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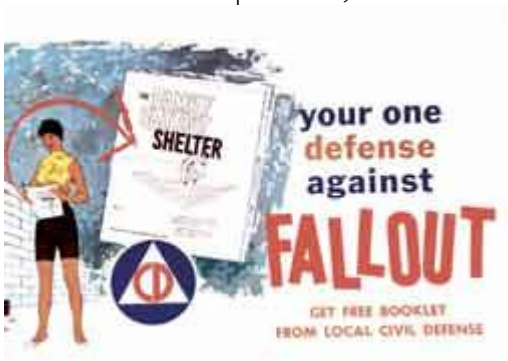
A world without nukes

Thomas C. Fox | Jul. 31, 2009



A 1962 poster advertises a free booklet on building a family fallout shelter. (Newscom)

Speaking last month in Moscow before a group of graduating students, President Barack Obama called for a world without nuclear weapons. No one thinks it will be easy.

For Obama, the goal of a world without nuclear weapons is not just one among many. It is, he says, ?the core challenge of the 21st century.?

Nuclear weapons continue to spread among nations even as the superpowers, the United States and Russia, work haltingly to cut their arsenals. Just in the past few months North Korea has triggered another nuclear weapon and many observers believe Iran is doing everything it can to build a nuclear bomb. Perhaps even more troubling is the thought that terrorist groups, not necessarily tied to any nation, could get their hands on nuclear materials and build a bomb. The knowledge and materials appear all too available and so it can be assumed it is only a matter of time.

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Can the United States, which is the only nation that has ever used an atomic weapon on another nation, lead a campaign to halt the spread of these weapons of mass destruction when it shares with Russia by far the largest arsenals of nuclear weapons on the planet? Any objective assessment seems to say no -- unless, perhaps, the United States is dead serious about dismantling its own stockpiles.

It is within this context that disarmament proponents find relief in Obama?s leadership in the abolishment campaign.

Obama understands how others, particularly nations outside the United States, see the picture. The president has said: ?In the short period since the end of the Cold War, we?ve already seen India, Pakistan and North Korea conduct nuclear tests. Without a fundamental change, do any of us truly believe that the next two decades will not bring about the further spread of these nuclear weapons? ... That?s why America is committed to stopping nuclear proliferation, and ultimately seeking a world without nuclear weapons.?

Obama first laid out his vision in early April when he addressed a throng of 20,000 crowded in a square in Prague, Czech Republic. In that address he referred to nuclear weapons as the ?most dangerous legacy of the Cold War.?

?Today, the Cold War has disappeared but thousands of those weapons have not,? he said. ?In a strange turn of history, the threat of global nuclear war has gone down, but the risk of a nuclear attack has gone up. More nations have acquired these weapons. Testing has continued. Black market trade in nuclear secrets and nuclear materials abound. The technology to build a bomb has spread. Terrorists are determined to buy, build or steal one.?

He denounced the ?fatalism? of critics who maintain the nuclear weapons genie is out of the bottle forever. ?Some argue that the spread of these weapons cannot be stopped, cannot be checked -- that we are destined to live in a world where more nations and more people possess the ultimate tools of destruction. Such fatalism is a deadly adversary, for if we believe that the spread of nuclear weapons is inevitable, then in some way we are admitting to ourselves that the use of nuclear weapons is inevitable.?

He told the Prague audience, ?So today, I state clearly and with conviction America?s commitment and desire to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.?

The president has set three bold goals before the nation:

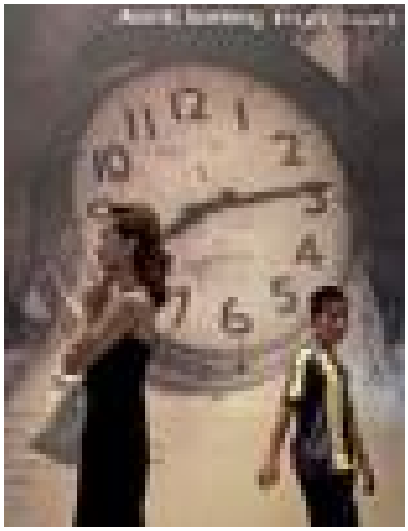
- Ratifying the nuclear Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which bans all nuclear explosions in all environments, for military or civilian purposes. The treaty was adopted by the United Nations in 1996. The United States has signed the treaty, but has not ratified it.
- Negotiating a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with the Russians. The current START treaty is set to expire Dec. 5.
- Seeking a new global treaty that verifiably ends the production of fissile materials (weapons-grade uranium and plutonium) intended for use in state nuclear weapons.

Observers say none of these goals will be easy. All will require considerable political will. The nuclear arms race has had a momentum of its own and despite efforts to curb it, the race proceeds with an unyielding, if seemingly irrational, logic. Weapons get built when they can be built and are allegedly deployed so that they will never be used.

In was in the early 1940s that senior members of the American scientific community, fearing that Germany might be working to develop a weapon based on newly discovered atomic fission processes, persuaded President Franklin D. Roosevelt to build the world?s first atomic bomb.

The top-secret Manhattan Project was born and in only 23 months the first atomic explosion was detonated July 16, 1945, at Alamogordo, N.M.

The threat of a German atomic bomb disappeared with the defeat of the Nazis in May 1945, but the war continued across the Pacific. By then the United States had developed two atomic bombs and top-level discussions took place in Washington as how to demonstrate their power. The goal was to shock Japan into submission by dropping one or both, either on islands off the coast or on the Japanese nation.



That question was answered on the morning of Aug. 6, 1945, when a B-29 bomber named Enola Gay dropped the first atomic bomb over Hiroshima. Three days later, another U.S. bomber dropped the second atomic bomb over the port city of Nagasaki. An estimated 140,000 perished in Hiroshima; another 80,000 in Nagasaki.

A month later Japan officially announced its surrender. Whether the bombs led to that surrender or it was already inevitable divides historians. What is undisputed is that the United States touched off an arms race, not with defeated Germany, but rather with the emerging world superpower, the Soviet Union.

In the years immediately following the Second World War, the United States had a nuclear monopoly based on knowledge of nuclear weaponry and raw materials. The myth of supremacy was short-lived. It ended when the Soviet Union detonated its first atomic bomb on Aug. 29, 1949.

The nuclear arms race was on. What many came to see as an era of nuclear folly had begun.

The 1950s witnessed the introduction by both the United States and the Soviet Union of intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons across the globe. This period also saw futile attempts to begin to defend against nuclear weapons. Both powers built large radar sites to detect incoming bombers and missiles. Jet fighters to use against bombers, and antiballistic missiles to use against intercontinental missiles were also being developed. Work began on large underground bunkers to save our nation?s leadership in the event of an attack. Nuclear fallout shelters proliferated.

At St. Sebastian Grade School in Milwaukee, where I grew up, we had weekly air raid drills in the early days of the Cold War in the 1950s. We were first taught to hide beneath our classroom desks for protection from the blast. Later, we practiced moving double file to the school?s basement where, theoretically, we would have been shielded from the blast and fallout.

In 1952, the United Kingdom became the third nation to build a nuclear weapon, eventually followed by France and the Peoples? Republic of China. The race was spreading.

Meanwhile, the size of nuclear arsenals kept growing as did the number of missile launchers. By the mid-1960s, the United States possessed some 2,400 launchers and 6,800 warheads; the Soviets had 375 launchers and 500 warheads.

By 1980, the U.S. arsenal had 2,000 launchers but many were tipped with ?multiple? warheads and the U.S. strategic arsenal reached 10,000 weapons. The Soviets tallied 2,500 launchers and 6,000 warheads.

As delivery systems grew more sophisticated, the time each nation had to determine ?true threat? from ?false

threat? diminished and the room for human error grew. Both nations were caught in a destructive logic.

Both wanted to build enough weapons to survive any first strike, thereby maintaining the ability to strike back even if attacked. This was called ?mutually assured destruction,? or simply MAD.

Meanwhile, as greater ecological understandings gained foothold in the ?70s and ?80s, scientists and others began to understand that any major nuclear exchange anywhere would bring with it nuclear fallout, raining down radioactive waste that would contaminate all living organisms. Any major attack would cause a ?nuclear winter,? possibly even extinguishing most human life on the planet. Alas, it began to be understood that any nuclear exchange, any attack on an enemy, even halfway across the world, would, in effect, be an attack on one?s own nation.

As the superpowers slogged forward with the arms race, the ranks of anti-nuclear-weapons advocates grew, especially in the ?80s, the last decade of the Cold War.

Two decades earlier, in 1963, already sensing the potential destructiveness to the environment of setting off nuclear weapons, the United States, United Kingdom and Soviet Union agreed to the Partial Test Ban Treaty, prohibiting aboveground testing. This treaty was followed by the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which pledged the nuclear nations to move toward disarmament while nonnuclear nations pledged not to pursue these weapons. These treaties were followed by a series of bilateral strategic reduction treaties (START) putting caps on warheads and delivery systems. Throughout these efforts, the United States and Soviet Union, mired in distrust, still often appeared on the brink of triggering a nuclear war even as they tried to break out of the expensive and seemingly ruinous arms race.

A high point of bilateral confrontation came as the superpowers in the early ?80s introduced intermediate and short-range nuclear-tipped missiles into divided Europe, reducing the nuclear ?response? time to only a few minutes. All room for human error had been eliminated. World peace, if not human survival itself, was in the balance.

It was in this climate of terror that the seeds of a moral, as opposed to a purely technical, discussion on nuclear weapons were spawned. Among the early episcopal war critics were a handful of U.S. bishops, one being Detroit auxiliary Thomas Gumbleton. It was with his urging that the U.S. bishops, in November 1981, agreed to establish an ad hoc committee headed by Chicago Archbishop Joseph Bernardin with the purpose of writing a letter on warfare. The focus of that effort, which went on for some two years, became nuclear weapons and the morality of the U.S. nuclear deterrent system.

This was the moral quandary: If, as the church taught, justifiable war outlawed attacks against civilians, and if nuclear weapons are, by nature, so large as to be indiscriminate, then how can the manufacturing and possession of these weapons be morally justified?

Critics like Gumbleton argued they cannot be, that the very possession of these terrorizing weapons is immoral. Others said these weapons, under the circumstances of a threatening Soviet Union, were justified.

Seattle Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen was one of the most outspoken nuclear weapons critics. He wrote at the time: ?Our security as people of faith lies not in demonic weapons which threaten all life on earth. Our security is in a loving, caring God. We must dismantle our weapons of terror and place our reliance on God.? He went further, calling upon Catholics to resist that portion of their taxes that was being spent in the preparation of war.

At that time the United States had a nuclear arsenal approximately 615,000 times the explosive force of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. The Soviets had even more firepower.

In 1983, Bernardin?s committee issued a document that was finally approved, after several drafts, by the full body of bishops. The letter was called ?The Challenge of Peace: God?s Promise and Our Response? and it was issued on May 3, 1983. It was an antiwar statement, but on the critical and divisive issue of nuclear deterrence it gave a limited, qualified moral acceptance.

The bishops stated: ?In current conditions, ?deterrence? based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself but as a step on the way toward a progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable. ... Deterrence is not an adequate strategy as a long-term basis for peace; it is a transitional strategy justifiable only in conjunction with resolute determination to pursue arms control and disarmament.?

Nuclear disarmament efforts moved forward haltingly under the Reagan, Clinton and first Bush administrations. They slowed during the second Bush administration. President George W. Bush set in motion policies aimed at building a new generation of smaller, more precise nuclear weapons. Despite the reversal of course, a more conservative body of U.S. bishops remained largely silent.

The United States currently has 1,198 land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-based missiles and bombers, which together are capable of delivering 5,576 warheads, according to its most recent START I report in January.

Russia reported in January that it has 816 delivery vehicles capable of delivering 3,909 warheads. While the number of deployed Russian strategic warheads is not known, the Arms Control Association estimated them between 2,000 and 3,000.

Both sides also have more warheads in storage or awaiting dismantlement, and the treaty discussions do not cover thousands of tactical nuclear weapons, some of which are as large as the bomb that fell on Hiroshima.

Last month in Moscow, Obama unveiled the fruit of his own disarmament efforts since he became president. He was hailed for moving forward but the numbers disappointed some peace advocates who had hoped for deeper cuts. The United States and Russia announced a deal in which they would each scrap about 1,000 nuclear warheads. The deal commits the two countries to cutting their nuclear warhead arsenals to 1,750 each, with possible moves to as few as 1,500, the lowest levels of any U.S.-Russia arms control deal.

The agreement was signed by the nation?s two presidents and is designed to guide negotiators who are working on a replacement for START I.

Under the START I treaty, each country is allowed a maximum of 2,200 warheads and 1,600 launch vehicles. But experts believe both sides have more than that and the new targets will effectively mean each will give up about 1,000 warheads.

?The new agreement will enhance the security of both the U.S. and Russia, as well as provide predictability and stability in strategic offensive forces,? the statement said.

John Isaacs, executive director of the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation in Washington, said the agreement ?represents progress, but there is still a long way to go.?

?It took George W. Bush eight years to unravel U.S.-Russian relations, and it will take Barack Obama more than eight months to stitch things back together,? Isaacs remarked.

Isaacs and other nuclear weapons watchdogs fear that the U.S. Senate will not approve the treaty in time, providing a new opening for the arms race. ?There is a very good chance things could drag into 2010 because of the time-consuming nature of the newly-created commissions, negotiations over specific numbers, and gaining approval in the U.S. Senate,? he said.

When the 1991 START I treaty, the bedrock of today?s nuclear weapons agreement, expires Dec. 5, it will mean the loss of the ability to legally limit and verify the two countries? weapons and delivery systems.

David Krieger, president of the watchdog group Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, was one of those disappointed by the Moscow agreement. He said progress is too slow and that the agreement fails to deal with other important issues, such as the dangers of weapons remaining on high alert status.

Observers disagree on whether ridding the world of nuclear weapons is feasible. But disarmament advocates, including the U.S. president, argue the effort must be made.

As Obama explained in Moscow, as long as the United States and Russia, who together possess some 90 percent of the world?s nuclear weapons, are seen as making legitimate efforts to reduce their stockpiles, they will have a higher ground from which to plead that other nations desist from pursuing their own nuclear weapons.

Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea have joined the list of nations with nuclear weapons. Much concern is currently focused on Pakistan where threats to government stability are quite visible.

Said Obama in Moscow: ?It is very difficult for us to exert [disarmament] leadership unless we are showing ourselves willing to deal with our own nuclear stockpiles in a more rational way.?

?It?s naive for us to think,? he told a reporter, ?that we can grow our nuclear stockpiles, the Russians continue to grow their nuclear stockpiles, and our allies grow their nuclear stockpiles, and that in that environment we?re going to be able to pressure countries like Iran and North Korea not to pursue nuclear weapons themselves.?

It will take major political will to eliminate nuclear weapons from the planet. Obama has committed himself to that goal. Observers note he will meet resistance in both the Pentagon and in Congress, and overcoming that resistance will require much political will and hard efforts of peace advocates everywhere.

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