

Empathy: Our Way Out of Nuclear War

When I started to think about a world without nuclear weapons, and whether they had saved the world, I realized that I first needed to figure out how nuclear weapons affect normal, everyday people – whether “the world” thinks that nuclear weapons have saved them. I decided to start by asking my friends. They would probably know better than me how “the world” thinks – given I spend many hours each day thinking about nukes.

My friends all seemed to have pretty straightforward ideas about nuclear weapons. When I asked them what they thought about nukes, they usually told me one of two things. That nuclear weapons are either "scary," or that they try not to think about them. None of them claimed that nuclear weapons could, or had, saved the world.

In these conversations, they'd often turn the question I'd ask them back around on me - what did I think of nuclear weapons? I had a harder time answering. Because for me, despite the months I've spent thinking about nukes, I still have complicated feelings about them.

Are nuclear weapons scary? Of course. I still, when I think about nuclear strategy, find myself intentionally ignoring the physical horror that the weapons I'm thinking about create - because the alternative to ignoring it would be failing to get anything done. The reason to ignore the horror is, to put it simply, survival. If I let myself be justly terrified for too long, I wouldn't be able to keep going.

And do I try not to think about nukes sometimes? Of course. For one, everyone needs other hobbies. But again, the nature of doing nuclear policy work is inherently a balance between ignoring and confronting terror. That tightrope can be incredibly stressful to walk. Sometimes, I need some time on solid ground.

But, overwhelmingly, when I think about nuclear weapons, I think about something that few advocates for the abolition of nukes think about. I think, indeed, about stability. I think about their necessity in defending us from the coercion of enemy states, who have their own nuclear weapons. I think about the 80 years the world has gone without great power war.

I am no perfect nuclear abolitionist. I have complex emotions about the weapons I am fighting against. I definitely don't believe they've “saved the world,” but I don't believe the stability that they created - however illusory - is necessarily worse than millions dying in a great power war. Importantly, however, nuclear weapons have not just created stability, and not just created positive forces in the world.

What would a world without nukes look like? Well, not a peaceful utopia. We would lose stability, the first creation of nuclear weapons. We might have world war, if countries no longer had the threat of annihilation deterring them.

But then, why do I still advocate for a world without nuclear weapons? Why, when they've apparently "saved the world" from great power war?

I advocate because of the second thing nuclear weapons have created: a sense of terror in the heart of every person on this planet. I advocate for freedom from that terror. In a world with nuclear weapons, everyone can see, far above their head, what Chuck Hansen, a documentor of nuclear history, called the "Swords of Armageddon." We live in a delicate balance of terror that we call deterrence, and that we justify in the name of stability. Jeffery Lewis of the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies once said "fear is how you know [deterrence] is working." Well, despite all the benefits deterrence brings, I just don't want to live in fear anymore.

In a world without nukes, the swords of armageddon bearing down on us are dispelled. There is an unprecedented collective relief to be gained from that. A certain exhalation that the world could collectively take, a slackening of the world's muscles. There would be a global psychological benefit from knowing that, no matter how bad war grew, we would not drive ourselves to extinction in the matter of hours, and that benefit would be incalculable. Nuclear weapons "save the world" from great power war. I want to save the world from the pain of believing that, maybe tomorrow, maybe 10 years from now, maybe 50 years from now, all they've ever worked for and loved, everyone they've ever known, might be destroyed. I think that's a noble goal.

But what was the point of that preamble - the exploration of the world as it is now, with nuclear weapons, and of my own difficulties in seeing them as purely evil - if I was just going to conclude, quite quickly, that a world without nukes would be better than one with them?

I spoke about my misgivings because I'm not the only one who holds them. World leaders, bureaucrats, and thousands of other thought leaders are dependent on nuclear weapons. The world right now is a dangerous, terrifying place. Coercion is on the rise, security is on a downturn, and global tension is at its highest since the cold war. Our leaders believe nuclear weapons, ultimately, keep them safe. They cling desperately to that feeling of security, ignoring the feeling of global terror they create.

The fight to abolish nuclear weapons is a fight *for* these leaders, these people who live with us in fear, not against them. The only way to convince them of the threat of nuclear weapons is to come from a place of empathy – to acknowledge our own misgivings, our own doubts, our own fears of global war. I am not a perfect nuclear abolitionist - I do not hate nukes with all my heart. In fact, a little bit of me gains comfort from them. But ultimately, the sword of armageddon hanging over me compels me to fight for a world without that comfort. And I believe acknowledging that balance, and that tension, is the first step toward convincing the world's most powerful individuals that nuclear weapons must be destroyed.