

*Comments made by GBPSR Steering Committee member Joseph Hodgkin, MD
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Nuclear weapons can be a difficult topic of conversation. They are scary, abstract, and distant. For people of my generation they are most likely to conjure up things we learned in high school history class. For many people that I talk to, they represent a political issue that is important, but global and unreachable in scale. It's a topic that makes you feel helpless, something that you can't do anything about, something that you don't want to think about.

This understanding is mistaken. That is why it's so important for those of us who have knowledge to share about this issue to tell two stories.

Admittedly, the first story is dark. The nuclear weapons in the world today are tens or even hundreds of times more powerful than the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One of these weapons dropped on Boston would kill hundreds of thousands of people and wipe much of eastern Massachusetts off the map. Use of a few hundred of these weapons would end civilization as we know it, and perhaps a few hundred more would make Earth uninhabitable. But there are fifteen thousand nuclear weapons in the world, and four thousand of them are ready to launch on warning, on "hair-trigger alert." The US president can make a unilateral decision to launch nuclear weapons. Command and control accidents have created situations increasing the risk of accidental nuclear war as recently as 2010. And international relations academia is still dominated by the suicide bomber ideology of deterrence – the ideology of "do what I say or I will end life on Earth"

Many people know all this, and many view it as a terrible state of affairs. But they don't think there's anything effective to be done. That is why we have to tell them a second story – the story of how effective grassroots activism has been against nuclear weapons, and the story of how far we have come.

The first wave of activism came in the late 50's and early 60's, when the health risks of atmospheric nuclear weapons testing became apparent. Physicians for Social Responsibility, founded in Boston in 1961, demonstrated those risks, in part through work showing that children in Boston had radioactive strontium-90 in their teeth from nuclear testing far away. The resulting grassroots movement, including allies from the Pugwash Conference and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, led to the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty, which outlawed nuclear testing in the atmosphere, underwater, and in outer space -- everywhere except underground.

In the early 1980s, the Reagan administration's aggressive plans to double defense spending, move new provocative intermediate-range missiles into Europe, and begin a space-based missile defense system caused a reawakening of the movement. The Nuclear Freeze campaign's demands swept through local and state governments. In June 1982, approximately one million people gathered in Central Park for what was at the time the largest protest in US history. PSR and its new partner, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, played a key role in communicating to the public the potential consequences of escalation, and as a result shared the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize.

It is often understated how effective this movement was. By 1983, the message had reached Hollywood, and a made-for-TV movie called *The Day After* aired to a live audience of 100 million Americans. The film showed the grim outcome of a nuclear war, and was followed by a live debate in which Carl Sagan forcefully argued for disarmament. President Reagan wrote in his diary that the film was “very effective and left me greatly depressed,” and over its remaining years, his administration changed course. He returned to the negotiating table, signed the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, laid the groundwork for the START treaty, and told Gorbachev in Reykjavik that “it would be fine with him if we eliminated all nuclear weapons.”

Since then, there has been significant progress in disarmament, and there are fewer than a quarter as many nuclear weapons now as there were at the peak of the Cold War. Prominent supporters of a nuclear weapons-free world include Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama; cold warriors Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, William Perry, and George Schultz, and former President Obama. Of course, the events of the past two years have been discouraging, with new saber-rattling in the US and Russia, and an uncertain future for the New Start Treaty. The administration has even threatened in the past week to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists has moved their Doomsday Clock to two minutes to midnight.

But recent years have also been energizing for our movement. Launched in 2006 at an IPPNW conference, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, or ICAN, has successfully passed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in the United Nations General Assembly. This treaty would put nuclear weapons in the same category as biological and chemical weapons, cluster bombs, and landmines, and would increase pressure towards disarmament. The treaty has been an amazing opportunity for the voices of our allies in Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia, who do not have nuclear weapons but would suffer the consequences of their use, to be heard. This treaty also brings to the table indigenous people and those living in the peripheries of the great powers, especially women, who have suffered the most from nuclear testing and waste disposal in Native American country, Pacific Islands, and Kazakhstan. The treaty has been ratified by 19 countries and will go into effect when that number reaches 50. ICAN and its partner organizations were awarded the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize for this work.

Here in the US, PSR, in partnership with other scientific groups, and prominent Catholic, Buddhist, and Quaker groups, have launched a campaign called Back from the Brink: A Call to Prevent Nuclear War, a list of five policy goals – renouncing first use of nuclear weapons, ending sole presidential authority to launch nuclear weapons, ending “hair-trigger alert,” cancelling the 1.3 trillion dollar plan to upgrade the nuclear arsenal, and support of treaties that would allow multilateral complete nuclear disarmament. This call has been endorsed by a rapidly growing number of organizations, and now includes the city councils of Baltimore and LA, and the state senate of California. The full list of endorsers can be found at preventnuclearwar.org.

We are in the third wave of the movement against nuclear weapons, and in many ways we are closer than ever to ending the nightmare that began in 1945. The story of our success is

remarkable, and it is just as critical to communicate as the dangers of nuclear weapons, so that people know that something can be done.