

July 20—Our Moral Choices and Responsibilities in the New Nuclear Age.

Must American democracy, notwithstanding its virtues we cherish, forever be wedded to militarism and the threat and use of mass organized violence? Before it is too late?

How should Unitarian Universalist congregations address these issues?

A bedrock assumption and conviction I have uncovered for myself, expressed variously:

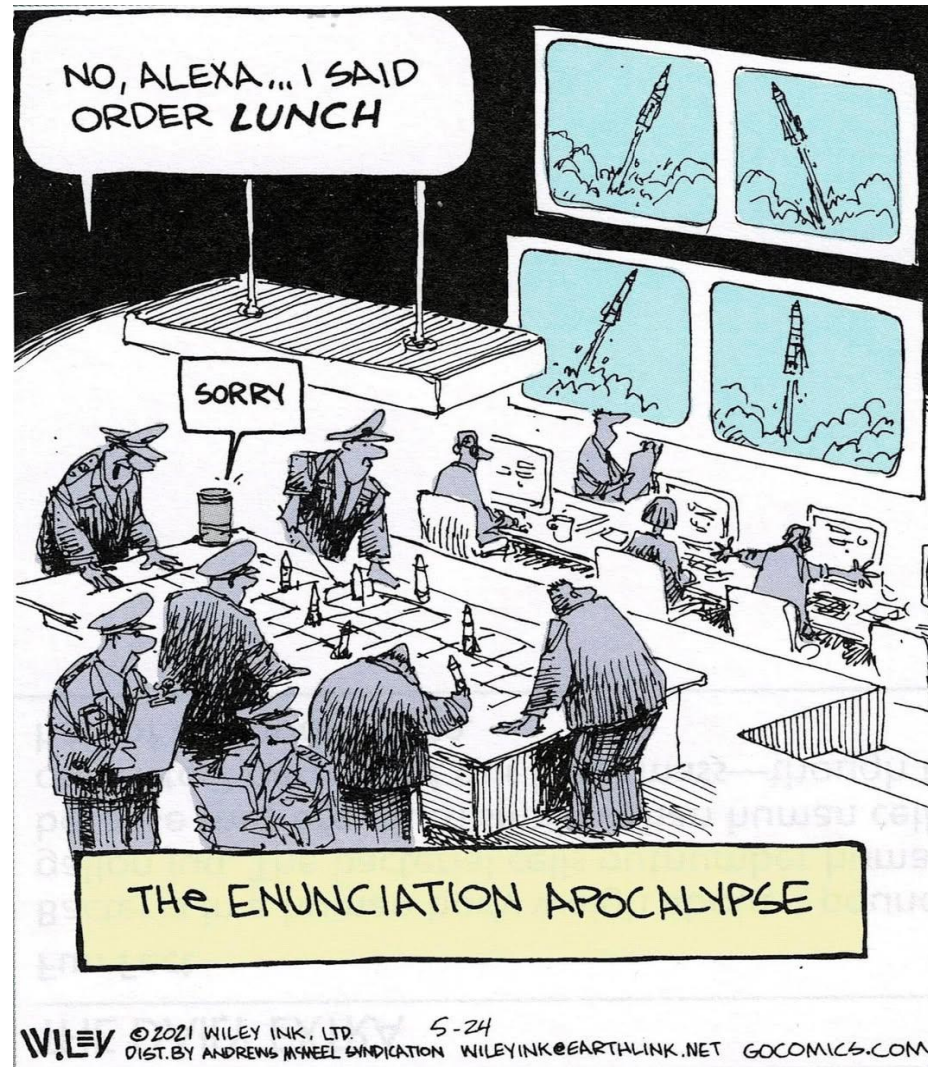
- Morality is inherent in reality
- To act morally one must truly face and recognize reality.
- The moral actor is and must be inherently realistic.
- The guide to moral choices and actions is a clear-eyed understanding of historical facts.

This is heresy in the context of traditional philosophical moral theory: where “is” and “ought” are forever divided (where “ought” can never be derived from “is”).

Moral choices—also prudent, and sane.



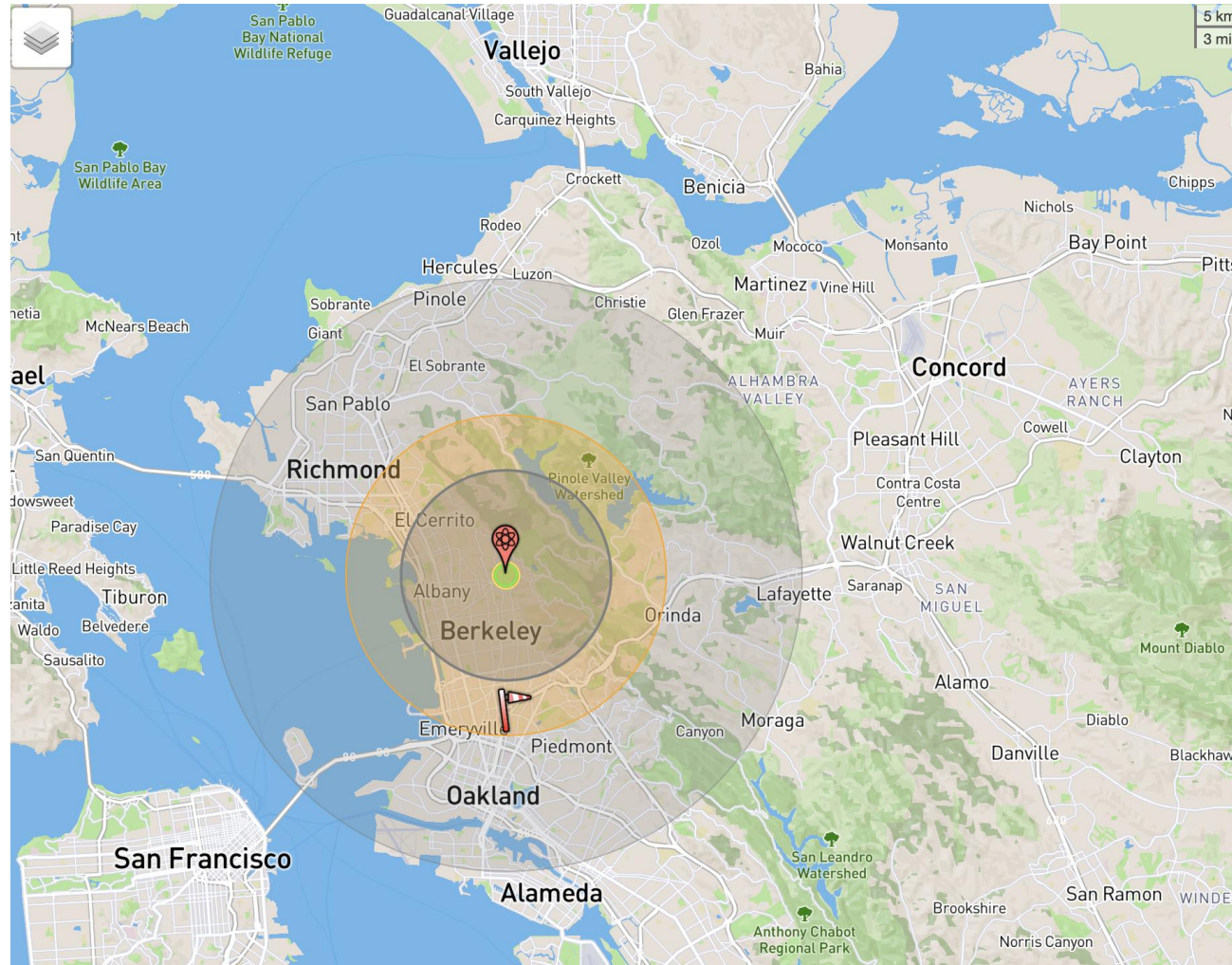
When AI and “thinking machines” are increasingly spliced into our decision-making systems, including nuclear command and control:



But there is good news—5 points to remember

- 1) The total numbers of nuclear weapons have been reduced since the all-time high point.
- 2) During the last decade, world public opinion against nuclear weapons has mobilized, culminating in the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.
- 3) The Nonproliferation Treaty is still in effect, with only four additional nuclear states, in spite of nuclear states' violation of Article VI.
- 4) Several Congressional bills have been introduced to reduce the risk of nuclear war and nuclear accidents and to challenge US policy and plans to “modernize” our nuclear arsenals.
- 5) More recent media attention is being focused on the mounting dangers of nuclear weapons, e.g., series of articles in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*.

From NUKEMAP.COM, by Alex Wallerstein. Estimated damages from one 300 Kiloton nuclear airburst detonation over Kensington—the size of our current Minuteman III nuclear warheads. Estimated 99,200 fatalities, 233,500 injuries, with an estimated 700,000 people in the entire circled area in any 24-hour period.



A regional nuclear war would be bad, but effects of US/Russia arsenals under New START catastrophic

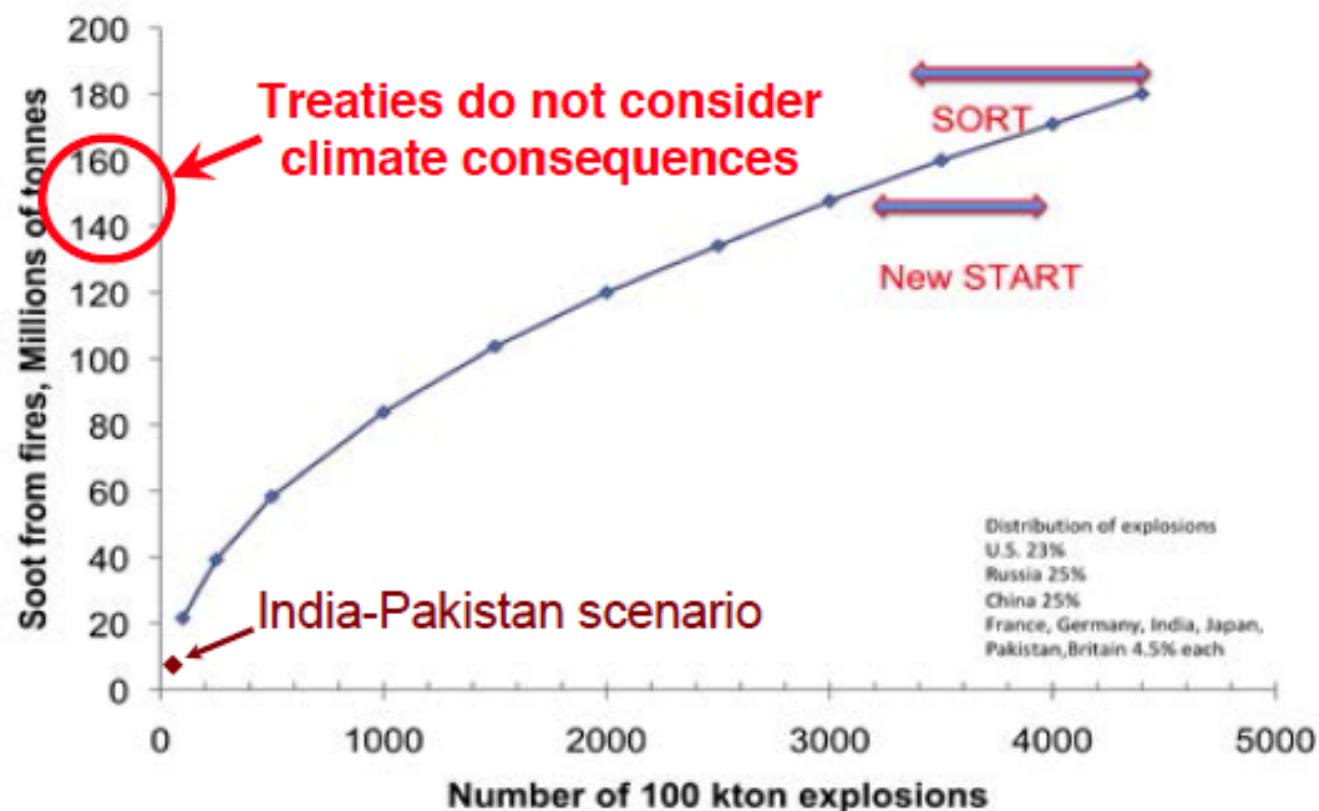


Fig. 9: The climate consequences of a regional war between India and Pakistan would be dwarfed by the consequences of a nuclear war between the US and Russia.

**Climate consequences of a US-Russia war
using New START arsenals would be catastrophic**
Temperature ($^{\circ}\text{C}$) in Ukraine

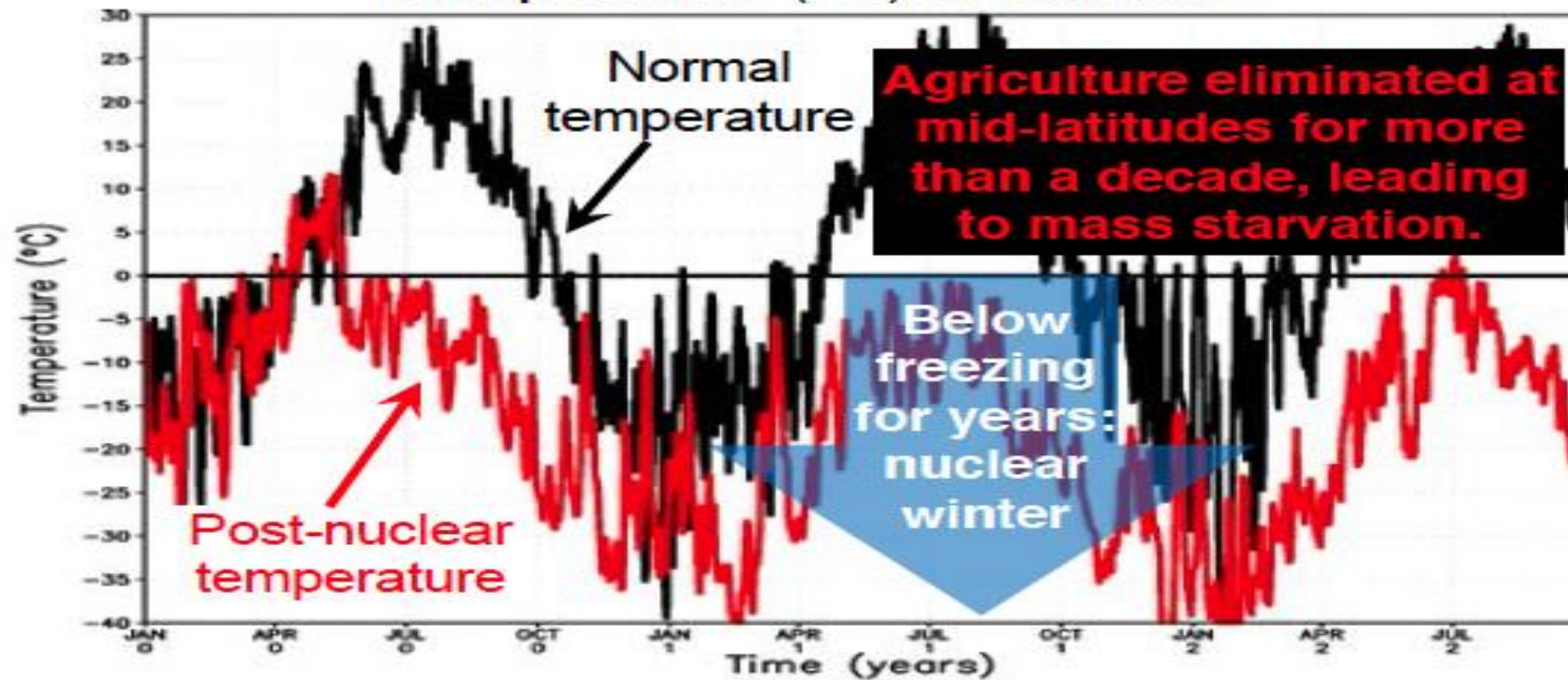


Fig. 10

Where do Unitarian Universalist stand?

The Unitarian Universalist Association has a longstanding commitment to nuclear disarmament and the abolition of nuclear weapons—
--rooted in UU core principles, i.e., inherent worth and dignity of each person, social justice, and promotion of peace,
--a conviction that nuclear weapons, described as “genocidal,” incompatible with UU values.

In 2010, the General Assembly ratified the “Creating Peace Statement of Conscience” which called for:

- nonviolent conflict resolution at all levels
- advocacy for policies that promote a peaceful, just, and sustainable world
- support for international peacemaking, disarmament, and civilian peacebuilding
- repudiation of military interventions and occupations that perpetuate violence.

In 2019, the Unitarian Universalists for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament network was established to mobilize UUs concerned with the existential threat of nuclear weapons. Its statement of purpose includes:

- **Unitarian Universalists for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament brings together UU's concerned about and motivated to end the existential threat posed by nuclear weapons. These genocidal weapons are an affront to all seven of our UU principles and defy our deepest UU yearnings for human dignity and social justice. Nuclear weapons undermine all other social justice causes by their untenable drain on resources to address other needs and their profound threat to humankind and our entire biosphere. Comparable only to climate change in their potential to end human existence, nuclear weapons can do in an afternoon what climate change will do in a century.**
- **Nuclear weapons are a problem created by human beings, and human beings can solve this problem. But time is short, the threat unfathomable. Join us and millions around the world in our campaign to eliminate these horrible instruments of destruction and work toward a world of peace and justice for all — so eloquently defined by our 6th Principle.**
- <https://www.uupmn.org/unitarian-universalists-for-peace-and-disarmament/>

According to an AI Perplexity.org search, the UUA has issued at least 13 Statements of Conscience and Actions of Immediate Witness over the years, explicitly opposing nuclear weapons and calling for their abolition. It was not stated when and by which UU body these actions were taken.

- The UUs for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament presented a workshop at the 2021 General Assembly, and
- They proposed an Action of Immediate Witness (AIW) at the 2023 General Assembly—"Urgent Call to Action: Embracing the Goals and Provision of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons." This AIW did not make it to the top three for adoption by the 2023 GA and has not been re-submitted.
- The proposal focused on the specific moment for action being urging support for House Resolution 77 before Congress, which embraced the goals and provision of the TPNW. It also called for the following actions by the United States:
 - Active pursuit of a verifiable agreement with other nuclear-armed states to eliminate their nuclear arsenals
 - Renouncing the option of using nuclear weapons first
 - Ending sole authority of the President to launch nuclear weapons
 - Taking US nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert
 - Cancelling the plan to replace the entire US arsenal with enhanced weapons.

UUA's Commitment to align the investment of its funds with its seven principles and values.

In compliance with the TPNW? In principle, YES.

The UUA's clear policy excludes investments in weapons manufacturers, which includes corporations involved in the production of nuclear weapons, and this policy is enforced through regular oversight and screening of its investment portfolio.

Many UU funds are invested in “pooled investment vehicles” which the UUA endeavors to select based on their adherence with its Socially Responsible Investing (SRI) criteria. But how to assess their faithfulness to the UU SRI criteria?

Some UU congregations have exercised “shareholder rights” and expressed their views to the companies they invest in. Who has done this, and has this been a productive and fruitful undertaking?

UU Morality In Action

Actions of Immediate Witness (AIWs) at the Unitarian Universalist General Assemblies

2024 General Assembly—the three AIWs proposed and approved

- Solidarity with Palestinians
- Centering Love Amidst the Ongoing Impact of COVID-19
- World on Fire: Humanitarian Work and Climate Change

2025 General Assembly—the three AIWs proposed and approved

- Declare and Affirm: Immigrants Are People Who Have Inherent Worth and Inalienable Rights
- Faithful Defiance of Authoritarianism: Reaffirming Our Covenants for Democracy and Freedom
- Defending LGBTIQ Freedom Amid Funding Crisis: A Call for Global Solidarity

These AIWs addressed immediate global and national concerns, including the rights of immigrants, the defense of democracy, and support for LGBTIQ individuals worldwide amid funding crises

Viewing U.S. Nuclear Policy Through A Moral Lens

A brief, public-facing summary of US nuclear policy (from the US statement to the NPT Preparatory Committee, May 2, 2025)

“The fundamental role of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter a strategic attack, assure allies and partners, and achieve objectives if deterrence fails. The United States will continue to maintain a safe, secure, reliable, and effective nuclear deterrent as long as nuclear weapons exist. As has been made clear by successive U.S. Administrations, the United States maintains a very high bar for nuclear employment and would consider the use of nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances.”

What are the questions raised, and submerged assumptions??

Are moral arguments relevant to the new nuclear arms race and nuclear policy?
If yes, what are they?
If not, why not,
and then, what ultimately guides decision-making?

Are nuclear weapons abolitionists missing some critical reasons why nuclear weapons are necessary, even morally necessary?
What could they be?

What moral obligations do we carry, and may not recognize or honor in our actual lives?

Are not we, in a nuclear weapons nation, holding the “Sword of Damocles” over all the peoples on the planet (nuclear and non-nuclear alike)? Are we not morally obligated to put down and relinquish and eliminate this threat to their very existence?

Given that we are citizens of a nuclear weapons nation that is nominally a democratic state of, by and for the people, what is our obligation toward the rest of humanity now and into the future?

Questions to ponder—

If Daniel Ellsberg's argument is valid, why don't the decision-makers change course and phase out ICBM's, or at the least take them off "launch on warning" status?

Do the nuclear weapons proponents really believe that nuclear weapons can be used in a way that is not utterly suicidal for all?

Is our confidence in the reliability of nuclear deterrence so high and rational that we can risk the survival of all of humanity (and untold other life forms on the planet)?

Do the predictions of "nuclear winter" and consequent global famine enter into the decision-making to enter a new nuclear arms race? What don't decision-makers understand? Or do they care? How could they not?

The Elephant in the Room: the doctrine of nuclear deterrence

—a leap of faith, or a bet disguised as a certainty

- Deterrence has almost always be regarded as the indisputable, bedrock *raison d'être* for nuclear weapons—the foundation of the justification and the necessity for the manufacture, possession, threat to use, and, God forbid, the actual use of nuclear weapons.
- Nuclear deterrence has been regarded as a military policy and system of unfailing efficacy.
- However, the defense of nuclear deterrence is fallacious and is morally bankrupt.
- --The proposition that nuclear deterrence has prevented a war between the great powers for the past 80 years, contrary to popular belief, is not a fact; it is a hypothesis (and one that is not amenable to empirical test).
- --The fact that there has not been a nuclear war or unintended nuclear detonation since Nagasaki is the result of good luck as much as from restraint and “fail safe” systems. There have been a number of instances in which only good luck saved us from nuclear catastrophe.

The Moral Bankruptcy of Nuclear Deterrence

- From a humanitarian perspective (one of the driving forces of the TPNW and the Ban Treaty Movement), when—not if--nuclear deterrence fails, all of humanity will suffer the consequences. Prohibition should forbid any state from imposing that risk on the rest of us, regardless of unwarranted faith that the deterrence system will never fail.
- Nuclear deterrence itself is a threat—backed up with the means of delivery—to inflict indiscriminate, catastrophic, and unacceptable consequences not only on an adversary, but also on the rest of humanity. From the humanitarian perspective, deterrence is nothing more than nuclear terrorism. Prohibition should forbid any state from making such a threat, regardless of the rationale.

Ward Wilson's analysis of the Myth of Nuclear Deterrence

(as spelled out in his *It's Possible: A Future Without Nuclear Weapons*)

- US's and other nations' nuclear policies are founded on Deterrence Theory, but do not recognize or willfully refuse to acknowledge that (1) nuclear weapons are too dangerous, and (2) deterrence theory is doubtful and untestable.
- The reliability of nuclear deterrence is doubtful; its bar it must reach is perfection—nuclear deterrence simply cannot fail, its failure would be catastrophic, too great for us to allow it to happen. But here is no reason for us to believe it can be this perfect; no kind of deterrence ever had a perfect record of success. Our belief that it can is an act of faith and being under the spell of the myth, the symbolic power, of nuclear weapons as the ultimate weapon and safeguard.

Ward Wilson's Analysis (continued):

- Nuclear advocates argue that nuclear deterrence is a different, exceptional kind of deterrence warranting our trust, because:
 - (1) they have the supreme power to hurt with enormous harm. But the historical record shows that many national leaders have shown lack of sympathy and inhibition even in the face of massive loss of their civilians—"civilian deaths rarely, if ever, determines whether a leader continues a war."
 - (2) the assumption of rationality—"no rational person could think about the consequences of a nuclear war and then choose to fight one." But human beings are not wholly rational beings--very often our actions are controlled by urges, instincts, desires, and emotions (not reason and cost/benefit analysis). Insisting that rationality will dominate is dangerous wishful thinking, which if wrong could cost the lives of millions of innocent people.

Ward Wilson's Analysis (continued):

(3) the power of fear—"the image of nuclear war is so frightful, the danger so clear-cut, and the power of fear so imperative" that no leader could possibly ignore the danger. While more plausible than (1) and (2), this argument founders on the fact that fear is not always the ruling emotion—based on the empirical facts of history and psychology, we know that fear cannot restrain all the other emotions all the time.

- The theory of nuclear deterrence is a false certainty. While nuclear deterrence may work some of the time, the claim that it can work every time cannot be true, because—(1) we just don't know that much about how it works (it does not work like a complex machine; it happens inside the "black box" of the human mind where we have no real facts to go on), and (2) nuclear deterrence cannot be trusted because human beings are unpredictable—while nuclear deterrence may have a better than 50% chance of working, we need a guarantee it cannot deliver, given that literally everything—past, present, and future—is at stake. Nuclear deterrence will always be a gamble.

Ward Wilson's "road map" for the elimination of nuclear weapons (It sounds like an overwhelming undertaking!)

- Argue forcefully that nuclear weapons are OBSOLETE (and have been from the beginning)—they have virtually no military utility and are catastrophically dangerous.

The moral force of this argument derives from the factual basis of its claims and the historical record that support them. It is empirically based and not theoretical (or “idealistic”).

- Drive this argument home in all of the nuclear-armed nations and in every state that relies on another state's nuclear weapons (those under “nuclear umbrellas”).
- When the reality sinks in and consensus takes hold, all countries undertake to eliminate nuclear weapons from all countries at the same time.

Shaming vs. Exhortation

- Dynamics of guilt and shame: Guilt—I did something bad. Shame—I am bad. Neither is a call for corrective action offering a new direction.
- An Alternative to Shaming

Relentless truth-telling, the unmasking of myths and self-blinding fantasy, an insistence on recognizing facts and the historical record, and a demand on taking responsibility and action for the well-being of self and others as guided by empirically based realism and pragmatism.

Book Recommendations

Must Reads--

- Timmon Wallis

Warheads to Windmills: Preventing Climate Catastrophe and Nuclear War, 2023

Nuclear Abolition: A Scenario, 2025

- Ward Hayes Wilson

It's Possible: A Future Without Nuclear Weapons, 2023

Resources: Nuclear Peace Organizations

- Unitarian Universalists for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament
<https://www.uupmn.org/unitarian-universalists-for-peace-and-disarmament/>
- Back from the Brink of the Prevent Nuclear War organization
<https://preventnuclearwar.org/?sfw=pass1752614127>
- The Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons
<http://www.icanw.org>
- Reaching Critical Will
<http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org>
- Ploughshares Fund
<https://www.ploughshares.org>
- Nuke Watch New Mexico
<http://www.icanw.org>
- Weapons to Windmills
<https://warheadstowindmills.org/>
- Nuclear Threat Initiative
nti.org
- Nuclear Age Peace Foundation
wagingpeace.org