

Useless Weapons

by Howard W. Hallman

The global nuclear arsenal is chock full of useless weapons. The world would be better off without them – every last one.

Yes, useless for three reasons. First, nuclear weapons have no appropriate use for military combat in contemporary wars and in dealing with terrorists. Second, there are better ways to deal with nations seeking nuclear weapons than threatened or actual nuclear attack. Third, for deterrence of other nations' nuclear arsenals a wiser and safer alternative is mutual elimination of all nuclear weapons.

I

On the first point nuclear weapons have no acceptable role in war-fighting because they are too powerful with too many harmful side effects for battlefield use. Their capability to destroy whole cities goes far beyond the bounds of human decency and proper moral conduct.

This isn't a theoretical conclusion. It's a judgment made on the basis of sixty years of practical experience. Just look at the record.

Since the atomic bombs destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, U.S. political and military leaders have found no use for nuclear weapons in warfare. In the Korean War Presidents Truman and Eisenhower accepted stalemate rather than use nuclear weapons. In Vietnam Presidents Johnson and Nixon rejected the use of nuclear weapons in a war that was headed for U.S. defeat.

Nuclear weapons had no relevance in numerous small military engagements in Lebanon, Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Bosnia, and elsewhere. They weren't used in the Persian Gulf War. They haven't been used in Afghanistan or in Iraq, and they aren't likely to be. If the U.S. should go to war with Iran or North Korea (God forbid), their uselessness in combat would be rediscovered. Nuclear weapons have no use in conquering terrorists hidden in caves and scattered in villages and urban neighborhoods.

Other nuclear weapon states have likewise discovered the uselessness of nuclear weapons in combat. In suffering defeat in Afghanistan the Soviet Union realized their lack of utility, nor did they have any role in the two Chechen wars. Nuclear-armed China has found that none of its external and internal military engagements since it acquired nuclear weapons in the 1960s have warranted their use. The United Kingdom, France, Israel, India, and Pakistan have also so far found no legitimate use for nuclear weapons for the same basic reason. Their power is far disproportional to military objectives.

This experience so overwhelmingly demonstrates the uselessness of nuclear weapons that the burden of proof is upon those who claim they have a useful military role.

II

Nevertheless, there are persons of hawkish persuasion in the United States who, in spite of the historic record of disutility, favor mounting nuclear attacks on emerging nuclear powers, such as North Korea and Iran, to destroy their production facilities and long-range missile sites. This is wrong for moral and pragmatic reasons.

From a moral perspective a preemptive strike would cross the long-time barrier of no first use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states. In the United States would President Obama be willing to take responsibility for huge loss of human life and serious environmental damage that could extend globally? Would he want the United States to face widespread condemnation in world opinion? Leaders of other nuclear powers face the same moral dilemma.

Fortunately there is a large toolkit of nuclear nonproliferation measures available to deal with aspiring nuclear weapon states. This encompasses international cooperation to control and safeguard fissile material and other weapon components, diplomacy, smart sanctions, and financial incentives. This worked with Libya over several years of patient negotiation. There's been some success with North Korea and possibilities remain with Iran.

But even if these states do get a few nukes and long-range missiles to dispatch them, they will discover that their nuclear weapons are useless, just as other nuclear states have found. They will find them unsuitable for battlefield use. And they will realize that the United States and its allies have sufficient firepower with conventional weapons for massive retaliation so that launching a nuclear attack would be suicidal.

That's the solution that the late Paul Nitze offered in 2000 when he insisted that highly accurate conventional weapons could achieve all of the missions envisioned for nuclear weapons without disastrous side effects. He wrote, "I can think of no circumstances under which it would be wise for the United States to use nuclear weapons, even in retaliation for their prior use against us." Nitze was so certain of the conventional alternative that he believed there is "no compelling reason why we should not unilaterally get rid of our nuclear weapons." This is further testimony of their disutility.

III

But even if nuclear weapons are not useful in war, many insist that they have deterrent value. Yet the truth is that the doctrine of nuclear deterrence is like the emperor who wore no clothes. We are garbed in an illusion that we have been persuaded to believe in.

First of all, nuclear deterrence hasn't stopped nations from developing their own arsenal. Thus, nuclear weapons spread from the United States to the Soviet Union to the United Kingdom, France, and China to India to Pakistan. Israel developed nuclear weapons to counter surrounding hostile states, but this motivated Iraq and Iran to try to produce their own. North Korea has done likewise to counter South Korea's shelter under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Rather than deterrence, possession of nuclear weapons has fostered nuclear proliferation.

This leaves nuclear weapons with the sole role of deterring other nations' nuclear weapons. That's the Cold War doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD). If it was ever

valid, it is now totally obsolete. Rather than living in fear with nukes deterring nukes, all sides would be better off through the mutual elimination of all nuclear weapons. There would then be nothing to deter. This makes global abolition the best deterrent.

IV

The United States and Russia should lead the way to global nuclear disarmament because together they possess more than 90 percent of the world's nuclear arsenal. Experts have identified a sequence of events to undertake: take nuclear weapons off high alert, take them out of service, dismantle them, safeguard left over fissile material, all with effective verification. Once the U.S. and Russia get below 500 or so nuclear weapons, other states can join in for the rest of the journey to zero.

China could become safer by joining the United States and Russia in nuclear disarmament. The United Kingdom and France should realize that they have no significant purpose for nuclear weapons beyond national pride. India and Pakistan should understand that they would be better off through mutual elimination. Israel should recognize that, as a nation which came into existence in part as recompense to Jews who were victims of the Holocaust, it would face a forbidding moral dilemma in considering the use nuclear weapons for another kind of holocaust.

But what about terrorists who have no moral compunction in killing thousands of people? Clearly they cannot be deterred by the threat of nuclear attack because they are too scattered and too hidden. The answer is to keep nuclear weapons out of their hands through vigorous nuclear nonproliferation activities. And nonproliferation would be much easier if all existing nuclear weapons were gathered in, dismantled and all fissile material securely safeguarded.

Howard W. Hallman is chair of Methodists United for Peace with Justice, a national association of laity and clergy. He can be reached at [hwhallman\[at\]verizon.net](mailto:hwhallman@verizon.net).

April 2009