

Confronting Nuclear Weapons: Lessons for Obama and Us

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At the first plenary session of this IPPNW world congress, I spoke about the remarkable impact of the world nuclear disarmament movement upon the nuclear policies of nations around the globe since 1945. Rather than repeat what I said there -- which in any case, can be read about at greater length in my book, Confronting the Bomb (Stanford University Press, 2009) -- I would like to use this workshop session to focus upon public attitudes toward nuclear weapons. Hopefully, this will provide us with a better understanding of how the public can be mobilized to support the goal of a nuclear weapons-free world.

The first use of nuclear weapons was met with considerable approval by people in different parts of the world. A Gallup poll of August 8, 1945, shortly after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, found that 85 percent of American respondents favored using atomic bombs on Japanese cities. Similarly, the initial support for the atomic bombing of Japan was 72 percent in Britain, 77 percent in Canada, and 85 percent in France. Why was there this level of support for the atomic bombing? One factor was clearly the hatred of the Japanese -- based on longterm racism, and inflamed by the brutal nature of World War II. Indeed, in the context of 50 million deaths caused by World War II -- plus the new practice of the aerial bombardment of cities and population centers -- the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not strike most people as transgressing their already declining moral norms. The second reason for widespread approval of the atomic bombing was the assumption that nuclear weapons brought the war to an end. Actually, a good case can be made that the weapons did not play the key role -- that, in fact, the

Japanese government was tottering toward surrender. But this is beside the point, for many people believed (and still believe) that the bombing brought the bloodiest war in history to a close.

However, the initial public fondness for the Bomb soon dissipated. The reason was that people came to understand that nuclear weapons threatened world survival. If a single nuclear weapon could destroy an entire city, then the widespread use of nuclear weapons in war seemed likely to bring an end to the human race. As peace groups hammered away at this message, it struck close to home. It foretold a future of ruin and calamity for individuals, their families, their friends, and for all the world's people, regardless of national boundaries. In a word, doom.

Not surprisingly, then, within a few years, polls showed that people in numerous nations had come around to viewing the development of nuclear weapons as a negative phenomenon. In August 1945, a poll found that 69 per cent of Americans regarded development of the Bomb as a "good thing," while only 17 percent regarded it as bad. By early 1947, though, an opinion survey found that only 37 percent of Americans thought people were better off because of the discovery of nuclear fission, while 38 percent thought they were worse off. Popular support for the Bomb also dropped in Australia, where – in November 48 – a poll found that only 36 percent thought the atomic energy would do more good than harm, while 46 percent thought the reverse. In France, a December 1948 poll found that only 34 percent of respondents thought that atomic energy would prove beneficial, while 42 percent felt it would be harmful. Meanwhile, approval of the atomic bombing of Japan declined precipitously. By mid-1950, French support for the atomic bombing – 85 percent back in August 1945 – had dropped to 25 percent.

This widespread public worry about human survival – based on the assumption that everyone would lose in a nuclear war – became the nuclear disarmament movement's strongest

card in nations around the globe. Furthermore, the movement's hand was strengthened because people were threatened not only by the possibility of nuclear war, but by the immediate reality of preparations for it. Specifically, nuclear testing spewed vast clouds of radioactive fallout into the atmosphere, and the winds carried this deadly poison around the world. Thus, the hydrogen bomb tests of the Cold War antagonists in the 1950s not only provided effective symbols of a looming nuclear holocaust, but actually began the process of indiscriminate transnational destruction. As a result, there was a great efflorescence of public concern about the nuclear arms race, as well as the growth of a demand to ban the Bomb.

Thus, if one looks at the three great upsurges of public protest against nuclear weapons, one finds that they coincide with the public's sense of imminent catastrophe. The upsurges occurred right after the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (the late 1940s); during the period of H-bomb testing in the atmosphere (the late 1950s and early 1960s); and amid the threats of nuclear war during the revival of the U.S.-Soviet confrontation (the early 1980s).

Although negative attitudes toward nuclear weapons were manifested in substantial protest campaigns during these periods, negative attitudes have persisted during periods of minimal protest. Although one of the great writers on the nuclear dilemma, the psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton, has contended that there has existed a dangerous level of what he calls "nuclearism" in public attitudes, the reality is that polls have consistently shown widespread popular distaste for nuclear weapons.

As early as 1946, when the U.S. government enjoyed a nuclear monopoly, a poll of Americans found that 72 percent of respondents favored giving the United Nations the power to see to it that no country, including the United States, could make atomic bombs. In the following years, this attitude showed a remarkable persistence. A Gallup poll in the summer of 1958 found

that support for establishing a worldwide organization to ensure that no nation made nuclear weapons or missiles stood at 70 percent in the United States, 72 percent in Britain, 78 percent in India, 85 percent in France, 91 percent in Japan, and 92 percent in West Germany.

Fifty years later, public attitudes were much the same. In December 2008, an opinion poll conducted in 21 nations around the world found that, in 20 countries, large majorities -- ranging from 62 to 93 percent -- favored an international agreement for the elimination of all nuclear weapons. Even in the one holdout nation (Pakistan), a plurality (46 percent) supported it. Overall, 76 percent of respondents favored such an agreement and only 16 percent opposed it. Among non-nuclear nations, support for nuclear weapons abolition was 65 percent in Turkey, 67 percent in Thailand, 68 percent in Iran, 70 percent in Azerbaijan and the Palestinian territories, 80 percent in the Ukraine, 81 percent in Indonesia, 83 percent in Egypt, 86 percent in Nigeria and South Korea, 87 percent in Mexico, 93 percent in Argentina, and 96 percent in Kenya. Even among the nuclear powers, there was strong support for nuclear abolition, including 62 percent in India, 67 percent in Israel, 69 percent in Russia, 77 percent in the United States, 81 percent in Britain, 83 percent in China, and 87 percent in France.

Opinion polls over the years have also shown massive popular support for nuclear arms control agreements (such as the SALT, INF, and START treaties), as well as popular opposition to nuclear testing, the building of new nuclear weapons, and the use of nuclear weapons.

In general, then, public opinion has favored -- and continues to favor -- nuclear arms control and disarmament, right up through the creation of a nuclear-free world.

Why, then, you might ask yourself, has the Bomb -- 65 years after its grim inaugural -- not been banned? Despite widespread public opposition, some 23,000 nuclear weapons remain in existence.

One key reason is that the Bomb is the most powerful weapon available. And, in a world of competing nation-states, government officials like to have powerful weapons in their arsenals. After all, competing territories – and most recently, nations – have been fighting wars for thousands of years. Renouncing powerful armaments seems unnatural to the guardians of national security. Thus, except for the most farsighted among them, they resist disarmament. At times, to be sure, they accept some measure of arms control to stabilize the arms race. And they sometimes, grudgingly, accept some nuclear disarmament measures when public pressure grows particularly intense. But, for the most part, they're more comfortable with building weapons than with abolishing them – at least when it comes to their own nations.

A second reason for the persistence of the Bomb is that public resistance to it is not as strong as these poll figures seem to suggest.

For one thing, there is a portion of society that agrees with most government officials that their nations are safer when their nations are militarily powerful. Some people, of course, are simply militarists, and look approvingly upon weapons and war. But others genuinely believe in the notion of "peace through strength," and government officials often rally them by playing upon this theme. One variant of this theme is to claim that the Bomb is a "deterrent." After all, if the public is worried about nuclear war, what could be better than to argue that, ironically, the Bomb is what saves the nation from nuclear attack! Thus, even some people who would prefer to have the Bomb banned will sometimes fall back on the comforting notion that their country's nuclear weapons are protecting them from nuclear war.

Furthermore, public resistance to nuclear weapons has waned when progress toward addressing nuclear dangers has been made. As is the case with other reform movements, gains by the movement tend to demobilize activists. Thus, for example, the Partial Test Ban Treaty of

1963 not only halted most contamination of the earth's atmosphere by nuclear tests, but convinced many people that the great powers were on the road to halting their nuclear arms race. As a result, the nuclear disarmament movement declined. A similar phenomenon occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the United States and the Soviet Union signed the INF Treaty, U.S.-Soviet nuclear confrontation eased, and the Cold War came to an end. Although public protest against nuclear weapons didn't disappear, it certainly dwindled.

Indeed, today, the public in many nations seems complacent about the menace of nuclear weapons. Consequently, although opposition to nuclear weapons is widespread, it does not seem to run very deep. Thus, those people who say that they "strongly favor" a treaty to abolish nuclear weapons constitute only 20 percent of respondents in Pakistan, 31 percent in India, 38 percent in Russia, 39 percent in the United States, and 42 percent in Israel – although, admittedly, majorities (ranging from 55 to 60 percent) take this position in Britain, France, and China. Another sign that support for a nuclear-free world is not as strong as implied by its favorability ratings is that an April 2010 poll among Americans found that, although a large majority said they favored nuclear abolition, 87 percent said such a goal was not realistic.

Yet another sign of the shallowness of popular support is that, despite widespread peace and disarmament movement efforts to mobilize supporters of nuclear abolition around the U.N.'s NPT review conference this past May, the level of public participation in this mobilization fell far short of the antinuclear outpourings of the 1980s and far short of the demonstrations opposing the war in Iraq. Indeed, despite the encouragement of U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the yeoman efforts of numerous civil society groups, and the staging of key events in a city of some 7 million people, the best the worldwide nuclear abolition movement could manage as a show of strength was to turn out some 15,000 antinuclear demonstrators on May 2.

The fact that the nuclear disarmament issue does not seem to have the same salience today as in earlier periods might also reflect the fact many people feel less directly threatened by nuclear weapons preparations and by nuclear war. After all, the present U.S.-Russian nuclear confrontation seems far less dangerous than the U.S.-Soviet nuclear confrontation of the past. Today, nuclear war seems more likely in South Asia, between India and Pakistan, and people living far from these nations find it easy to ignore this dangerous situation.

The public is also very poorly-informed about what is happening with respect to nuclear weapons. For example, one of the most important defeats for the world nuclear disarmament movement occurred in 1999, when the U.S. Senate rejected ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Tellingly, a Gallup poll taken a week after the key vote, found that, although most Americans supported the treaty, 34 percent had never heard of it and only 26 percent knew that the Senate had rejected it!

Young people seem particularly ill-informed about nuclear issues. This year, a poll of people from their teens thru their thirties in eight countries found that a large majority favored nuclear abolition. That's the good news! But large majorities of these young people didn't know that Russia, China, Britain, France and other nations possessed nuclear weapons. In fact, only 59 percent of American respondents knew that their own country possessed nuclear weapons. And this record was better than that of British respondents, only 43 percent of whom knew that Britain maintained a nuclear arsenal.

Public ignorance of nuclear issues occurs largely thanks to the commercial mass media's focus on trivia and sensationalism. But, in certain ways, the public is complicit with this blackout on nuclear issues, for many people prefer to avoid thinking about nuclear weapons and nuclear war.

Overall, then, although there is widespread public opposition to nuclear weapons, it lacks intensity and is not informed by key information about nuclear dangers and nuclear disarmament.

What, then, are the lessons for the Obama administration (which claims to support the building of a nuclear-free world) and for us?

The first is that nuclear disarmament and nuclear abolition have majority public support. And the second is that this support needs to be strengthened if progress is to be made toward a nuclear-free world.

How can this support be strengthened? In my view, disarmament organizations and government officials who are serious about this goal should emphasize the following themes.

The first theme is that nuclear weapons are suicidal. A nuclear exchange between nations will kill many millions of people on both sides of the conflict and leave the survivors on both sides living in a nuclear wasteland, in which – as Soviet party secretary Nikita Khrushchev once suggested – the living might well envy the dead. If one atomic bomb could destroy the entire city of Hiroshima, imagine what over 23,000 of them could do. Furthermore, that atomic bomb was quite small compared to most nuclear weapons today. The H-bomb, for example, can be made up to a thousand times as powerful as the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. As numerous observers have remarked, there will be no winners in a nuclear war. Even a long-time nuclear enthusiast like Ronald Reagan eventually concluded, as he stated during the 1980s on numerous occasions: "A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."

The second theme is that there are no safe havens from a nuclear war. Even in the event of a small-scale nuclear war – a regional nuclear war with relatively few nuclear weapons – the results would be catastrophic. A new study, published in the January 2010 issue of the *Scientific American*, concludes that, in a conflict between India and Pakistan, in which only 100 nuclear

bombs were dropped on cities and industrial areas, millions of people would die immediately, millions more would be wounded, and still others would suffer and die from the long-term radioactive contamination. Nor would the consequences of such a war be confined to that region. The firestorms generated by this conflict would put massive amounts of smoke into the upper atmosphere and create a nuclear winter around the globe. With the sun blocked, the earth's surface would become cold, dark, and dry. Agriculture around the world would collapse, and mass starvation would follow. Thus, if a nuclear war occurs anywhere, no one will be safe.

The third theme is that nuclear weapons do not guarantee security. This contention, I realize, defies the conventional wisdom – the constantly-repeated claim of "Peace through Strength" -- and certainly the contention that the Bomb is a "deterrent." And yet, consider the case of the United States. It was the first nation to develop atomic bombs and, for some time, had a monopoly of them. But each year it became less secure. In response to the U.S. nuclear monopoly, the Soviet government built atomic bombs. And so the U.S. government built hydrogen bombs. Whereupon the Soviet government built hydrogen bombs. Then the two nations competed in building guided missiles, and missiles with multiple warheads, and on and on. Meanwhile, seven other nations built and deployed their nuclear weapons. And each year, all these nations felt less and less secure. And they were less secure, because the more they threatened others, the more they were threatened in return!

Not only did the nuclear powers find themselves in a situation of unprecedented danger – that is, threatened with nuclear annihilation -- but they became entangled in bloody conventional wars. Millions died in China, in Korea, in Algeria, in Vietnam, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and numerous other lands – including large numbers of people from the nuclear nations. As the leaders of the nuclear powers learned, their vast nuclear arsenals did not help them at all in these

conflicts. The Chinese, the Koreans, the Algerians, the Vietnamese, the Afghans, the Iraqis, and other peoples were simply not cowed by the nuclear weapons of the great powers. "Throughout the wide range of our foreign policies in the sixties," recalled Dean Rusk, the former U.S. Secretary of State, "I was struck by the irrelevance of nuclear weapons to decision making. . . . Countries like Burma, Uruguay, and the Central African Republic aren't influenced by our nuclear bombs." Henry Kissinger, who began as a keen advocate of integrating nuclear weapons into U.S. foreign policy, found to his regret – once he began to direct that foreign policy – that nuclear weapons simply weren't useful.

Nor has the vast nuclear arsenal of the United States protected it from terrorist assault. On September 11, 2001, nineteen men – armed only with box cutters – staged the largest terrorist raid on the United States in its history, in which some 3,000 people died. Of what value were nuclear weapons in deterring this attack? Of what value are they now in what is billed as "the war on terror"? Given the fact that terrorists do not occupy territory, it is difficult to imagine how nuclear weapons can be used against them, either as a deterrent or in military conflict.

Moreover, there is the possibility of accidental nuclear war. Over the course of the Cold War and in the decades since then, there have been numerous false alarms about an enemy attack that have nearly led to the launching of a nuclear response with devastating potential consequences. Furthermore, nuclear weapons can end up being exploded in one's own nation. For example, in the summer of 2008 the top officials of the U.S. air force were dismissed from their posts because, thoughtlessly, they had allowed U.S. flights with live nuclear weapons to take place over U.S. territory.

The fourth theme is that, while nuclear weapons exist, there will be a temptation to use them in wars. Waging wars has been an ingrained habit for thousands of years and, therefore, it

is unlikely that this practice will soon be ended. And as long as wars exist, governments will be tempted to draw upon nuclear weapons to win them.

Nuclear weapons emerged in the context of World War II and, not surprisingly, the first country to develop such weapons, the United States, used them to destroy Japanese cities. U.S. President Harry Truman later stated, when discussing his authorization of the atomic bombing: "When you have a weapon that will win the war, you'd be foolish if you didn't use it." Recalling his conversation with President Truman about the bomb, at Potsdam, Winston Churchill wrote: "There was never a moment's discussion as to whether the atomic bomb should be used." It was "never even an issue." Joseph Stalin had a brief opportunity to discuss the Bomb with his U.S. ally at Potsdam, when Truman told the Soviet leader about possessing a wonderfully destructive new weapon. According to Truman, Stalin replied that "he was glad to hear it and hoped we would make `good use of it against the Japanese.'" It also seems pretty clear that, if the German government and the Japanese governments had developed the Bomb, they would have used it just as casually upon their wartime foes.

Of course, nuclear armed nations have not used nuclear weapons for war since 1945. This fact, though, reflects the effectiveness of popular pressure against nuclear war, rather than the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence. Indeed, if nuclear deterrence worked, governments would not be desperately trying to develop and deploy missile defense systems. And so we cannot assume that, in the context of bitter wars and threats to national survival, nuclear restraint will continue forever. Indeed, I think we can conclude that, the longer nuclear weapons exist, the greater the possibility that they will be used in a war. Old ideas of national defense die hard, and it is pollyannish to assume that, in the midst of international power struggles, callous tyrants,

desperate national leaders, or even conventional national rulers will continue to resist employing the deadliest weapon they possess in their national arsenals.

Thus, in the context of a world of warring nations, with thousands of nuclear weapons at their disposal, we all live on the brink of catastrophe.

The fifth theme is that, while nuclear weapons exist, the dangers posed by terrorism are vastly enhanced. Terrorists cannot build nuclear weapons by themselves, as the creation of such weapons requires vast resources, substantial territory, and a good deal of scientific knowledge. The only way terrorists will attain a nuclear capability is by obtaining the weapons from the arsenals of the nuclear powers—either by donation, by purchase, or by theft. Therefore, as long as governments possess nuclear weapons, the potential exists for terrorists to have access to them. Conversely, a nuclear-free world would end the threat of nuclear terrorism. This is a key reason, I think, why portions of the national security establishment in many countries have come around to endorsing nuclear abolition.

IPPNW, of course, does not have the strength and resources to conduct a public education and mobilization campaign along these lines by itself. But it can certainly work with other, like-minded organizations to develop this kind of campaign – organizations like Peace Action in the United States, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in Britain, Gensuikin and Gensuikyo in Japan, and like the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Greenpeace, and the International Peace Bureau on the international level.

IPPNW – and other disarmament groups – should also work closely with the United Nations. Both the leadership of the United Nations (such as Secretary-General Ban) and many member nations of the world organization appear thoroughly committed to building a nuclear-free world. In addition, the U.N. provides the world's best hope for international security. And

international security is vital if we are to head off the sense of national insecurity that does so much to foster the desire for nuclear weapons.

In this fashion, we could mobilize pressure at two important levels of world power – at the bottom (i.e. the public) and at the top (i.e. the United Nations) – to rein in the aggressive, militaristic behavior of the major actor in the middle (i.e. the nation state). After all, it is the nation state that has developed nuclear weapons and, ultimately, it is the responsibility of the public and of the world's most important international organization, working together, to create a nuclear-free world.