

First Use Policies and the Risk of Escalation

"My own belief is that the United States already has a de-facto no first use policy and that it would be beneficial to declare 'no first use' as official U.S. doctrine and demonstrate to other nuclear power states that our primary goal is deterrence, not domination."

—Former United States Secretary of Defense William Perry

The United States currently reserves the option to use nuclear weapons first. If the United States did use nuclear weapons first, a nuclear-armed adversary is likely to retaliate with nuclear weapons, and a conflict could escalate into a full-scale nuclear war. We can protect this nation and our allies without threatening to start a nuclear war.

THREATENING TO USE NUCLEAR WEAPONS FIRST INCREASES THE CHANCES OF A NUCLEAR CONFLICT

- Retaining the option to use nuclear weapons first assumes we can actually win a nuclear war. This policy is at odds with President Reagan's assertion that "a nuclear war can never be won and so must never be fought."
 - The first use of nuclear weapons against a nuclear-armed state will almost certainly result in nuclear retaliation and escalation.
 - Without a No First Use policy, our nuclear-armed adversaries have reason to fear that the United States might launch a nuclear attack that could destroy some or all of their own nuclear weapons and prevent them from responding. They might feel pressure to use their nuclear weapons early in a crisis, even if they misunderstand the intention behind a U.S. action.
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WE DO NOT NEED TO START A NUCLEAR WAR TO PROTECT OUR NATION OR OUR ALLIES

- U.S. conventional forces are second to none. U.S. and allied conventional forces are capable of deterring and responding to any and all non-nuclear threats.
 - The U.S. nuclear arsenal is robust and will continue to deter adversaries from using nuclear weapons against us or our allies.
 - A No First Use policy would not preclude the use of nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack on the United States or our allies.
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THE AMERICAN PUBLIC DOES NOT WANT TO START A NUCLEAR WAR

According to a YouGov/Huffington Post poll, 50% of Americans believe that we should only use nuclear weapons to respond to a nuclear attack, and 17% believe we should never use them. In 2017, Vice President Joe Biden supported this view when he said he and President Barack Obama were "...confident that we can deter—and defend ourselves and our allies against—non-nuclear threats through other means."

LEGISLATION RELATED TO A NO FIRST USE POLICY

- HR 2603 (Smith)/S 1219 (Warren): The No First Use Act would make it the policy of the United States not to use nuclear weapons first.
- HR 669 (Lieu)/S 1148 (Markey): The Restricting First Use Act require Congress to authorize the first use of nuclear weapons in a declaration of war.