

Path to a Nuclear Free Future: The Urgent Need for US Leadership Now.

By Frida Berrigan

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I was thinking of a few things as I got ready for tonight's event. The first is that now that President Bush is on his way out, I am going to have to work a lot harder on my pronunciation of the word "nuclear." My excuse in the past has always been: hey, if the leader of the free world can't say it right, I don't have to either.

And second (speaking of leader of the free world), I suggested the title for this talk, *A Path to a Nuclear Free Future: The Urgent Need for US Leadership Now*-- but lately, I have been thinking --the world has probably had it up to here with US leadership. We have seen "leadership" right over the cliff of war and torture and nuclear weapons. Maybe the world could use a little break from U.S. leadership. So, I want to start by reviewing where U.S. leadership has gotten us so far, and end up with the kind of new leadership we need in these times.

Where are we? The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has been measuring the danger posed by nuclear weapons since 1947. In January 2007, they moved the clock from seven to five minutes to nuclear midnight due to "the perils of 27,000 nuclear weapons—2,000 of them ready to launch within minutes." Under the Bush administration disarmament efforts have stalled, other countries have developed nuclear weapons, proponents of nuclear power have gained significant ground, billions of dollars are being pumped into a nuclear weapons complex each year and the nuclear labs are once again on the offensive—trying to set a nuclear build up agenda for the next administration. These are just a few of the nuclear knots that still need to be unraveled.

Stalled Disarmament. At the top of the list of bad news is the stalled disarmament between the two nuclear-armed Cold War rivals—the United States and Russia. In 2002, Presidents Bush and Putin agreed to sharp reductions in their nuclear stockpiles by 2012. This key priority in the post-Cold War era has faltered and it is unlikely that either nation will meet the goals of cutting the number of active nuclear weapons by two-thirds within this time frame.

While not living up to promised disarmament, the United States is being irresponsible and inconsistent throughout the world—supporting some states which possess nuclear weapons outside of international treaty obligations while punishing others. Washington's stance towards India and Iran exemplify the two sides of this set of provocative policy choices.

The 1970 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty established the framework under which nuclear weapons states committed to disarm. Non-nuclear signers of the treaty pledged not to develop nuclear weapons capability in exchange for assistance in acquiring peaceful nuclear capabilities. One hundred and eighty one nations signed the treaty: they thought they were taking the first step toward the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Article VI of the NPT, for instance, states: "Each of the parties to the treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measure relating to cessation of the nuclear

arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international controls.”

This is the heart of the NPT. The smaller countries agreed to forgo nuclear weapons only because the nuclear powers agreed to scrap theirs. Instead, the Big Five (The United States, Russia, China, France and Great Britain) increased the number of warheads in their arsenals and raised their military budgets. The NPT’s delicate balance has been overturned—promises broken. The nuclear states are no disarming and Israel, North Korea, Pakistan and India have all built nuclear weapons outside the treaty, while Iran is suspected of pursuing that technology.

Now, the Bush administration has further undermined this critical pillar of disarmament by giving India a special path to nuclear legitimacy despite its development of these weapons outside of international law. India and the US signed the deal a few months ago giving New Delhi access to nuclear fuel and technology for power plants. In exchange, India will open its nuclear weapons program to inspections.

While supporting India’s nuclear program, the United States threatens Iran with attack for thinking nuclear thoughts. According to the National Intelligence Estimate, Tehran ceased pursuit of nuclear weapons in 2003, while continuing to attempt mastery over uranium enrichment. Tehran maintains its current nuclear program is a lawful pursuit of peaceful energy resources. In a recent interview, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency said that Iran “does not even possess the raw enriched uranium to develop one nuclear weapon if they decided to do so.”

Turning to our own nuclear power project—U.S. nuclear power plants are making a comeback. The industry is taking advantage of the high costs of gas and the burgeoning energy crisis to get rid of the Three Mile Island/Chernobyl/China Syndrome associations that so many have with nuclear power. It is having an impact. During the campaign, we heard Republican Presidential hopeful John McCain call for 45 new nuclear reactors by 2030, asserting they are “the cleanest, safest and most reliable energy source on earth.” His Democratic counterpart—and our new President-- also indicated an openness to nuclear power, although Barack Obama has made it clear that long-term storage, environmental impact and other issues will need to be satisfactorily dealt with before he is fully on board. That may take a while: The United States has 45,000 tons of highly radioactive nuclear waste stored in temporary and inadequate facilities around the country.

Nuclear power is not cheap. The estimate for each new nuclear reactor in the United States is \$5-12 billion. As Jim Riccio, a nuclear analyst with Greenpeace points out, it’s a “very expensive way to boil water.” And despite the clean and green claims on nuclear power, Riccio notes that every dollar spent to increase energy efficiencies and install renewable technologies is 7 to 10 times more efficient than a dollar invested in nuclear power.

New Nukes: Complex Transformation. In the midst of all these nuclear concerns, we have seen the Bush administration continue to push for new nuclear weapons. Under his direction, the Department of Energy’s National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) is pushing for “Complex Transformation” -- a multi-year plan to build new or upgraded facilities at

each of the NNSA's eight nuclear weapons-related sites. The Arms and Security Initiative estimates that this undertaking would entail spending up to \$200 billion over the next two decades to sustain an unneeded nuclear weapons complex that would build not only new warheads, but new weapons factories as well. This \$200 billion proposal would build on the Bush administration's quiet surge in nuclear weapons spending. Adjusting for inflation, U.S. spending on nuclear weapons has increased by over 13% since 2001. More importantly, at this late date the United States is still spending one-third more than the Cold War average on nuclear weapons.

So, here we are. It is a new day and we have a new President. Will that change things? In September, the National Nuclear Security Administration released a new policy document pitched to the new administration. It is called National Security and Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century. It is 28 pages long. But basically it says: let us keep our nukes. There is a section entitled: Does the United States Still Need Nuclear Weapons? According to those who want them, the answer is yes: for two reasons; “**First**, the international security environment remains dangerous and unpredictable... Political intentions can change overnight and technical surprises can be expected. **Second**, nuclear weapons continue to play unique roles in supporting U.S. national security. Although not suited for every 21st century challenge, nuclear weapons remain an essential element in modern strategy.”

Here we are—with the urgent need for U.S. leadership—and hungry for new directions-- - but President-elect Obama is considering holding on to Robert Gates as Secretary of defense, we need to look again at his comments on nuclear weapons. At the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington last month, Gates made a last ditch effort to justify the continued development and possession of nuclear weapons by the United States. Echoing the National Nuclear Security Administration's recent report, the thrust of Gates' argument was that we need nuclear bombs because "We cannot predict the future. Who can tell what the world will look like in 10 or 20 years?" He went on to say: “We must be realistic about the world around us – about the challenges we face and about our ability to predict what other nations will do... We'll lead the way in reducing our arsenal, but we must always hedge against a dangerous and unpredictable world... Rising and resurgent powers, rogue nations pursuing nuclear weapons, proliferation, international terrorism – all demand that we preserve this “hedge.” Rather than setting a goal of eliminating nuclear weapons within 10 to 20 years -- if not sooner -- the "Gates doctrine" calls for perpetuating the nuclear danger as long as we suffer from a state of uncertainty (in other words, forever).

President-elect Obama has pledged to make the elimination of nuclear weapons worldwide a central element of American nuclear policy. But with Gates in the Pentagon and the nuclear labs getting \$9 billion a year, pushing Obama to deliver on this promise is not going to be easy.

This brings me back to leadership and the old line about if the people lead, the leaders will follow. Because of people's leadership on the nuclear issue throughout the dark years of the Cold War, that war ended. We did not destroy the world and all its inhabitants during the cold war. Mutual assured destruction was staved off. And because of that leadership—the leadership

of many in this room, the leadership of PeaceAction and its predecessors Sane and Freeze-- we were granted what Jonathan Schell so evocatively calls “the gift of time,” the gift of a future.

It is a gift we continue to possess—only if we continue to lead. And I think we have some great examples of leadership in the room. Our awardees: Jerry Berrigan, Steven Blatt and Bonnie Adams.

I want to close by holding up another leader, if I may. Someone who gave her own gift of time--- so that we could all enjoy the gift of time—just to belabor Schell’s image. Tomorrow is my mom’s 69th birthday and she is here tonight (Elizabeth Mcallister). As we celebrate this milestone of wisdom and grace, we are also marking another important anniversary: A week from now-- twenty five years ago—my mom was part of a small group of people entered Griffiss Airbase in Rome, New York. They took hammers and blood to B-52 bombers converted to carry nuclear missiles. This action was an enactment of Isaiah’s injunction to beat swords into plowshares, shields into pruning hooks so that nations would not wage war against nations anymore.

My Uncle Dan and Kathleen Rumph who are here tonight, my Dad—Phil Berrigan, Susan Crane, Ardeth Platte, Carol Gilbert-- the women of the Jonah House community where my mom lives—are all members of Plowshares communities who have taken personal responsibility for nuclear weapons, who have said no, who have sought to transform them, who created their own path to a nuclear free future. My mom served the better part of 2 years in prison for that action. And looking back to that period in the life of our family—I am struck that it is a testament to her love and commitment, her faith and her boundless enthusiasm that our family was strengthened rather than undone by that sacrifice, and that we—my brother and sister and I—were set on a path of activism, resistance, and radical embrace of that gift of time.

So, here we are—five minutes to nuclear midnight, with our finger still firmly fixed on the nuclear button, in control of the power to destroy the planet many times over, living in a country on the brink of economic collapse, spending half a trillion dollars on the military, fighting trillion dollar wars in Iraq and Afghanistan... **here we are—looking for leadership.**

Many of us are proud and impressed the United States elected a young, dynamic, African American president after a historic and exciting campaign. But, on nuclear weapons, the question is: will President Obama take his lead from Robert Gates, who sees nuclear weapons as a hedge and a protection in a dangerous and unpredictable world? **Or will he take his lead from us as we insist on nuclear abolition? If we lead, will he follow?**