

## **Disarmament work amidst a global economic crisis**

Andrew Lichterman,\* address outside the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Hiroshima Day, August 6, 2009.

Like many of you, I have been coming out here for many years—decades now. But it has perhaps never been so difficult to figure out what to say. The messages I am getting from the Washington-centric world of U.S. arms control and disarmament work make less and less sense to me. There is a curious lack of real urgency, and what urgency there is seems to be to be looking in the wrong direction, away from the greatest dangers.

We likely are facing the beginning of great crisis of our time. Both the economy and the ideology of the great wave of corporate globalization that has come to dominate most of the planet has been greatly shaken, and may be on the verge of collapse. Yet discussions of disarmament seem to proceed as if this doesn't matter, as if very little has changed since two or ten or even fifteen years ago— with the exception of the election of President Obama, whose approach to disarmament generally is viewed as a cause for optimism. There is very little discussion of how or whether the broader crisis might change the dangers nuclear weapons pose, or how it should affect our strategies for disarmament. So I want to start from where we are, and then to try to place the current round of elite arms control proposals in a broader context that I believe raises questions that are being pushed to the margin of thought.

Almost two decades after the end of the Cold War, the U.S. deploys a force of nuclear weapons numbering in the thousands, on delivery systems originally designed to destroy as much as possible of Russia's nuclear arsenal before it could get off the ground. The U.S. has about 5000 nuclear weapons in its stockpile, about 2700 of them deployed. Thousands more that have been withdrawn from service have yet to be dismantled. Russia has an arsenal of roughly the same size, but both countries are committed under the Moscow Treaty, reached early in the Bush administration, to reaching a limit of 2200 deployed strategic weapons by 2012. The US is believed to have reached that limit already.

But a central goal of U.S. planners is to allow the reconstitution of a larger nuclear arsenal should U.S. decision makers choose to do so. As the head of the National Nuclear Security Administration described it, “. . .the deterrent won't be the old Cold War model based on numbers of weapons, rather it will be the capability to respond to any national security situation and produce those weapons if necessary.”<sup>1</sup>

The relatively “small” nuclear arsenals of China, England, France, and Israel number in the low hundreds. India and Pakistan each have tens of atomic weapons. North Korea may have a small number of nuclear explosive devices— less than ten. It is virtually certain that none can be delivered by a missile.

What do these numbers really mean? We learned— or should have learned— from the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that the nuclear destruction of even a single city

remains a horror that defies human comprehension. General George Lee Butler, retired commander of U.S. Strategic Command, calculated that “twenty weapons would suffice to destroy the twelve largest Russian cities with a total population of twenty-five million people—one-sixth of the entire Russian population;”<sup>2</sup>

According to current estimates, a single U.S. Trident submarine now carries 96 nuclear warheads. There are two types of warheads for submarine-launched missiles, one about six or seven times as powerful as the Hiroshima bomb, the other about thirty times as powerful. Two of the 14 Trident submarines the U.S. has today would carry enough warheads to hit every city and town in the U.S. with a population over about 130,000. In California alone, there would be a warhead not only for San Francisco and Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, San Diego and San Jose, but for Pasadena, Fresno and Long Beach, Hayward and Palmdale, Modesto, Stockton, and Salinas, and many more.

It is against this background that we must evaluate the meaning of the recent spate of elite disarmament proposals, including the recent agreement for negotiation of a successor to the START treaty.

The Joint Understanding for the START Follow-on Treaty signed by Presidents Obama and Medvedev last month commits the United States and Russia to reducing deployed strategic warheads to no more than 1675— seven years from the time the treaty is signed. The treaty would have little real effect on current nuclear weapons deployments, and would not limit several thousand additional nuclear weapons each country keeps in various other accounting categories—tactical nuclear weapons (most more destructive than the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki), and weapons designated as spares and reserves, likely leaving both countries with thousands more nuclear weapons for many years to come.

There is some talk about going down to 1000 or so weapons without much specificity as to what that really means, but this already appears to be a goal consigned to an even more distant future. A thousand nuclear weapons is enough to destroy the largest country, and quite likely much of the biosphere along with it. And again, when thinking about these numbers, it is essential to remember that the nuclear weapons establishment and their allies in Congress already are battling to assure that if the numbers of nuclear weapons deployed is reduced, the capacity to build additional warheads should the U.S. decide to do so will be strengthened.

The flurry of elite disarmament proposals we have seen over the last year and a half have two common themes. One is that getting rid of nuclear weapons is a laudable but distant goal. The other is that the United States will have to keep quite a lot of them around as long as anyone has nuclear weapons to assure adequate “deterrence.” President Obama’s proposals are no different. He describes actual elimination of nuclear weapons as a goal that “will not be reached quickly -- perhaps not in my lifetime.” And the White House web site states that “Obama and Biden will always maintain a strong deterrent as long as nuclear weapons exist.”

But the reality is, of course, that the US uses its nuclear weapons for far more than what

most people would understand as “deterrence.”

U.S. military doctrine calls for the use nuclear weapons to "leverage" the power of its conventional expeditionary forces world-wide by having them operate under the "umbrella" of nuclear forces. Hence if U.S. conventional forces are used to attack another country-- including in the course of a war of aggression, like that against Iraq and repeatedly threatened against Iran-- the role of nuclear weapons is to "deter deterrence"-- to prevent the use of nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons against US forces, bases, or regional allies, even when the US and/or its allies are the aggressor, and to provide an ultimate threat if conventional forces are in danger of defeat. As one Air Force top level planning document put it,

"The NR [Nuclear Response] CONOPS [Concept of Operations] will provide a credible deterrent umbrella under which conventional forces operate and, if deterrence fails, strike a wide variety of high-value targets with a highly reliable, responsive and lethal nuclear force. Desired effects include: Freedom for U.S. and Allied forces to operate, employ, and engage at will."<sup>3</sup>

The illusion that the only role of U.S. nuclear weapons is deterrence-- and the use of the word “deterrence” to obscure the many ways nuclear weapons have been used to threaten, to coerce--is likely to grow even more dangerous in years to come. Nuclear weapons now are integrated into a spectrum of high-tech violence where the US seeks "escalation dominance" at every level of military action-- and in every region of the world, including the home waters and borderlands of other major powers such as China and Russia. Missile defenses and highly accurate long-range missile systems now under development by the United States that may allow destruction of a far broader range of "strategic" targets with non-nuclear payloads add new, inadequately understood factors to this already dangerous mix.

With the world on the brink of an economic and political crisis of a magnitude and kind unseen since the 1930's, those in power may be willing to roll the dice in ways that were unimaginable during the Cold War.

The global scene in some ways resembles that which brought the devastating world wars of the century past. The corporate capitalist system the U.S. has worked to expand and continues to defend now extends to virtually the entire planet. But new economic and military powers are emerging, seeking an increased share of the means needed to create wealth for their elites and to raise the standard of living for the rest of their populations sufficiently to avoid unrest. Older powers are determined to hold on to advantages acquired through centuries of war, conquest, and hard-driving forms of technological and economic development that have enabled them to accumulate great economic and military power, but also have rapidly depleted the resources they directly control. The United States, while still enormously powerful, is on the downslope, a debtor nation dependent on imported resources that has seen much of its manufacturing capacity slip away at the moment of its greatest military ascendance.

In the past, transitions of this kind have brought wars. These wars, like the economic system that in large part drives them, have become more intense, more total, with both the terrain contested and the energies unleashed encompassing more and more at each turn.

Today, there is no visible alternative on the horizon to global competition among state-centered or regional aggregations of capital. All states with significant power are controlled by elites who are either ideologically committed to or at the very least seem unable to offer any alternative to the immense power and inertia of the global capitalist system. Over all looms the United States, its rulers self-consciously committed to preserving this system, and possessing a military machine unparalleled in human history.

The military pre-eminence of the country with the largest economy in any given period is not surprising. And an economic system that has unleashed great industrial capacity confers military advantages on the wealthiest states. But there are particularly dangerous new aspects in the current conjuncture. The integrated complex of large-scale science, the military, and high-tech industrial capacity possessed by the United States will take a long time to match. In addition, nuclear weapons now make it possible for an incumbent “great power” to destroy an adversary entirely, and perhaps itself along with it. And even lesser wars in which nuclear weapons are used risk catastrophe that defies comprehension.

All of this makes it appear possible for a declining but still dominant global power to sustain a status quo favorable to its interests for far longer than its economic capacity might otherwise allow. And great danger can come from its elites believing that they can do so, whether it is true or not.

At the same time, global human society is fast approaching resource and ecological limits. While perhaps in principle surmountable by technology and changes in social organization, addressing these problems would require an unprecedented degree of cooperation, democracy, and shared sacrifice both within and among states. The potential for conflict over oil alone is self-evident, shaping the foreign policies and military deployments of the most powerful states over decades and constituting a significant driver for wars large and small, from Iraq to the Sudan.

U.S. elites apparently have decided to exploit what they see as structural advantages conferred by its immense military establishment to extend U.S. dominance for as long as possible. And it should be emphasized that this is not just about the policies of the Bush administration. There is little questioning in the upper echelons of U.S. political elites in either party of the need to maintain global military dominance, and of the right of the United States to use force to further its vision of global “order.”

So far, aside from gentler atmospherics, there is not much sign of a major course change from the Obama administration. It has announced plans to expand the size of the military, and has intensified the war in Afghanistan (now extending into Pakistan). The Obama military budget differs only in the details from the Bush Administration budget, continuing military spending that already is almost as large as that of the rest of the world combined— and far larger than any imaginable combination of adversaries. And despite a change in the party holding the majority, Congress is continuing entrenched patterns, with powerful committee members in many instances seeking to restore military appropriations in the few areas that the Obama administration has made cuts, and to protect powerful military industrial complex institutions with which they have close ties.

Ironically, the upcoming arms control negotiations with Russia over START, together

with renewed efforts to achieve ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban, are likely to become opportunities for the nuclear weapons establishment to bargain for more facilities and funding guaranties for nuclear weapons for many years to come. We already are seeing signs of this, with powerful senior congress members and senators from both parties maneuvering to place language in this year's defense bills to give the nuclear weapons laboratories more voice in policy decisions for maintaining the nuclear stockpile, and to firmly establish long-range plans for modernization of both nuclear weapons and the facilities to make them.

Here in the U.S., professional arms control elements dominate public discourse of arms control and disarmament. Their approach implicitly assumes that the leading nuclear weapons states will keep civilization-destroying nuclear arsenals numbering in the hundreds or thousands and the institutions to sustain them for a very long time— many decades. Elimination of nuclear weapons is framed largely as an aspirational goal for a distant future. The timeline for nuclear disarmament, to the extent that there is one, is very, very, long.

At the same time, the global political and economic system is characterized by the interplay of strong forces that make war more likely, including wars involving one or more countries that have nuclear weapons. The potential for the kinds of crisis that in the past brought significant danger of conflict and war among major powers seems to me to be on a much shorter time line— perhaps years, at most a decade or two. Yet many who work in the arms control and disarmament field here in the U.S. behave as if wars among the major nuclear armed-states are virtually unimaginable, a far more manageable “nuclear danger” than that posed by nuclear weapons that don't yet exist— nuclear weapons in the hands of Iran, or of “terrorists.”

I believe this is due in part to a fundamental contradiction at the core of much "disarmament" thought-- many proclaim that nuclear weapons are "useless," but at the same time implicitly seem to believe that "deterrence" works, at least among major nuclear-armed states.

But it also is due to the fact that that sustained analysis of why major nuclear armed-states might come to blows in a post-Cold War, thoroughly capitalist world is strangely scarce in arms control and disarmament debate. No one really seems to want to think about how likely nuclear war might be if we reach the point where the ruling elites of nuclear-armed states are facing levels of material competition abroad and socio-economic discontent at home at levels not experienced for generations— since before the nuclear age began. More and more, this period brings to mind historian Eric Hobsbawm's characterization of the years before WWI:

“...[W]hat gave the period its peculiar tone and savour was that the coming cataclysms were both expected, misunderstood and disbelieved. World war would come, but nobody, even the best of the prophets, really understood the kind of war it would be. And when the world finally stood on the brink, the decision-makers rushed towards the abyss in utter disbelief.”<sup>4</sup>

I think we need to come to grips with the fact that we live in a time when the gap between the challenges and dangers we face and the usefulness of the solutions we are being offered are perhaps greater than they have ever been. So too the gap between the soothing rhetoric coming from a feel-good President and the reality of the policies that are coming out of Washington.

Ultimately, it's not about the rhetoric, but about power. The nuclear weapons establishment constitutes a formidable set of institutions. And they are part of a far broader constellation of powerful institutions and organizations, never far, if at all, out of power, that see their interests as being well served by a mode of US global military dominance ultimately underwritten by nuclear weapons.

Unfortunately, our willingness to name and confront anew the interests served by overwhelming military power in fact seems to be to have declined significantly, and with it the breadth and depth of our disarmament and peace movements. Every year, peace groups observe Martin Luther King's birthday, often conducting public readings of one or another of his great speeches. Sometimes I wonder how closely we are listening, even as we are reading, and if we are willing to take up again the challenge he presented to us 40 years ago now in his Beyond Vietnam speech, King said,

“...[B]y choice or by accident, this is the role our nation has taken: the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments. I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”<sup>5</sup>

I believe that disarmament initiatives unaccompanied by strong social movements for democracy, global economic equity, and a more ecologically sustainable way of life are highly unlikely to create the political conditions in which significant progress towards disarmament can occur. Our goal must be to better understand what part disarmament work can play in these broader movements for fundamental social change.

We also must take back our politics from the technocrats and professionals, people with little to sell us except how to sell. Their language of “branding” and “entrepreneurship” pervades the political culture, reaching now far into the so-called “nonprofit” sector and even down to community groups. Far too many mouth the words without thinking about what they mean. They are in fact expressions of the corporate attitudes and practices that have pushed our economy into bankruptcy and our ecosphere to the brink of disaster. The path to a more just and peaceful world will be one of cooperation and solidarity, not more competition. The road to Martin Luther King's revolution in values will not be “branded” or advertised.

We face this dangerous and difficult moment without much in the way of recent analysis and discussion that helps us understand the relationship between nuclear weapons and the structures of a global society and politics that are in crisis and are changing fast. In these circumstances, we must discard much of the “expert” analysis, beginning again with what we know about nuclear weapons, what every human being can know about them. As the Russell-Einstein Manifesto put it over a half century ago, “remember your humanity and forget the rest.”

Nuclear weapons represent the threat of unlimited violence, and of willingness to sacrifice the people for the State.<sup>6</sup> The decision to acquire nuclear weapons raises to the level of an absolute the willingness of those in power to risk all of us, and everything, to achieve their ends.

And it is a decision that in every case has first been taken in secret, with neither the means nor ends open to question, much less choice, by the vast majority of those affected. Both the decision to acquire nuclear weapons and the manner in which it always is taken should tell us that the “state” that we live in significant ways does not “represent” *us*. We must understand that it represents someone, or something, else— and that our very survival may depend on finding out who or what, and doing something about it.

This is what it means for the state we live in to have nuclear weapons, at the simplest and most basic level. It is in this context that educating ourselves and others about the terrible realities of nuclear warfare can have positive meaning. This must not, however, be the end of the discussion, but the beginning. Stopping here, we risk contributing to a climate of fear and hopelessness that can demoralize those we hope to organize, and that can reinforce the fear-based ideologies of those who offer more armaments as the only “practical” form of “security” in a dangerous world. Starting here, we can begin to understand the violence that sustains both stratified societies and the inequities of the global system as a whole.

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1. Address by Thomas P. D’Agostino, Administrator, National Nuclear Security Administration, “Complex Transformation and Strategic Weapons in the 21st Century,” Strategic Weapons in the 21st Century Conference Sponsored by Los Alamos National Laboratory and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, January 31, 2008
2. General George Lee Butler, Speech at the University of Pittsburgh, May 13, 1999.
3. United States Air Force Strategic Planning Directive for Fiscal Years 2006-2023 p.20. For more on this point, see. Andrew Lichterman, “Delivery Systems,” in John Burroughs and Michael Spies, eds., *Nuclear Disorder or Cooperative Security: U.S. Weapons of Terror, the Global Proliferation Crisis, and Paths to Peace* (New York: Lawyers Committee on Nuclear Policy, Western States Legal Foundation, and Reaching Critical Will project of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 2007) 105,114-115.
4. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875-1914*, (Vintage Books, New York: 1989), p.10.
5. Martin Luther King, “Beyond Vietnam,” Delivered 4 April 1967, at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned at Riverside Church in New York City
6. This concept is drawn in part from a yet unpublished draft paper by Kumkum Sangari, “The Place of Gender: Systemic Violence and the Nuclear Threat.”