

# A world free of nuclear weapons

With a crucial conference at the UN next month, we need **informed consciences** to re-open the **weapons debate**

BY BRIAN D'AGOSTINO

**W**HEN WE HEAR ABOUT nuclear weapons in the news, it is usually in connection with terrorism or "rogue states"—small dictatorships that violate international law. In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq when many claimed that its regime had weapons of mass destruction and ties with terrorist groups. We hear that North Korea has tested a nuclear weapon and that Iran is not far behind. Many worry that missiles tested by such countries today could be nuclear-armed tomorrow. U.S. foreign policy, we are told, aims to prevent "nuclear proliferation" and to insure that nuclear-armed Pakistan will have a "friendly" government.

Exposed to such media reports, it is easy for Americans to focus

on the threat to their country's security posed by other countries' nuclear weapons. And yet most Americans realize there is more to the problem. How can the U.S. reasonably insist that other countries relinquish nuclear weapons, if the U.S. is unwilling to do the same? To be sure, many feel that rogue states possessing these weapons pose a much greater threat to world security than the U.S. or other major powers. But according to public opinion polls, a large majority of Americans don't want any country to have nuclear weapons. After constructive talks with Russian President Medvedev, President Obama spoke for this majority last spring in Prague when he offered "America's commitment to seek

the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons."

What will it take to transform these words into reality? Major obstacles are the factual ignorance and moral confusion that many people harbor about nuclear weapons and their role in national security policy. Ordinary citizens should be helped to understand and form their consciences on these subjects, which are too important to be left only to the experts.

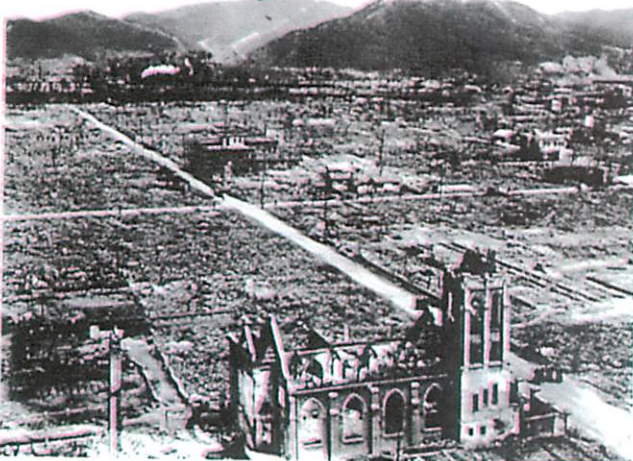
## Nuclear deterrence

One of the goals of U.S. military policy today is to maintain "a credible nuclear deterrent," that is, the threat to use nuclear weapons under certain circumstances. For the threat to be "credible,"

the weapons, trained personnel and systems needed to carry out nuclear attacks must be maintained in a constant state of readiness. Our government also needs to make clear to other countries that the U.S. is willing to actually use the weapons. These same requirements apply to all nuclear-armed countries that wish to maintain a credible deterrent.

At first the U.S. said it was prepared to use "strategic" nuclear weapons only in retaliation for a nuclear attack by the Soviet Union. The threat of retaliation, it was thought, would be enough to deter such an attack. But the U.S. soon developed "tactical" nuclear weapons, which it planned to use in many other circumstances, such as a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. It was believed that the threat to use these weapons would give the U.S. a military advantage in conventional wars, such as Vietnam and Iraq. Today nuclear deterrence is part of U.S. policy to maintain overwhelming military superiority over rogue states, China, and any potential adversary.

The dispassionate and technical language that national security experts use when talking about deterrence persuades them that the weapons are under rational control. But a 2002 conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis showed this to be an illusion. U.S., Russian and Cuban officials, who



**Hiroshima after the 1945 atomic bombings.**

*The international movement for a treaty to abolish nuclear weapons is collecting signatures to be presented at the NPT Review Conference in May in New York. For more [lcnp.org](http://lcnp.org).*



**Nuke-tree.** Originally created as part of the logo of the international organization [abolition2000.org](http://abolition2000.org), this image has become the symbol of nuclear disarmament.

had managed the crisis forty years earlier, shared experiences and information. One Soviet captain, according to an eyewitness, had believed his submarine was under attack, and he prepared to launch a nuclear torpedo. Had he not been calmed down by a subordinate, the U.S. and Russia would have probably been annihilated in a nuclear war.

Expert discussions of deterrence also tend to ignore the human effects of a nuclear attack. In 1945, an atomic bomb that was small by today's standards destroyed Hiroshima. Its blast was equivalent to 13,000 tons of TNT, immediately wiping out more than 70,000 lives, mostly civilians. Tens of thousands more died slow and painful deaths over the next several months from burns and radiation poisoning, and yet more from cancer in the following decades. Responding to this history, today's mayor of Hiroshima is a leader in the global movement to abolish nuclear weapons.

### **Catholic social teaching on nuclear weapons**

The Catholic Church teaches that some uses of force are "intrinsically evil." These are acts that are always and without exception immoral, even during a war that is itself justified. First, in the words of Pope John Paul II, "Genocide, torture, and the direct and intentional targeting



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**Upcoming at the United Nations.**

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon with Libran N. Cabactulan, President-Elect of the 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

UN PHOTOS/KINDER DEBEE

of noncombatants in war or terrorist attacks are always wrong” (The Gospel of Life). Second, it is immoral to attack military targets, if disproportionate numbers of noncombatants will be killed, even unintentionally. According to the U.S. Catholic bishops, this generally applies to retaliation with strategic nuclear weapons, “because of the way modern military facilities and production centers are so thoroughly interspersed with civilian living and working areas,” combined with the indiscriminate nature of the weapons themselves (The Challenge of Peace). Finally, the use of tactical nuclear weapons, especially a “first use,” would be immoral, because “the chances of keeping use limited seem remote,” and escalation brings an unacceptable risk of large-scale carnage.

Taken together, these three principles of civilian immunity, proportionality and non-escalation amount to a condemnation of any use of nuclear weapons, strategic or tactical. Further, if certain acts are immoral, the planning or threat to commit them is also immoral, a concept in law called “inchoate crimes.” The prohibition of use, therefore, also applies to the policy of deterrence.

With the Cold War behind us and the dangers of proliferation looming, the abolition of nuclear

weapons is long overdue. In 1996, the World Court ruled that the use of nuclear weapons, or threat of use, is generally prohibited under international law. The court concluded, “There exists an obligation to pursue in good faith negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control.” But how can this be done if the U.S. depends on nuclear deterrence for its security?

In his first World Day of Peace message on January 1, 2006, Pope Benedict questioned this understanding of security. Regarding governments that “count on nuclear arms as a means of insuring the security of their countries,” he wrote, “Along with countless persons of good will, one can state that this point of view is not only baneful but also completely fallacious.”


**Disarmament**

This May diplomats from around the world will be conferring on nuclear disarmament at the United Nations in New York. They are meeting to review their governments’ compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which banned the spread of nuclear weapons in 1970 and obligated countries already possessing them to work for their complete elimination.


Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has claimed that it is meeting its obligations under the NPT by reducing its stockpiles of nuclear weapons. Non-nuclear weapon states, however, point out that the U.S. and other nuclear-armed states continue to rely on deterrence and have no plans to eliminate all their nuclear weapons as required under the NPT. To comply with this treaty, they argue, the U.S. needs to stop planning for nuclear war and, instead, plan with other countries the abolition of nuclear weapons in a reasonable time-frame.

What can we do to help create a world free of nuclear weapons? First, we should continue to inform ourselves about the issues. Second, we should bring

information and moral awareness into dialogues with citizens, politicians and those whose work depends on nuclear weapons. Finally, we should all do our part in building relationships that generate reciprocal trust and concern for the common good, as the most solid foundation for a world of peace.

To be sure, abolishing nuclear weapons will not be easy and will require prudence. “Will other countries honor an international agreement to eliminate nuclear weapons?” one could ask. Like the World Court and U.N. disarmament experts, Baltimore Archbishop Edwin O’Brien advocates “robust measures to monitor, enforce and verify compliance.” Even so, he recognizes that, “The path to zero [nuclear weapons] will be long and treacherous.” In the end, our choice is whether to go down this path trusting in Providence or continuing to trust in nuclear weapons and in policies that we know are dangerous, immoral, and illegal. This is not only a political dilemma. It is a struggle for the soul of our nations. 

**“Extending social and economic development throughout the world and eliminating nuclear weapons are two fundamental prerequisites to replacing the culture of war with a culture of peace, and building true security for all the world’s peoples.”**

—Douglas Roche, o.c., author, parliamentarian and diplomat   
(douglasroche.ca)

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