

# Finger on the Nuclear Button: Gender, Responsibility and Nuclear Custodianship

Written by Shampa Biswas

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/08/24/finger-on-the-nuclear-button-gender-responsibility-and-nuclear-custodianship/>

SHAMPA BISWAS, AUG 24 2016

Recent discussions of the upcoming US Presidential elections have raised questions about Donald Trump's emotional fitness to be in charge of the US nuclear weapons program. This article is an analysis of the gendered assumptions that determine questions of responsible custodianship of nuclear weapons, both within and outside the US. In particular, I examine questions about nuclear weapons possession and use that are precluded by using temperament as the barometer for determining nuclear custodianship.

### A Feminist Moment

What would happen if a female President had her finger on the "nuclear button"<sup>[1]</sup>? A long-held prejudice appeared to automatically disqualify women from running for political leadership of the most powerful nations of the world. If it was the case, as this prejudice held, that women are led by emotion over reason, much is at stake when a woman leader has her finger on that proverbial nuclear button. The entire discourse of nuclear deterrence is, after all, premised on the ability to exercise rationality. What was widely thought to have kept the Cold War "cold" was the rational calculation made by the leaders of the two superpowers that it was irrational to launch a first nuclear strike when you expected a retaliatory devastating second strike. This was the logic underlying the doctrine we know as Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) – a logic that was incumbent on the ability of political leaders to exercise calm, cool, calculating reason at times of enormous stress in order to prevent the annihilation of the world. In other words, you could not afford to be mad if you wanted MAD to work. And women, it was thought, are prone to get mad sometimes, especially at that infamous "time of the month". A prejudice that had long obstructed women from participation in the public sphere – as voters and as workers – seemed to linger even longer when it came to the question of a female US commander-in-chief with access to the codes that could unleash nuclear havoc on the world.<sup>[2]</sup>

So there is much cause for celebration in the fact that recent political discourse has contrasted the two candidates for the US Presidential race, and declared Hillary Clinton, a woman, a far more responsible custodian of nuclear weapons than the blustery and unpredictable Donald Trump. Hillary Clinton herself helped contribute toward subverting this patriarchal discourse, offering up her credentials as a reasoned and seasoned administrator against an overly impulsive opponent. Amidst the celebrations of the historic occasion marking the nomination of the first female candidate of a major political party to be contesting the US Presidential election, Hillary Clinton addressed the Democratic National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio, and evoked this spectre of Donald Trump as President – "Imagine, if you dare imagine, imagine him in the Oval Office facing a real crisis. A man you can bait with a tweet is not a man we can trust with nuclear weapons." Dressed in white to honor the history of the women's suffrage movement, Clinton resorted to that most effective of liberal feminist tactics – arguing, with evidence, that women, too, can be trusted to exercise reason and rationality – but also, and in an ironic twist, unwittingly feminized her seemingly mad and macho opponent by suggesting that a man so led by emotions could not be trusted with nuclear weapons.<sup>[3]</sup> Donald Trump, after all, has fashioned himself as a "man's man" of a Presidential candidate – hinting at his phallic prowess in a Republican primary debate, raising questions about Clinton's fragility as well as her mental stability, and even attributing a female news anchor's challenge of his sexism to her emotional time of the month. For feminists, there is surely some comfort in the way that Hillary Clinton quite literally turned the tables on Trump – inverting the gender binary that had for centuries kept women from public office – in effect, making him the overly-emotional

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candidate on whom one could not depend for responsible custodianship of the nation's nuclear arsenal.

Clinton's charge appeared to have taken on some traction. When asked about her comments at a press conference following the convention, President Obama echoed the concern about Trump's mental fitness that Clinton had expressed. The news media ran with this story, and most major media outlets questioned Donald Trump's emotional "fit" for a job in which he, if elected, would have virtually unchecked power to launch a nuclear attack on whim. Clinton's convention speech brought renewed attention to some of the unconventional and often eyebrow-raising statements Trump had previously made about nuclear weapons possession and use. Going against the non-proliferation agenda of US security policy, Trump had, for instance, suggested that he would not be averse to South Korean, Japanese, or Saudi Arabian nuclearization. Although the campaign denied this, Joe Scarborough of MSNBC reported that an unnamed source had claimed that Trump had made multiple inquiries about nuclear use. Earlier in the year, Trump had said that he would not rule out using nuclear weapons against Europe. And of course, it had appeared quite early on in the campaign season that Donald Trump did not quite get the nuclear triad – the three-pronged approach of US nuclear strategy that relies on air-borne bombers, land-based missiles, and sea-launched submarines – thus demonstrating his overall lack of nuclear policy knowledge. Against this, Hillary Clinton's long experience in foreign policy matters, especially as Secretary of the US Department of State, appeared to inspire confidence in her ability to understand, formulate, and execute sensible policy and sound decision-making. In contrast to Trump, her calm, reasoned statements appear quite measured, and have invited much less scrutiny of Clinton's own relatively hawkish views on nuclear use.<sup>[4]</sup> In effect, Clinton appears to have been ratified as much more responsible than Trump to press that nuclear button, if needed.

Without erasing the significance of this gendered role reversal, I would like to raise a few larger questions. From what kinds of questions does this triumphant moment of feminist achievement deflect? What do we not ask about nuclear custodianship when we ask which of these two current candidates for the US presidency should have their finger on the nuclear button?

## Responsible Custodianship of Nuclear Weapons

The question of responsible custodianship of nuclear weapons has had a long history when considering who should or should not have access to nuclear weapons on the international stage. Indeed, assumptions about rational versus emotional fingers on the nuclear button are in a sense embedded within the nuclear non-proliferation regime. One can begin with the shining star of this regime – the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) – whose primary purpose is to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons beyond a small club of states that had developed and tested a weapon before 1967. That leaves five states – US, Russia, UK, France, and China – not coincidentally the veto-wielding permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, as the only *legitimate* custodians of nuclear weapons.<sup>[5]</sup> Much has been made about Article VI of that treaty that urges (but does not require) this exclusive nuclear club to work towards disarmament, but it is clear that none of the five nuclear weapons states has shown any inclination to eliminate their stockpiles. Rather, each of them considers nuclear weapons an integral aspect of their strategic doctrines. Together they possess over 16,000 nuclear weapons, of which US and Russian stockpiles account for 93 percent. Indeed, occasional gestures toward disarmament that appear to emerge from powerful nuclear states like the US eventually get pushed aside toward an argument for retaining custody of nuclear weapons. In fact, in that other nuclear triad of "disarmament, arms control, and nonproliferation", US policy has entirely ignored disarmament, has put some efforts toward arms control<sup>[6]</sup>, and has focused the bulk of its efforts on non-proliferation.<sup>[7]</sup> Disarmament, in other words, is a goal always deferred in favor of an argument for making sure that the right fingers are on the nuclear button.

Let me provide two examples. President Obama's lofty words that dreamed aloud of a world without nuclear weapons in a famous speech delivered at Prague early in his career were followed shortly after by a trillion-dollars investment in a ten-year modernization of the US nuclear weapons cache. If one were to make any predictions on the basis of Hillary Clinton's foreign policy positions and record, arguably more militaristic than Obama, in a context in which she is being depicted as an heir to the Obama legacy, there is little cause to be optimistic about the possibility of US nuclear disarmament under a Clinton presidency. In a similar vein, the "gang of four" – a group of former politicians and policy makers who were at one times fierce defenders of nuclear weapons and have now emerged as

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an unconventional group of disarmament activists – made a surprisingly strong statement arguing for universal nuclear disarmament, only to walk it back in due course to reiterate the need for the US to maintain its deterrent capacity.<sup>[6]</sup> Why can't the "nuclear five" ever get rid of their weapons? What presumptions about rationality and irrationality as it exists in the world end up servicing an argument for continued US fingers on the nuclear button?

"Nuclear Orientalism" is the term that Hugh Gusterson uses to describe the widely shared perception of third world or non-Western nuclear irrationality vis-à-vis presumptions of the safe and reliable possession of nuclear weapons by Western nuclear democracies (Gusterson, 1999). Gusterson points to the pervasiveness of these characterizations in media coverage and respected journals, as well as amongst politicians, policy makers, and even nuclear scientists – despite all the evidence of safety mishaps and near-accidents among existing nuclear weapons states (Gusterson, 1999). In many such accounts, a feminized third world given over to impulse and passion that cannot be trusted to exercise restraint stands against a (male) West thoroughly in charge and in control.<sup>[9]</sup> A different kind of patriarchal discourse has attributed the possession of nuclear weapons themselves as potent signs of masculine virility, marking the boundaries of a powerful self from weak, feminine others (Cohn, 1987, 1993).<sup>[10]</sup> This sort of emotional attachment to nuclear weapons may, in part, explain why nuclear disarmament is so hard to put into practice. In other words, gendered assumptions thoroughly suffuse nuclear discourse – and the custodianship of nuclear weapons has produced both a kind of masculinist nationalism that generates a deep investment in their retention by existing nuclear weapons and also claims about paternalist guardianship by responsible custodians that keeps such weapons exclusive.

What is important to point out here is that anxieties about nuclear custodianship in the hands of non-Westerners deflects attention from the belligerent foreign policies and practices of powerful nuclear states, sometimes in direct response to proliferation concerns. Indeed, a group of scholars and commentators have explicitly called on the US to not just retain but also fortify its nuclear weapons arsenals to keep at bay the unpredictable, inscrutable and potentially undeterrable stalwarts and rogues of "the second nuclear age. For such thinkers, the functioning of deterrence requires the sort of enlightened Western thinking utterly lacking among unenlightened non-Western states. (Payne, 1996; Bracken, 2012). This, then, become the basis for an argument for not just for keeping US fingers on the nuclear button, but for a far more aggressive policy to seek nuclear primacy, urging the Obama administration to invest in useable nuclear weapons (Liber and Press 2006, 2009, 2011) In the end, it appears that in a world where (gendered) assumptions about non-Western irrationality and unpredictability run so deep, the case for US/Western nuclear weapons possession will always remain compelling, and disarmament can forever be postponed.

But how might US custodianship of nuclear weapons look from the more feminized parts of the world? Thus, for instance, those who have been on the short end of US interventionism in Iraq or Libya recently may not feel particularly comforted by US custody of nuclear weapons, whether the finger on that button be that of Trump or Clinton. Perhaps Iran's desire for nuclear weapons was not just an emotional, prideful response to its declining global status as argued in some quarters, but made rational sense when considered from a realist geostrategic perspective that would see its security needs as a response to its encirclement by US military presence all around its borders. From the perspective of non-nuclear weapons states who are not allies or friends of the mighty US or fans of its muscular foreign policy, the choice between an impulsive male Presidential candidate who is arguing for a more nativist, insular approach to foreign policy and a rational, experienced female Presidential candidate with a record of military interventionism may not seem like much of a choice at all.

In other words, what is occluded by a discourse of fear about the nuclear irrationality of third world or non-Western states is a scrutiny of the alleged "rationality" of the legitimate custodians of nuclear weapons, and especially the US. On what basis should we trust the rational restraint of the only country in the world to have ever used an atomic weapon, that continues to be an aggressive and interventionist global power with the most expansive string of military bases around the world, that spends more on its military than the next twenty countries in the world, and who, disarmament rhetoric aside, continues to possess 4,670 nuclear warheads, far in excess of anything that it needs as a credible deterrent force against any power in the world?<sup>[11]</sup> If temperament wasn't our barometer for responding to the question of who should have his or her finger on the nuclear button, perhaps we can start asking more pointed questions about whether and how much access to nuclear weapons any US president should have. I would like to

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raise three such questions here:

- Rather than focus on the madness of a political aspirant for President, we might be better served by asking how mad it is that the leader of an aggressive state with such enormous killing power has no effective checks on the use of nuclear weapons. That the US President can launch a nuclear attack unilaterally, whether to attack or retaliate, without any legal requirement to check with Congress or even the State Department is an issue that needs vigorous public discussion.
- Rather than evince shock at Donald Trump's questions about why the US cannot use nuclear weapons, perhaps it may be useful to discuss why the US, unlike some other nuclear weapons states, refuses to adopt a "no first-use" policy. Some have urged President Obama to adopt such a policy before he departs from office in a few months.
- Rather than rest assured that a calm and collected Hillary Clinton has her finger on the nuclear button, perhaps we need to ask why the US has so many nuclear weapons in the first place, many on hair-trigger alert, and how much damage, in human lives and resources, continues to be wrought just from that possession. The dangers of nuclear weapons lie not just in their possible future use, but also in their enormous opportunity costs in the present and the toxicity their production and maintenance discharges in the bodies of workers and the environments of communities that house nuclear projects far into the future (Masco, 2006; Hecht, 2012; Krupar, 2013).

In many ways, a focus on temperament is a distraction from the really important policy issues that pertain to the US nuclear weapons program – issues on which the Presidential candidates have had very little of substance to say. Unfortunately, the small window to discuss such issues that appeared to have opened as a result of Clinton's convention speech and some of Trump's outrageous comments was a truly missed opportunity to open up a serious debate about the role of nuclear weapons in a post-Cold War world, the ethics of maintaining such a lethal force with long term toxic consequences, and the possibilities for nuclear disarmament in such a world. Fortunately, there is much we can learn from feminist theory in asking these kinds of more serious and consequential questions (Cohn and Ruddick, 2004).

## Conclusion

There is considerable reason to worry about Donald Trump as US president with easy access to one of the deadliest forces in the world. But neither should we rest assured with Hillary Clinton's fingers on the nuclear button. Indeed, if we set aside discussions of (gendered) temperamental suitability to exercise nuclear control, we might be able to focus much more on Hillary Clinton's own foreign policy record, and even more so on the larger imperial history of a United States that now stands in a post-Cold War world as a singularly powerful state with a mighty war machine at its disposal. If we set aside our expectations for women leaders to meet the masculinist standards of state leadership – whether that be demonstrating the requisite level of aggression or proving the ability to exercise rationality – perhaps we may begin to ask political candidates for public office much more substantive feminist questions on the possibilities for disarmament, the conditions for peace, and the pathways to justice.

## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> The so-called "nuclear button" is actually a combination of two items – a "football" is suitcase that accompanies the US president which has a list of all possible nuclear targets and procedures for launching an attack and the "biscuit" is a card with verification codes carried on the person of the president.

<sup>[2]</sup> Carol Cohn (1987) offers the best and most devastating critique of the gendered language of deterrence discourse, demonstrating in the process how much emotion is at play in the alleged rationality underpinning the logic of deterrence.

<sup>[3]</sup> It is said that former US President Richard Nixon subscribed to the "madman theory" – that it would deter adversaries if they believed that he was a volatile, mad, irrational leader best not to provoke (Sagan, 2003). There is no indication that Trump's seeming madness comes from any such strategic calculation.

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<sup>[4]</sup> There is no question that women face many structural and normative barriers in the ascent to political power. This may make women heads of state adopt overly aggressive and militaristic foreign policy postures in order to be credentialed as serious contenders within muscular foreign policy establishments. Historical examples include Margaret Thatcher of UK, Golda Meir of Israel, and Indira Gandhi of India, among others (Enloe, 1989; Tickner, 2001).

<sup>[5]</sup> There are four other states that possess nuclear weapons. Of these, three – Israel, India, and Pakistan – have never signed the NPT. The fourth – North Korea – was once a signatory of the NPT but eventually withdrew. Israel has never publicly declared its nuclear weapons program. The NPT does not recognize any of these states as nuclear weapons states.

<sup>[6]</sup> Such as in President Obama's successful negotiation of the New START treaty with Russia in his first term as president.

<sup>[7]</sup> Such as in the crowning glory of President Obama's foreign policy record – the successful negotiation of a nuclear deal with Iran in 2015.

<sup>[8]</sup> The “gang of four” consists of two former secretaries of state (George Shultz and Henry Kissinger), one former secretary of Defense (William J. Perry) and one former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Sam Nunn). Their now widely circulated *Wall Street Journal* op-ed column first appeared in January 2007. Their reformed position appeared in 2011.

<sup>[9]</sup> There is certainly a sound argument to be made about states that do not have the requisite infrastructure of control over the production and possession of dangerous and toxic weapons (which would include both first and third world states), but that is very different from the prejudices about intemperate third world guardians of nuclear weapons that circulate in the kinds of accounts I am referring to here.

<sup>[10]</sup> This is a form of nationalism that has unsurprisingly accompanied the desire for nuclear weapons amongst potential aspirants, too. Anand Patwardhan's documentary *Jang Aur Aman* (War and Peace) documents the masculinist nationalism that accompanied the 1998 Indian nuclear test. In an interesting gendered reversal of its own kind, in Pakistan, then (female) opposition leader Benazir Bhutto had reportedly sent bracelets to (male) prime minister Nawaz Sharif to suggest that the Indian nuclear tests had emasculated Pakistan, goading him to assert Pakistani masculinity by testing its own weapons in response (as it did shortly thereafter).

<sup>[11]</sup> Many have argued that if deterrence was the only objective of US nuclear weapons, it could make do with not just a much smaller stockpile but also the elimination of one (land-based) and possibly two (including air-based) of the three legs of the nuclear triad.

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## About the author:

**Shampa Biswas** is Paul Garrett Professor of Political Science at Whitman College. Her teaching and research interests are in postcolonial International Relations, international security, globalization, nationalism, and gender. She is the author of *Nuclear Desire: Power and the Postcolonial Nuclear Order* (2014), co-editor of *International Relations and States of Exception: Margins, Peripheries, and Excluded Bodies* (2010), and *Torture: Power, Democracy, and the Human Body* (2011), and has published numerous articles.