

76 Years After Hiroshima and Nagasaki; Where Do Things Stand? A View from the United States

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Following four harrowing years culminating with a devastating pandemic, economic collapse, volatile and chaotic international relations, a racial justice uprising and a violent right-wing insurrection, U.S. President Joseph Biden entered office facing a daunting array of challenges. On the domestic front, the Biden administration is seeking to reverse the Trump administration's reckless disregard for the pandemic, its xenophobic policies attacking immigrants, people of color, Muslims, Jews, women, non-gender conforming people and the poor, and its assaults on healthcare, the environment and democracy itself. Regarding nuclear weapons and foreign policy, however, the direction of the new administration and Congress so far maintains the status quo, and Donald Trump retains control of a large majority of Republican members of Congress and state legislatures.

Nuclear weapons were worse than worthless in preventing and containing the COVID-19 pandemic. What we needed instead was unprecedented worldwide cooperation to eradicate the virus and prepare for future pandemics, and to address a cascade of converging crises including climate change, poverty, racism, and rising authoritarian nationalisms. Yet, according to a report by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), in 2020, the nine nuclear-armed states spent \$72.6 billion on nuclear weapons, with the U.S. leading the pack at \$37.4 billion, or \$70,881 per minute!

We celebrated entry-into-force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) on January 22, 2021, but just six days later, The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists announced it is keeping the hands of its Doomsday Clock at 100 seconds to midnight, the closest we've ever been to global annihilation, stating: "By our estimation, the potential for the world to stumble into nuclear war—an ever-present danger over the last 75 years—*increased* in 2020."

President Biden has been involved in arms control negotiations since 1979. Shortly before leaving office in January 2017, then-Vice-President Biden said: "It is precisely because we do not trust our adversaries that treaties to constrain the human capacity for destruction are indispensable to the security of the United States of America. Arms control is integral to our national defense and—when it comes to nuclear weapons—to our self-preservation."

Biden's announcement his first day in office that the U.S. would rejoin the Paris Climate Accord and the World Health Organization, and his decision to extend new START were welcome. But his budget request for Fiscal Year 2022 *increases* military expenditures by \$11 billion from the Trump years. And despite campaign promises to the contrary, the Biden budget extends funding for *all* nuclear warhead and delivery system upgrades in the Trump budget, as well as its massive investment in the nuclear weapons infrastructure, intended to project nuclear weapons research, development, production, and deployment well into the 21st century – in clear violation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

In his January 2017 remarks, outgoing Vice-President Biden declared: "As a nation, I believe we must keep pursuing the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons," but, "A nuclear deterrent has been the bedrock of our national defense since World War II. And so long as other countries possess nuclear weapons that could be used against us, we too must

maintain a safe, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal to deter attacks against ourselves and our allies. That is why, early in the administration, we *increased* funding to maintain our arsenal and modernize our nuclear infrastructure—so that our arsenal remains safe and reliable—even with fewer weapons, and even without tests.” Paradoxically, this was the deal the Obama administration made with the Senate for its ratification of the new START treaty in 2010.

During the 2020 Presidential campaign, Biden said: “Our nuclear arsenal should be managed in a way that deters the use of nuclear weapons and makes nuclear use less likely. The use of even one nuclear weapon would be catastrophic, cause significant casualties, and result in enduring radiation that could affect millions of humans, as well as the environment. There would be no ‘winners’ in a nuclear exchange.... The United States does not need new nuclear weapons. Our current arsenal of weapons.... is sufficient to meet our *deterrence* and alliance requirements.”

Unfortunately, U.S. national security policy has been remarkably consistent since 1945. “Deterrence,” the threatened use of nuclear weapons, has been reaffirmed as the “cornerstone” of U.S. national security by every President, Republican or Democrat, since President Harry Truman, a Democrat, oversaw the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Deterrence now is an ideology which has outlived its Cold War origins and is used by nuclear-armed states to justify the perpetual possession and threatened use of nuclear weapons. It is an eternally elastic concept which serves to justify entire military-industrial complexes and the national security states and elites that they serve (not only in the U.S.).

Entry-into-force of the TPNW notwithstanding, an entrenched military-industrial-complex with nuclear weapons at its core, a reactionary large Republican minority in Congress, and the lack of a visible anti-nuclear movement in the United States make fundamental changes to U.S. nuclear weapons policy unlikely for the foreseeable future.

Opposition to the TPNW began before the Trump administration. In October 2016, President Obama’s UN Ambassador condemned the TPNW in the General Assembly, stating: “Advocates of a ban treaty say it is open to all, but how can a state that relies on nuclear weapons for its security possibly join a negotiation meant to stigmatize and eliminate them”.

Today, out of 535 members of the U.S. Congress, only 11 have signed the ICAN Parliamentary Pledge.

However, there is better news at the local level. On August 6 and 9, groups in towns and cities across the United States will hold commemorations and protests on the 76th anniversaries of the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and many will be part of Gensuikyo’s Peace Wave. 41 U.S. cities and three states have adopted the ICAN Cities Appeal in support of the TPNW. 59 cities and four states have adopted Back From the Brink resolutions calling on the United States to lead a global effort to prevent nuclear war by: actively pursuing a verifiable agreement among nuclear-armed states to eliminate their nuclear arsenals; renouncing the option of using nuclear weapons first; ending the sole, unchecked authority of any U.S. President to launch a nuclear attack; taking U.S. nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert; and cancelling the plan to replace the entire U.S. nuclear arsenal with enhanced weapons. Back From the Brink has also been endorsed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the national association of more than 1,400 big cities.

From my point of view as a civil society activist, the main value of the TPNW in the U.S. is as a key “talking point” in public education and advocacy. Raising awareness about the TPNW can help us challenge the ideology of nuclear deterrence, which must be dismantled if we are ever to achieve a world without nuclear weapons.

It is increasingly clear that the multiple national and global crises we are confronting arise from the same foundational causes, and that we are unlikely to prevail on any of them as single issues. We need to come together as never before to build national and international political power, from the bottom up, through durable, diverse, multi-issue coalitions, networks, and networks of networks based on our shared commitments to nonviolence and universal, indivisible human security.

There is an emerging movement which, I believe, has the vision and potential to bring together such a coalition—at least in the U.S.; The Poor People’s Campaign; A National Call for Moral Revival.

Exactly one year before his tragic assassination in 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. declared: “[If] we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values.... we must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”

The Poor People’s Campaign has picked up Dr. King’s unfinished work, weaving the interlocking injustices of systemic racism, systemic poverty, environmental devastation, militarism and the war economy, and a distorted moral narrative of religious nationalism, into one “moral fusion” campaign.

The Poor Peoples Campaign calls for cutting U.S. military spending by half (\$350 Billion), including by eliminating nuclear weapons. With growing state-based organizations in 45 states, the burgeoning Poor People’s campaign is supported by an extraordinary range of diverse constituencies including labor unions, faith organizations, racial justice, anti-poverty, environmental and peace groups.

In 1964, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. warned: “Somehow we must transform the dynamics of the world power struggle from the negative nuclear arms race which no one can win to a positive contest to harness man's creative genius for the purpose of making peace and prosperity a reality for all of the nations of the world. In short, we must shift the arms race into a ‘peace race’.” Today, 56 years later, this is still the work ahead.