

The Threat of Nuclear War: Nuclear Disarmament Should be a Top 2020 Campaign Issue. But It's Being Ignored

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Global Research, July 29, 2019

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

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

Two years ago on July 7, 2017, 122 nations approved the text of the [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) (TPNW). The [International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons](#) (ICAN) received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 for spearheading this achievement. Few Americans are aware of it and none of the major presidential candidates are informing us.

None of the nuclear powers (China, France, India, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, UK, US) participated in the negotiations. The treaty is now being considered by the nations of the world. 23 nations have ratified it. The treaty goes into effect for signatories when 50 nations ratify it.

As the biggest military power by far in the world today, the US can play a pivotal role in initiating nuclear disarmament. US nuclear disarmament peace initiatives should start with taking US nukes off hair-trigger alert, declaring a No First Use policy, and unilaterally disarming to a minimum credible deterrent. Those initiatives would lay the foundation for following up with urgent negotiations with the nuclear powers for complete global nuclear disarmament and ratification of the TPNW.

None of the major presidential candidates are now calling for this set of nuclear disarmament peace initiatives.

The Growing Threat of Nuclear War

We are lucky to still be alive today because the US, Russia, and other nuclear powers have had their nukes on hair-trigger alert for launch on warning for over 60 years with enough nukes to kill us all from starvation in a [nuclear winter](#) if the blasts and radiation don't kill us first.

We have [come close many times to blowing ourselves off the face of the Earth](#) during international crises and false alarms. The US has repeatedly used nuclear weapons as blackmail. As Daniel Ellsberg has repeatedly explained, these threats are like the mugger who puts a gun to your head and demands all your money. Every president from Truman to Trump has used this nuclear terrorism to demand concessions from other countries. "No option is off the table." Such threats could easily blow up into the real thing.

The "nuclear football" that is carried around with the president is for all practical purposes a fiction to reassure the public about command and control of US nuclear weapons. In fact, the power to launch nukes has been delegated far down the chain of command since

Eisenhower's presidency. Once one nuke flies, they will all fly in automated "Doomsday Machines" on both the US and Russian sides. Daniel Ellsberg documents all this in his "second Pentagon Papers," his 2016 book *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*.

Now we are into a new nuclear arms race, with [nuclear modernization programs](#) underway in the US and Russia. They are now [joined by China and Pakistan in deploying "miniaturized" tactical nukes](#) into conventional battlefields with the idea that their use won't trigger a strategic nuclear armageddon.

This new Cold War and nuclear arms race, along with the climate crisis, convinced the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists in 2018 to move their Doomsday Clock to two minutes to midnight, as close to Doomsday as it has ever been since the 1953 crisis when both the US and USSR began testing H-bombs amidst high tensions.

The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM), Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force (INF), and Iran nuclear agreements have been unilaterally abandoned by the US. Russia responded to the 2001 ABM withdrawal by increasing its nuclear arsenal. After Trump withdrew the US from the INF treaty last November, Putin followed his lead in March. The Strategic Arms Treaty (START) expires in February 2021. Trump calls it a terrible treaty. Warhawk [John Bolton, who was a key player in the US reneging on the ABM, INF, and Iran nuclear agreements](#), is in charge of START negotiations.

Democrats Silent

The Democratic presidential candidates are largely silent on these developments, except for the venerable Mike Gravel. On his presidential campaign website, Gravel calls for fully agreeing to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, signing and ratifying the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and pledging No First Use of nuclear weapons.

Gravel's program is a good start. I have had great respect for Senator Gravel since June 1971 when he convened his Buildings and Grounds subcommittee and started reading into the Congressional Record the Pentagon Papers, which Daniel Ellsberg had conveyed to him while on the lam from the FBI. As Gravel was putting the Pentagon Papers into the Congressional Record, the Supreme Court was deliberating on whether to sustain a federal court injunction against their publication.

I have one quibble with Gravel on fully agreeing to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. This 1970 treaty has three parts: stop the spread of nuclear weapons to new countries, negotiate complete global nuclear disarmament and general disarmament, and promote the spread of the "peaceful atom." It's the third part I object to. Nuclear power risks catastrophic accidents produces deadly radioactive waste that has to be isolated for over 250,000 years and facilitates nuclear weapons proliferation. Instead of proliferating nuclear power, we need a Global Green New Deal that builds clean, renewable energy and economic human rights.

In all likelihood, Gravel won't be on the November 2020 ballot. Tulsi Gabbard got notice in the first Democratic debate by calling nuclear war the biggest threat we face. But she's [a self-described hawk for the US "war on terror"](#) who supports [drone strikes, torture, the division of Iraq and Syria along ethnic/sectarian lines, and the intervention of US special forces in partnership with authoritarian regimes](#). Gabbard has joined three other

candidates—Kirsten Gillibrand, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren—as co-sponsors of the [congressional No-First-Use bills](#). However, none of these or other Democratic candidates have No First Use in the issues section of their campaign websites or raise it in their campaign appearances. No First Use is not a high priority for them.

Nuclear Disarmament Peace Initiatives

The doctrines of no first use and a minimum deterrent have already been deployed by China and India, although both are now reconsidering their posture in the face of the new nuclear arms race that they fear makes their deterrent forces vulnerable to a first strike. Nuclear strategists' proposals for a US minimum credible nuclear deterrent range from a handful to a few hundred nuclear weapons deployed on hard-to-detect nuclear submarines. The US currently has over 6,000 nuclear warheads. The point of a minimum deterrent is to deploy the minimum nuclear weapons sufficient to inflict enough damage in a strike back against a nuclear attacker to deter such an attack in the first place. Moving to a US minimum credible deterrent combined with a no-first-use policy will maintain nuclear deterrence; reduce the motivations for the nuclear arms race; ease tensions, particularly in a crisis; reduce the risks of miscalculations and accidental nuclear war; save money; reduce the risk of an omnicidal nuclear winter in the event of a nuclear war; and give the US political credibility in negotiations for mutual and complete global nuclear disarmament.

A program of US Nuclear Disarmament Peace Initiatives should include:

- Take nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert.
- Adopt a No-First-Use policy for nuclear weapons.
- Unilaterally Disarm to a Minimum Credible Nuclear Deterrent, including
 - End the nuclear weapons modernization program.
 - Dismantle the land-based Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs).
 - Dismantle the strategic nuclear bomber force.
 - Dismantle the tactical nuclear weapons.
 - Dismantle preemptive first-strike forces.
 - Keep a minimum credible deterrent of nuclear weapons on submarines (SLBMs).
- Begin urgent negotiations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty toward complete global nuclear disarmament and general disarmament.
- Sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

With none of the major presidential candidates raising this kind of nuclear disarmament program, it is up to the US peace movement and Green Party candidates up and down the ticket to inject these demands into the 2020 elections.

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