The Old and New Shapes of Nuclear Danger

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"After I became an American citizen, the thing that stands out so clearly in my mind is the Reagan/Gorbachev summit at Reykjavik," California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger said recently. "The leaders of the two most powerful nations on earth were actually discussing the elimination of nuclear weapons. Such a breathtaking possibility. I still remember the thrill of it."

The occasion was a conference at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, led by the four authors of an article that appeared in the Wall Street Journal last January. It called for "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," as championed by Reagan and Gorbachev at Reykjavik, and its authors were George Shultz, Secretary of State under Ronald Reagan (Shultz was present at Reykjavik); William Perry, Secretary of Defense under Bill Clinton; Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State under Richard Nixon; and former Senator Sam Nunn--four archbishops of the cold war nuclear priesthood, most of whom until now have dismissed the idea of nuclear abolition as undiscussably utopian and naïve. The four cited proliferation and the terrorist danger, and warned that the world is entering "a new nuclear era that will be more precarious, psychologically disorienting, and economically costly than Cold War deterrence." Significantly, they invoked moral as well as practical reasons for their proposal, approvingly quoting Reagan's opinion that nuclear weapons are "totally irrational, totally inhumane, good for nothing but killing, possibly destructive of life on earth and civilization." The conference at Hoover was the second in a series convened to explore concrete pathways to the goal of abolition. The group will eventually publish a book and hold an international conference to present their findings.

As Schwarzenegger self-deprecatingly observed, he knows more about weight lifting than throw-weights; yet he went on to speak compellingly of the new nuclear dangers. (It is a perverse pleasure to be able to quote Schwarzenegger, Shultz, Kissinger, Perry, Nunn and Reagan approvingly in a single article in The Nation, which normally does not keep company of this kind. The hopeful aspect may be that in our fractious time there are still some issues that can recall

us to our common humanity.) And not only former weight lifters and nuclear priests but anyone who reads a newspaper can see that nuclear dangers are spreading like the brush fires that were sweeping through Southern California as the conference met. The United States has, of course, got itself stuck in Iraq in pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and facilities for making them, including nuclear ones. In Iran the government is racing to produce nuclear power fuels that, with a few extra touches, could become nuclear weapons materials. To halt this development, many inside and outside the Bush Administration have favored a military attack on Iran, though a recent National Intelligence Estimate has declared that while Iran once had an active nuclear weapons program, it was suspended in 2003.

The Pentagon has even developed plans for nuclear strikes against Iran as well as other possible proliferators. In nuclear-armed Pakistan, the state is in crisis and the danger is rising that some of its nuclear bombs or materials will fall into hands even more irresponsible than those currently holding them. A recent op-ed in the New York Times by liberal hawk Michael O'Hanlon and neoconservative Frederick Kagan suggested that the United States might intervene militarily in Pakistan. The mission would be to take control of the country's nuclear arsenal and help "hold the country's center." (If, in a neoconservative dream-come-true, the United States assailed both Iran and Pakistan, it would be at war simultaneously in four contiguous Islamic countries: Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan.)

Waves of fear are rippling across the Middle East and beyond from these crises and wars. In this year alone, twelve other nations in the Middle East have announced their interest in acquiring nuclear energy. Israel, of course, has been a nuclear power since about 1967, and in a still mysterious episode, on September 6 it bombed a facility in Syria that allegedly was part of a nuclear program assisted by North Korea, which tested its first nuclear weapon last year. Although North Korea has declared a readiness to give up its arsenal, no one knows if or when it will actually do so. Nor have the cold war nuclear powers surrendered their arsenals; on the contrary, they are retooling and retargeting them at the proliferators. The United States has founded an Air Force command called Global Strike Task Force, which enables it to target "any dark corner of the world" with conventional or nuclear munitions. Britain and France have announced similar policies. Thus, from Pyongyang to Tehran to Tel Aviv to Washington, a new global struggle has been born, matching many existing nuclear powers against aspiring nuclear powers.

Is there any chance that the abolition initiative will be taken up not only by people retired from power but by those who are in power or seek it, such as the current crop of presidential candidates? There are some hopeful signs. The nuclear question, an exile from discussion since the end of the cold war, has begun to seep in around the edges of the campaign. In the Democrats' August 19 debate, John Edwards pledged to "eliminate nuclear weapons"--and got a brisk round of applause. Dennis Kucinich was championing nuclear abolition long before the Journal article was written and has remained an eloquent and steadfast proponent of the cause. In a speech mostly detailing many sensible steps to reduce nuclear dangers, Bill Richardson committed himself to the same goal. The most significant conversion to abolition, however, was made by Barack Obama in a major foreign policy speech in October. He stated, "We'll keep our commitment under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty on the long road towards eliminating nuclear weapons.... As we do this, we'll be in a better position to lead the world in enforcing the rules of the road if we firmly abide by those rules. It's time to stop giving countries like Iran and North Korea an excuse."

Hillary Clinton took note of the Journal article in an article of her own in Foreign Affairs, but her substance and tone were notably different from Obama's. She reported that the Journal four had advocated "reducing reliance on nuclear weapons" and promised to do the same. But the very title of the article had been something quite different: "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons"--a goal unmentioned and not embraced by Clinton. As if to underscore the evasion, she claimed she could "reassert our nonproliferation leadership" merely by negotiating an agreement to further reduce US and Russian arsenals. In a remarkable piece of double-think, she added that this "dramatic initiative" would "send a strong message of nuclear restraint to the world, while we retain enough strength to deter others from trying to match our arsenal." Deterring others from matching the United States is crucially different from deterring them from attacking the United States, for it commits the nation, as the Bush Administration does, to indefinite nuclear superiority over all other nations. In short, her "dramatic" act of "restraint" would leave the United States in a position of global nuclear dominance for the indefinite future. It's hard to imagine a stance more likely to accelerate nuclear proliferation.

The statements of Obama and Clinton have drawn a line between the campaigns of these two Democratic front-runners on an issue of supreme importance for our time. Obama has embraced the goal of a world without nuclear weapons. Clinton has not. Wouldn't this matter be as worthy of a few questions in the debates as, say, driver's

licenses for undocumented immigrants or Obama's readiness
to get verbally tough with Clinton?

So far, Reagan's legacy has found no takers among the Republican candidates, even as they claim with every other breath to be his heirs. The debate question for them would be whether their admiration for their hero extends to his vision of nuclear abolition, and if not, why not?

Abolition in the First Era of the Nuclear Age

In the year of campaigning that lies ahead, we'll find out whether the nuclear question--a "presidential" issue if there ever was one--gets the attention it deserves. Developments in the world's multiplying nuclear hot spots, however, are not going to wait for pundits, pollsters and spinmasters. The need of the hour, with or without the candidates' participation, is to figure out the alarming new shape of nuclear danger, how it got that way and what to do about it. One approach to these questions is to look back at the Reykjavik summit and ask what its larger significance might be and whether it has the relevance to our day that has been claimed. Reykjavik occurred at a turning point of the cold war. Today we have entered what many call the second nuclear age. Does the first nuclear age have relevance for this second one?

The reaction in the immediate aftermath of Reykjavik would suggest that the answer is no. An impression arose that the negotiations had been a chaotic and dizzying bout of improvisation in which a clueless Reagan had somehow been lured into momentarily agreeing to abolition. In this telling, the whole episode, both embarrassing and futile, came off as a freakish event in which the leaders of the major cold war states, departing from their briefing books and perhaps their senses, somehow decided to give an airing to a proposal that all serious people knew to be utterly quixotic. However, the recently declassified Soviet and American Memoranda of Conversation of the event reveal that the summit was in fact a disciplined, sincere exploration and negotiation of the possibility of abolishing nuclear weapons. Each leader knows exactly what he wants. Each listens carefully to the other. Each is a rock-ribbed abolitionist. Each, indeed, has been an abolitionist for several years and has thought long and deeply about the subject. By the second day of the meeting, each is prepared to surrender his country's entire nuclear arsenal on the spot. But their paths to the goal are different, and in the end--heartbreakingly--they cannot agree.

More important for understanding the present moment than this impressive performance is that the negotiation can be seen as the

culmination of an evolution of thinking as long as the cold war. The problem presented by the advent of the bomb in 1945 was how to absorb such a stupendous, disproportionate force as the energy released from mass into the fluctuating, frail, contingent realm of historical events. A protracted effort at what might be called translation was required--a slow sifting and weighing, in heart and mind, of each aspect of the nuclear dilemma. For a single modern historical era, the cold war lasted a remarkably long time--and thereby offered a pedagogical advantage. Considered as a laboratory in which to examine the bomb, it provided ample leisure for investigation. You might say that it held the mysterious and elusive atomic fire steady in its tense grip long enough for people to discover some important things about it and to reflect on it quite deeply.

Most important, the bomb's uselessness for war was impressed upon its possessors. In this period, the nuclear-warfighting school, teaching that nuclear arms were just another weapon for war, was gradually eclipsed by the rise of the deterrence, or mutual-assured-destruction, school, teaching that the main objective of nuclear policy must be to assure that the weapons are never used. This strand of nuclear thinking seemed to reach a culmination in 1985, when Reagan and Gorbachev made their famous joint statement at the Geneva summit that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." Observers might have thought the mutual-assured-destruction school had finally triumphed, once and for all. For decades right-wing politicians who rejected the doctrine had maintained that victory in a nuclear war was possible. Now their greatest champion, the ultraconservative Reagan, was standing beside a leader of the Soviet Union declaring otherwise. The decades of danger had not passed in vain. The illusion that anyone could win or gain any advantage from a nuclear war was officially dead.

Yet Reagan had not embraced the deterrence doctrine's corollary: namely, that nuclear arsenals must be preserved forever. It so happened that he despised deterrence, chiefly on moral grounds. He did indeed assess the realities of nuclear war in the same way as his liberal opponents, most of whom were wedded to deterrence, but his prescription for dealing with the situation could not have been more different. Neither, of course, did he agree any longer with his own tribe of nuclear hawks. He was on his own. He was a fervent nuclear abolitionist.

The theme first surfaced on March 23, 1983, in the third year of Reagan's presidency, when he made two radical proposals in the peroration of a speech on his military buildup. The first, later named the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), was to build a defensive system that would "intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles

before they reached our own soil or that of our allies," thus rendering "these nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete." That accomplished, the world--and this was the second blockbuster proposal--could proceed to "achieve our ultimate goal of eliminating the threat posed by strategic nuclear missiles," which in turn would "pave the way for arms control measures to eliminate the weapons themselves."

Reagan's double shock caught his top officials by surprise--and almost all of them were appalled. They believed, quite correctly, that an impervious missile shield over the United States or any other country was a technological impossibility. Reagan seemed to have escaped from one of the grand illusions of the nuclear age (that a nuclear war could be won) into another (that a nuclear attack could be defended against). Furthermore, support for abolition among Administration officials was nil. Seen from their perspective, Reagan had committed the United States to two impossibilities in one speech.

The reaction of the Soviet leaders was even more unfavorable. One of the often-avowed purposes of Reagan's arms buildup had been to spend the Soviet Union into bankruptcy. SDI appeared to them to accelerate this effort. They were not mistaken. After leaving office Reagan recalled, "We...knew that if we showed the political resolve to develop SDI, the Soviets would have to face the awful truth: They did not have the resources to continue building a huge offensive arsenal and a defensive one simultaneously." SDI also seemed to the Soviets to be aimed at US nuclear superiority after all. Yet just four days after his SDI speech, Reagan addressed this second issue. He announced that if the United States developed effective SDI technology, he would share it with the Soviet Union. Once the two countries were thus defended, he would declare, "I am willing to do away with all my missiles. You do away with yours."

The sharing proposal struck both his own Administration and the Soviets as the most unreal element of the plan yet. Less noted at the time was that, however remote from realization (as was SDI itself), sharing made a kind of conceptual sense. If enacted, it would have precluded any bid for superiority. Moreover, it would radically reduce the burden of proof on SDI. Even Reagan was soon required to recognize that a full, impenetrable shield against a large nuclear arsenal was chimerical. On the other hand, if offensive arsenals were first eliminated, then defenses would face only the lesser and more feasible challenge of defending against the kind of tiny missile forces that a cheater on an abolition agreement might cobble up in secret. Later, Reagan would insist that this objective was the chief rationale for his program.

'Let's Do It!'

The abolition idea aired at Reykjavik arose out of the confluence of several historical currents in the cold war's last decade. One was the evolution in Reagan's thinking, moral as well as strategic, regarding nuclear arms. Another was the nuclear freeze movement of the early 1980s. Reagan had opposed it in harsh terms, calling it "a dangerous fraud" perpetrated by those "who want the weakening of America." Yet he could not ignore the freeze. One of its many important victories was a sharp decline in the popularity of his nuclear buildup, which had dropped in the polls from 80 percent to 20 percent. Administration officials hoped the SDI/abolition package would steal the freeze movement's thunder--an aim in which it in fact appeared to succeed. For example, in 1984 Reagan's National Security Adviser, Bud McFarlane, wrote in a memo to Reagan, "You have thrown the left into an absolute tizzy. They are left in the position of advocating the most bloodthirsty strategy--Mutual Assured Destruction--as a means to keep the peace." Yet at its peak in 1982 and '83, the freeze movement created the political conditions that permitted Reagan's abolitionism, dormant until then, to appear. Unknowingly and unwillingly, the freeze movement and Reagan were partners in a powerful, almost decade-long effort to lift nuclear danger, leaving one wondering what might be possible today if a popular movement and a President were to cooperate in an attempt to rid the world of nuclear arms.

Then a new historical current, destined to absorb all the others, came into play. On March 11, 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Remarkably, Gorbachev was no less fervent a nuclear abolitionist than Reagan. In January 1986 he proposed a three-stage plan to abolish nuclear weapons by the year 2000. Gorbachev had arrived at his position along a route of his own. His goal was a democratic Soviet Union at peace with the West. In pursuit of this, he sought, more insistently than Reagan, an end to the cold war, for its own sake but also for the economic relief it would afford his domestic reforms.

Of course, abolition didn't happen in 1986 any more than it had in 1945. The decisive moment was Reykjavik. At the opening session, on October 11, both men agreed, in keeping with their public and private statements for some two years, that their objective was the elimination of all nuclear weapons. Gorbachev then startled Reagan with a handful of sweeping and highly detailed arms-control proposals, including a 50 percent reduction in strategic nuclear weapons. They were conditioned, however, on US willingness to confine development of SDI to

the laboratory.

Gorbachev did not mention abolition in these proposals, but
Reagan did in his response. Gorbachev was calling on him to
restrict SDI, but SDI in Reagan's opinion was the very thing
that "would make the elimination of nuclear weapons possible." The
fundamental terms of the negotiations were set. In the course of the
summit, the two heads of state seemed to compete in bringing forward
ever more radical proposals for offensive nuclear disarmament, only to
see them dashed on the unbridgeable disagreement over SDI.

The climax came on the afternoon of the second and last day.
Gorbachev proposed ridding the world of all strategic nuclear arms in
two five-year periods, while Reagan introduced a proposal to get rid of
half of strategic weapons in five years and all ballistic missiles in
the following five years. Gorbachev's proposal was the more sweeping, as
strategic arms include bombers and cruise missiles as well as ballistic
missiles: it was nuclear abolition.

Next, Gorbachev noted the differences between the two proposals
and asked if Reagan would accept the Soviet one. Reagan promptly agreed.
Hawkish aides had handed him his more limited proposal as a means to
pre-empt his abolitionism. But taking his cue from Gorbachev, he cast
aside that plan and reverted to his own goal. He even worried that not
every last nuclear weapon would be eliminated. He asked whether
Gorbachev was saying that "we would be reducing all nuclear
weapons--cruise missiles, battlefield weapons, sub-launched and the
like." For it would be "fine with [me] if we eliminated all nuclear
weapons." Gorbachev responded, "We can do that. We can eliminate them."
At this point, the record shows that the normally sober, impassive
Shultz burst out, "Let's do it!"

Of course, it was not to be. SDI reared its head again. Gorbachev
continued to insist that SDI research be confined to the laboratory.
Reagan continued to insist on the right to conduct tests outside the
laboratory. Was the abolition of nuclear weapons, Reagan
asked, to founder on a single word--"laboratory"? It was, and it did.

Whether abolition would have been implemented had an agreement
been struck is an interesting question. A strange "asymmetrical"
struggle between the two leaders, on the one hand, and a phalanx of the
nuclear establishments, on the other, would have ensued. The outcome,
whatever it was, could only have been decided in a struggle of the
widest dimensions.

Reykjavik in History

The deeper and more important question raised by Reykjavik, however, concerns the relationship of the cold war to abolition, and the meaning of that relationship for our present nuclear disorders. Common sense would suggest that the end of the cold war should have been an ideal moment for disarmament. Isn't peace better for disarmament than war, however cold? But the record shows that the opposite was true. In actuality, the idea of abolition resurfaced at one of the pinnacles of cold war tension. Reagan was in the midst of his military expansion. The decade before, the Soviet Union had conducted an immense nuclear buildup of its own in the wake of the Cuban missile crisis. In early 1983 it had walked out of nuclear arms-reduction talks with the United States.

It's also a fact that when the cold war disappeared into history, the idea of abolition disappeared with it.

One reason for these surprising turns of events is that negotiations between great powers generally go best when the parties are in equilibrium; yet as the 1980s proceeded, equality was eroding. The Soviet Union had never come close to the United States in overall economic productivity; but by the early 1980s it had--at punishing economic cost--achieved parity in the nuclear arena, removing any hope that the United States could "prevail" in a nuclear war. The new parity drove home the long-existing reality that the two nations, equally and redundantly menaced with prompt inexistence, were in the same boat. Such had been the backdrop to Reagan's and Gorbachev's historic joint statement that nuclear war can never be won and should never be fought. And it was this recognition that led both men to ask why, if that were so, it was necessary to have nuclear weapons at all. In Reagan's words in his 1984 State of the Union speech, "The only value in our two nations' possessing nuclear weapons is to make sure they will never be used. But then would it not be better to do away with them entirely?" It was one of the deepest, hardest-won lessons of the cold war.

Nuclear strategy has often been likened to a chess game whose last few moves need not be played because everyone can see that the outcome is a foregone conclusion. The remarkable yet somehow fitting fact is that in the mid-1980s, this very conclusion was drawn by that game's two kings, who were now asking themselves why, if the known end of the game was destruction for all concerned, anyone should even make the intermediate moves. Indeed, why play such a futile game at all?

But the moment of equilibrium was perishable. At Reykjavik,

Gorbachev told Reagan, "A year ago it was not the case that the Soviet Union had advanced major compromise proposals.... I simply did not have that capability then. I am not sure that I will still have it in a year or two to three years." Gorbachev's reforms were designed to cure the ills afflicting the Soviet system, but the system was itself the illness, and instead of curing it, his genuinely salubrious measures helped it toward its demise. Whatever chance it had of surviving in a reformed condition was killed off in 1991, when hard-line Communists launched their coup against Gorbachev, and Boris Yeltsin picked up the pieces. Thus it happened that as one of the two great cold war rivals collapsed, the other rose, to what some began to imagine would be world dominance. The "sole superpower" was getting ready to proclaim itself. Its leaders thought they had been relieved from any pressure to surrender their nuclear arsenals.

Seen from this angle, the Reykjavik summit was a tragedy of timing. At exactly the moment when the harvest of protracted nuclear education was being gathered, the cold war laboratory in which it had been learned was on its way to being dismantled, and its great lesson--that the only sensible thing to do with nuclear arsenals was get rid of them--was shelved.

The Second Nuclear Era

With the end of the cold war, a new era of the nuclear age opened. At first it seemed that with the old restraining parity with the Soviet Union a thing of the past, the sole superpower could simply do anything it wanted. But harsher realities built into the very nature of the nuclear age soon began to reassert themselves. In the new laboratory of the new era, the educational process resumed. Once again a dialectic of pressures and counterpressures commenced. Once again the nuclear dilemma, having further matured (some fifty nations are now capable of building the bomb), was driven from hiding by political events. Once again, there were trials and errors. And once again, just as in the 1980s, an impasse appeared--the one we face today.

There are important differences, of course. The new era has brought a new set of nuclear dangers to the fore. In the cold war, the most salient lesson was that the bomb is equally destructive to all; in the post-cold war era, the inescapable lesson is that the bomb's technology is equally available to all competent producers, very likely including, one day not far off, terrorist groups. In the cold war, the driving force was the bilateral arms race; in the post-cold war era, it has been proliferation.

Nevertheless, the fundamental underlying lesson, built into the genetic code of the nuclear age and destined to last as long as that age does, is the same: nuclear weapons cannot be the source of advantage for any one nation or group of nations at the expense of the rest; they are a common danger and can be faced only by all together, through political and diplomatic means. Just as during the cold war the double standard inherent in the concept of American nuclear superiority could not be sustained, so today the double standard implicit in the two-class world of nuclear and nonnuclear powers is unsustainable. Just as the two Reykjavik leaders drew the lesson that only negotiation, not further buildups, could release the world from the common peril, so today we must give up the illusion that force can solve the proliferation problem and must turn to negotiation instead. Finally, just as the true solution to the cold war peril of annihilation could only be abolition, so it is today, because any other leaves the double standard intact, and the double standard is at the root of proliferation. Perhaps because this is the second time around, the lessons have been presented more quickly, for a critical moment of decision has already arrived.

The Prospects for Nuclear Abolition Today

These are the realities that the Wall Street Journal authors and Kucinich, Schwarzenegger, Obama and others are addressing. They are the reason the abolitionist message of Reykjavik is the right one for our day. Of course, the surrounding circumstances in the United States are as greatly altered as the shape of the international order. The prospects for abolition today are in some respects more promising than in the 1980s but in others less so. The arguments for maintaining large nuclear arsenals during the cold war were clear and strong. Many disagreed with them, but everyone at least knew what they were: each side saw in the other an implacable ideological foe with global reach. Neither dared to be without nuclear arms as long as the other possessed them. The path to mutual disarmament was strewn with large obstacles, not least the difficulty of verifying a disarmament agreement.

Today the arguments for nuclear arsenals are incomparably weaker. Consider the American case. If we ask why, in a Soviet Union-free world, the United States is willing to live in a world in which it and Russia possess thousands of nuclear weapons poised on hair-trigger alert, instead of seeking to negotiate away both nations' arsenals, it's not easy to give an answer. There is no hostility with Russia that could justify any war, much less mutual annihilation. Why, almost two decades after the end of the Soviet Union, should the United States and Russia maintain more than 20,000 warheads between them and nuclear materials for producing thousands more? Jack Matlock, Reagan's

adviser on Soviet affairs at Reykjavik, has recently called this state of affairs "insane."

Does the counterproliferation mission perhaps create a new need for the arsenals, as the Bush Administration has often stated? For all the talk about the need to smash underground bunkers, it is hard to escape the suspicion that the nuclear bombs left over from the cold war have gone searching for missions rather than the other way around. It's difficult to suppose that the nation's leaders, unless they have truly taken leave of their senses, will attack Iran or North Korea with nuclear weapons simply in order to dig a deeper hole in the earth in search of a fugitive mini-arsenal all too probably hidden somewhere else. Certainly, arsenals of thousands of weapons would scarcely be required for the purpose.

A policy vacuum has thus opened up, and politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum. The gate is open for something new. A few Democrats have tiptoed up to it but not yet walked through. One reason may be that even if the arguments for keeping nuclear arsenals are weaker, so is popular will to challenge them. There is no movement on the scale of the freeze; however, there are stirrings of fresh efforts to address the new situation. Peace Action, the legatee of the freeze, has more than 100,000 members in some thirty states. Student Peace Action is active on more than 100 campuses. Other groups with a long history of antinuclear activism are stepping up efforts. They include the American Friends Service Committee, Women's Action for New Directions, Physicians for Social Responsibility, the Council for a Livable World and the Nuclear Policy Research Institute, headed by the legendary antinuclear activist and writer Helen Caldicott. More specifically geared to the details of abolition is the Lawyers Committee on Nuclear Policy, which, with other groups, continues to refine its blueprint for a Nuclear Weapons Convention. A number of Washington NGOs are gearing up to supplement the Hoover effort. A new group, Faithful Security, under the direction of David Cortright, has begun to remobilize religious communities. Evangelical groups, many of which are concerned about global warming under the banner of "creation care," are a natural constituency to oppose nuclear weapons. The same is true of the secular environmental movement. If a coalition of traditional peace groups, environmental groups, Washington arms control organizations such as the World Security Institute and the Henry L. Stimson Center, and religious groups, including evangelicals, were to push for abolition in tandem with the Hoover group, a powerful political force would result, especially if there were a receptive President in the White House. But it won't happen by itself. It has to be created.

When Americans are asked about nuclear abolition, they regularly
favor it by wide margins. A recent poll sponsored by the Center for
International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland has
found that 73 percent of Americans embrace the goal. In most countries
support is even higher. This gulf between official and popular opinion
is striking, especially since the public almost never hears abolition
advocated in the news media. At the very least, the numbers show that if
such a proposal were made, it would not meet with crippling public
resistance. It even seems possible that if antinuclear sentiment did
grow more intense, nuclear establishments around the world might yield
to it more quickly than anyone now imagines.

Yet trying to forecast the rise or fall of public interest in
this or any issue is probably a vain exercise. Major shifts in opinion
almost always come unexpectedly. Who would have thought in 1979 that a
nuclear freeze movement would soon arise and win approval in Congress,
or that shortly thereafter the most right-wing President of the cold war
period would advocate the abolition of nuclear arms, or that a Soviet
leader would come to power ready to champion both abolition and
democracy for the Soviet Union, which would then disappear? Is a serious
new bid to achieve a world without nuclear weapons possible? Or will
history's first use of a nuclear weapon since 1945 come sooner?
Events--in the Middle East, in South Asia, in Northeast Asia, in Russia
and in the United States--are pushing the world toward a decision. Soon,
whether by commission or omission, for better or worse, it will be
made.