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Nuclear Weapons are a Nightmare Made in America



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What transforms American elections from participatory politics into farce is the exclusion of crucial issues. Environmental crisis, the threat of nuclear annihilation and the wildly skewed distribution of political and economic power will affect how people live in coming years, regardless of how effectively they are excluded from electoral consideration.

Each of these are historical accumulations— they exist in different time-space than the binary oppositions of political marketing. Environmental crisis has been accumulating since the dawn of the industrial revolution. The threat of nuclear annihilation emerged

from WWII as the lunatic id of technological innovation. Class relations have determined the realm of official power since the birth of capitalism.

This history grants presence to each, regardless of how hidden they are in any given political moment. If a bomb is dropped on a city in the forest, it destroys the lives of those it is dropped on regardless of whether you and I hear it. The subtexts of modernity are automatically written to preclude reflection.

Recently, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that he would unilaterally end the INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces) treaty with Russia. The calculated irrelevance of American electoral politics to the side, this didn't happen in an historical vacuum. It ties back to Bill Clinton's unilateral placement of NATO troops on Russia's border following George H.W. Bush's [promise not to do so](#).



Graph: On top of the \$700 billion Pentagon budget for 2018, U.S. weapons sales abroad are big business. Among the top recipients of American weapons are Saudi Arabia, China, Japan and South Korea. The Saudis are currently funding a dirty war in Yemen that puts the lives of millions of human beings at risk. Sources: [tradingeconomics.com](#), [SIPRI](#).

During the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, senior members of the George H.W. Bush administration [promised](#) to keep NATO troops and equipment away from the Russian border in exchange for Russian agreement that the reintegrated East and West Germany would fall within NATO's sphere.

After (Bill) Clinton unilaterally [abandoned the promise](#), Russia began rebuilding its short and intermediate range nuclear arsenal to counter the NATO threat being amassed on its borders. This was followed by an [American sponsored coup](#) in Ukraine that threatened the annexation of the Russian [naval port](#) at Sevastopol, Crimea.

In response, Barack Obama [proposed](#) a trillion dollar ‘modernization’ program that shifted emphasis toward battlefield nuclear weapons of the type NATO might use against Russia in a ‘conventional’ war. Largely hidden is that this emphasis on ‘tactical’ nuclear weapons is taking place with the American Cold War weapons and plans for total nuclear annihilation still in place.

In a series of [interviews](#) with Paul Jay of The Real News, Daniel Ellsberg [outlines](#) the development of nuclear weapons from Adolf Hitler’s moral qualms about their potential for total annihilation of all life on the planet to America’s warm embrace of them as a cost-effective tool for fighting foreign wars.

Best known for leaking insider documents on the Vietnam War through the [Pentagon Papers](#), Mr. Ellsberg worked for the [Rand Corporation](#) during the development and testing of U.S. nuclear weapons and wrote some of the key documents regarding nuclear planning. His insiders’ account adds crucial details about the military (il)logic of the American nuclear weapons program.

The U.S. program to build nuclear weapons, long explained to counter the Nazi nuclear program, was brought to its initial stage of completion after the Germans had surrendered in WWII. Following the German surrender, the Americans hindered Japanese efforts to do so until the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki could be [annihilated](#) to demonstrate the ferocity of the American weapon.

As per Mr. Ellsberg, by the late 1950s the U.S. military had a [plan](#) to launch a first-strike nuclear war against Russia that would encompass most of the known world and would ultimately kill, by the military’s own estimates, 600,000,000 human beings. ‘Only’ 100 – 200 million of these human beings would be Russian civilians. The rest would be collateral damage. As Ellsberg put it: the equivalent of ‘one hundred holocausts.’

The motives were twofold. In the first, U.S. President [Harry Truman](#) had feared that a land war against Russia would bankrupt the U.S. Nuclear weapons were considered an economically efficient way to ‘win’ such a war. In the second, the number of civilian casualties was functionally irrelevant to the American plan. If more Americans survived than Russians— no matter how few that might be, the plan would be considered a military success.

Erased from the American consciousness of the present is that the senior U.S. military leadership that fought WWII had few moral qualms about inflicting massive civilian casualties. U.S. General Curtis LeMay, who led the [bombing of Tokyo](#) with incendiary

devices that burned 100,000 Japanese civilians alive, spent much of his time as the head of SAC (Strategic Airforce Command) [trying to launch a nuclear first-strike](#) against Russia. General Lemay subsequently led the incendiary bombing of North Korea that killed twenty-percent of the civilian population and reduced the country to rubble. [Three million Koreans](#) were killed. Later, three and one-half million Vietnamese— overwhelmingly civilians, [were killed](#) in the Vietnam War. In that war, U.S. forces bombed Laotian and Cambodian villages gratuitously, to clear out their payloads when returning from bombing runs.

It was a [known possibility](#) (and [here](#)) when the U.S. exploded the first [hydrogen](#) bomb that the fission-fusion process might not be contained and that all life on the planet could be instantaneously annihilated. This fear was in part why, according to Mr. Ellsberg, Adolf Hitler [abandoned](#) the German effort to build such a bomb. Tellingly, the Americans moved forward with the test despite the risks.

By the 1930s, the economic rationale behind [U.S. military interventions](#) had been laid bare by Smedley Butler in his '[War is a Racket](#)' speeches. General Butler described his role in imperial adventures as a 'gangster for capitalism.' Butler is the human and military link between the American imperialism of 'manifest destiny' and modern military production as a business.

WWII ended the Great Depression. Military production, military Keynesianism in the parlance of economists, brought government spending to the levels needed to reduce unemployment and boost incomes. There are near infinite less destructive ways to put people to work than war. But geopolitical struggles unite people along national lines. As Butler might have put it, 'nationalism is a racket.'

Later in the interviews, Mr. Ellsberg explains the business logic of weapons production. The end of WWII created the fear of a return to the Great Depression if government spending levels were reduced. Continued military production was 'pragmatic' in the sense that the factories, supply chains and workers were already in place. Additionally, (America's [voluntary entry into](#)) two World Wars had instantiated a war logic into the public psyche. Enter the Cold War.

Likely not widely considered in the present is that this same static economic logic applies to looming environmental crises. Since the mid-nineteenth century the U.S. economy has been organized around dirty capitalist production. This includes the U.S. military, which is the largest single user of fossil fuels. Nuclear weapons are 'attractive' to those to whom they are attractive because they can kill a whole lot of people for not very much money.

As with other relations of production in history, post-war U.S. military production produced an internal logic to sustain it. The military personnel who developed and presented the plan to ‘rationally’ murder 600,000,000 human beings fit Hannah Arendt’s ‘banality of evil’ characterization quite well. The logic of annihilation fit nicely into Rand Corporation spreadsheets and presentations.

According to Ellsberg, the American plan for nuclear annihilation was presented to John F. Kennedy when he was President. Evidence elsewhere suggests that Mr. Kennedy came close [to implementing it](#) twice during his shortened time in office— once during the ‘Berlin crisis’ of 1961 and also during the Cuban Missile Crisis. American historical accounts of the latter have until recently been near complete fantasy.

Kennedy initiated the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#) when the Soviets delivered nuclear missiles to Cuba in response to the CIA’s invasion of the Bay of Pigs and the [U.S. deployment of nuclear missiles](#) to Italy and Turkey. The ‘crisis’ was an American provocation followed by domestic political concerns that balanced nuclear annihilation against a politics that conflated an unwillingness to end the world with weakness.

The nuclear missiles placed by the U.S. in Italy and Turkey were arguably and logically first-strike weapons. By the time of the crisis, the senior U.S. military leadership had unilaterally developed nuclear weapons, used them to slaughter civilian populations in Hiroshima and Nagasaki for demonstration purposes, tested the first hydrogen bomb without apparent regard for continued life on the planet and had spent two decades actively planning a nuclear first strike against Russia that would kill, by its own estimates, 600,000,000 human beings.

Astonishingly, or not, Kennedy appeared to have been unaware that [he had approved the deployment](#) of first-strike nuclear weapons to Italy and Turkey when the missile crisis began. The U.S. had vastly more nuclear capacity than the Soviets. And Kennedy had already been presented with the U.S. plan to launch a nuclear first strike against Russia that included annihilating the civilian population of China to save the trouble of doing so later.

Two decades later, in the early 1980s, modeling of the likely impact of large-scale nuclear war introduced the concept of nuclear winter. (I recall hearing the thesis in the 1975). Nuclear winter would arise as nuclear explosions sent dirt into the upper atmosphere that blocked solar warming of the earth. [Subsequent research](#) in the mid-2000s suggested that nuclear winter would be a likely result of limited nuclear exchanges.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s provided a unique opportunity to put this nuclear madness in the past. The rapidity with which it dissolved demonstrated the fragility of complex political organization. The broad distribution of the Soviet nuclear arsenal left the Russians with the logistical nightmare of trying to control weapons systems while no longer controlling the political geography in which they were located.

The political language in the U.S. at the time was of a peace dividend where the military industrial complex that had existed since WWII could be reduced and the social resources that had gone into military production could be reallocated to more constructive uses. The (finance-led) recession of the early 1990s provided the opening for military careerists and military-related industries to argue that ‘the economy’ couldn’t afford a shrunken military. This also marked the inception of the contemporary thesis that nuclear war is no longer a risk. The [INF Treaty](#) that Donald Trump is ending reduced the arsenal of short and intermediate range nuclear weapons by about 2,600 missiles. The rationale for eliminating them was that battlefield use in conventional warfare risked escalation to all-out nuclear war. This is what makes Bill Clinton’s movement of NATO forces to Russia’s border in the early 1990s so profoundly short-sighted.

Unfortunately, the INF Treaty did little to eliminate the capacity, and with it the threat, for nuclear annihilation. Enough submarine and land-based missiles were left in place to destroy most life on the planet 15 – 30 times over. Why this capacity ever reached even 1X is a testament to the logic of military production. The Pentagon is both directly and indirectly one of the largest employers in the U.S. Debate over the efficacy of military Keynesianism centers on the economic multiplier effect, not the question of whether what is being produced should be produced?

While Donald Trump didn’t create these circumstances, he is living evidence of why nuclear weapons are a profoundly bad idea. But the same is true of the American political and military leadership since nuclear weapons were first created. Harry Truman thought it worth killing 200,000 civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki to ‘send a message’ to Russia that the U.S. has nuclear weapons. The American first strike plan against Russia, as reported by Daniel Ellsberg, included slaughtering the civilian population of China almost as an afterthought.

Complacency, that because nuclear annihilation hasn’t happened yet, it won’t happen, is misplaced. Thanks to events dating back to the 1990s, both the U.S. and Russia are currently rebuilding nuclear arsenals. Going further back, the number of accidents with [nuclear launch systems](#), [nuclear weapons](#) and [nuclear materials](#) is not encouraging. Would

the annihilation of most life on the planet with nuclear weapons be more, or less, horrifying because it was accidental?

Given how (1) quickly, and (2) unexpectedly, the Soviet Union dissolved in the early 1990s, why is there confidence that something like that couldn't happen to the U.S.? What would happen to the American nuclear arsenal in such an event? Whatever contingencies might be in place necessarily depend on a complex set of assumptions that might not hold. As with the factors driving environmental crisis, these systems need to be ended. The future of the world depends on doing so.