

On the Edge of Nuclear Armageddon: Donald Trump Welcomes in the Age of “Usable” Nuclear Weapons

“When future generations read the transcripts of this meeting, they will not forgive us.”

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*It was only an announcement, but think of it as the beginning of a journey into hell. Last week, **President Donald Trump** [made public](#) his decision to abrogate the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), a 1987 agreement with the Soviet Union. **National Security Advisor John Bolton**, a Cold Warrior in a post-Cold War world, [promptly flaunted](#) that announcement on a trip to Vladimir Putin’s Moscow. To grasp the import of that decision, however, quite another kind of voyage is necessary, a trip down memory lane.*

That 1987 pact between Moscow and Washington was no small thing in a world that, during the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#) only 25 years earlier, had reached **the edge of nuclear Armageddon**. The INF Treaty led to the elimination of [thousands](#) of nuclear weapons, but its significance went far beyond that. As a start, it closed the books on the nightmare of a Europe caught between the world-ending strategies of the two superpowers, since most of those “intermediate-range” missiles were targeting that very continent. No wonder, last week, a European Union spokesperson, responding to Trump, [fervently defended](#) the treaty as a permanent “pillar” of international order.

To take that trip back three decades in time and remember how the INF came about should be an instant reminder of just **how President Trump is playing havoc with something essential to human survival**.

In October 1986 in Reykjavik, Iceland, the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union, **Ronald Reagan** and [Mikhail Gorbachev](#), briefly came close to fully freeing the planet from the horrifying prospect of nuclear annihilation. In his second inaugural address, a year and a half earlier, President Reagan had wishfully called for “the total elimination” of nuclear weapons. At that Reykjavik summit, Gorbachev, a pathbreaking Soviet leader, promptly took the president up on that dream, proposing — to the dismay of the aides of both leaders — a total nuclear disarmament pact that would take effect in the year 2000.

Reagan promptly agreed in principle. “Suits me fine,” he said. “That’s always been my goal.” But it didn’t happen. Reagan had another dream, too — of a space-based missile defense system against just such weaponry, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), also dubbed “Star Wars.” He refused to yield on the subject when Gorbachev rejected SDI as the superpower arms race transferred into space. “This meeting is over,” Reagan then said.

Of the failure of Reykjavik, Soviet **Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze** would then

[comment:](#)

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At that point, the nuclear arsenals of the U.S. and the USSR had hit a combined [60,000 weapons](#) and were still growing. (Five new American nuclear weapons were being added each day.) A month after Reykjavik, in fact, the U.S. deployed a new B-52-based cruise missile system in violation of the 1979 SALT II Treaty. Hawks in Moscow were pressing for similar escalations. Elites on both sides — weapons manufacturers, intelligence and political establishments, think tanks, military bureaucracies, and pundits — were appalled at what the two leaders had almost agreed to. The national security priesthood, East and West, wanted to maintain what was termed “the stability of the strategic stalemate,” even if such stability, based on ever-expanding arsenals, could not have been less stable.

But a widespread popular longing for relief from four decades of nuclear dread had been growing on both sides of the Iron Curtain. In a surge of [anti-nuclear activism](#), millions of ordinary citizens took to the streets of cities in the U.S. and Europe to protest the superpower nuclear establishments. Even behind the Iron Curtain, voices for peace could be heard. “Listen,” Gorbachev pleaded after Reykjavik, “to the demands of the American people, the Soviet people, the peoples of all countries.”

A Watershed Treaty

As it happened, the Soviet leader refused to settle for Reagan’s no. Four months after the Iceland summit, he proposed an agreement “without delay” to remove from Europe all intermediate missiles — those with a range well under that of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). When Pentagon officials tried to swat Gorbachev’s proposal aside by claiming that there could be no such agreement without on-site inspections, he said fine, inspect away! That was an unprecedented concession from the Soviet Union.



President Reagan was surrounded by men like **then-Assistant Secretary of State Paul Wolfowitz** (later to become infamous for his role in promoting a post-9/11 invasion of Iraq), who assumed Gorbachev was a typical Soviet “master of deceit.” But for all his hawkishness, the president had other instincts as well. Events would show that, on the subject of nukes (SDI notwithstanding), Reagan had indeed recognized the threat to the human future posed by the open-ended accumulation of ever more of those weapons and had become a kind of nuclear abolitionist. Even if ending that threat was inconceivable to him, his desire to mitigate it would prove genuine.

At the time, however, Reagan had other problems to deal with. Just as Gorbachev put forward his surprising initiative, the American president found himself engulfed in the Iran-Contra scandal — a criminal conspiracy to trade arms for hostages with Iran, while illegally aiding right-wing paramilitaries in Central America. It threatened to become his Watergate. It would, in the end, lead to the indictments of 14 members of his administration. Beleaguered, he desperately wanted to change the subject. A statesman-like rescue of faltering arms-control negotiations might prove just the helping hand he was looking for. So the day before he went [on television](#) to abjectly offer repentance for Iran-Contra, he announced that he would accept Gorbachev’s INF proposal. His hawkish inner circle was thoroughly disgusted by the gesture. Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger promptly resigned in protest. (He would later be indicted for Iran-Contra.)

On December 8, 1987, Reagan and Gorbachev would indeed meet in Washington and [sign](#) the INF Treaty, eliminating more than 2,000 ground-based warheads and giving Europe the reprieve its people had wanted. This would be the first actual reduction in nuclear weapons to occur since two atomic bombs were built at Los Alamos in 1945. The INF Treaty proved historic for turning back the tide of escalation. It showed that the arms race could be not just frozen but reversed, that negotiations could lead the two superpowers out of what seemed like the ultimate impasse — a model that should be urgently applicable today.

In reality, the mutually reinforcing hair-trigger nuclear posture of the United States and the Soviet Union was not much altered by the treaty, since only land-based, not air- and submarine-launched missiles, were affected by it and longer range ICBMs were off the table. (Still, Europe could breathe a bit easier, even if, in operational terms, nuclear danger had not been much reduced.) Yet that treaty would prove a turning point, opening the way to a better future. It would be essential to the political transformation that quickly followed, the wholly unpredicted and surprisingly non-violent end to the Cold War that arrived not quite two years later. The treaty showed that the arms race itself could be ended — and eventually, it nearly would be. That is the lesson that somehow needs to be preserved in the Trump era.

A Man for All Apocalypses

In reality, the Trump administration’s abandonment of the INF Treaty has little to do with the actual deployment of intermediate-range missiles, whether those that the Pentagon may now seek to emplace in Europe or those apparently already being put in place in Russia. In truth, such nuclear firepower will not add much to what submarine- and air-launched cruise missiles can already do. As for Vladimir Putin’s bellicosity, removing the restraints on arms control will only magnify the Russian leader’s threatening behavior. However, it should be clear by now that Donald Trump’s urge to trash the treaty comes from his own [bellicosity](#),

not from Russian (or, for that matter, Chinese) aggressiveness. Trump seems to deplore the pact precisely because of what it meant to Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, as well as to the millions who cheered them on long ago: its repudiation of an apocalyptic future. (As [his position](#) on climate change indicates, the president is visibly a man for all apocalypses.)

Trump has launched a second nuclear age by rejecting the treaty that was meant to initiate the closing of the first one. The arms race was then slowed, but, alas, the competitors stumbled on through the end of the Cold War. Shutting that arms-contest down completely remained an unfinished task, in part because the dynamic of weapons reduction proved so reversible even before Donald Trump made it into the Oval Office. George W. Bush, for instance, struck a blow against arms control with his [2002 abrogation](#) of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which rekindled Reagan's Star Wars fantasy. The way Washington subsequently promoted missile defense systems in Europe, especially in Poland, where a [nearly \\$5 billion missile contract](#) was agreed to this year, empowered the most hawkish wing of the Kremlin, guaranteeing just the sort of Russian build-up that has indeed occurred. If present Russian intermediate-range missile deployments are in violation of the INF Treaty, they did not happen in a vacuum.

Barack Obama, of course, [won](#) the Nobel Peace Prize in the early moments of his presidency for his vision of a nuclear-weapons-free world, yet [not even he](#) could curb the malevolent influence of nuclear planning in the Pentagon and elsewhere in Washington. To get approval of the 2010 New START Treaty, which was to further reduce the total number of strategic warheads and launchers on both sides, from the Republican Senate, the Peace Laureate president had to agree to an [\\$80 billion renewal](#) of America's existing nuclear arsenal just when it was ripe for a fuller dismantling. That devil's bargain with Washington's diehard nuclear hawks further empowered Russia's similarly hawkish militarists.

All of this reflects a pattern established relatively early in the Cold War years. U.S. arms escalations in that era — from the long-range bomber and the hydrogen bomb to the nuclear-armed submarine and the cruise missile to the “high frontier” of space — inevitably prompted the Kremlin to follow in lockstep (and these days, you would need to [add the Chinese](#) into the equation as well). Americans should recall that, since August 6, 1945, the ratcheting up of nuclear weapons competition has always begun in Washington. And so it has again.

By the time the Obama administration left office, the Defense Department was already planning to “modernize” the U.S. nuclear arsenal in a massively expensive way. Last February, with the [release](#) of the Pentagon's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, the Trump administration committed to that arsenal's full bore reinvention, big time, to the tune of at least [\\$1.2 trillion](#) and possibly \$1.6 trillion over the next three decades. ICBM silos only recently slated for closing will be rebuilt. There will be new generations of nuclear-armed bombers and submarines, as well as nuclear cruise missiles. There will be wholly new nuclear weapons [expressly designed](#) to be “usable.” And in that context, American nuclear strategy is also being recast. For the first time, the United States is now explicitly threatening to launch those [“usable” weapons](#) in response to non-nuclear assaults.

The surviving lynchpin of arms control is that New START Treaty that mattered so to Obama in 2010. It capped deployed strategic nuclear warheads at 1,550 and implied that there would be further reductions to come. It must, however, be renewed in 2021. Trump is already [on record](#) calling it a bad deal, but he may not have to wait until possible reelection in 2020 to do it in. His INF Treaty abrogation might do the trick first. Limits on long-range

strategic missiles may not survive the pressures that are sure to follow an arms race involving the intermediate variety.

No less worrisome, the Trump administration's fervent support for the Pentagon's modernization, and so reinvention, of the American nuclear arsenal amounts to a blatant violation of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which [required](#) nuclear powers to work toward "the cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date." The president's explicit desire to maintain an ever more lethal nuclear arsenal into the indefinite future violates that requirement and will certainly undermine that treaty, too.

It's no exaggeration to say that those arms control treaties, taken together, probably saved the world from a nuclear Armageddon. President Trump's cavalier and supremely ignorant readiness to walk away from America's most solemn international commitments should offer us all a grim reminder of just how precious that nuclear weapons treaty regime has been. The most decisive covenant of all was the 1987 INF Treaty, which demonstrated that nuclear reductions are possible, and that the movement toward nuclear abolition is, too. The INF Treaty was the pin that has held the mechanism of hope together all these years. Now, our nihilistic president has pulled the pin, apparently mistaking that structure of human survival for a grenade, sure to blow.

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