

1. THE GAME WAS RIGGED

It is possible because the long record of failure doesn't count—the game was rigged.

The record of failure by those who oppose nuclear weapons is more than seven decades long. The failure of anti-nuclear think tanks, nongovernmental organizations, and activists that have worked against nuclear weapons is undeniable. Almost from the moment nuclear weapons were first used, people have been protesting against them, raising doubts about the wisdom of keeping them, and decrying their horrible destructive power. But those efforts have barely dented the belief that there will always be some nuclear weapons. Perhaps they will be small arsenals, but there will be arsenals. The anti-nuclear movement's best successes, in terms of popular organizing, came in the early 1980s, when anti-nuclear referenda were passed in about a third of the United States and more than a million marched and protested in Europe. But that movement in the 1980s, for all its success at pressuring the European governments and the Reagan administration (and even though it attracted millions of people), was not strong enough to advocate the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. The underlying rationale for keeping nuclear weapons has never been seriously threatened.

It is true that the arsenals had swelled to monstrous proportions in the 1970s and 1980s. It is true that they have steeply declined since. The seventy thousand weapons that were in existence in the middle 1980s have shrunk down to something like thirteen thousand weapons today. That is real progress, and almost certainly some of that progress is due to the efforts of groups and organizations in the anti-nuclear community.

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And today, the efforts of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), the Red Cross, a collection of dedicated diplomats, and other groups led to a treaty that commits each country that signs the treaty to ban nuclear weapons. *The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons* (TPNW) has had a worldwide impact and changed the conversation about nuclear weapons. Before this effort, most countries that didn't have nuclear weapons were excluded from discussions about these weapons. The nuclear-armed states condescendingly told the rest of the world to leave this problem to them. A nuclear war would have worldwide consequences, but apparently, that was no reason to allow non-nuclear-armed states to have a say in the matter. Since the TPNW was passed by the United Nations in 2017, however, the non-nuclear-armed states have become increasingly vocal in their objections. There is now real international pressure on nuclear-armed states to abandon nuclear weapons. Every country that signs on to the treaty (and there are now more than eighty countries that have signed) increases that pressure.

But set against this progress is the fact that the nuclear-armed states are more committed to nuclear weapons than ever. The long, slow decline of nuclear forces that took place from the 1980s to the 2010s has now been reversed. Each of the nine nuclear-armed states is now either expanding its arsenal or upgrading its existing weapons. We have moved from a period of fading interest in nuclear weapons to a second nuclear arms race. Although there are only thirteen thousand nuclear weapons in the world today, that number is increasing and will likely continue to grow. And the number of countries that possess nuclear weapons appears likely to expand as well.

The real battle, the one that will determine whether nuclear weapons continue to exist in our world, the one that the anti-nuclear groups have not figured out how to win, is the battle over the rationale for keeping nuclear weapons. Should nations continue to rely on nuclear weapons? That is the central question. But what this second arms race shows is that that rationale is still roughly as strong and as effective as it was when it was first articulated in the Cold War, nearly seventy years ago.

FRAMING

Polls show that most Americans would get rid of nuclear weapons (if they felt they could). But for the most part, people try to put nuclear weapons out of their minds. They don't just ignore the issue; they actively try not to think about it. The unwillingness to think about the issue, however, is unsurprising after all these decades of failure.

The only way this record of failure could be explained away, the only way you could potentially break through people's learned indifference,

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would be to claim that there is some extraordinary, previously unnoticed reason for this long string of defeats. To open people's minds to the possibility of elimination, you'd have to somehow show that there has been some sort of sub-rosa chicanery going on, some form of cheating hidden in the debate that has been tilting it—putting a finger on the scale, so to speak—so that the advocates of nuclear weapons keep winning. Without this kind of unlikely explanation, a realist would have to admit that the chances of eliminating nuclear weapons are almost nil.

But it turns out there is just this sort of hidden tilting of the playing field. Buried in the debate, in a way that you have probably never noticed, there is a built-in advantage for the people who argue that we should keep nuclear weapons. It has to do with framing—political framing: the art of setting up a debate in such a way that the answer is determined by the way the question is phrased, defining the terms of a debate in such a way that only one side can possibly win.

A friend of mine once talked, with a shake of his head, about the brilliance of the anti-abortion movement labeling themselves “pro-life.” “Who could be against life?” he asked sadly. By framing the question of whether women should be allowed to have a medical procedure that ends a pregnancy as a choice between being in favor of life or being in favor of killing, people who were against abortion gave themselves an enormous advantage.

An older and more obvious example of framing is asking, “Do you still beat your wife?” The question forces you to either admit that you are still beating her or say that you used to beat her but now you've stopped. Either way, if you respond to the question, you're trapped.

The nuclear weapons debate got framed in this same way at the very outset, and the impact of that clever maneuver is still being felt today. To see how the advocates of nuclear weapons got an unbeatable advantage, let's revisit some long-forgotten history.

THE FIRST TWO DEFEATS

Almost immediately after reports reached the United States about the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Americans of all kinds—conservatives and liberals, young and old, hopeful and cynical, and in every kind of occupation—began worrying about the long-term consequences of the existence of such devastating weapons.³ It seemed that these weapons could one day destroy the world, and groups sprang up determined to head off that destruction by eliminating the weapons entirely. And each group had a different plan. The first two plans that gained national attention,

however, turned out to be the most important ones. Together, they had a remarkable, long-lasting impact. That impact, though, wasn't exactly what the authors of the proposals hoped for.

SHARING THE SECRET

The first plan was supported by scientists and called for resolving the danger by copying the approach used in science. In the world of science, when you make an important discovery, you tell everyone about it. This has three results. First, you get credit for the discovery—if you publish first, then there's no doubt whose work it is. Second, everyone in the field can then test your results and try to reproduce them. This serves as an important double-check to make sure your results are correct. And third, everyone else can then take what you've learned, add it to what they know, and push the boundaries of discovery even further. Publicly releasing your findings allows everyone to, in effect, work together to push knowledge forward as quickly and efficiently as possible.

To see this kind of information sharing at work, you need only look at early efforts to split atoms. Progress came from many countries, and from scientists of many nationalities. An Englishman, James Chadwick, discovered the neutron in 1932. In 1933, Leo Szilard, a Hungarian, conceived the notion of splitting atoms with neutrons to produce a chain reaction. In 1938, Otto Hahn and Fritz Strassmann, German chemists, bombarded a solution of uranium nitrate, hoping to create heavier new elements but instead found much lighter barium in their solution. They wrote a former colleague physicist Lise Meitner, an Austrian Jew who had fled Austria for Sweden. With her physicist nephew Otto Frisch, Meitner worked out that to create barium, the uranium atoms must have actually split apart. And so on. Scientific understanding was an international product, with many contributors. Progress was rapid, and the benefits were available to all.

The first proposal for getting rid of nuclear weapons argued that rather than keeping the science behind nuclear weapons a secret, the information should be shared with Russian scientists. This act of scientific openhandedness, according to the plan's proponents, would build confidence between scientists in the United States (and its allies) on the one hand and Russian scientists on the other. And that confidence would lead to greater trust between the two nations. Instead of competing with one another to build the biggest nuclear weapons—in other words, instead of starting an arms race—the United States and Russia could cooperate, learn to trust one another, and thus begin the process of bringing peace to the post-war world. Scientists would lead the way. This suggestion eventually

made its way to the United Nations as a major disarmament proposal that was called the Baruch Plan.

ONE WORLD OR NONE

The second proposal for eliminating the danger of nuclear war was a call to rapidly institute a world government. Only a strong centralized government could prevent the kind of competition between nations that led to war, so the reasoning went, and therefore it was imperative to put an end to such dangerous competition. Only by empowering the United Nations, or some sturdier successor, to judge and settle disputes without war could the world be saved from nuclear war. One of the strongest formulations of this proposal was the book, *One World or None*, whose title cleverly encapsulated the argument that if world government were not instituted quickly, the world would be destroyed by nuclear war.⁴

These two proposals each received widespread attention, were debated in newspapers and magazines and became a part of the national conversation about nuclear weapons. They also helped to fix the shape of the debate for decades to come.⁵ Even though they were widely discussed, and even though both garnered considerable support in various quarters, neither ever amounted to anything. The problem was that both were hopelessly naive.

Superiority in military technology has often been the basis for military dominance. In the ninth century BCE, the Assyrians, for example, conquered much of the present-day Middle East by taking advantage of iron weapons, at the time a new technology. Their opponents, who were armed with softer bronze weapons, could not match the Assyrians' newer, stronger, cheaper weapons. In the eleventh century, the Mongols built the largest empire the world has ever known by relying on advances in bow technology. The ability to shoot farther and with greater force (combined with superior horsemanship, unbending discipline, careful intelligence gathering, and ruthless leadership) was the basis of one of the greatest feats of military conquest in recorded history.

The problem with sharing the secret of the bomb was that the science behind nuclear weapons was not an esoteric branch of human understanding. It made possible military tools that seemed to promise the ability to conquer on a terrifying scale. No sensible statesman shares important military technology with an adversary. Military advantage could be the difference between national survival and national destruction. And, in fact, we now know the plan was doomed from the start. New information revealed when Soviet archives were opened in the 1990s shows that Joseph Stalin, the Soviets' leader "was ready to thwart the Baruch Plan

long before it was announced.”⁶ Given Stalin’s suspicious nature, he seems to have judged that a naive peace plan couldn’t possibly be serious and therefore must be the mask for a more sinister move. The notion of sharing the secret of the bomb never had a chance. Sharing what might be dominant military technology in order to build trust was a well-intentioned but foolish idea.⁷

The proposal to build a world government was also flawed. A successful government of laws, it has been persuasively argued, must be based on shared values.⁸ Laws are merely words—powerless in themselves—unless they reflect underlying beliefs that have taken root throughout a society. As the attempt to prohibit alcohol in the United States in the 1920s so vividly demonstrated, it does no good to pass even a constitutional amendment if a large and determined segment of the population does not believe in the underlying goal of the law. Prohibition led to widespread flouting of the law by ordinary citizens, the formation of gangs competing to supply liquor, and eventually widespread lawlessness that nearly undermined the rule of law itself.

If shared values are essential for governing a country, then in order to build a world government, it would be necessary to discover values that are shared worldwide. Yet the world is a jumble of differing cultures, religions, business practices, laws, customs, languages, ideas, and attitudes toward life. Finding commonly held values that would be sufficient to construct the rule of law over the entire world seems like an extraordinarily complex and demanding task. (It might, of course, be possible to impose a set of values on the world by force—for a time. But eventually the human desire to live one’s life as a reflection of one’s own inner values would lead to insurrection, violence, and revolt.) Of course, a world government may one day be possible, as powerful communication technology brings people closer together and a true world culture grows; but it is surely far beyond our reach today and for the foreseeable future. Imagining that world government could have been instituted in the late 1940s was a utopian dream.

So, each of the first two suggestions for eliminating nuclear weapons were, in different ways, flawed from the start. This is not particularly surprising. When you’re faced with a complex new problem, it often takes a few tries to come up with a workable solution. But these first two failures had an unexpected and outsized impact on the debate.

In those early days of thinking about nuclear weapons, there were no thumbnail sketches of the “typical” nuclear weapons opponent or advocate. The two sides hadn’t hardened into set positions. But all that changed after these two ill-considered proposals.

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The advocates of nuclear weapons didn't see these first proposals as simply a pair of ideas that didn't work out. They didn't see them as efforts to find a solution to a very difficult problem that (unsurprisingly) fell short. Advocates of nuclear weapons looked at the two proposals and saw a pattern, a pattern that they then used to recast the entire debate.

They pointed out that the two proposals shared a common characteristic: They were both solutions that relied, to an unusual degree, on idealism. Does the example of good behavior inspire good behavior in others? In an ideal world, it does. Is it possible for very different peoples to share common values? In an ideal world, it is. Advocates of nuclear weapons took that similarity and made it into an iron rule. They claimed that these two proposals proved that there was only one way to think about eliminating nuclear weapons. And more than that, there was only one way to think about the people who said we should eliminate nuclear weapons. Since both proposals were naive and idealistic, they concluded, it must be the case that any proposal to eliminate nuclear weapons was necessarily idealistic. Opposition to nuclear weapons was informed by a kind of simple-minded, utopian reasoning, they decided. Anyone who opposed nuclear weapons was, therefore, an idealist. They were all soft-hearted, addle-headed peaceniks. It was regrettable that so many people shared these views, and although they shouldn't be punished for holding them, the country had to be protected from these fools, naïfs, and hopeless Don Quixotes. Former U.S. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger's dismissal of opponents of nuclear weapons, for example, is typical. "The notion that we can abolish nuclear weapons reflects a combination of American utopianism and American parochialism... It's like the *Kellogg-Briand Pact* renouncing war as an instrument of national policy... It's not based upon an understanding of reality."⁹

It didn't take long for the belief that all opposition to nuclear weapons was idealistic to harden into an established "fact." And this view has dominated the thinking of nuclear weapons policymakers for more than seventy years.

Once the opponents of nuclear weapons had been labeled as idealists, it suddenly became clear to advocates for nuclear weapons who they were. The identity of proponents of nuclear weapons was created, in part, in contrast to who they were not: They were not the people who wanted world government or to give away the secret of the bomb. If the people who wanted to get rid of nuclear weapons were hopeless idealists, then the people who wanted to keep nuclear weapons must be realists. They must be hard-hearted, tough-minded people who were unafraid to see the world the way it really was. They had to be people who understood that to survive in a world of nuclear weapons, you had to be tough.

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That toughness was perhaps best exemplified by General Curtis LeMay, the Air Force general who had commanded and organized the U.S. campaign to bomb Japanese cities in World War II and who went on to be Chief of Staff of the Air Force. LeMay argued that nuclear weapons were decisive as long as you weren't squeamish. And nuclear weapons advocates agreed. Only the people who were tough enough to embrace such harsh positions, they decided, were capable of being realistic about the issue.

REALISTS VERSUS IDEALISTS

Once the roles of the two different sides had been sorted out, the advocates for nuclear weapons believed it was possible to see the shape of the entire debate. Based on only two pieces of evidence (and perhaps a bit of wishful thinking), they leaped to the conclusion that the struggle to make nuclear weapons policy was a contest that pitted realists against idealists. The realists saw the world as it actually was; the idealists saw the world the way they hoped it would be. And once you understood this, it became crystal clear who was right about nuclear weapons. The realists were right. And they would always be right. It can be inspiring to think about how the world might be, but foolish dreams can get you killed. To survive, you had to see the world the way it really is. You had to hold on hard to realism.

You can see immediately why this had such a huge impact. In fact, it assured that the advocates of nuclear weapons would win every debate. When there is a danger of losing your life, which would you rather rely on an idealistic plan or a realistic one? When heavily armed bandits surround your party on a lonely mountaintop, are you more inclined to follow the lead of the person who says, "We should depend on the inherent goodness of human beings and invite them in, show them our trust, and then they will surely return that trust by letting us go"? Or the one who says, "I think there's a path off this mountaintop that only a few people know about. If we can stealthily kill any bandit guarding it, we can make our escape"?

Where there is danger and the possibility of death on the line, most people want a realistic plan of action.

As a result, once the debate was defined as a contest between realists and idealists and the people who said we should eliminate nuclear weapons were branded as the "idealists," their proposals for dealing with nuclear weapons were largely dismissed out of hand—not just by nuclear weapons advocates, but by most ordinary people, too. Everyone can see the danger that nuclear weapons pose. Who wants to risk trying an idealistic plan when faced with danger of that kind? Within a few years, this framing of the debate became the standard view in American society. There were "realists," who said (reluctantly) we have to keep nuclear weapons, and

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“idealists,” who had foolish utopian ideas about getting rid of them. After becoming a society-wide consensus in the United States, it became a consensus in the nuclear-armed states worldwide. In some ways, it is remarkable that proposals for reducing nuclear weapons have done as well as they have given that almost everyone automatically assumes that eliminating nuclear weapons is a ridiculous, unrealistic proposal.

The “realists” who advocate for nuclear weapons have an enviable record of success in policymaking. They almost always get their way. And this experience has played a part in their developing a calm sense of their own rightness. They seem to imagine that their position is unassailable. When they speak, they sometimes sound like frightening old judges: official, remorseless, beyond doubt.

They seem formidable, but they have a weakness. Despite their many victories, there is a crucial frailty in their thinking. True, they were right to oppose the idea of sharing the secret with the Russians. It was a foolish proposal. And the notion that human beings are ready for full world governance was also doubtful. But those two early attempts are not the only way to go about elimination.

The people who advocate keeping nuclear weapons are actually quite human. They have strong emotions, and those emotions have led them to take on flawed position after flawed position and treat each one as cold, hard fact. They think they are objective, but their self-evaluation is myopic. They are fearful rather than analytical. They exaggerate and distort rather than seeing the world clear-eyed and objectively. The fatal flaw in their positions, ironically, is that they are not realists.

Nuclear weapons advocates are so sure of their realism that they don't bother to go back over their reasoning and reexamine their assumptions. But that sort of confidence is often the first indication of a problem. After so many years of success, they act today almost like people in the grip of a divinely inspired faith. They are not angry with the opponents of nuclear weapons but saddened and gently dismissive. They see the opponents of nuclear weapons as well-meaning but wrong-headed, rather like gentle, long-haired, patchouli-scented, pot-smoking hippies—for the most part harmless, but they shouldn't be allowed to interfere in the discussions or decisions of serious, responsible people.

Nuclear weapons “realists” don't understand that they have been swept up by deep emotions. They don't see that their patina of realism covers assumptions and ideas that are, at best, wrong and, at worst, dangerous. Their entire position is doubtful, but they don't see it.