

Nuclear Weapons: Why Are They Still Here?

Virtual address by Andrew Lichterman, Western States Legal Foundation, for #75 years of shared nuclear legacy, an online collaboration marking the 75th year after the bombing by the United States of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Good afternoon. My name is Andrew Lichterman, and I am a policy analyst and lawyer with the Western States Legal Foundation, based in Oakland, California.

75 years after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States, the effects of nuclear weapons are well known. Nuclear weapons can incinerate cities and their people in an instant. They create radioactive fallout that can contaminate vast regions of the earth, with effects that can last for generations. The many thousands of nuclear weapons that still exist today could end our civilization in an afternoon.

But in some ways, these terrible effects have come to overshadow other important questions about nuclear weapons—questions that may affect our survival. The most important of these is: given how terrible these weapons are, why are they still here? Why are they still here not only three quarters of a century after the world witnessed the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but three decades after the end of the Cold War, the confrontation that gave rise to nuclear arsenals of civilization-destroying magnitude? Why are we seeing the resumption of nuclear arms racing? What forces are driving this, and how dangerous is this new round of confrontation among nuclear-armed countries? Finally, what kinds of movements might reverse this renewed slide towards the nuclear brink?

With all of this still lying in the future, other issues were in the forefront of the minds of leading thinkers in the years immediately following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One of these should resonate for us again today, despite having largely gone into eclipse for most of the nuclear age. That was the danger posed by the incendiary mix of atomic weapons and continued nationalist competition.

In 1946, journalist and disarmament advocate Norman Cousins wrote,

“Let us have a National Concentration Week, during which we can ponder not only the implications of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, moral and political, but the problem of competitive national sovereignty in an atomic age.”ⁱ

A year later, the Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists, which included Albert Einstein and several of the physicists who had participated in developing the atomic bomb, warned that

“Through the release of atomic energy, our generation has brought into the world the most revolutionary force since prehistoric man's discovery of fire. This basic power of the universe cannot be fitted into the outmoded concept of narrow nationalisms.”ⁱⁱ

These insights were clear to many in the immediate aftermath of a catastrophe brought on by competing nationalisms. World War II was a global conflagration of industrialized warfare and

genocidal extermination, with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki only being the culmination. The United Nations and the broader system of international organizations constructed at the close of World War II was crafted to bring competing nationalisms under control, and also to manage the economic forces in the global capitalist economy that had played a central role in driving the underlying conflicts that had led to war.

With the rapid onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s, the focus on the dangers posed by nationalisms in the atomic age faded into the background. The Cold War brought a different kind of competition, a global confrontation between competing political and economic systems, with different dynamics and potential flashpoints.

Each side of the Cold War divide was dominated by a superpower capable of largely suppressing nationalist competition in its sphere of influence. The United States had emerged from WWII with little damage to its society and industries, an economic and military power with the weight to shape the new international institutions to serve its interests. Throughout much of this period competition between countries in the West was suppressed and managed. This was due in part to the recent experience of depression, economic chaos, and war, but also to better confront the systemic challenge presented by the communist governments in power across much of the Eurasian continent. A number of factors, including the presence of that alternative, contributed to an unprecedented degree of regulation and redistribution in the Western economies, as governments sought to show that capitalism could deliver a better standard of living. In both the East and the West, the dynamic of competition among states for resources and markets was largely uncoupled from military competition for the duration of the Cold War.

The immense nuclear arsenals, high-tech militaries, and the condition of permanent mobilization for war developed in this context. The extraordinary destructive power constructed by both sides was driven by the distinctive character of the Cold War and its ideologies, but also by dynamics internal to the arms race that many observers believed were new, and not reducible to familiar economic or geopolitical categories.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought both the Cold War political confrontation and the Cold War arms race to a stunning close. With the Cold War confrontation seen as the reason for the existence of vast nuclear arsenals and the risk of nuclear war, mass movements for nuclear disarmament disappeared.

And with the Cold War over, the reasons for eliminating nuclear weapons were portrayed as self-evident. Much subsequent disarmament advocacy characterized nuclear weapons as Cold War anachronisms without military purpose, a massive, costly, risky “deterrent” with nothing left to deter. Disarmament discourse focused mainly on the effects of nuclear weapons: the impossibility of using them without violating the laws of war, the catastrophic potential for accidental use, the danger that they might be stolen and used by “terrorists.” Whether there might be circumstances in which those who hold power would choose to use nuclear weapons on purpose received far less attention.

And in the first two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dangers of competitive nationalisms leading to conflict among nuclear-armed states foreseen by Cousins and the atomic

scientists were not immediately apparent. One of the two most powerful states had collapsed, and was significantly diminished geographically, economically, and militarily. China's emergence as a first rank economic power still lay in the future. The other leading states were preoccupied with the project of integrating much of the Eurasian continent into the global neoliberal circuit of trade and investment.

There were warning signs of a resurgence of dangerous nationalisms, from tensions stemming from the Balkan wars to the confrontation between nuclear armed India and Pakistan. But these were for the most part portrayed as rooted in old and particular grievances rather than as having broader significance. In 2010, the President of the United States still could proclaim that “[t]oday, the threat of global nuclear war has passed.”ⁱⁱⁱ And in 2012 the U.S. Defense Department still saw the most pressing nuclear dangers to be proliferation and “nuclear terrorism.”^{iv}

At the same time, an atmosphere of capitalist triumphalism was accelerating trends already present in the last years of the Cold War. In the United States and elsewhere, elite factions ascended to power who long had viewed the post WWII institutions designed to manage the political and economic dynamics that drive conflict as unnecessary constraints.

With their rise we are seeing some of the same conditions that brought us the world wars of the 20th century. A corporate capitalist circuit of trade and investment that now encompasses the entire planet has brought extreme polarization of wealth. We are seeing a new version of the boom and bust economic cycle, with the insecurity it brings for many millions of people. There is growing competition for resources and markets and conflict over trade among the leading economic powers. That competition will be intensified this time by struggles over diminishing resources and the effects of climate change and overstressed ecosystems. And together with this we are seeing the resurgence of authoritarian nationalisms world-wide, including in several nuclear-armed states. These forces not only drive war risk but pose a threat to domestic minorities and to refugee populations everywhere which is likely to grow in a society stressed by profound inequality, resource shortages, and environmental decline.

If there was a window for nuclear disarmament created by the end of the Cold War, it now is over. What is emerging now is *not* a new Cold War, but something very different, and less predictable. We must confront the changed meaning of nuclear weapons in confrontations among nuclear-armed states, all seeking advantage in a harshly competitive global capitalism that encompasses the entire planet and is straining its ecological limits.

If we hope to eliminate nuclear weapons, or even to discourage their use in this moment, it will not be enough to criticize their effects. We must delegitimize their purposes. The 2018 United States Nuclear Posture Review declared that “since 2010 we have seen the return of Great Power competition,” and stressed the role of nuclear weapons in deterring great power war.^v The 2020 Department of Defense Nuclear Matters Handbook observes that “While U.S. nuclear weapons have not been employed since World War II, the United States uses its nuclear deterrent every day to maintain peace around the globe. The U.S. nuclear deterrent underwrites every U.S. military operation.”^{vi}

And this always has been true, not only for the United States but for every country that brandishes nuclear weapons. The world-threatening, almost unimaginable effects of nuclear weapons are essential to the way they are used *as a threat*. They are used this way by countries faced by an adversary with superior conventional forces, and also by countries with a conventional advantage when facing nuclear-armed adversaries. In either case, nuclear weapons force an adversary to win or lose with conventional forces or face a kind of warfare that by its nature is unpredictable, potentially limitless, and hence terrifying. Terror is the essence of deterrence. As Thomas Schelling, a leading Cold War theorist of nuclear war put it, "...[T]he risk of disaster becomes a manipulative element in the situation. It can be exploited to intimidate."^{vii}

In a world bristling with high-tech weapons of all kinds, nuclear weapons are unlikely to be eliminated until the forces driving military competition among nuclear-armed countries are eliminated. Meaningful progress towards disarmament will require social movements broad and deep enough to address the causes of high-tech militarism and war. Movements of this kind also will be needed to stave off catastrophic wars in the near term. These movements will need to bring together work for peace and disarmament with the disparate strands of work against environmental breakdown, polarization of wealth and economic injustice, erosion of democracy, and the targeting of migrants, national minorities, and other vulnerable people. The connections between these issues will have to be made at the level of their common causes in a global economy whose central dynamic for centuries has been endless material growth, driven by ruthless competition among authoritarian organizations of ever-increasing size and power.

The global pandemic has revealed a great deal about who holds that power, and who benefits from it. The murder of George Floyd by police sparked an upwelling of protest driven as well by the impacts and inequities of the pandemic and the government response, and also has opened the way for a deeper inquiry into the ways that we are ruled, and the status quo defended. We should understand, however, that in the absence of a war crisis immediately involving nuclear-armed states, the movements developing in the wake of the pandemic likely will not be focused on peace and disarmament. Their main focus will be defending the most vulnerable communities and the rebalancing of the immense inequities in meeting basic human needs that have been laid bare by the pandemic. These struggles will have the potential to raise fundamental questions about governance and about the structure of the economy.

To avoid catastrophe, we will need new movements and a politics broad and deep enough to transform our economy, our technology, and how we conceive "the state" and its purposes. Nuclear disarmament will come only through the vehicle of such movements, such politics. This same path also is our best hope for reducing the risk of war. Our task is to discern how work for peace and disarmament, the strand we know best, can best strengthen the fabric of the whole.

Notes

ⁱ Norman Cousins, *The Saturday Review*, September 14, 1946, collected in Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz, eds., *Hiroshima's Shadow* (Stony Creek, CT: Pamphleteers Press, 1998) 305, 306.

ⁱⁱ The Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists, January 22, 1947. (Trustees: Albert Einstein, Chairman, Harold C. Urey, Vice Chairman, Hans A. Bethe, T.R. Hogness, Philip M. Morse, Linus Pauling, Leo Azilard, V.F. Weisskopf).

ⁱⁱⁱ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Statement by President Obama on the 40th Anniversary of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, March 05, 2010.

^{iv} U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States Specified in Section 491 of 10 U.S.C.*, June 12, 2013, p.2.

^v U.S. Department of Defense, *2018 Nuclear Posture Review*, p.6 and *passim*.

^{vi} U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Matters Handbook 2020* p.1 The *Nuclear Matters Handbook* is billed as an “unofficial” but comprehensive overview of U.S. nuclear weapons programs.

^{vii} Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966) p.102.