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# Abolishing Nuclear Weapons: Psychological Freedom or Escape from Freedom?

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Death and destruction through the employment of nuclear weapons has been dreaded--or even longed for--depending on ideology, need for power, or psychiatric status. Strategic military plans, civilian governmental initiatives--including alternate plans for mailing government pay checks--symposia of academic experts, and convocations of the illustrious from literature and the arts have addressed the what if of nuclear employment.

Of course, the what if of nuclear employment has already occurred. Nuclear weapons killed thousands in Japan at the end of World War II, and the sequelae are still killing there today. And nuclear weapons have killed while employed as deterrents to adversarial conventional, chemical, biological, nuclear, and even nonmilitary threats. Deaths in these cases have been through accidents with and perhaps sabotage of the weapons themselves as they were being maintained or transported or the structure, function, process and components of installations supporting nuclear weapons.

Efforts to abolish nuclear weapons--from the face of the earth as it were-- have long been stymied by belief systems: (1) that the genie can never be put back into the bottle--a phrase as stupefying as haste makes waste or still waters run deep; (2) that there would always be rogue nation-state or non-state actors to exploit a ban on nuclear weapons design, development, production, testing, deployment, and employment; (3) that the very presence of nuclear weapons actually deters warfare of various sorts; (4) that advocates of abolishing nuclear weapons have been or are (a) communists; (b) enemies of democracy, liberty, freedom, and capitalism; (c) Panglossian purveyors of the best of all possible worlds; (d) an assortment of useful idiots; or (e) controlled by those who are any of the above; (5) that a full-scale nuclear war could be fought and won in some meaningful sense; (6) that if (5) were not possible, a nuclear war could be fought and won in a partial or gradually escalating manner in some meaningful sense.

Yet now General George Lee Butler (USAF-Ret.)--former commander of the Strategic Air Command, former director of Strategic Plans and Policy for the Joint Staff--and a host of other national security experts are advocating the unthinkable. Not the longtime unthinkable of fighting and winning a war--an unthinkable that many national security experts have thought long about--but that of abolishing nuclear weapons. Or as General Butler put it "...a world free of the threat of nuclear weapons is necessarily a world devoid of nuclear weapons...."

This quote and its commonly accepted meaning are certainly logical. But like assertions supporting the contrary position and positions on nuclear weapons policy since 1945, the relationship to reality may be suspect and much too close for comfort to paranoid ideation. This pessimistic conclusion is by no means a negative reflection on nuclear weapons experts but instead is a necessary reflection of nuclear weapons. The many meanings and implications of nuclear weapons employment may simply defy human comprehension.

This may be part of the reason J. Robert Oppenheimer was reminded of a Bhagavad-Gita fragment upon the first nuclear explosion in the New Mexico desert back in 1945: "...If the radiance of a thousand suns

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were to burst into the sky, that would be the splendor of the Mighty One...." Only something different from or beyond being human, some god-like or inhuman force essence could apperceive how the world had changed and would continue to change.

And this may be why in his speech General Butler stated that he has "...seen an army of 'experts' proved wrong." Why as "...an advisor to the President on the employment of nuclear weapons, I have anguished over the imponderable complexities, the profound moral dilemmas, and the mind-numbing consequences of decisions...." Why "...the rapid acceleration of arms control agreements (was) miraculous...." Why the threat of nuclear weapons is "...apocalyptic...." Why "...the position that) a world free of the threat of nuclear weapons is necessarily a world devoid of nuclear weapons...is a conviction...." Why the historic opportunities after the end of the Cold War to handle nuclear weapons differently would necessitate "...advancing the human condition...." Why "...terror-filled anesthesia numbed rational thought (and) made nuclear war thinkable...."

General Butler states "...I believe that a swelling chorus of reason and resentment will eventually turn the tide...." (An interesting choice of words suggesting, perhaps, the chorus of a Greek tragedy which typically comments with the perspective of the Gods.) His advocacy is logical. However, again, nuclear weapons may defy logic, at least human logic. As Oppenheimer also was reminded by another Bhagavad-Gita fragment, "...I am become Death, the shatterer of worlds...." (See Agenda 2001: What is to be done? (1992.) Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. 48. Chicago, IL: Atomic Scientists of Chicago; Butler, G. L. (October 3, 1996.) Speech at the State of the World Forum. San Francisco, CA. (<http://www.arq.co.uk/worldforum/sacspeech.html>); Daalder, I., & Terriff, T. (Eds.) (1993.) Special issue: Rethinking the unthinkable: New directions for nuclear arms control. Arms Control, 14, 1-268; Laughlin, R.B. (January 9, 1997.) Letter to the editor. The New York Times. (<http://www.nytimes.com>); Mendlovitz, S., & Weiss, P. (1996.) Judging the illegality of nuclear weapons: Arms control moves to the World Court. Arms Control Today, 26, 10-14; Oppenheimer, R. (1980.) Robert Oppenheimer: Letters and reflections. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Rhodes, R. (1995.) Dark sun: The making of the hydrogen bomb. NY: Simon & Schuster; Slater, A. (January 9, 1997.) What test ban? The New York Times (<http://www.nytimes.com>). (Keywords: Nuclear weapons.)