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“Escalation Dominance” . . . and the Prospect of More Than 1,000 Holocausts



The mushroom cloud from the Castle Bravo thermonuclear weapon test in 1954, the largest nuclear weapons test ever conducted by the United States. Photo: NOAA.

Everything is at stake. Everything is at stake with nuclear weapons.

While working as a nuclear war planner for the Kennedy administration, Daniel Ellsberg was shown a document calculating that a U.S. nuclear attack on communist countries would result in 600 million dead. As he put it later: “A hundred Holocausts.”

That was in 1961.

Today, with nuclear arsenals vastly larger and more powerful, scientists know that a nuclear exchange would cause “nuclear winter.” And the nearly complete end of agriculture on the planet. Some estimates put the survival rate of humans on Earth at 1 or 2 percent.

No longer 100 Holocausts.

More than 1,000 Holocausts.

If such a nuclear war happens, of course we won’t be around for any retrospective analysis. Or regrets. So, candid introspection is in a category of now or never.

What if we did have the opportunity for hindsight? What if we could somehow hover over this planet? And see what had become a global crematorium and an unspeakable ordeal of human agony? Where, in words attributed to both Nikita Khrushchev and Winston Churchill, “the living would envy the dead.”

What might we Americans say about the actions and inaction of our leaders?

In 2023: The nine nuclear-armed countries spent \$91 billion on their nuclear weapons. Most of that amount, \$51 billion, was the U.S. share. And our country accounted for 80 percent of the increase in nuclear weapons spending.

The United States is leading the way in the nuclear arms race. And we’re encouraged to see that as a good thing. “Escalation dominance.”

But escalation doesn’t remain unipolar. As time goes on, “Do as we say, not as we do” isn’t convincing to other nations.

China is now expanding its nuclear arsenal. That escalation does not exist in a vacuum. Official Washington pretends that Chinese policies are shifting without regard to the U.S. pursuit of “escalation dominance.” But that’s a disingenuous pretense. What the great critic of Vietnam War escalation during the 1960s, Senator William Fulbright, called “the arrogance of power.”

Of course there’s plenty to deplore about Russia’s approach to nuclear weapons. Irresponsible threats about using “tactical” ones in Ukraine have come from Moscow. There’s now public discussion – by Russian military and political elites – of putting nuclear weapons in space.

We should face the realities of the U.S. government’s role in fueling such ominous trends, in part by dismantling key arms-control agreements. Among crucial steps, it’s long past time to restore three treaties that the United States abrogated – ABM, Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces, and Open Skies.

On the non-proliferation front, opportunities are being spurned by Washington. For instance, as former CIA analyst Melvin Goodman wrote in September: “Iran’s Ayatollah has indicated

a readiness to open discussions with the United States on nuclear matters, but the Biden administration has turned a deaf ear to such a possibility.”

That deaf ear greatly pleases Israel, the only nuclear-weapons state in the Middle East. On September 22, former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said unequivocally that Israel’s pager attack in Lebanon was “a form of terrorism.” The United States keeps arming Israel, but won’t negotiate with Iran.

The U.S. government has a responsibility to follow up on every lead, and respond to every overture. Without communication, we vastly increase the risk of devastation.

We can too easily forget what’s truly at stake.

Despite diametrical differences in ideologies, in values, in ideals and systems – programs for extermination are in place at a magnitude dwarfing what occurred during the first half of the 1940s.

Today, Congress and the White House are in the grip of what Martin Luther King Jr. called “the madness of militarism.” In a toxic mix with the arrogance of power. Propelling a new and more dangerous Cold War.

And so, at the State Department, the leadership talks about a “rules-based order,” which all too often actually means: “We make the rules, we break the rules.”

Meanwhile, the Doomsday Clock set by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists is now just 90 *seconds* away from apocalyptic midnight.

Six decades ago, the Doomsday Clock was a full 12 *minutes* away. And President Lyndon Johnson was willing to approach Moscow with the kind of wisdom that is now absent at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue.

Here’s what Johnson said at the end of his extensive summit meeting with Soviet Premier Alexi Kosygin in June 1967 in Glassboro, New Jersey: “We have made further progress in an effort to improve our understanding of each other’s thinking on a number of questions.”

Two decades later, President Ronald Reagan – formerly a supreme cold warrior — stood next to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and said: “We decided to talk *to* each other instead of *about* each other.”

But such attitudes would be heresy today.

As each day brings escalation toward a global nuclear inferno, standard-issue legislators on both sides of the aisle keep boosting the Pentagon budget. Huge new appropriations for nuclear weapons are voted under the euphemism of “modernization.”

And here's a sad irony: The few members of Congress willing to urgently warn about the danger of nuclear war often stoke that danger with calls for "victory" in the Ukraine war. Instead, what's urgently needed is a sober push for actual diplomacy to end it.

The United States should not use the Ukraine war as a rationale for pursuing a mutually destructive set of policies toward Russia. It's an approach that maintains and worsens the daily reality on the knife-edge of nuclear war.

We don't know how far negotiations with Russia could get on an array of pivotal issues. But refusing to negotiate is a catastrophic path.

Continuation of the war in Ukraine markedly increases the likelihood of spinning out from a regional to a Europe-wide to a nuclear war. Yet, calls for vigorously pursuing diplomacy to end the Ukraine war are dismissed out of hand as serving Vladimir Putin's interests.

A zero-sum view of the world.

A one-way ticket to omnicide.

The world has gotten even closer to the precipice of a military clash between the nuclear superpowers, with a push to greenlight NATO-backed Ukrainian attacks heading deeper into Russia.

Consider what President Kennedy had to say, eight months after the Cuban Missile Crisis, in his historic speech at American University: "Above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war. To adopt that kind of course in the nuclear age would be evidence only of the bankruptcy of our policy, or of a collective death wish for the world."

That crucial insight from Kennedy is currently in the dumpsters at the White House and on Capitol Hill.

And where is this all headed?

Daniel Ellsberg tried to alert members of Congress. Five years ago, in a letter that was hand-delivered to every office of senators and House members, he wrote: "I am concerned that the public, most members of Congress, and possibly even high members of the Executive branch have remained in the dark, or in a state of denial, about the implications of rigorous studies by environmental scientists over the last dozen years." Those studies "confirm that using even a large fraction of the existing U.S. or Russian nuclear weapons that are on high alert would bring about nuclear winter, leading to global famine and near extinction of humanity."

In the quest for sanity and survival, isn't it time for reconstruction of the nuclear arms-control infrastructure? Yes, the Russian war against Ukraine violates international law and "norms,"

as did U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But real diplomacy with Russia is in the interests of global security.

And some great options don't depend on what happens at the negotiation table.

Many experts say that the most important initial step our country could take to reduce the chances of nuclear war would be a shutdown of all ICBMs.

The word "deterrence" is often heard. But the land-based part of the triad is actually the opposite of deterrence – it's an invitation to be attacked. That's the reality of the 400 intercontinental ballistic missiles that are on hair-trigger alert in five western states

Uniquely, ICBMs invite a counterforce attack. And they allow a president just minutes to determine whether what's incoming is actually a set of missiles – or, as in the past, a flock of geese or a drill message that's mistaken for the real thing.

The former Secretary of Defense William Perry wrote that ICBMs are "some of the most dangerous weapons in the world" and "they could even trigger an accidental nuclear war."

And yet, so far, we can't get anywhere with Congress in order to shut down ICBMs. "Oh no," we're told, "that would be unilateral disarmament."

Imagine that you're standing in a pool of gasoline, with your adversary. You're lighting matches, and your adversary is lighting matches. If you stop lighting matches, that could be condemned as "unilateral disarmament." It would also be a sane step to reduce the danger — whether or not the other side follows suit.

The ongoing refusal to shut down the ICBMs is akin to insisting that our side must keep lighting matches while standing in gasoline.

The chances of ICBMs starting a nuclear conflagration have increased with sky-high tensions between the world's two nuclear superpowers. Mistaking a false alarm for a nuclear-missile attack becomes more likely amid the stresses, fatigue and paranoia that come with the protracted war in Ukraine and extending war into Russia.

Their unique vulnerability as land-based strategic weapons puts ICBMs in the unique category of "use them or lose them." So, as Secretary Perry explained, "If our sensors indicate that enemy missiles are en route to the United States, the president would have to consider launching ICBMs before the enemy missiles could destroy them. Once they are launched, they cannot be recalled. The president would have less than 30 minutes to make that terrible decision."

The United States should dismantle its entire ICBM force. Former ICBM launch officer Bruce Blair and General James Cartwright, former vice chair of the Joint Chiefs of

Staff, wrote: “By scrapping the vulnerable land-based missile force, any need for launching on warning disappears.”

In July, the Union of Concerned Scientists released a letter signed by more than 700 scientists. They not only called for cancelation of the Sentinel program for a new version of ICBMs – they also called for getting rid of the entire land-based leg of the triad.

Meanwhile, the current dispute in Congress about ICBMs has focused on whether it would be cheaper to build the cost-overrunning Sentinel system or upgrade the existing Minuteman III missiles. But either way, the matches keep being lit for a global holocaust.

During his Nobel Peace Prize speech, Martin Luther King declared: “I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear destruction.”

I want to close with some words from Daniel Ellsberg’s book *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*, summing up the preparations for nuclear war. He wrote:

“No policies in human history have more deserved to be recognized as immoral, or insane. The story of how this calamitous predicament came about, and how and why it has persisted for over half a century is a chronicle of human madness. Whether Americans, Russians and other humans can rise to the challenge of reversing these policies and eliminating the danger of near-term extinction caused by their own inventions and proclivities remains to be seen. I choose to join with others in acting *as if* that is still possible.”

This article is adapted from the keynote speech that Norman Solomon gave at the annual conference of the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation in Washington, DC on Sept. 24, 2024.

*Norman Solomon is the national director of RootsAction.org and executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. His latest book, *War Made Invisible: How America Hides the Human Toll of Its Military Machine*, is published by The New Press.*

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