



## Apocalypse, No

By Mark Stout

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The lesson of remaining engaged—of always keeping your brain in the game (and sometimes your voice)—is made manifest daily and was epitomized by a recent Boston Globe article entitled *US nuclear arsenal a dangerous remnant*. The article, written by James Carroll, is simply inconsistent with reality. Carroll's fundamental position is that the U.S. possession of nuclear weapons is not only dangerous, but is literally insane.

As the article puts it, callow politicians and the defense-industrial complex have conspired to sustain “the demonic structures of the Cold War.” Similarly, the nation's nuclear deterrent force is manned by “prisoners to the past, condemned to carry out an earth-shattering mission that makes absolutely no sense in the 21st century.” That deterrent effort includes “young missile officers who, season in and season out, stand ready to wreck the earth” and are “poised to kill millions of people.”

First and foremost, Carroll either ignores or does not understand that nuclear weapon release is *authorized* by the President and the actual assignment is *carried out* by military personnel. Instead, his article leads the reader to believe military members are both authorized to and carry out the task of executing nuclear weapons. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The actuality is today's nuclear operators fall under civil control, just as they always have and just as they always will. Those missile crews, bomber pilots, and nuclear submariners who execute Presidential nuclear commands are fulfilling the orders of those who hold the legal authority to do so. Moreover, military members lack not only the authority to release nuclear weapons by themselves, but also the lack the physical ability to do so unless properly authorized.

Few things are as groan-inducing to the nuclear community as Carroll's undead and zombie-like assertion that America's nuclear weapons are on a “hair trigger.” The more appropriate metaphor is that nuclear weapons are locked inside a bank vault that requires Presidential authorization (and codes) to open. Inside that vault is a second locked safe which itself requires two people to open followed by a minimum of another two people (doing the same actions at a separate location) to launch. The “nuclear hair trigger” oxymoron has exceeded its shelf life. While I'm not in favor of euthanasia, I'm willing to consider it for the phrase “hair trigger” as it regards U.S. strategic nuclear weapons.

While it's often impossible to prove a null or negative hypothesis (in this case, it cannot be proven that nuclear weapons have prevented nuclear wars), it is possible to observe history, and these observations show conflict between nuclear states since the advent of the atomic age has been limited and indirect. About the closest serious non-nuclear conflict to take place between two nuclear states was the 1999 Kashmir clash between India and Pakistan.

So did the Kashmir conflict result in a nuclear apocalypse now? Of course not. Did the presence of nuclear weapons prevent a significant conventional conflict? Perhaps. Again, it's impossible to rewind the events and play them out with different inputs. However, consider India's response following the Pakistani-hatched Mumbai terror attacks of November 2008, which might be the very definition of restraint between nuclear states.

With the bad-old-days of the Cold War now behind us, the United States is once again reviewing its nuclear forces. When the soon-to-be-released 2010 Nuclear Posture Review is rolled out in a few weeks, it is certain to call for cuts, perhaps significant, in our current nuclear force. That's OK: When reality changes, policy should change as well. That's part of why the Cooperative Threat Reduction initiative from the early 1990s deactivated or destroyed over 6000 nuclear weapons. Its why even more stringent restrictions came with the 2002 Moscow Treaty, which limited the U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals to 1700-2200 operationally deployed warheads each.

While Carroll focuses on America's nuclear inventory, he conveniently ignores nuclear-related events around the world, most notably the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs and their associated missile systems development programs. Also ignored is the fact that Russia, China, France, and Great Britain are all pursuing—especially the first three—nuclear modernization to include weapons and delivery systems. Non-nuclear nations that are desirous of nuclear weapons seem to be so because they are ill-equipped to compete conventionally.

As such, the idea of a naked and unilateral U.S. denuclearization simply does not pass the smell test. Granted you may not need nuclear weapons that often, but when you need them, you really need them. I'll submit that if the U.S. today had no nuclear weapons and Russia, North Korea, and China (and others) did, that the American people would demand we embark on an aggressive program to develop just such a capability.

Still, there are plenty of things having a nuclear-weapons capability can't do, and that's part of the reason for a balanced force. For example, nuclear weapons can't keep other nations from pursuing their own. Likewise, they've been unable to keep others from developing their own nuclear weapons delivery systems—missiles are the delivery vehicle of choice-- as Iran and North Korea have been doing.

However, existing nuclear nations are now modernizing their capabilities and are doing so because they see the inherent deterrent value and asymmetry of such weapons. Are there other ways to defeat nuclear weapons besides treaties and disarmament? Yes, but they largely include the politically-disfavored idea of missile defense. By the way, the Chinese just conducted a successful test of a missile defense "technology," something they've complained about the U.S. doing for quite some time. Similarly, Russian Prime Minister Putin has also spoken of his desire to linking strategic arms-control weapons reductions with limits on U.S. missile defense.

Ah, but back to Carroll's original article: keeping your head—and voice--in the game, whether it's at the tactical, operational, or strategic level is essential and rebutting errors is often a part of that responsibility. The responsibility may include educating the public and the media as to actual truth, a sometimes painful thing. It's likely you've heard the expression "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." Using that expression as a point of departure, see if you can agree with my proposal as to why military thinkers *must* remain engaged in the world of ideas and public debate: non-participation is way too expensive.

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