familiar to many readers, the strength of Bentley's work lays in the in-depth analysis of the earlier periods where discussions of WMD were largely confined to political elites. Relying on extensive examination of archival records she demonstrates not only how the usage and definition of WMD has shifted but also how, within these earlier periods, the open-ended nature of the concept permitted actors to manipulate the term depending on their motivations. A potential shortcoming facing any work relying on the historical record or subjects' subsequent retellings, including this one, is whether one can discern the true meaning or intent of the actors. While this charge can be leveled against the use of the WMD label by U.S. officials, Bentley does well in buttressing her interpretations by layering contemporaneous documents which either by similarities or differences reinforce how particular meanings were context and interest specific.[1]

This historical approach works quite well in chapters two and three, focusing on the immediate post-war and Cold War periods. During this time the concept assumed a place in foreign policy elites' vernacular, most notably in arms control efforts. Rather than tackling the entirety of arms control negotiations to examine how WMD definitions employed by U.S. actors were interest and context driven, Bentley develops a series of short case studies – The UN Disarmament Conference, The Outer Space and Seabed treaties, the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, and efforts in the 1970s to create “new” WMD. In advancing her thesis, she focuses on how U.S. actors sought to variously define WMD to frame arms control debates—depending on the matter at hand—so to advantage US interests and restrain the Soviets. As she explains, during the Cold War, “definition was a battlefield in itself” (p. 43). The Soviets often encouraged a broader notion of WMD, capturing conventional as well as unconventional weapons. Meanwhile U.S. officials sought to avoid such a static interpretation as a matter of privileging U.S. strategic interests as well as political expediency in negotiating narrowly tailored arms control agreements.

Bentley is careful not to overreach by suggesting that the open-ended nature of the WMD concept completely removes the importance of convention. Even in the post-9/11 environment where WMD surged into the broader public, political actors are not completely free to alter meaning. While the WMD concept possesses a great deal of malleability, past usage can constrain actors' attempts at manipulation. In chapter six, Bentley details such challenges as exemplified by the conviction of Zacarias Moussaoui, the captured 9/11 accomplice. She notes that the allegation of “conspiracy to use a WMD” posed a significant hurdle for both the government prosecutors and the jury. Bentley contends that the case demonstrates an attempt at “conceptual innovation” by the US government to define airplanes as WMD in achieving a specific conviction against Moussaoui, one providing for the death penalty. Unable to argue that an airplane constituted a weapon of mass destruction, due to existing statutory definitions, prosecutors repeatedly referred to the “unconventional” nature of the weapon, seeking to shift the limits of what constitutes a WMD as based on the user's intent rather than a device's intended use or design.

While the argument was ultimately persuasive to the jury, certainly due in part to the specific context of the case, the episode reveals the interplay between convention and discursive needs. On the one hand, we see that there is some, albeit inchoate, baseline for what can be envisioned as a WMD. On the other hand, convention can also serve as a bridge for innovation. In this case “exploiting” an oft-used defining feature of WMD – the unconventional nature of such weapons in causing mass destruction – allowed for reimagining that what might otherwise be viewed as a conventional weapon as a weapon of mass destruction (p. 128). Returning to her main thesis, Bentley claims that while convention acts as a general guide, the meaning of WMD “remains up for grabs” and that “the concept can be as flexible as the user wants” (p. 130). Understanding or imagining WMD therefore cannot be divorced from the surrounding context and actors' interests. This is why Bentley's analysis is both important and useful, since she has provided a deeply researched context in which to evaluate the use of the term itself and the interests of those who are seeking to define WMD.

Bentley offers several important insights about the role and use of language by political actors. In understanding that language is politically constructed, subject to manipulation and innovation, the next step is to better grasp the connection between language and behaviour. In this vein, Bentley's research connects to works examining the equally broadly defined “rogue” label by U.S. foreign policy elites.[2] Concepts like WMD and rogue are not politically neutral. Why is it that certain countries are said to be building or possessing WMD while others, often possessing far greater numbers of such weapons, have “arsenals”? This discussion is of particular relevance in the current political

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environment as the WMD concept has shifted from weapon types to encompass a general sense of threat; a threat demanding proactive action to secure US interests.

Notes

[1] Others contend that in several historical international armaments negotiations the inclusion of WMD into the treaty language was a less purposeful and more a formality. See Jacques Hymans (2004) "The Roots of the Washington Threat Consensus," in B. Glad and C. Dolan (eds.) *Striking First: the Preventive War Doctrine and the Reshaping of U.S. Foreign Policy*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan: 34-45.

[2] Examples of this literature include: Michael Klare (1995) *Rogue States and Nuclear Outlaws: America's Search for a New Foreign Policy*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang; Paul Hoyt (2000) The 'Rogue State' Image in American Foreign Policy. *Global Society* 14:297-310; Mary Caproli and Peter F. Trumbore (2005) Rhetoric versus Reality: Rogue States in Interstate Conflict. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49: 770-791.; K.P. O'Reilly (2007) "Perceiving Rogue States: The Use of the 'Rogue State' Concept by U.S. Foreign Policy Elites." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 3: 295-316.

About the author:

K.P. O'Reilly is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and Global Studies at Carroll University. His research on international security, US foreign policy, and decision making has been published in *Foreign Policy Analysis*, *Contemporary Security Policy* and *Political Psychology*.