

# BAN THE BOMB— Before Our Luck Runs Out

BY IRA HELFAND



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## WE ARE CLOSER TO NUCLEAR WAR THAN WE HAVE EVER BEEN.

That is the assessment of William Perry, who served as Secretary of Defense under President Bill Clinton.

“The likelihood today of a nuclear catastrophe is greater than during the Cold War,” Perry told an audience in Washington, D.C., early in the Trump Administration. “Today, inexplicably to me, we are recreating the geopolitical hostility of the Cold War and we are rebuilding the nuclear dangers of the Cold War. We are doing this without any serious public discussion, or any real understanding of the consequences of these actions: We are sleepwalking into a new Cold War, and there is a very real danger we will blunder into a nuclear war.”

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Perry expounded on this theme recently in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed co-written with former U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz and former U.S. Senator Sam Nunn, who chaired the Armed Services Committee. The trio warned that the world “may soon be entrenched in a nuclear standoff more precarious, disorienting, and economically costly than the Cold War.” They called for de-escalating tensions caused by Trump’s “dysfunctional Russia policy” by building a framework for strategic stability and announcing a joint declaration affirming the senselessness of nuclear war.

This sense of heightened danger is shared by the experts who set the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists’* Doomsday Clock at two minutes to midnight in January 2018 and reaffirmed that decision in January of this year.

To erase the threat of unparalleled catastrophe that has existed since the dawn of the nuclear age, we must articulate a clear strategy to eliminate these weapons before they eliminate us.

“Humanity now faces two simultaneous existential threats, either of which would be cause for extreme concern and immediate attention,” the group said. “These major threats—nuclear weapons and climate change—were exacerbated this past year by the increased use of information warfare to undermine democracy around the world, amplifying risk from these and other threats and putting the future of civilization in extraordinary danger.”

Among the factors driving concern upward were President Trump’s decision to unilaterally abandon the Iran nuclear deal and withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty while joining other nuclear-armed countries in sweeping programs of “nuclear modernization.”

Yet despite these alarming developments, the imminent threat of nuclear war barely registers on most people’s radar. In the early 1980s, the danger of nuclear war emerged as a matter of widespread public concern, with one survey finding that 76 percent of Americans believed nuclear war was “likely” within a few years. Millions of people took political action to stop the Cold War arms race, including a rally in New York City on June 12, 1982, that drew one million people, then the largest political demonstration in U.S. history.

But with the end of the Cold War, people began to think and act as though the danger posed by nuclear weapons had passed.

Of course, the danger never went away. Thou-

sands of nuclear warheads remained, along with the possibility that they would be used, perhaps even by accident. In January 1995, the United States launched a weather rocket from Norway that caused a false alarm in Moscow. We came within minutes of a full scale nuclear war—four years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

Today, at latest count, the nine nuclear nations maintain an arsenal of 14,500 nuclear weapons. The danger of them being used has increased dramatically in recent years (see sidebar). There is an urgent need to rebuild the broad public understanding of this danger to bring about fundamental change in nuclear policy and end that danger once and for all.

We have been incredibly fortunate throughout the nuclear weapons era. As Robert McNamara famously declared after the Cuban Missile Crisis, “We lucked out. It was luck that prevented nuclear war.” The policies of the nuclear weapons states are essentially a hope that this luck will continue. But hoping for good luck is not an acceptable security policy and, sooner or later, our luck will run out.

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Internationally, 122 nations voted in July 2017 to adopt the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which bans the use and possession of nuclear weapons as well as activities that make it possible to build and maintain them. The ratification process is moving forward; when fifty nations formally ratify the treaty it will enter into force, creating a powerful new standard where it is the countries with nuclear weapons who are the ultimate “rogue states.”

Here in the United States, a grassroots campaign called Back from the Brink seeks to embrace the goals of the treaty with a “Green New Deal” for the nuclear threat, a comprehensive prescription for how to avoid nuclear war. It calls on the United States to recognize that nuclear weapons, far from being agents of our security, are in fact the greatest threat to our safety and must be eliminated as the only way to assure that they will not be used.

Representatives Jim McGovern, Democrat of Massachusetts, and Earl Blumenauer, Democrat of Oregon, have drafted a resolution, H.R. 302, to adopt this new policy prescription.

The core of the campaign is a five-point platform of policies that the United States should pursue. The central plank is to commence negotiations with the other eight nuclear weapons states for an enforceable, verifiable, timebound agreement to dismantle nuclear

## SEVEN POSSIBLE PATHWAYS TO NUCLEAR WAR

**1 United States and Russia:** These two countries together possess more than 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons and, despite President Trump's fondness for Vladimir Putin, relations between them are at the lowest point in thirty years, since the end of the Cold War. Events in Syria and Ukraine and tensions in the Baltics make clear the possibility of conflict. Trump's recent decision to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty underlines the potentially nuclear nature of a future war.

**2 United States and China:** The economic rivalry between the world's two largest economic powers has become increasingly hostile and there is now an active military dimension to that rivalry. Chinese and U.S. naval forces routinely play chicken in the South China Sea, a disastrous incident waiting to happen.

**3 United States and North Korea:** In early 2018, the United States and North Korea appeared to be headed toward a nuclear confrontation. The "on again, off again" bromance between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un brought a temporary reprieve, but the collapse of the Hanoi Summit revealed how dangerous the situation remains.

**4 South Asia:** Perhaps the most dangerous potential conflict is one that receives scarce attention in the West. India and Pakistan have fought four wars; there is almost daily low-level fighting on their disputed border in Kashmir; and the military doctrines of both countries create a high level of concern that a future war between them will go nuclear. Use of less than half of the 290 weapons in their combined nuclear arsenal would cause worldwide climate disruption and a global famine putting two billion people at risk.

**5 Climate change:** The nuclear powers periodically claim they are willing to get rid of their nuclear weapons—just not yet. They say conditions are not ripe today but, in the future, when the world is safer, they will seek to disarm. Unfortunately, the world is not getting safer. Climate change is placing increasing stress on societies around the world and, as it progresses, there will be increased conflict and mass migration on a scale unprecedented in history. If nuclear weapons remain on the table, the danger that they will be used will also increase.

**6 Cyber terrorism:** We used to worry that terrorists might build or steal a nuclear weapon and blow up a city like New York or Moscow, and that is still a danger. But the greater danger is that terrorists will carry out a cyber attack that induces one of the nuclear-armed states to launch its nuclear weapons in the mistaken belief that it is under attack.

**7 The Trump factor:** Apart from his many wrongheaded policies, Donald Trump's personal instability increases the danger of nuclear war. This is not a partisan comment; concern about his control over a nuclear arsenal is shared by members of his own party. During the 2016 campaign, fifty prominent Republican security experts warned that Trump "lacks the character, values, and experience" to command a nuclear arsenal. For years, the United States has maintained that it would be intolerable for even a single nuclear weapon to fall into the wrong hands, including a rogue state or a terrorist group. In January 2017, we turned 6,800 nuclear weapons over to Donald Trump.

—Ira Helfand

arsenals. There is no guarantee such an initiative will be successful, but there is no reason to assume that it will not be: It has never been tried.

While various U.S. Presidents, including Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, and Barack Obama, have given lip service to the idea that the United States will seek the security of a world free of nuclear weapons, none has actively pursued this goal. That is the fundamental change that must take place and to which we must commit.

The other four planks in the Back from the Brink platform are common-sense steps that can be taken to lessen the danger of nuclear war as these negotia-

tions proceed and the weapons are being dismantled. They are:

1) The United States should adopt a No First Use policy, making it clear that it will not initiate nuclear war. This will reduce tensions during future crises, decrease the possibility of miscalculation by future adversaries, and signal the United States' disinclination to destroy the world.

Legislation to implement this policy has been introduced in both houses of Congress, the House bill (H.R. 921) by Representative Adam Smith, Democrat of Washington, and the Senate bill (S.272) by Senator Elizabeth Warren, Democrat of Massachusetts.

2) We should end the sole unchecked authority of any President to launch a nuclear attack. The Constitution provides unequivocally that only Congress can declare war, but current practice allows the President to initiate a nuclear attack—surely an act of war—without Congressional authorization and without the approval of the Cabinet, the Vice President, or anyone else.

This policy evolved during the Cold War, when it was felt the President needed to be able to respond quickly to an attack from the Soviet Union that might destroy America's land-based nuclear missiles. The current sea-based Trident missiles are not vulnerable in this way and there is no need to delegate this terrible power to any one individual. Legislation to limit presidential authority has been introduced in the House (H.R. 669) by Representative Ted Lieu, Democrat of California, and in the Senate (S. 200) by

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Senator Edward Markey, Democrat of Massachusetts.

3) The U.S. nuclear arsenal should be taken off hair-trigger alert. Hundreds of warheads in both the United States and Russia are mounted on missiles that can be launched in fifteen minutes. This makes them vulnerable to cyber attack, accidents, and impulsive or unauthorized decisions. The policy of maintaining weapons in this high-alert state is a vestige of the Cold War and should be abandoned. If the United States decides at some point that it needs to destroy the world, it can wait twenty-four hours to do it.

4) The United States should cancel the plan to replace its entire nuclear arsenal with enhanced weapons. The current plan calls for spending some \$1.7 trillion, after inflation, over the next thirty years replacing and enhancing every component of its nuclear arsenal in a program that will assure the existence of nuclear weapons for decades to come (or until they are used). This plan, mirrored by similar efforts in the other nuclear-armed states, will fuel a new and destabilizing arms race. Several bills in Congress seek to curtail this dangerous and unnecessary spending spree including H.R. 1086, S. 401, H.R. 1231, S. 312, H.R. 1249.

The Back from the Brink campaign has been joined by many civic organizations, faith communities, and professional associations and has won the support of a rapidly growing list of cities, towns, and states. It was endorsed by unanimous votes of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and the Baltimore, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., city councils and by an overwhelming vote of the California state legislature. It is currently before the state legislatures in Maine, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Oregon, Washington, and Vermont as well as many town and city councils.

Yet, obviously, despite this broad grassroots support, negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons will require a paradigm shift in the thinking of the leaders of nuclear-armed states, and aggressive leadership by at least one of the nuclear powers. They must be persuaded by the force of world opinion that nuclear weapons are not necessary for their safety.

In the early 1980s, few expected that the United States and the Soviet Union could overcome their enormous mutual distrust and end the arms race. When Mikhail Gorbachev proposed a halt to all nuclear weapons tests in 1986, the United States initially rebuffed the overture. But he persisted, and over time both he and Ronald Reagan were able to understand that nuclear weapons posed a greater threat to both of their countries than either did to each other.

There is not an obvious successor to Gorbachev among today's world leaders. But a large group of U.S. politicians are vying for the presidency in 2020 and perhaps one of them will have the wisdom and courage to follow in his footsteps. The United States cannot afford to elect a *good* President in 2020; it must elect a *great* President. And the definition of greatness at this time includes the ability to successfully address the threats we face, from nuclear weapons and climate change. The next President must make these top priorities.

Back from the Brink seeks to enlist ordinary citizens in a national campaign that will create the political space and political pressure that will allow the next President to be successful. Like the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign of the 1980s, it seeks to create a national consensus of what nuclear policy ought to be in the hope and belief that such a consensus will lead to fundamental policy change.

It is not enough to work on incremental changes to our nuclear policy. Such changes are valuable, but will not do what must be done. They must be part of an explicit and clearly articulated plan to actually achieve the security of a world free of nuclear weapons, and we must pursue that overall plan now. Time is not on our side. ♦