For the last decade, the United States and its European allies have worked diligently to block an Iranian nuclear program that they fear will enable Tehran to acquire nuclear weapons and roil Middle East security relationships. Yet the roots of Iran’s nuclear research efforts can be traced back 60 years, when Washington first provided the Shah’s regime with nuclear technology and materials under President Dwight Eisenhower’s Atoms for Peace program. Mara Drogan examines the labors of national security policymakers to produce a concrete policy to fulfill the President’s oratorical promise of sharing non-military nuclear technology with the rest of the world. She contends that behind Atoms for Peace lurked the nuclear imperative, “a pervasive mindset” which “stated that the expansion and use of nuclear technology for military and civilian purposes was inevitable and necessary, and that the United States must maintain its lead in the nuclear field, regardless of economic costs, technological complications, or questions of health, safety, and security” (949). In the case of Atoms for Peace, however, she argues that it became an “invented imperative” because “the United States stirred international desires for civilian nuclear power” and “then claimed it was being forced to meet the demand for nuclear power by international pressure” (950).

The article’s strengths lay in its tracing of the administration’s struggle to articulate a coherent policy in the wake of Eisenhower’s December 1953 speech that overstated United States (U.S.) capabilities in civilian nuclear technologies. The president latched onto the idea of emphasizing the peaceful atom in the wake of the first hydrogen bomb tests and amidst calls from the Panel of Consultants on Disarmament to be candid with the world about the devastating effects of this new class of nuclear weapons. The group consisted of physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, President of the Carnegie Institution Vannevar Bush, Deputy Director of Central Intelligence Allen W. Dulles, President of Dartmouth College John Dickey, and President of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace Joseph E. Johnston. Secretary of State Dean Acheson had convened the panel in the waning months of the Truman administration, and its final report had been passed on to the incoming administration for final action. Eisenhower, however, stood the committee’s recommendations on their head and sought instead to obscure the new military reality and focus on the constructive aspects of nuclear science. The President wanted Atoms for Peace to function as a piece of “psychological warfare” that put pressure on the Soviet Union to react and counter U.S. offers, and he ultimately saw his speech at best as a “catalyst to
some future policy, not a statement of policy itself” (950). As a result of his attempts at secrecy, only a “small handful of Eisenhower’s advisors” had prior knowledge of the speech’s contents, and no one with any specific expertise in nuclear physics or engineering had been asked to vet the text in advance (952). The President’s hope that his call for international cooperation on peaceful uses for nuclear science would place the Soviet Union on the defensive boomeranged, moreover, and the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Henry Cabot Lodge, soon found himself under pressure to elaborate on Eisenhower’s pledge to share American technologies and materials. Over the course of the next two years, lower-level officials in the national security bureaucracy cobbled together a policy that both tried to meet international demand for U.S. aid while recognizing that efficient and affordable nuclear power production lay some distance in the future. Yet they feared that if they did not put forward a concrete plan, the Soviet Union might supplant the United States as the key supplier of civilian nuclear technologies throughout the globe. Washington also felt pressure to emphasize peaceful uses for nuclear science after U.S. hydrogen bomb tests in 1954 sparked worries about the hazards of radioactive fallout.

Drogan makes an important contribution to the field’s understanding of how the Atoms for Peace program emerged through her detailed analysis of these internal debates. Other works have examined the origins of Atoms for Peace and its role in Eisenhower’s foreign policy, and so Drogan sees no reason to give fine-grained attention to those issues. In prior works, some scholars have erroneously labeled the program a disarmament measure or an effort at stemming nuclear proliferation.1 It was neither, and Drogan acknowledges this in her discussion of its evolution. The program actually threatened to increase access to the knowledge and materials necessary to produce nuclear weapons. Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov warned Secretary of State John Foster Dulles about this danger in one of their first discussions about the President’s offer. Preventing civilian nuclear aid from being diverted to military uses was one of the issues that national security policymakers struggled with after 1953 and ultimately failed to resolve. In the end, Eisenhower’s pledge to share peaceful nuclear technologies and materials likely accelerated the development of programs designed to produce nuclear weapons.

One leaves the article impressed with the depth of the author’s research and appreciative of the new details uncovered, but less convinced about the ‘nuclear imperative’ as an interpretive concept. Drogan’s account of the efforts to implement Atoms for Peace actually seems to weaken her claims that policymakers saw the expansion of access to nuclear technologies as “inevitable and necessary” (949). Eisenhower and Lewis Strauss, the Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission and a key advisor to the President on nuclear issues, both denied the need for haste in moving forward with a nuclear aid program (954-955). Any examination of Atoms for Peace also needs to take into account congressional authority in nuclear policy. Since 1946, the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy (JCAE) had asserted and aggressively protected its right to question and block executive actions regarding civilian and military uses for nuclear materials. Deep doubts circulated among its members about the wisdom of aiding other countries, and congressional animosity toward multilateral nuclear cooperation proved as fatal to Eisenhower’s original plans to create an international pool of fissionable material as Soviet intransigence had been. The Atomic Energy Act of 1946 that established the Committee also included restricted data provisions that banned the sharing of U.S.

nuclear technology and materials with any other state or even private companies at home. The JCAE conceded to loosening the restricted data provisions when it passed the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, but it also granted itself the right to review any agreements to share civilian technologies with other countries. The strict requirements for nuclear sharing it had drafted meant that the administration had to rely on individually negotiated bilateral agreements to share U.S. materials and technologies. Continuing reticence and a penchant for secrecy and exclusion, more than unyielding pressure to move forward, emerge as important countervailing forces when one examines congressional attitudes and actions toward nuclear sharing efforts.

A broader theme that emerges from Drogan’s account that receives less emphasis is Eisenhower’s haphazard policymaking. Much ink has been expended extolling Eisenhower as a subtle and even brilliant leader, but in nuclear policy the evidence often contradicts that portrait. As Drogan amply documents, the President plunged forward with Atoms for Peace with no advance staff work and little sense of the challenges faced the construction of nuclear power plants. He then left lower-level officials to clean up his mess and often dismissed their pessimism regarding the obstacles to fulfilling his promises. One cannot attribute these errors to his inexperience in the Oval Office. Late in his presidency, he saddled his successors with an ill-conceived scheme to share nuclear weapons with the United States’ European allies. This so-called multilateral force would have featured American-manufactured submarines or surface ships equipped with nuclear missiles and the crews would have been composed of sailors of multiple nationalities. Announced in 1960, Eisenhower’s proposal received little attention from the President before he left office, but it bedeviled both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson for the next seven years and its failure to become reality precipitated the fall of Chancellor Ludwig Erhard’s government in West Germany. Like Atoms for Peace and Eisenhower’s initial vision of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the multilateral force ran afoul of the JCAE and logistical obstacles to its implementation.

As the case of Iran demonstrates, the consequences of Eisenhower’s December 1953 United Nations speech still reverberate over sixty years later. Drogan’s focus on U.S. efforts to disseminate nuclear technology around the globe makes a valuable contribution to historians’ understanding of nuclear proliferation and the U.S. role in encouraging it. Eisenhower’s decision to promote Atoms for Peace is a crucial case study and a warning about what happens when policymakers concoct policies in a secret without thought given to the possible negative consequences.

Shane J. Maddock is Professor of History at Stonehill College in Easton, Massachusetts. His publications include Nuclear Apartheid (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), (co-author) American Foreign Relations: A History 8th ed. (Cengage, 2013), and (editor and contributor) The Nuclear Age (Houghton Mifflin, 2001).

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