

# Nuclear Weapons as the Currency of Power: Deconstructing the Fetishism of Force

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# Introduction: Research Question

Does the existence of nuclear technology mean that  
Great Powers have no choice but to  
practice nuclear deterrence?

# Introduction: Thesis Statement

No, nuclear deterrence is not inevitable.

It is a practice that we created and therefore it is a practice that we can change.

# Introduction: The Theory of Nuclear Fetishism

Nuclear weapons function as a currency of power for states because they are the mature expression of the fetishism of force.

# The Practice of Fetishism

- The divine power of a king



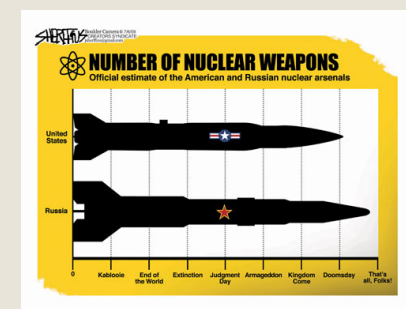
- *Fetissos* (religious objects) as protection against threat



- Gold as the embodiment of wealth

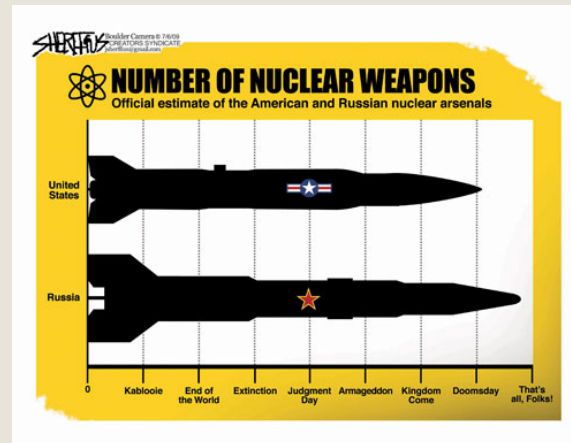


- Nuclear weapons as the embodiment of power

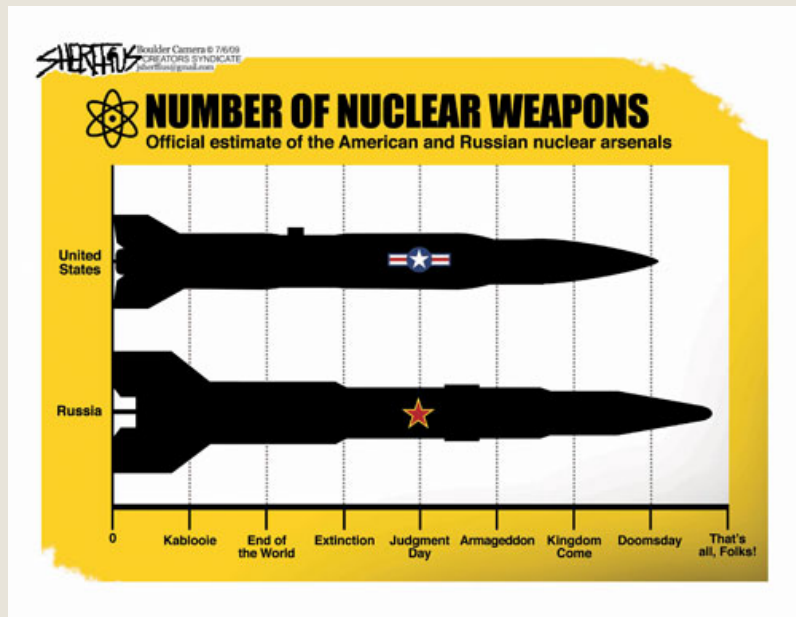


# Fetish Objects are the Material Embodiment of a Social Value

- *A practice in which a physical object is treated as if it were the material embodiment of a social value.*
- The practice of treating weaponry as if it were an embodiment of power.



# The Currency of Power



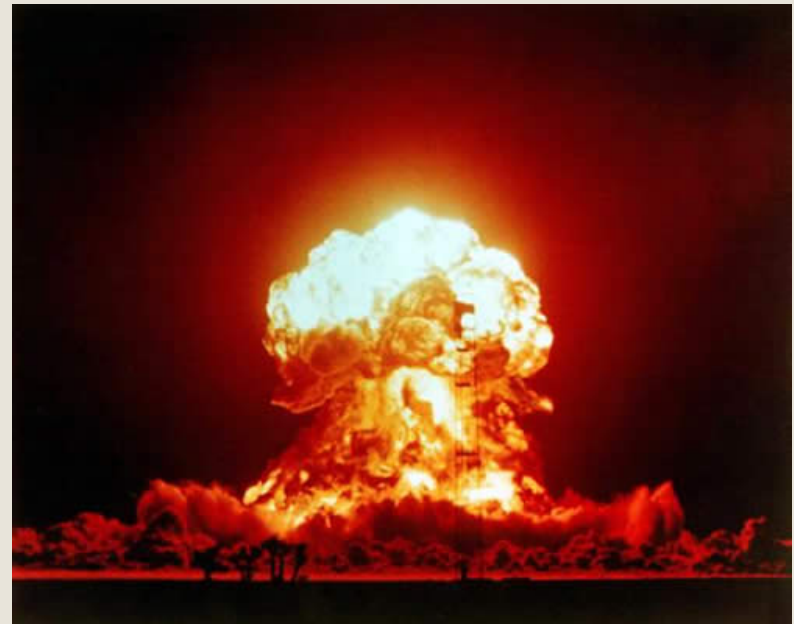
# Use-Value vs. Exchange/Threat-Value



Use-Value

# Use-Value vs. Exchange/Threat-Value

Threat-Value



# Deterrence

- The discouragement of the initiation of military aggression by the threat (implicit or explicit) of applying military force in response to the aggression.

Glenn Snyder

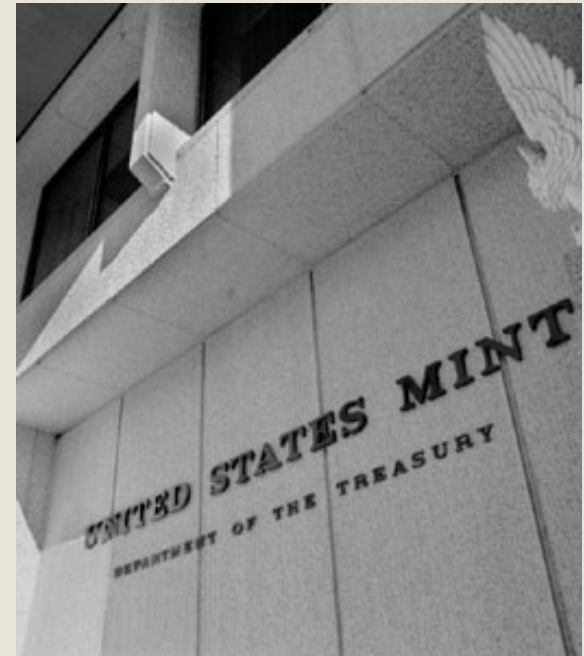
*Deterrence and Defense, 1961*

# Use-Value vs. Exchange/Threat-Value

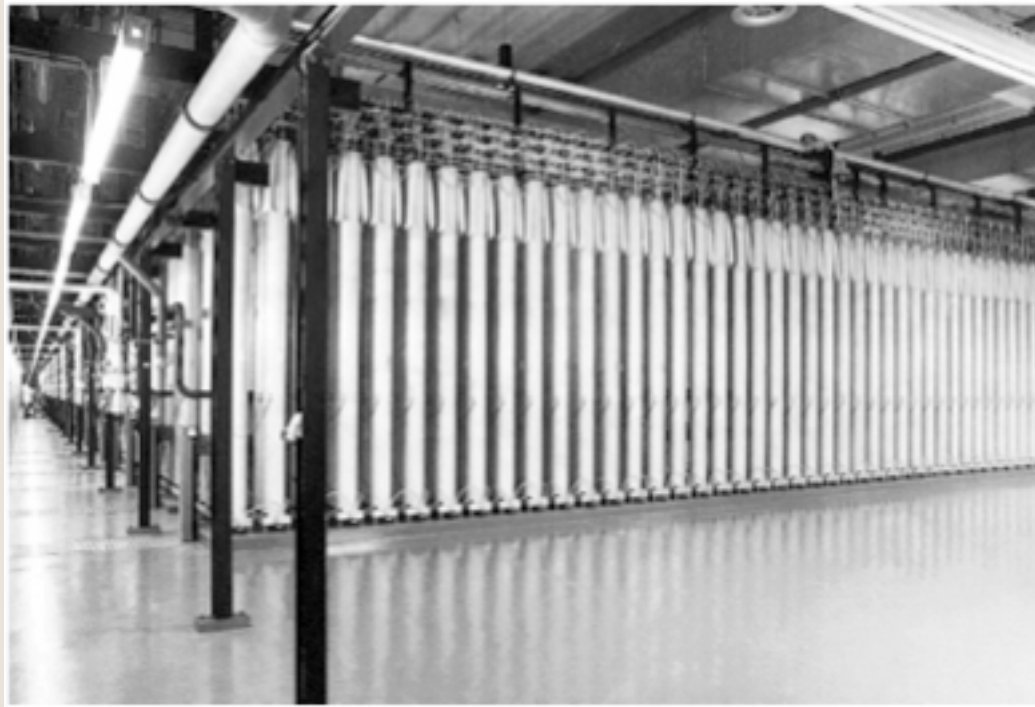


Use-Value

# Nuclear Weapons are Durable (and Sublime)



# Nuclear Weapons are Scarce



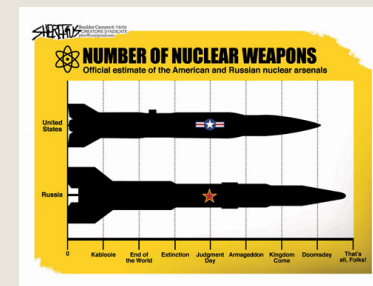
Separating U-235 from U-238 in centrifuges

# The Fetishism of Force



# Fetish Objects are Historically Specific

- *The value of the object is created by a certain order of social relations and therefore serves to reproduce that order.*
- The value of the nuclear weapons is maintained by the system of deterrence as codified in the Non-Proliferation Regime.
- That order was fixed as of January 1, 1967.



# The Mature Fetish Form

## **Commodity Form**

Barter → Money → Capitalism

## **Fetishism of Force**

Air Power → Nuclear Weapons → Nuclear Order

# The Role of Belief

- “The problem is that in their social activity itself, in what they are *doing*, they are *acting* as if money, in its material reality, is the immediate embodiment of wealth as such. They are fetishists in practice, not in theory.”



Slavoj Žižek

*The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 1989

# The Role of Belief

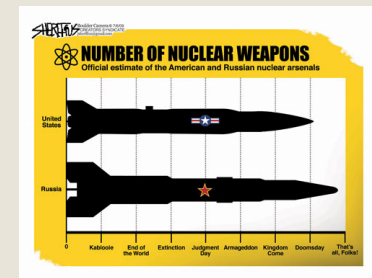


# Fetish Objects Act

- *It acts on individuals to establish status, protect against threat, and promote health and well-being.*
- Nuclear Weapon States are granted privilege and authority that other states are not.



- Nuclear weapons act on the body of the state to provide security.



# Policy Implications

- Terrorists are unlikely to fetishize nuclear weapons
- UN Security Council reform, and enforcing disarmament under the NPT
- International Fuel Bank and the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty
- Information about current costs (human, environmental, financial)

# Social Science Implications

- Why do some states proliferate and others don't?
  - Nuclear fetishism provides incentives for nuclear proliferation among states on the margins of the current order.
- Why have nuclear weapons never been used in combat since WWII?
  - Use devalues the threat-value, so fetishism provides a disincentive for use.

# Fetishism vs. Symbolism

- Fetishism is a pattern of human behavior organized with respect to a material object.
- Symbolism is referential.
- Nationalists do not require a flag, but capitalists require a commodity.

# The Practice of Fetishism

Fetish comes from the Portuguese word '*fetisso.*' Portuguese traders in the 16<sup>th</sup> century coined the term to describe the trivial objects Africans accepted in exchange for gold.



Portuguese musketeer in 16<sup>th</sup> century military clothing. Benin, Nigeria 18<sup>th</sup> century AD

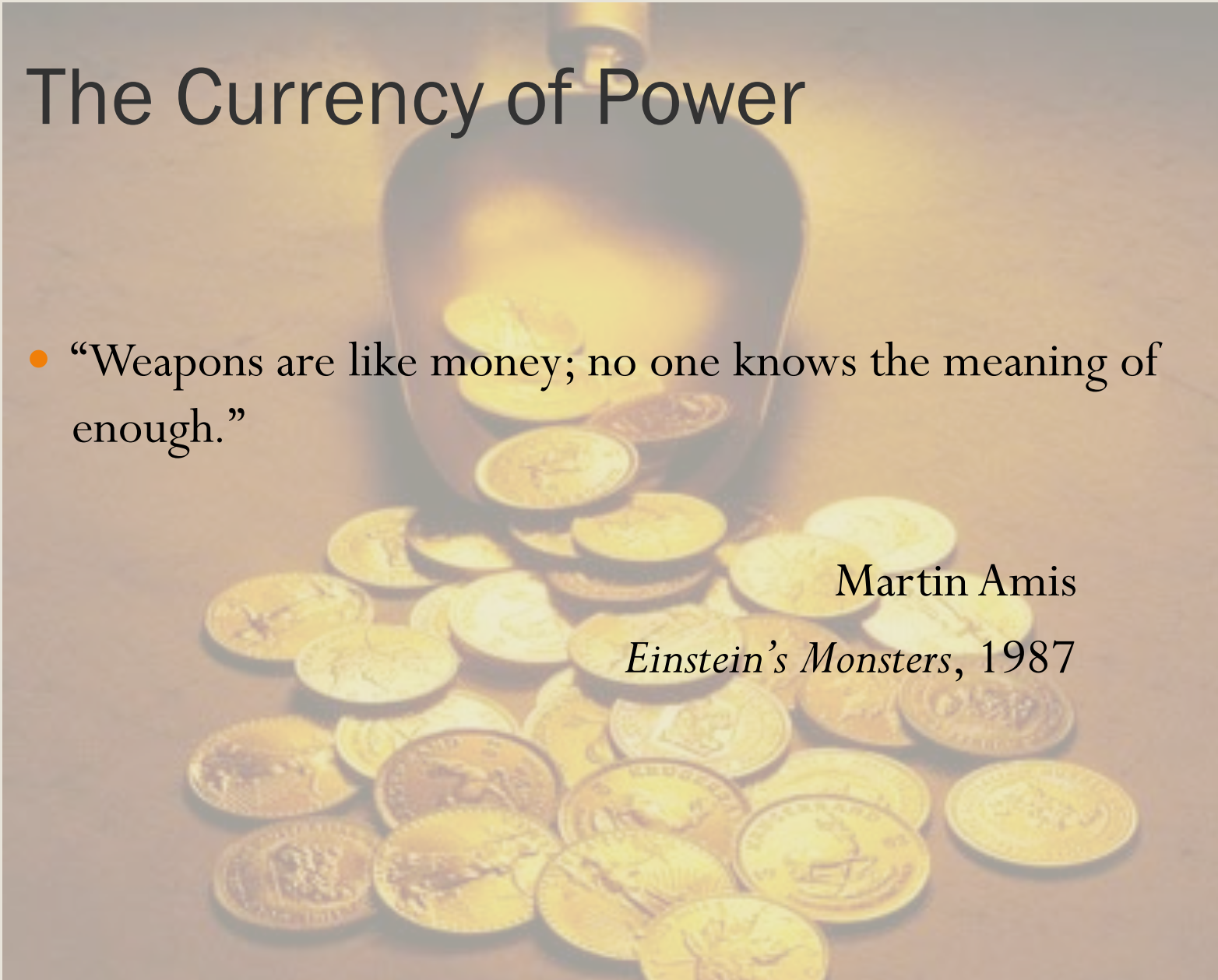


Saint Vincent, the patron saint of Portugal and of navigation. Coin introduced in 1555.



Fetish Belt, Ghana

# The Currency of Power

A photograph of a funnel pouring gold coins onto a surface. The coins are scattered in a pile in front of the funnel. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

- “Weapons are like money; no one knows the meaning of enough.”

Martin Amis

*Einstein's Monsters*, 1987

# Material Embodiment of Power

- A methodology becomes a tacit ontology

	Swerve	Straight
Swerve	Tie, Tie	Lose, Win
Straight	Win, Lose	Crash, Crash

*Fig. 1: A payoff matrix of Chicken*