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US LEADERSHIP FOR A NUCLEAR WEAPONS FREE WORLD?

By David Krieger

Since the onset of the Nuclear Age, nuclear weapons have posed an existential threat to humanity. With the development of thermonuclear weapons in the early 1950s and the ensuing Cold War nuclear arms race between the United States and Soviet Union, humanity has stood at the brink of catastrophe. Albert Einstein noted famously, "The splitting of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking and thus we drift toward unparalleled catastrophe."

With the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s many people breathed a sigh of relief, believing incorrectly that there was no longer a threat of nuclear annihilation. Today, more than 15 years after the end of the Cold War, the threat of nuclear devastation remains very much with us. In some respects, in this time of extremism, the possibilities for nuclear weapons proliferation and use may have actually increased.

Richard Garwin, a respected nuclear scientist, estimates the risk of a terrorist nuclear attack against an American or European city to be greater than 20 percent per year, not a figure that gives reassurance that the dangers have dramatically diminished. Graham Allison, director of Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and an expert in international terrorism, believes that the chances of a nuclear terrorist nuclear attack in the next decade are greater than 50 percent.

The surest and perhaps only way to eliminate the threat of nuclear annihilation is to eliminate nuclear weapons. To achieve this goal will require US leadership. Without such leadership, the other nuclear weapons states are unlikely to move toward the elimination of their arsenals. With US leadership it will be possible to forge a path forward. Unfortunately, for those of us who accept the centrality of US leadership on this issue, there have been few signs of hope that such leadership will be forthcoming. The US has been more inclined to place obstacles on the path to nuclear disarmament than to lead the way back from the nuclear precipice. If the 13 Practical Steps for Nuclear Disarmament set forth at the 2000 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference are taken as a benchmark, the US has failed to lead virtually across the board. If anything, the US has led in the wrong direction.

The Bush administration has committed in the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) to reduce its arsenal of deployed strategic nuclear weapons from about 6,000 to 2,200 or below by the day the Treaty ends, December 31, 2012. It has, however, purposely left out of the agreement any provisions for transparency, verifiability or irreversibility. Weapons taken off deployed status can be put on a shelf in a reserve status for later redeployment. By the terms of the Treaty, the US and

Russia are free to again expand their deployed strategic arsenals the day after the Treaty ends.

In addition, the US has withdrawn from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in order to pursue missile defenses and space weaponization. Despite US assurances that the missile defenses are aimed at rogue nations and not at Russia and China, leaders of these countries have repeatedly stated that US deployment of missile defenses is provocative and is spurring them to increase their offensive nuclear capabilities. China and Russia have also called for banning weapons in outer space, and the US has persisted in blocking their efforts.

Since the end of the Cold War, the US has failed to take its nuclear arsenal off high alert status; failed to give legally binding pledges of No First Use of nuclear weapons, failed to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, failed to support a verifiable Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty and failed to reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons for its security. To the contrary, it has developed contingency plans for nuclear weapons use against seven countries, including five that were thought to be non-nuclear weapons states at the time. And it has sought to develop new nuclear weapons, such as the “bunker buster” and the Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW).

The principal elements of US nuclear policy favor continued reliance on these weapons. When taken together, the first letters of these elements actually spell out “Death Plan.” I don’t mean to imply that there is a conscious plan to destroy humanity, but that is the result of such policy. These elements are:

- **D**ouble standards
- **E**xtended deterrence
- **A**mbiguous messages
- **T**hreat of preventive use
- **H**igh alert status

- **P**reventing proliferation by force
- **L**aunch on warning
- **A**lliance sharing
- **N**egative leadership

A Bipartisan Plea for US Leadership

Against this bleak background, a bipartisan plea early in 2007 for US leadership for nuclear disarmament from four former high US officials stands out as a ray of hope. Their commentary, entitled “A World Free of Nuclear Weapons,”

appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* on January 4, 2007. It was remarkable not so much for what it proposed but for who was making the proposal. It was written by four former Cold Warriors: former Secretaries of State George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of Defense William Perry, and former chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee Sam Nunn. Shultz and Kissinger served in Republican administrations, while Perry served in a Democratic administration and Nunn was a Democratic Senator from Georgia. Sixteen other former US foreign and defense policy officials also endorsed the view represented in the statement.

The statement began by recognizing a present opportunity for diminishing nuclear dangers that will require US leadership to achieve. The authors stated: “Nuclear weapons today present tremendous dangers, but also an historic opportunity. US leadership will be required to take the world to the next stage – to a solid consensus for reversing reliance on nuclear weapons globally as a vital contribution to preventing their proliferation into potentially dangerous hands, and ultimately ending them as a threat to the world.”

The authors expressed their belief in the importance of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War, but its decreasing relevance in a post Cold War world. They, in fact, found that Soviet-American mutually assured deterrence is “obsolete.”

The four prominent former US officials reviewed current nuclear dangers and called for US leadership to achieve the abolition of nuclear weapons. In essence, the argument leading them to this position was based on the following premises:

1. Reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence “is becoming increasingly hazardous and decreasingly effective.”
2. Terrorist groups are outside the bounds of deterrence strategy.
3. We are entering a new nuclear era that “will be more precarious, disorienting and costly than was Cold War deterrence.”
4. Attempting to replicate Cold War strategies of deterrence will dramatically increase the risk that nuclear weapons will be used.
5. New nuclear weapons states lack the safeguarding and control experiences learned by the US and USSR during the Cold War.
6. The nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty envisions the elimination of all nuclear weapons.
7. Non-nuclear weapons states have grown increasingly skeptical of the sincerity of the nuclear weapons states to fulfill their Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations to eliminate their nuclear arsenals.
8. There exists an historic opportunity to eliminate nuclear weapons in the world.
9. To realize this opportunity, bold vision and action are needed.
10. The US must take the lead and must convince the leaders of the other

nuclear weapons states to turn the goal of nuclear weapons abolition into a joint effort.

In other words, the bipartisan group found that it was in the self-interest of the US to lead the way toward a world without nuclear weapons. They are not a group of men likely to encourage US leadership for altruistic reasons or humanitarian concerns. They were hardened Cold Warriors, willing to risk humanity's future during the Cold War nuclear arms race, even if it meant blowing up the world, including the United States, for what they perceived as America's security.

The group outlined a number of steps that need to be taken to lay the groundwork for a world free of nuclear threat. They specifically called for the following:

- de-alerting nuclear arsenals;
- reducing the size of nuclear arsenals;
- eliminating tactical nuclear weapons;
- achieving Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and encouraging other key states to also ratify the Treaty;
- securing nuclear weapons and weapons-usable materials everywhere in the world; and
- reducing proliferation risks by halting production of fissile materials for weapons, ceasing to use enriched uranium in civil commerce and removing weapons-usable uranium from research reactors.

Evaluation of the Bipartisan Plea

For individuals and organizations long committed to the global effort to abolish nuclear weapons, there is nothing new in the arguments of the former Cold Warriors. They are arguments that many civil society groups have been making for decades and with particular force since the end of the Cold War. The proposals of the former officials include many of the steps long called for by the international community such as those in the 13 Practical Steps for Nuclear Disarmament. Other former high-level US officials, such as former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and former head of the US Strategic Command General George Lee Butler, have also made such arguments.

What is new is that these former Cold Warriors have joined together in a bipartisan spirit to publicly make these arguments to the American people. This means that the perspectives of civil society organizations working for nuclear weapons abolition are finally being embraced by key former officials who once presided over Cold War nuclear strategy.

The bipartisan advice of Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn to abolish nuclear weapons will require a full reversal of the current Bush administration nuclear policies. The Bush administration has thumbed its nose at the other parties to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, behaving as though the US has been in full compliance with its obligations under that Treaty.

If the Bush administration wants to demonstrate leadership toward nuclear weapons abolition, it could immediately take the following steps:

- submit the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty to the Senate for ratification;
- halt its missile defense program;
- remove US nuclear weapons from Europe;
- call for negotiations at the Conference on Disarmament on a verifiable Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty;
- negotiate with Russia to take nuclear weapons off high-alert status;
- reach an agreement with Russia to begin implementing deeper cuts in the nuclear arsenals of the two countries, which Russia supports; and
- call for a summit of leaders of all nuclear weapons states to negotiate a new treaty for the elimination of nuclear weapons.

The Bush Administration Issues Its Own Plea (for RRW)

The Bush administration unfortunately does not seem to have been influenced by the bipartisan statement. It released a July 2007 Joint Statement by the Secretaries of Defense, State and Energy, entitled, “*National Security and Nuclear Weapons: Maintaining Deterrence in the 21st Century.*” The Statement begins from the perspective that nuclear weapons will be necessary to maintaining deterrence in the 21st century, although it makes no effort to indicate exactly who is being deterred. Rather, it states the perceived threat in very vague terms, “[t]he future security environment is very uncertain, and some trends are not favorable.”

Two-thirds of the way through the Joint Statement, one discovers that it is basically a sales pitch for the Reliable Replacement Warhead, which Congress has been reluctant to embrace and fund. “To address these issues of sustainability, safety, security and reliability, and to achieve a smaller yet credible nuclear deterrent force,” the three Secretaries argue, “the United States needs to invest in the Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW) program. Pursuit of this program is critical to sustaining long-term confidence in our deterrent capability....”

Ironically, the Bush administration bases its argument for the Reliable Replacement Warhead program, which will replace every nuclear weapon in the US arsenal with a new thermonuclear weapon, on allowing the US to assure its allies, reduce its nuclear arsenal and continue the nuclear testing moratorium. Despite the fact that scientists have concluded that the current US nuclear weapon stock will remain reliable for some 100 years, the Statement actually threatens that “[d]elays on RRW also raise the prospect of having to return to underground nuclear testing to certify existing weapons.”

Conclusion

If the United States becomes serious about leading the way to a world free of nuclear weapons, as called for by the former Cold War officials in their bipartisan plea, it can assume a high moral and legal ground, while improving its own security and global security. Each day that goes by without US leadership for achieving a nuclear weapons-free world diminishes the prospects for the future of humanity and the US itself. There is no issue on which US leadership is more needed, and there is no issue on which the US has more to gain for its own security by asserting such leadership.

The former Cold War officials conclude with a call to vision and action. They state: “Reassertion of the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons and practical measures toward achieving that goal would be, and would be perceived as, a bold initiative consistent with America’s moral heritage. The effort could have a profoundly positive impact on the security of future generations. Without bold vision, the actions will not be perceived as fair or urgent. Without the actions, the vision will not be perceived as realistic or possible.”

These men have seen a new light, one consistent with a human future, and their statement is a fissure in the wall of Cold War security based upon deterrence and mutually assured delusions. It remains to be seen whether their combined bipartisan political clout is sufficiently hefty to move the mountain of US nuclear policy in the direction of their vision. This will depend in part upon the priority they give to this effort and to their persistence in seeking to influence policy. It is certain that one statement will not end the debate.

In June 2007, Sam Nunn, one of the authors of the bipartisan plea, made an important speech to the Council on Foreign Relations. It was entitled, “The Mountaintop: A World Free of Nuclear Weapons.” He argued that “the accelerating spread of nuclear weapons, nuclear know-how and nuclear material has brought us to a nuclear tipping point. The world is heading in a very dangerous direction.” He further stated that the dangers of nuclear terrorism, nuclear proliferation and accidental nuclear war can only be prevented through cooperation with Russia and China. He reiterated the call for US leadership “to take the world to the next stage.” He likened achieving nuclear abolition to reaching the top of a mountain, and set forth steps to be taken to ascend the mountain.

Nunn quoted Ronald Reagan, who said, “We now have a weapon that can destroy the world – why don’t we recognize that threat more clearly and then come together with one aim in mind: How safely, sanely, and quickly can we rid the world of this threat to our civilization and our existence?”

It is late in the day, but the question continues to hang in the air before us. Nunn’s answer was this: “If we want our children and grandchildren to ever see the mountaintop, our generation must begin to answer this question.”

If we fail to address and adequately answer this question and continue with business as usual, choosing new nuclear weapons systems and continued reliance on these weapons, we tempt fate. If we lack the vision and impetus to change and lead, we will stay stuck, and eventually the mountain will explode and our cities, our countries and civilization at the base of the mountain will be destroyed. We will have failed ourselves and worse, our children and grandchildren.

The 19th century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said, “All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.” The truth that if we are to have a human future the US must lead the way in abolishing nuclear weapons has been frequently ridiculed and violently opposed. The commentary by Shultz, Perry, Kissinger and Nunn offers the hope that this truth may now be passing the stage of violent opposition and entering the stage of being self-evident – at least to those who stand outside the halls of power.

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