

Looking Back for a Way Forward: The Call for a Future Free of Nuclear Weapons

In order to envision our future, it is important that we reflect on the past.

The existence of nuclear weapons is proof of the capabilities of the human mind and scientific achievement, a physical feat demonstrative of our spirit and intelligence. But nuclear weapons have caused enormous harm and tragedy to millions of people, and their impact is a profound reminder that crossing certain thresholds in the name of innovation can lead to negative consequences.

One such consequence is the negative impact on people who have been affected by the testing or deployment of nuclear weapons. When the United States began weapons testing, it displaced Indigenous communities located on nuclear sites in Washington state, New Mexico, and others. Even after testing was completed, the environmental contamination (which still persists today) greatly affected the health of returnees, as well as subsequent generations, and the surrounding land. Where is the justice for these communities? Where is the justice for nature?

Nick Bostrom's *The Vulnerable World* hypothesis posits that, one day, humankind may invent a weapon so powerful that it causes pure destruction, and possibly annihilation, of the planet. According to this hypothesis, human creativity is such that a near limitless number of inventions can be developed, whether they are good for humankind (likened to a white ball), or harmful (likened to a gray ball). Bostrom claims that we have not yet encountered a “black ball”, something so dangerously potent that it destroys civilization.¹ As demonstrated by the long term damage done by nuclear weapons, we are already severely close to this. Should we continue on our path towards innovation, we might create something even worse. We must avoid this result at all costs.

In the July 2023 Blockbuster film *Oppenheimer*, U.S. President Harry S. Truman tells the titular character that as President, “he alone” bears responsibility for the use of the atomic bomb. But the reality is that he was not alone in the decision to use the bomb — many people, Oppenheimer included, contributed to the creation and deployment of the bomb. How many of them stopped themselves along the way to question if they should really follow through on it? How many tried to stop others? How many were ignored?

If we expand on this viewpoint, we may come to understand that everyone — all of us, in some way or form — is responsible for such decisions. The decision to go to war, the decision to support politicians eager to implement policy with epic consequences, or the decision to ignore what is happening in current geopolitics to avoid accountability out of a misguided belief that they are bigger than us. These are decisions we all have the power to make. They all contribute to the usage and spread of nuclear weapons. Following this, we must think of nuclear weapons as our collective responsibility.

¹ Bostrom, N. (2019). The Vulnerable World Hypothesis. *Global Policy*, 10(4).

Governments justify their possession of nuclear weapons by saying they are imperative for their own national security, that because their adversaries have them they must do the same as a preventative measure. These statements are understandable, they are borne from a sense of self-preservation and distrust. Although histories and perspectives vary, the reality is that this lack of trust is dangerous. Possession of nuclear weapons justifies innovation; taking advantage of one's possession of nuclear weapons to coerce international cooperation justifies increased military competition until eventually, someone makes the irreversible decision to launch a nuclear attack. To what extent do we seek solutions that promote trust instead? Or are we to always walk this tightrope towards utter destruction?

In 1983, Soviet officer Stanislav Petrov was on duty when a nuclear early-warning system reported that a missile had been launched by the U.S. Despite it being at the height of the Cold War, Petrov decided to disobey military protocol and instead assessed the warning as a false alarm. By doing this, he inherently prevented a nuclear war. Petrov has indicated that his decision was made via a mix of deduction (assessing the warning as an illogical action on behalf of the U.S.), but also through his "civilian training", which prevented him from immediately reporting the incident and questioning its validity instead. His decision to stand down was the very line between the survival or destruction of civilization.

We should all follow Petrov's example and question the very existence of nuclear weapons. We should question the audacity of our policymakers who, intentionally or not, perpetuate the proliferation of nuclear arms by demanding their necessity. The grave capacities of nuclear arms is a black box we should have never opened, but that also does not mean that it cannot be closed. If we question our orders, if we lead with empathy, we can reach a future that is free of nuclear weapons.