

Time to remobilize against the nuclear arms race

Frank von Hippel, Coalition for Peace Action, Hines Plaza, Princeton, 9 August 2022

Today is the 77th anniversary of the day our government dropped a nuclear bomb on Nagasaki. The anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing was Saturday. About 200,000 people died in the two cities, including a dozen American prisoners of war in Hiroshima.

We members of the Coalition for Peace Action, and our fellow activists around the world have helped prevent nuclear weapons from being used again.

We have been in retreat in recent years, however, as our government has committed hundreds of billions of dollars to "modernize" our nuclear "deterrent" so that it can last until at least the 2080s.

We therefore have to mobilize again. Either we get rid of these weapons, or they will get rid of us.

Atomic museums

First, however, I would like to say something about Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

I visited both for the first time 44 years ago, to witness the anniversary ceremonies.

The cities had been rebuilt by that time. They are small and beautiful. Hiroshima is on a broad flat delta at the mouth of a river valley, Nagasaki is on hills surrounding a narrow bay and river valley.

Both have built museums dedicated to educating the public on the effects of the nuclear bombs. More than a million people visit each annually.

Some of their exhibits are deeply shocking. I have studied nuclear-weapon effects but formulas and graphs do not convey what nuclear weapons do to people.

While I was in the Hiroshima museum, it occurred to me that, if the leaders of the nuclear-armed states were locked in there overnight once a year, we might get nuclear disarmament.

Barack Obama was the first serving US president to visit Hiroshima –at the end of his time in office. There had been a lot of hesitation because the president of the United States could not be seen as apologizing for an act that still widely seen in the US as bringing World War II to a triumphant end.

Obama did not apologize but he expressed sorrow for those who had died in Hiroshima. Half a year later, Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe did the same at Pearl Harbor.

We have survived – so far

Our former neighbor, Albert Einstein, would be both surprised and pleased to learn that we are still here almost 80 years into the nuclear era.

Just days before he died in 1955, Einstein signed a statement written by the English logician, philosopher and anti-nuclear-bomb activist, Bertrand Russell. Now known as the Russell-Einstein manifesto, its second sentence says,

"We are speaking... as human beings, members of the species Man, whose continued existence is in doubt."

That was not just rhetoric. A year earlier, the US had tested a bomb one thousand times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb - so powerful it had to be tested in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. We were building nuclear bombs at a rate of thousands a year. The Soviet Union was not far behind.

But the fact that we have survived to this point does not guarantee our future.

Sidney Drell, a physicist who worked on nuclear arms control in the generation before mine, said he was determined that nuclear war would not happen *on his watch*.

We must have the same determination: "***Not on our watch!***" and we must recruit a new generation to succeed us with that same determination.

But we have lost ground

We have a lot of ground to recover, however. We demobilized at the end of the Cold War and Strategic Command again has unchallenged control of our nuclear-weapon policy.

Strategic Command argues that nuclear weapons deter other countries from attacking us or our allies. They're right.

Many nuclear weapons are on hair trigger

But they ignore the danger of accidental nuclear war. Three decades after the end of the Cold War, about one thousand US and Russian nuclear warheads are still ready to launch on warning. The Chinese are preparing to deploy hundreds of new Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles – probably in that same launch-on-warning posture.

What could go wrong?

In 1997, Bruce Blair, Hal Feiveson and I published an article titled, "Taking Nuclear Weapons Off Hair-Trigger Alert." The then Commander in Chief of US Strategic Command invited us to his headquarters outside Omaha and tried to convince us that he and his Russian counterpart had everything under control.

He became less sure after he retired. That has happened with other former Commanders in Chief of Strategic Command who, while they were in charge, also had the illusion of being in full control.

The Coalition for Peace Action

Our Coalition for Peace Action was born in the early 1980s as part of a national grassroots uprising against an administration that was particularly reckless about the possibility of a nuclear war.

The Reagan administration came in believing that the Soviet Union thought it could fight and win a nuclear war.

They therefore proposed that we replace our 10,000 strategic nuclear warheads with more powerful and accurate ones so that, if necessary, we could destroy the Soviet Union's nuclear weapons before they could be launched.

A group of faith leaders in our area created what became the Coalition for Peace Action.

All over the country similar groups sprang up and, in June 1982, there was a million-person demonstration in Central Park and a march to the United Nations calling for a "Freeze" on the US-Soviet nuclear arms race..

The Coalition chartered a New Jersey Transit train and 1400 of us took it to the demonstration.

President Reagan got the message. He switched his focus to missile defense (which we called "Starwars") and then finally, in partnership with Mikhail Gorbachev, to nuclear reductions. Over the following decades, the total number of nuclear warheads in the world declined from about 60,000 to about 10,000 today.

The tide has turned against us

Ten thousand nuclear warheads is still an insane number, however. Civilization could probably be destroyed with one hundred.

But the reductions have stopped and may be reversing.

That's our fault. With the end of the Cold War, most of us declared victory and went on to other things.

Strategic Command did not go away, however. It is downsized but is still morally certain that nuclear deterrence is critical. And that belief is shared by the entire US military-industrial-Congressional complex.

In 1992, ten years after the Central Park demonstration, we were still strong enough to force US nuclear testing to end. And, four years later, we got most of the countries in the world to sign a Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty

But, by 1999, we were so weak that we could not get half of the Senate to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty – much less the two thirds the Constitution requires. Because we and a few other countries have not ratified the test ban, it has not come legally into force.

Miraculously, however, almost all countries are complying anyway. Only North Korea has tested since 1998.

By 2011, the nuclear arms control movement was even weaker. President Obama had to promise to replace all US strategic weapons and their delivery vehicles with "modernized" versions to get the Senate to ratify the New START Treaty to replace Reagan's expiring START Treaty. The Pentagon, the National Security Council, and the House and Senate Armed Services Committees have all enforced the modernization deal and we are spending tens of billions a year on new nuclear weapons.

A new insurgency is needed

Our Coalition is still one of the hottest embers left from the anti-nuclear-arms-race conflagration that burned across this country forty years ago. It is time for us to light a new fire to reverse the new nuclear arms race that now involves China as well as ourselves and Russia.

We need to focus on measures that will reduce the danger of nuclear war.

For example, we should adopt a *no-first-nuclear-use policy*. President Biden came into office intending to do that but found it impossible to overcome the opposition of the Pentagon, Congressional Republicans, and some of our allies.

We should also *get rid of our 400 Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles that sit in underground silos* in the northern Great Plains ready to be launched on warning of an incoming attack.

You can find them with Google Earth. Because they are targetable, Strategic Command insists that they be kept in the launch-on-warning posture. If a president is told that intercontinental ballistic missiles are on the way, he is also told that he has about ten minutes to decide on whether or not to launch. President Bush the younger said that wasn't even enough time for him to get off the crapper.

Both we and the Russians have had false warnings that resulted in close calls. President Obama tried and failed to get Strategic Command to give up its launch-on-warning posture.

This posture makes our intercontinental ballistic missiles a net negative to our security. We should get rid of them. We don't need them. We have about 800 invulnerable nuclear warheads on about ten ballistic missile submarines spread across the vast Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Unfortunately, the Pentagon and the majority of the members of Congress on the Armed Services Committees don't see it that way. For them, our nuclear "Triad" of intercontinental ballistic missiles, long-range bombers and submarine-launched ballistic missiles has become a security blanket.

We must educate Congress again

Because of our movement, during the thirty and forty years ago, Congress was well informed and opinionated about nuclear weapons. Today, only those who represent bases or defense contractors pay attention.

We must educate the other members of Congress that our nuclear posture is dangerous and must be changed.

We should start with members of Congress representing our membership in central and south New Jersey and in the Philadelphia area.

We have a number Congresspeople who could have impact if they decided to focus on our agenda:

- Andy Kim and Donald Norcross from southern New Jersey and Chrissy Houlihan from the Philadelphia area are members of the House Armed Services Committee;¹
- Houlihan and Kim are members and Tom Malinowski is Vice Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee).²

¹ Donald Norcross, Camden and Cherry Hill, NJ; Andy Kim, Willingboro, NJ; Chrissy Houlihan, West Chester, PA

² [Tom Malinowski, Vice Chair, Somerville, NJ], Chrissy Houlihan, Andy Kim.

- Both of our New Jersey Senators, Corey Booker and Bob Menendez, are members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. (Menendez is chairman.)

The Nuclear Ban Treaty

We also can take advantage of the fact that there is a movement outside the US that has produced a new international Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. One third of the members of the United Nations have already ratified that treaty.

The idea is simple: outlaw nuclear weapons in the same way as we outlawed biological and chemical weapons. The Treaty gives the rationale: "the catastrophic humanitarian consequences that would result from any use of nuclear weapons."

Divesting from the nuclear-weapon industry

We also have support in New Jersey's State legislature.

Andrew Zwicker, our State Senator, has submitted a bill mandating that New Jersey's \$100 billion pension fund divest from nuclear-weapons contractors. A companion bill has been introduced in the State Assembly by our Assemblywoman, Sadaf Jaffer, and Assemblyman William Sampson. We should lobby to get these bills passed.

In short, we have plenty to do, and we have good places to start.

There must be no nuclear war on our watch.