

Nuclear Weapons: Making Us Feel Secure by “Threatening Armageddon”

“We prepare for our extinction in order to assure our survival” - Jonathan Schell (American author)

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

The terrifying film ‘The man who saved the world’ has been showing in London. Stanislaw Petrov, who appears himself in the film, was the lieutenant colonel in charge of the Russian early warning system when the electronic alarms blared deafeningly and insistently in his command centre. All checks confirmed that there was no malfunction. They confirmed a nuclear attack from the US was on its way. It was not possible to wait for radar confirmation of the incoming ballistic missiles because by that time it would be too late to retaliate. Petrov knew that if he reported the alarm to the high command they would immediately order a retaliatory strike¹ initiating a global nuclear war and the end of most of the human race. On his own initiative he decided that he did not trust the computers and did nothing.

The author Steve Taylor, in his book ‘The Fall’, expresses the view that the human race became, to a significant degree, insane about six thousand years ago when we introduced warfare as a way of ‘solving’ disputes. It is difficult to deny that it is insane to set up a system in which it is down to the humanity of one man to save the planet. The insanity is compounded when we realise that, rather than learning from the past, we have perpetuated the same mad system. We even call it MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction).

Over a thousand nuclear weapons are held, right now, ready for launch at the press of a button. Missiles travel at more than fifteen thousand miles an hour so we are entirely dependent on computers to warn of an attack. We know that computers malfunction. But those manning the early warning centres are rigorously trained to follow orders to the letter. They have a protocol and they are trained to follow it robotically. It seems most unlikely that the next time the alarms go off there will be a Stanislaw Petrov present with the immense courage to go against his training. Putting his humanity first under enormous pressure to obey orders was heroism of the highest order. This was recognised when he was honoured at the United Nations and it is reiterated by Kevin Costner in the film (Stanislaw Petrov is a fan of Costner and Costner is a fan of Petrov so they met when Petrov visited the US). Introducing Stanislaw to his film crew Costner said ‘I act heroes. Here is the real thing’.

There will be a next time. Unbelievably, in spite of this terrifying experience, we continue to perpetuate the same arrangement; with missiles ready for immediate launch at the press of a button and the only way of deciding to do this is on the basis of incoming electronic signals from a system which we know cannot be trusted!

The threat is escalating

The more nuclear weapons states there are the more likely that the weapons will be

launched by accident or malfunction. The number has been escalating since the US used nuclear weapons against Japan in 1945. Already there are nine; US, Russia, China, UK, France, India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea. Inevitably the leaders of other states want them. The leaders think it gives them status. According to a Sunday Times report Saudi Arabia has given Pakistan billions of dollars in subsidized oil, while the latter has unofficially agreed to supply the Gulf state with nuclear warheads². An anonymous British military official told the Sunday Times *“The fear is that other Middle Eastern powers — Turkey and Egypt — may feel compelled to do the same and we will see a new, even more dangerous, arms race”*²

Yet not all states want to take the nuclear path. A wide range of countries capable of building nuclear weapons, including many living in actual or potential “conflict zones,” have elected not to pursue this option, including Japan and South Korea. Countries such as South Africa and Ukraine have dismantled existing arsenals.

Deterrence

The logic of the deterrence concept leads to more and more states wanting nuclear weapons. If one state needs a deterrent then, of course, other states need a deterrent. It also leads to the ones which have these weapons upgrading and extending them since it is thought that the more in number and the more in destructive power your arsenal is the more it will be an effective deterrent.

Apart from the appalling risks from malicious and inadvertent use, misunderstandings and terrorist attacks, there are major safety risks. A recent Whistleblower, a Royal Navy submariner, William McNeilly, exposed the safety risks in an 18 page report and says the Trident deterrent is a ‘Disaster Waiting To Happen’. He tells us *“ We are so close to a nuclear disaster it is shocking, and yet everybody is accepting the risk to the public.”* He also tells us that poor security checks could leave the door open for the *“worst terrorist attack the UK and world has ever seen”*.

The Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty

In an attempt to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and to get rid of the existing ones The Nuclear Non proliferation Treaty (NPT) was drawn up and came into force in 1970.

The NPT is an international treaty of which a primary goal is to rid the world of nuclear weapons. A treaty review conference is held every five years and this year it extended from 27th April to 22nd May. This treaty is the only binding international commitment to the goal of nuclear disarmament of all states. 190 states are now party to the treaty. Four [UN member states](#) have never joined the NPT: [India](#), [Israel](#), [Pakistan](#) and [South Sudan](#).

Nuclear states who are signatories to the treaty undertake to pursue nuclear disarmament aimed at the ultimate elimination of their nuclear arsenals. The UK has been legally bound by the treaty since 1970. In spite of this the signatories to the Treaty, including the UK, essentially ignore the obligation they have incurred.

In view of the refusal of the nuclear states to disarm the matter was taken to the International court of justice for an Advisory Opinion on the obligations of the states which have signed up to the treaty. Their opinion was unequivocal. They declared *‘There exists an*

obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control'. Can't be much clearer than that.

Never mind. In terms of getting the nuclear states to honour their obligations to humanity and their treaties, the recent NPT Review Conference has been another disastrous failure. It contains no meaningful commitments on nuclear disarmament. Our leaders are following their own power/influence focussed agenda and are ignoring the wishes and wellbeing of the people just as they did with the Iraq war.

The primary nuclear weapons states, all founder members of the United Nations Security (!) Council, are doing the exact opposite of ridding us of this curse. They are all rebuilding their nuclear arsenals; US, Russian, China, UK and France. The determination of the main 'Security' Council state leaders to ignore the wishes and real security of peoples of the world has become clear as a result of the 2015 NPT Conference. The leaders of these states are parking their humanity and putting their power politics before the safety of the people. The enormity of this crime is arguably even greater than that of Blair and Bush in starting the Iraq war.

It is even more clear now, after this conference, that the non-nuclear weapons states must make nuclear weapons illegal without the participation of the nuclear weapons states. And this is what they are doing.

A crime against humanity

There are 193 states in the United Nations. So there are 184 states which do not have nuclear weapons. Realising the intransigence of the nuclear states many of the non-nuclear states decided on another approach to having them banned. The existence of nuclear weapons threatens the commission of crimes against humanity. They are weapons for committing genocidal-scale attacks on civilian populations. There have now been three conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons (in Oslo, Nayarit and Vienna). At these the non nuclear and less wealthy states were able to have a much greater impact than at the NPT conferences which were dominated by the nuclear states 159 states supported a joint statement on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons arguing that nuclear weapons have catastrophic humanitarian consequences and must never be used again under any circumstances. These states have affirmed that elimination is the only way to prevent use.

Having nuclear weapons is, of itself, a crime against humanity. It implies the willingness to use them *'if our vital interests are threatened'* as ex-Prime Minister Blair put it in his 2006 White Paper, 'The future of the United Kingdom's nuclear deterrent'. It is also criminal because it puts us all at totally unnecessary risk. As President John F Kennedy put it:

"Today, every inhabitant of this planet must contemplate the day when this planet may no longer be habitable. Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness. The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us."

This is as true now as it was when he declared it.

The Humanitarian Pledge

The non-nuclear states are putting the interests of humanity before power in the teeth of opposition from the nuclear states.

Consequently the major outcome of the 2015 NPT is the Humanitarian Pledge which has over 100 endorsements³ by states round the planet. It was proposed by the Austrian government and includes the pledge to join efforts to stigmatise, prohibit and eliminate nuclear weapons in light of their unacceptable humanitarian consequences and associated risks.

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) tells us,

'Based on the evidence of the humanitarian impacts from any nuclear weapon detonation and an acknowledgment of the increasing risk of use of nuclear weapons, the humanitarian pledge reflects a fundamental shift in the international discourse on nuclear disarmament over the past five years... The wide and growing international support for this historic pledge sends a signal that a majority of the world's governments are ready to move forward with the prohibition of nuclear weapons, even if the nuclear weapon states are not ready to participate.'

The executive Director of ICAN, Beatrice Fihn, said from the conference,

"Regardless of what has happened here today, the humanitarian pledge must be the basis for the negotiations of a new treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons. It has been made clear that the nuclear weapon states are not interested in making any new commitments to disarmament, so now it is up to the rest of the world to start a process to prohibit nuclear weapons by the 70th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

What citizens must do

600 million people demonstrated round the world to stop the Iraq War. But the war happened. Blair and Bush were determined that it would. The leaders had their own agenda. The lust to kill won out. It has been said that one of the reasons that this massive demonstration was not successful is because it only happened once. Stopping the rabid militarists and MAD yielders of nuclear weapons will require massive people-power. And protesting will have to be relentless; it must persist until the goal is achieved. Mass demonstrations cannot happen everyday but they could happen once a month. They can be supplemented by vigils, acts of civil disobedience, bombarding the media with letters and articles promoting the passion of the people for peace. We are many and they are few.

Notes

1. Even if the computers were correct it would be an act of insanity to launch a retaliatory nuclear attack. Why incinerate more millions because some are doomed?
2. <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article41890.htm>
3. <http://www.ican.org>

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