

# Doomsday Redux: The Most Dangerous Weapon Ever Rolls Off the Nuclear Assembly Line

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In-depth Report: [Nuclear War](#)

*Last month, the National Nuclear Security Administration (formerly the Atomic Energy Commission) announced that the first of a new generation of strategic nuclear weapons had [rolled off](#) the assembly line at its Pantex nuclear weapons plant in the panhandle of Texas. That warhead, the W76-2, is designed to be fitted to a submarine-launched Trident missile, a weapon with a range of more than 7,500 miles. By September, an undisclosed number of warheads will be [delivered](#) to the Navy for deployment.*

What makes this particular nuke new is the fact that it carries a [far smaller](#) destructive payload than the thermonuclear monsters the Trident has been hosting for decades — not the equivalent of about 100 kilotons of TNT as previously, but of five kilotons. [According to](#) Stephen Young of the Union of Concerned Scientists, the W76-2 will yield “only” about one-third of the devastating power of the weapon that the *Enola Gay*, an American B-29 bomber, dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Yet that very shrinkage of the power to devastate is precisely what makes this nuclear weapon potentially the most dangerous ever manufactured. Fulfilling the Trump administration’s quest for nuclear-war-fighting “flexibility,” it isn’t designed as a deterrent against another country launching its nukes; it’s designed to be used. This is the weapon that could make the previously “[unthinkable](#)” [thinkable](#).

There have long been “low-yield” nuclear weapons in the arsenals of the nuclear powers, including ones on cruise missiles, “air-drop bombs” (carried by planes), and even nuclear artillery shells — weapons designated as “tactical” and intended to be used in the confines of a specific battlefield or in a regional theater of war. The vast majority of them were, however, eliminated in the nuclear arms reductions that followed the end of the Cold War, a scaling-down by both the United States and Russia that would be quietly greeted with relief by battlefield commanders, those actually responsible for the potential use of such ordnance who understood its self-destructive absurdity.

Ranking some weapons as “low-yield” based on their destructive energy always depended on a distinction that reality made meaningless (once damage from radioactivity and atmospheric fallout was taken into account along with the unlikelihood that only one such weapon would be used). In fact, the elimination of tactical nukes represented a hard-boiled confrontation with the iron law of escalation, another commander’s insight — that any use of such a weapon against a similarly armed adversary would likely ignite an inevitable chain of nuclear escalation whose end point was barely imaginable. One side was never going to take a hit without responding in kind, launching a process that could rapidly spiral toward an apocalyptic exchange. “Limited nuclear war,” in other words, was a fool’s fantasy and gradually came to be universally acknowledged as such. No longer, unfortunately.

Unlike tactical weapons, intercontinental strategic nukes were designed to directly target the far-off homeland of an enemy. Until now, their extreme destructive power (so many times greater than that inflicted on Hiroshima) made it impossible to imagine genuine scenarios for their use that would be practically, not to mention morally, acceptable. It was exactly to remove that practical inhibition — the moral one seemed not to count — that the Trump administration recently [began the process](#) of withdrawing from the Cold War-era Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, while rolling a new “limited” weapon off the assembly line and so altering the Trident system. With these acts, there can be little question that humanity is entering a perilous [second nuclear age](#).

That peril lies in the way a 70-year-old inhibition that undoubtedly saved the planet is potentially being shelved in a new world of supposedly “[usable](#)” nukes. Of course, a weapon with one-third the destructive power of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, where as many as 150,000 died, might kill 50,000 people in a similar attack before escalation even began. Of such nukes, former Secretary of State George Shultz, who was at President Ronald Reagan’s elbow when Cold War-ending arms control negotiations climaxed, [said](#),

“A nuclear weapon is a nuclear weapon. You use a small one, then you go to a bigger one. I think nuclear weapons are nuclear weapons and we need to draw the line there.”

### How Close to Midnight?

Until now, it’s been an anomaly of the nuclear age that some of the fiercest critics of such weaponry were drawn from among the very people who created it. The emblem of that is the [Bulletin of Atomic Scientists](#), a bimonthly journal founded after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by veteran scientists from the Manhattan Project, which created the first nuclear weapons. (Today, that magazine’s sponsors include [14 Nobel Laureates](#).) Beginning in 1947, the *Bulletin’s* cover has functioned annually as a kind of nuclear alarm, featuring a so-called Doomsday Clock, its minute hand always approaching “midnight” (defined as the moment of nuclear catastrophe).

In that first year, the hand was positioned at seven minutes to midnight. In 1949, after the Soviet Union acquired its first atomic bomb, it inched up to three minutes before midnight. Over the years, it has been reset every January to register waxing and waning levels of nuclear jeopardy. In 1991, after the end of the Cold War, it was set back to 17 minutes and then, for a few hope-filled years, the clock disappeared altogether.

It came back in 2005 at seven minutes to midnight. In 2007, the scientists began factoring climate degradation into the assessment and the hands moved inexorably forward. By 2018, after a year of Donald Trump, it clocked in at two minutes to midnight, a shrill alarm meant to signal a return to the greatest peril ever: the two-minute level reached only once before, [65 years earlier](#). Last month, within days of the announced manufacture of the first W76-2, the *Bulletin’s* cover for 2019 was [unveiled](#), still at that desperate two-minute mark, aka the edge of doom.

To fully appreciate how precarious our situation is today, the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* implicitly invites us to return to that other two-minutes-before-midnight moment. If the manufacture of a new low-yield nuclear weapon marks a decisive pivot back toward jeopardy, consider it an irony that the last such moment involved the manufacture of the

extreme opposite sort of nuke: a “super” weapon, as it was then called, or a hydrogen bomb. That was in 1953 and what may have been the most fateful turn in the nuclear story until now had just occurred.

After the Soviets exploded their first atomic bomb in 1949, the United States embarked on a crash program to build a far more powerful nuclear weapon. Having been decommissioned after World War II, the Pantex plant was reactivated and has been the main source of American nukes ever since.

The atomic bomb is a fission weapon, meaning the nuclei of atoms are split into parts whose sum total weighs less than the original atoms, the difference having been transformed into energy. A hydrogen bomb uses the intense heat generated by that “fission” (hence *thermonuclear*) as a trigger for a vastly more powerful “fusion,” or combining, of elements, which results in an even larger loss of mass being transformed into explosive energy of a previously unimagined sort. One H-bomb generates explosive force 100 to 1,000 times the destructive power of the Hiroshima bomb.

Given a kind of power that humans once only imagined in the hands of the gods, key former Manhattan Project scientists, including Enrico Fermi, James Conant, and J. Robert Oppenheimer, [firmly opposed](#) the development of such a new weapon as a potential threat to the human species. The Super Bomb would be, in Conant’s word, “genocidal.” Following the lead of those scientists, members of the Atomic Energy Commission recommended — by a vote of three to two — against developing such a fusion weapon, but President Truman ordered it done anyway.

In 1952, as the first H-bomb test approached, still-concerned atomic scientists proposed that the test be indefinitely postponed to avert a catastrophic “super” competition with the Soviets. They suggested that an approach be made to Moscow to mutually limit thermonuclear development only to research on, not actual testing of, such weaponry, especially since none of this could truly be done in secret. A fusion bomb’s test explosion would be readily detectable by the other side, which could then proceed with its own testing program. The scientists urged Moscow and Washington to draw just the sort of arms control line that the two nations would indeed agree to many years later.

At the time, the United States had the initiative. An out-of-control arms race with the potential accumulation of thousands of such weapons on both sides had not yet really begun. In 1952, the United States numbered its atomic arsenal in the low hundreds; the Soviet Union in the dozens. (Even those numbers, of course, already offered a vision of an Armageddon-like global war.) President Truman considered the proposal to indefinitely postpone the test. It was then backed by figures like Vannevar Bush, who headed the Office of Scientific Research and Development, which had overseen the wartime Manhattan Project. Scientists like him already grasped the lesson that would only slowly dawn on policymakers — that every advance in the atomic capability of one of the superpowers would inexorably lead the other to match it, *ad infinitum*. The title of the bestselling James Jones novel of that moment caught the feeling perfectly: *From Here to Eternity*.

In the last days of his presidency, however, Truman decided against such an indefinite postponement of the test — against, that is, a break in the nuke-accumulation momentum that might well have changed history. On November 1, 1952, the first H-bomb — “Mike” — was [detonated](#) on an island in the Pacific. It had 500 times more lethal force than the bomb that obliterated Hiroshima. With a fireball more than three miles wide, not only did it destroy

the three-story structure built to house it but also the entire island of Elugelab, as well as parts of several nearby islands.

In this way, the thermonuclear age began and the assembly line at that same Pantex plant really started to purr. Less than 10 years later, the United States had 20,000 nukes, mostly H-bombs; Moscow, fewer than 2,000. And three months after that first test, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* moved that hand on its still new clock to two minutes before midnight.

### A Madman-Theory Version of the World

It may seem counterintuitive to compare the manufacture of what's called a "mini-nuke" to the creation of the "super" almost six decades ago, but honestly, what meaning can "mini" really have when we're talking about nuclear war? The point is that, as in 1952, so in 2019 another era-shaping threshold is being crossed at the very same weapons plant in the high plains country of the Texas Panhandle, where so many instruments of mayhem have been created. Ironically, because the H-bomb was eventually understood to be precisely what the dissenting scientists had claimed it was — a genocidal weapon — pressures against its use proved insurmountable during almost four decades of savage East-West hostility. Today, the Trident-mounted W76-2 could well have quite a different effect — its first act of destruction potentially being the obliteration of the long-standing, post-Hiroshima and [Nagasaki](#) taboo against nuclear use. In other words, so many years after the island of Elugelab was wiped from the face of the Earth, the "absolute weapon" is finally being normalized.

With President Trump [expunging](#) the theoretical from Richard Nixon's "madman theory" — that former president's conviction that an opponent should fear an American leader was so unstable he might actually push the nuclear button — what is to be done? Once again, nuke-skeptical scientists, who have grasped the essential problems in the nuclear conundrum with crystal clarity for three quarters of a century, are pointing the way. In 2017, the Union of Concerned Scientists, together with Physicians for Social Responsibility, [launched](#) Back from the Brink: The Call to Prevent Nuclear War, "a national grassroots initiative seeking to fundamentally change U.S. nuclear weapons policy and lead us away from the dangerous path we are on."

Engaging a broad coalition of civic organizations, municipalities, religious groups, educators, and scientists, it aims to lobby government bodies at every level, to raise the nuclear issue in every forum, and to engage an ever-wider group of citizens in pressing for change in American nuclear policy. Back From the Brink makes [five demands](#), much needed in a world in which the U.S. and Russia are withdrawing from a key Cold-War-era nuclear treaty with more potentially to come, including the New START pact that [expires](#) two years from now. The five demands are:

- No to first use of nukes. (Senator Elizabeth Warren and Representative Adam Smith only recently [introduced](#) a No First Use Act in both houses of Congress to stop Trump and future presidents from launching a nuclear war.)
- End the unchecked launch-authority of the president. (Last month, Senator Edward Markey and Representative Ted Lieu [reintroduced](#) a bill that would do just that.)
- No to nuclear hair-triggers.
- No to endlessly renewing and replacing the arsenal (as the U.S. is now doing to

the tune of perhaps [\\$1.6 trillion](#) over three decades).

- Yes to an abolition agreement among nuclear-armed states.

These demands range from the near-term achievable to the long-term hoped for, but as a group they define what clear-eyed realism should be in Donald Trump's new version of our never-ending nuclear age.

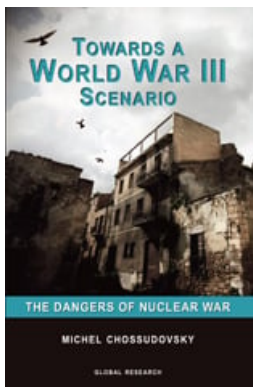
In the upcoming season of presidential politics, the nuclear question belongs at the top of every candidate's agenda. It belongs at the center of every forum and at the heart of every voter's decision. Action is needed before the W76-2 and its successors teach a post-Hiroshima planet what nuclear war is truly all about.

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*Featured image: The W76-2 will be launched aboard Trident II D5 missiles. (Ronald Gutridge/U.S. Navy)*



[“Towards a World War III Scenario: The Dangers of Nuclear War”](#)

by Michel Chossudovsky

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## Reviews

"This book is a 'must' resource - a richly documented and systematic diagnosis of the supremely pathological geo-strategic planning of US wars since '9-11' against non-nuclear countries to seize their oil fields and resources under cover of 'freedom and democracy'."

*-John McMurtry, Professor of Philosophy, Guelph University*

"In a world where engineered, pre-emptive, or more fashionably "humanitarian" wars of aggression have become the norm, this challenging book may be our final wake-up call."

*-Denis Halliday, Former Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations*

Michel Chossudovsky exposes the insanity of our privatized war machine. Iran is being targeted with nuclear weapons as part of a war agenda built on distortions and lies for the purpose of private profit. The real aims are oil, financial hegemony and global control. The price could be nuclear holocaust. When weapons become the hottest export of the world's only superpower, and diplomats work as salesmen for the defense industry, the whole world is recklessly endangered. If we must have a military, it belongs entirely in the public sector. No one should profit from mass death and destruction.

*-Ellen Brown, author of 'Web of Debt' and president of the Public Banking Institute*



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