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STS Summer Research College
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Project Title: Ethics, Nuclear Weapons, and Public Opinion

Participants:
- Tia Sewell: Undergraduate Research Assistant
- Cassia Ferguson: Undergraduate Research Assistant
- Alicia Chen: Masters Student, Research Assistant
- Katie McKinney: Full-time Research Assistant
- Scott Sagan: Professor of Political Science, Senior Fellow at Stanford’s Center for International Security and Cooperation and the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies

Abstract:
This summer, the research team under Professor Sagan supported his work conducting a survey experiment aimed to investigate the effects that different primes had on influencing the public’s support for the use of nuclear weapons. The survey, designed by Professor Sagan and his collaborator, Dartmouth Professor Ben Valentino, included a hypothetical scenario where Iran and the United States are in a war, and the US is deciding whether or not to use a nuclear weapon to end this war. The survey assigned subjects to one of eighteen different versions of the scenario, each including a unique “prime” that led subjects to consider factors such as the environmental impact, the impact of radiation, and the morality and legality of nuclear weapons use. Analysis of the responses to these primes will allow Sagan and Valentino to assess what factors reduce Americans public support for nuclear weapons use.

The research team that I work with has contributed to this survey experiment through extensive proofreading of the survey contents. We presented some of the versions of the hypothetical scenario to a group of students and professors affiliated with the Summer Research College (SRC) Program. After running a mock survey with the SRC participants during our presentation, we discussed the findings with Professors Sagan and Valentino.

While the survey was being conducted, our research team has been coding previous answers to related surveys conducted by Sagan and Valentino. This allowed us to gain experience with analyzing results and categorizing participants’ responses. We also assisted Professor Sagan by writing memos related to the theory that undergirds this survey. Our research team recently received the results from the new survey, and the responses suggested that when subjects were
primed to think about the long-term environmental effects of nuclear weapons or that nuclear weapons may set a precedent in the global community, their support for nuclear weapons use significantly decreased compared to subjects who read a baseline version that neither mentioned the environment nor precedent-setting.

In addition to the survey, Professor Sagan has been writing a paper with Professor Weiner from the law school that seeks to connect the legal and nuclear strategy worlds. In support of his work, I have been researching the legal aspects of nuclear weapons and writing memos to help provide Professor Sagan with more information on the sources he uses and the topic as a whole.

Images:
If you had to choose between launching the nuclear strike against the Iranian city or continuing the ground war against Iran, which option would you prefer?