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# Social and Psychological Obstacles to Nuclear Disarmament Education and Promotion

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The overarching goal of this conference is to examine the dangers of the theory known as nuclear deterrence, and to explore ways to successfully communicate the fallacies inherent in that theory to people everywhere. In this paper I will address several concrete examples of nuclear deterrence based errors, and will also describe some of the social and psychological obstacles which cause many people to ignore the distinct omnicidal nuclear threat to life on this Planet. Finally, I will suggest several excellent educational resources which are available to help nuclear disarmament advocates overcome these obstacles as they work to mobilize individuals and groups to eliminate the overall nuclear danger.



First, let us define nuclear deterrence. According to the New American Foundation:

“Nuclear deterrence is the belief that states can protect themselves by credibly threatening to impose unacceptable costs on an adversary in the event of an attack. Those unacceptable costs typically entail the wholesale slaughter of an adversary’s population centers (counter force) using nuclear weapons.

([http://www.newamerica.net/events/2008/rethinking\\_nuclear\\_weapons](http://www.newamerica.net/events/2008/rethinking_nuclear_weapons))

In their DVD “The Myth of Nuclear Deterrence”, David Krieger, Rick Wayman and Eric Choquette detail the many flaws which underpin nuclear deterrence theory.

([www.archive.org/details/The\\_Myth\\_of\\_Nuclear\\_Deterrence](http://www.archive.org/details/The_Myth_of_Nuclear_Deterrence)).

In a summary of the DVD’s key points, Professor Martin Hellman says:

- “Although often advanced as if it were proven fact, nuclear deterrence is really an unproven theory about human behavior. That it works is a myth, and there is significant evidence to the contrary;
- Nuclear deterrence cannot deter terrorists;
- Nuclear deterrence assumes rational leaders. That is a questionable assumption when war looms;
- If, as advertised, nuclear deterrence ensured peace, we would encourage global nuclear proliferation. World peace would follow;
- If military leaders really believed that nuclear deterrence worked, they wouldn’t be so concerned with missile defense;
- Belief in the myth of nuclear deterrence creates a false sense of security that hampers efforts to solve the real problems. We need to mutually Assured Destruction to Mutually Assured Survival.”

([earrisk.wordpress.com/2010/09/18/the-myth-of-nuclear-](http://earrisk.wordpress.com/2010/09/18/the-myth-of-nuclear-)

;) )

One of the primary dangers of nuclear deterrence is its instability in terms

of potential technical and human error. In a 1969 presentation at the Missouri Peace Study Institute, eminent economist and peace scholar Kenneth Boulding said of nuclear deterrence: "It is a threat system which says if you do bad to me, I will do bad to you. Therefore, no one will do bad to anyone." In expanding that concept, Professor Boulding also noted, that for mutual threat systems to be viable, they also have to be completely stable. Thus, such stability demands absolute control by the chief threateners, namely, the heads of state of the adversarial nations. Unfortunately, absolute control has been absent on many occasions since 1945. To make matters worse, there have also been numerous false alarms, accidents, miscommunications and other unanticipated events which came very close to triggering World War III, during the last 65 years.

(see: <http://www.nuclearfiles.org>)

In 1969, I interviewed several U.S. Air Force officers who were stationed at Whiteman Air Force Missouri, and whose job it was to launch nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union if so ordered. One of those launch officers, a young captain, told me: "The fact is, it is possible for four officers in a Minuteman squadron to launch and start World War III without authorization from anyone. If four officers, in two capsules decide to turn their keys and launch, then they can do so without orders from anyone. There is no absolute guarantee that orders have to be followed. Naturally, this would be 'illegal', but who would be around to punish them?"

Clearly this four man launch scenario ran counter to Kenneth Boulding's stability criterion. Fortunately, such unauthorized missile launches are said to be no longer possible. Lets hope that is true for both U.S. and Russian nuclear missile systems. The point is that those who have long praised the past safety record of nuclear launch and control procedures might want to rethink that belief.

In 1994, I wrote the late Congressman Ted Weiss of New York concerning the risk of an unauthorized nuclear weapons launch by a U.S. Trident submarine commander. In a letter dated June 15, 1984, he said: "In response to your request, I contacted the Congressional Liaison Office of the Department of the Navy. An officer for the Navy Department informed me that with the support of as few as three other officers, the commander of a Trident submarine could launch an unauthorized attack against Soviet targets ... (and) ... a conspiracy to engineer an unauthorized launch of a Trident's missiles could take as few as four officers to accomplish. To be successful, however, such a conspiracy would require the support of the submarine's radio operator and communications officer, who are responsible for receiving transmissions from the President, and the crew members responsible for actually preparing the missiles for launch."

Here, again, we had a situation which failed to meet the stability criterion for nuclear deterrence. If such historical weaknesses existed with U.S. command and control, we must wonder what the situation was, and is, with Soviet and Russian ballistic missiles. Are there similar weaknesses in those systems today? We could go on at length concerning past miscommunications, errors and accidents related to nuclear weapons. (See: [www.nuclearfiles.org](http://www.nuclearfiles.org)). However, space will not permit an in depth look at all of those phenomena. But, since this conference is primarily concerned with the imminent dangers of nuclear deterrence, I do want to note two past examples of those dangers.

On September 26, 1983, the alarms in a Soviet early warning bunker, just south of Moscow, sounded as a computer screens indicated that the United States had launched a nuclear strike against the Soviet Union. The officer in charge of the bunker and its 200 officers and enlisted personnel was Lt. Colonel Stanislav Petrov. His job was to monitor incoming satellite signals and report directly to the Russian early-warning system headquarters if indicators revealed that a U.S. missile attack was underway. "For several minutes, Col. Petrov held a phone in one hand and an intercom in the other as alarms continued blaring, red lights blinking, and the computers reporting that U.S. missiles were on their way. In the midst of this horrific chaos and terror, with the prospect of the end of civilization itself, Petrov made a historic decision not to alert higher authorities, believing in his gut and hoping with all that is sacred, that contrary to what all the sophisticated equipment was reporting, this alarm was in error... As agonizing minutes passed, Petrov's decision proved correct. It was a computer error that signaled a U.S. attack." (Association of World Citizens News-letter, Fall 2004, p.1.)

Had Col. Petrov obeyed standard operating procedures by reporting the erroneous information, it is likely that Soviet missiles would have devastated all major U.S. cities, and the Pentagon would have retaliated. Accordingly, we would not be here today to discuss the myth of nuclear deterrence, and how to put an end to that flawed concept.

On January 25, 1995, another potentially disastrous early warning error occurred when a Russian radar mistook a U.S. scientific research rocket launched from Norway as an incoming nuclear strike from a U.S. Trident submarine. Even though the United States had notified Russia it would launch a non-military research rocket, those in control of Russia's strategic nuclear weapons did not receive the message. Fortunately, Russian President Boris Yeltsin, a man with a drinking problem, who had three minutes to order a retaliatory strike, elected

to a crisis and did not launch the thousands of nuclear-tipped missiles available on his command.

< [valleycares.org/prnov99.htm](http://valleycares.org/prnov99.htm)

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Given such close calls, why was there no great public outcry regarding the dangers of U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons? First, these

incidents were not widely publicized at the time of their occurrence. Second, there are a host of social and psychological mechanisms which were operable then, as they are today, which prevent most individuals from directing serious attention to, and confronting the potential destruction of themselves, their children and people everywhere.

The Nuclear Age Peace Foundation's DVD "Nuclear Weapons and the Human Future: How You Can Help" discusses three such obstacles, namely: ignorance, fear and apathy. My own research strongly supports the DVD's assumptions regarding those factors. With regard to psychological denial, it is the case that when a potentially horrific atrocity such as nuclear annihilation is discussed, many folks simply experience the "glazed eye" effect, and proceed to stick their heads in the sand (the Ostrich response). Such individuals usually ignore the problem and distance themselves from it by declaring that political, military and scientific experts know how to handle the situation, and it is their job to do so. If the person's denial runs deeply enough, it is very difficult to engage him or her in a serious dialogue regarding the nuclear threat. In some cases, however, a simple non-academic explanation of psychological denial as it applies to nuclear deterrence will increase the readiness, openness, and willingness of individuals and groups to carefully focus on the topic.

Two other serious psychological blocks to nuclear disarmament dialogue were described by the late Professor Jerome D. Frank of the Johns Hopkins University Department of Psychiatry. Dr. Frank described those mechanisms as "insensitivity to the remote"; and "habituation". Regarding insensitivity he said:

" Human sense organs are magnificently equipped to detect tiny changes in the environment – a few parts of illumination gas in a million parts of air brings the housewife rushing into the kitchen; a match flaring a quarter of a mile away on a dark night instantly flags an onlooker's attention. Only the environmental events within the range of our sense organs matter, and like our ancestors, we have no biological need to detect and respond to stimuli that do not impinge on any sense organ. With distant events becoming increasingly vital to our safety, this deficiency – "insensitivity to the remote" is a particularly important source of the general failure to respond with appropriate vigor to the dangers of nuclear weapons."

One way to deal with such insensitivity is to remind individuals and groups that decision making time for the launching of U.S. and Russian nuclear missiles is very short (as few as 3 minutes), and launch to landing times are 25 minutes or less.

"The Timeline for Catastrophe" table attached to this paper contains such data, and is one tool that brings the threat of nuclear war out of the abstract into the concrete.

Dr. Frank described "habituation" as follows:

"Habituation, another property of our biological equipment, also impedes adequate appreciation of the nuclear danger. Survival in the wild requires the ability not only to detect tiny changes in the environment, but also to stop detecting them if nothing happens. If an animal kept on attending to every stimulus, his capacity to sense possible fresh dangers would be swamped. Therefore continuing stimuli, except painful ones which represent a continuing danger, rapidly stop registering, thus freeing the sense organs to pick up new ones. The phenomenon is familiar to all of us – a person moving to a busy street soon sleeps through the traffic noise that first kept him awake. As long as it is not overwhelmingly unpleasant or dangerous, any persistent environmental feature gradually comes to be taken for granted. One is reminded of Alexander Pope's comment on vice:

'A monster of such evil mien/as to be hated needs but to be seen/ but seen too oft, familiar with her face, /we first endure, then pity, then embrace."

"As a new form of destructive power, the Hiroshima atom bomb, with an explosive equivalent of two thousand tons of TNT created considerable apprehension. Since then, the size of available nuclear weapons has about doubled annually, until today (in 1967) the world's stockpiles total at least 50 BILLION tons. We should be terrified, but because of habituation and insensitivity to the remote we are not."

( Frank, J.D., 1967. *Sanity and Survival in the Nuclear Age: Psychological Aspects of War and Peace*: New York: Random House, pp.26-27).

Linguistic Psychologist Charles Osgood also addressed the denial problem as a serious obstacle to nuclear disarmament education and he explained that many people simply refuse to think about negatives like nuclear extinction. According to Osgood, this is particularly prevalent when negatives "... seem remote in time, and are highly symbolic in nature." In such cases, people are less likely to try to do anything about them until it's too late. Seated in the backyard on a nice Spring day, watching a beer, the Neanderthal within us simply cannot conceive of trees suddenly blackened and the voice of the stiller – or there being no more beer."

(GRIT: "A Strategy for Survival in Mankind's Nuclear Age" in W. Epstein, and B. Feld, eds. *New Directions in Disarmament*, New York,

Praeger, 1981)

Marc Pilisuk and Jaime Rowen have also addressed a number of social and psychological obstacles faced by nuclear disarmament advocates when they approach different audiences with their message. In the introduction to their on-line, no-cost book USING PSYCHOLOGY TO HELP ABOLISH NUCLEAR WEAPONS, they state:

“The goal for this brief handbook is to be useful for the following audiences:

- Abolition coalition activists and organizers;
- Peace movement activists;
- Supporters of other Progressive causes;
- Psychologists who wish to apply their professional knowledge to the task of abolishing the dangerous threat of nuclear weapons; and,
- Any member of the public concerned with preventing nuclear war.”

“Our intentions here are to share some knowledge and ideas to increase the efficiency of people and groups working to abolish or reduce reliance on nuclear weapons, and to remind psychologists of some of the hurdles for professional involvement in this issue. The Handbook allows you to look up a general group that you might wish to understand or to influence. It also includes a list of psychological concepts that can be applicable to the tasks of both understanding and action in the human response to weapons of mass destruction.”

The four main concept areas discussed in the book include:

- Dealing with how beliefs and attitudes about nuclear weapons are formed
- Attribution error, belief systems, cognitive dissonance, group think, obedience;
- Relevant to the motivations of people in the nuclear weapons establishment — Achievement motivation, addiction, aggression, and destructive motivation, decontextualized language, game theory, masculine identity, narcissism, patriarchy, professional identification;
- Dealing with individuals coping with threats — Alienation, death wish and apocalyptic fantasies, denial, desensitization, dissociation, fear-arousing appeals, guilt, habituation, learned helplessness, paranoia, psychic numbing, repression;
- Relevant to people opposed to nuclear weapons — Attitudes, empowerment, diffusion of information, self-actualization, social networks.

(The aforementioned book was published by Psychologists for Social Responsibility. To retrieve an on-line, no-cost copy, simply Google: Using Psychology to Help Abolish Nuclear Weapons)

For additional information on psychological blocks to nuclear disarmament education and citizen action, see my recent book CONFRONTING NUCLEAR WAR: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION, RELIGION, AND THE COMMUNITY, Chapter 7. The link to website for this on-line, no-cost book is: [www.confrontingnuclearwar.com](http://www.confrontingnuclearwar.com)

David Barash and Judith Eve Lipton have also provided an analysis of psychological issues surrounding the search for nuclear disarmament. Their well written book, STOP NUCLEAR WAR: A HANDBOOK, includes a chapter titled: “Psychology: Thinking and Not Thinking About the Unthinkable”. Topics include:

- “The Neanderthal Mentality”: fighting pays; we win – you lose; either you’re with us, or you’re against us; it hasn’t happened yet, so it won’t happen.
  - “Cognitive Dissonance”;
  - “Nuclearism”, or the “Strangelove Syndrome”;
  - “Shall We Overcome?": Religion, Morality, and Sanity; Beyond Psychic Numbing.
- (Barash, D.P. and Lipton, J.E. (1982). STOP NUCLEAR WAR; A HANDBOOK. New York: Grove Press. pp. 214-239)

end this book.

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rough mid 2009, three separate research organizations did studies which examined public understanding of nuclear weapons: Topos Partnership (done on behalf of the Union of Concerned Scientists), American Environics, and Greenberg,

Quilan and Rosner. The organization, U.S. in the World, issued a summary of findings of those studies which indicated that one of the biggest challenges peace and security advocates face is the American public's perception of nuclear weapons as a "shield" and the "best/strongest" weapon in our arsenal. Among the key recommendations of the study were two which focused directly on the dangers of nuclear deterrence:

1. "Peace and security advocates should work to help the public think about nuclear weapons in a new way, i.e., 'reframe' the issue to help people see that it is the existence of the weapons themselves – not who has them – that poses the primary threat to global security and national security;
2. "The fact that nuclear weapons are a source of risk – not the fact that they are morally wrong – should be presented as the underlying reason why the issue of nuclear weapons matters.... 'morality' arguments should not be key elements of advocates' frame; for most of the public these are losing arguments ... because they seem to place principles over safety."

The title of the U.S in the World paper is: "Talking About Nuclear Weapons with the Persuadable Middle". To view all of its recommendations simply Google that title.

Despite the numerous psychological mechanisms which hinder public perception and action on behalf of nuclear disarmament, it is important to note that most Americans do have an unfocused concern with the nuclear danger. A 2004 paper published by the Arms Control Association indicated that an overwhelming (84 percent) majority of U.S. citizens say that preventing the spread of nuclear weapons is a very important foreign policy goal of the United States. And, an even higher 86 percent said the United States "... should do more to work with other powers toward eliminating their nuclear weapons."

(<http://www.armscontrol.org/print/1580>)

A 2008 poll by World Public Opinion.org found that in five nations with large nuclear arsenals and advanced delivery systems, large majorities favor the elimination of nuclear weapons – the U.S (77%); Russia (69%); China (83%); and Great Britain (81%). (To view the poll, Google: World Public Opinion 2008 Poll on Nuclear Weapons)

The above public attitudes regarding nuclear weapons are the good news. The bad news is, that despite such favorable opinion for nuclear disarmament, there is no substantial evidence that personal action on behalf of nuclear disarmament is high on anybody's list of things to do, except of course for nuclear disarmament activists. Many recent polls regarding perceived public problems and priorities indicate that nuclear war prevention is nowhere to be found on the list of concerns. Typical lists of U.S. public concerns include: unemployment and jobs; federal deficit and spending; health care; war in Afghanistan; immigration, etc.

When asked directly about nuclear war, people do express their concerns. However, when asked to list problems which they feel are most pressing, nuclear war prevention is rarely mentioned. My general impression is that nuclear war is an abstraction which is basically out of sight and out of mind. And, for many, the threats of nuclear deterrence ended with the Cold War. Without question, this perception, along with the other aforementioned obstacles, has to be addressed if there is any real chance for U.S. and worldwide mobilization to end the myth of nuclear deterrence. This is not to say that we must use psychological "overkill" to the point that we psychologize every issue related to the nuclear danger. However, a case can be made that the overall problem of nuclear deterrence is a psychological one which relates directly to human perception, human attitudes, and human behavior.

Given the increasing amount of funds and resources being garnered by various NGOs for purposes of nuclear disarmament education and promotion, it would seem wise to incorporate sound psychological precepts in the preparation of all education materials, and with all other programming efforts, including those involving the mass media.



Bill Wickersham



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