



Jonathan Schell says nuclear weapons cuts Russia and the United States agreed upon “were not so real.” Left, President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin walk out to address the media at the White House November 13, 2001. Courtesy of White House/Paul Morse

DUCK AND COVER: Why We Must Abolish Nuclear Weapons

An Interview with Jonathan Schell

by Rob Ponce

Nuclear weapons have survived the Cold War. Though the conflict ended over 12 years ago, the proliferation of nuclear weapons continues to spread. In his book, *The Unfinished Twentieth Century*, *Nation* columnist Jonathan Schell argues that the last century is “unfinished” simply because nuclear weapons still exist. Schell foresees two possible conclusions to the nuclear age: either states must abolish nuclear weapons or the “unthinkable” nuclear war—the very mention of which arouses widespread fear—will break out, threatening the continuity of the human race.

Schell notes that while eight countries are nuclear powers, 182 are not. He writes that the United States must take the lead in the movement to abolish nuclear weapons, or “denuclearization” as he calls it, because, as the sole superpower, it provides a global example.

BardPolitik In your book you make the point that it was the United States that obviously initiated the use of nuclear weapons, and you give a very interesting reason for why that now makes the post-Cold War situation much worse. Please explain.

Schell Everybody remembers that nuclear arsenals were built for the purposes of the

Cold War. The United States built them to deter the Soviet Union, and they did likewise with respect to us. So they were a Cold War development. When the Cold War ended we asked whether it would now be possible to get away from nuclear danger and in fact to move toward the elimination of nuclear weapons. Recently we have learned that new arsenals have been discovered. The Bush administration’s new

Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) explicitly names seven countries that the United States is targeting; only one of [which] is Russia. The others [include] China, North Korea, Iran, Iraq, and Libya. So this has given nuclear weapons a new lease on life. It was possible to think in the first couple of years after the Cold War that we were going to gradually get away from this threat, this danger. The stockpiles were dwindling, it looked possible that proliferation might be stopped, and you could imagine that at the end of 50 years they'd be useless, irrelevant, gone. Now a sharply different picture, with two different aspects, emerges.

One is that you've had very serious proliferation, above all in South Asia, which is probably closer to a

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nuclear conflict than any other part of the world. India and Pakistan have a million men on the border, they've got a disputed territory between them, they have artillery fire going back and forth, you have a dictatorship on one side of the border in Pakistan, you have a very hard line nationalist regime on the other, and you have sectarian strife between Muslims and Hindus within India. President Musharraf of Pakistan explicitly threatened the use of nuclear weapons in the event of a successful Indian attack against his forces. He did something that's very unusual in the nuclear age: He actually used the phrase "atom bomb." Normally these threats are cloaked in diplomatic language such as "all means necessary," or "all options are on the table," or some such expression as that.

All of the ingredients for a nuclear conflict are present. We just pray that it doesn't happen.

You could have the use of nuclear weapons in the Middle East even without an Arab country getting the bomb. For example, if a terrorist group or Iraq or some other state were to use a weapon of mass destruction in Israel then it is quite conceivable that Israel would retaliate with its considerable arsenal of 200 nuclear weapons. Any single nuclear weapon can destroy a city. That's a lot of overkill for the whole Middle East right there in that arsenal.

Then, on the other hand, you have the United States tooling up its arsenal again. The NPR has plans for building a new missile in 2020 and another one in 2050. The cuts that were agreed upon between Bush and Putin turn out to be not quite real on the U.S. side. This NPR reveals again that the United States plans not to get rid of the weapons that it cuts, but rather just to shelve them. So that in 10 years time, the United States will still have 15,000 nuclear weapons. That's overkill on a tremendous scale. Some will be in the garage, some will be on the weapons, some will be beside the weapons, but it will be 15,000 nuclear weapons. And that's 20 years after the fall of the Soviet Union. The administration will tell you straight out that it sees nuclear weapons as a key instrument of power in the post-Cold War age.

Other countries are looking at [U.S. policy]. Pakistan and India looked at it, and they said, "OK, if there are going to be two clubs in the world, a first class and a second class, we want to be in the first class. Saddam Hussein wants to be in the first class. Iran probably wants to be in the first class. North Korea maybe too. So the whole thing is moving toward a kind of nuclear revival if you will; new targets, new strategies, new bombs, new delivery vehicles, new nuclear weapon powers, and that's why I say that I'm afraid that we're heading down a path that sharply increases the risk of the use of nuclear weapons in one way or another.

BardPolitik You said that nations like Iraq and North Korea are looking to come into this first class. So then is it idealistic to trust that all nations will put the

collective welfare of the global community above their own aspirations to increase their own stature by becoming nuclear powers?

Schell Well, I think that's the direction that we're headed in now. In other words, proliferation breeds more proliferation. But really your question is, can that be turned around? And my answer is emphatically yes. But it can do so only with American leadership. And we're leading in the opposite direction. In the first place, it is historically proven that it's possible at the very least to keep on a path of reduction. After all, we have reduced since the end of the Cold War. Now we seem to be stopping; instead we've decided to put them in storage rather than to reduce. Treaties work. There's an even more dramatic example that pertains to proliferation. You have the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and, mind you, that's the most successful treaty perhaps ever negotiated in the history of the human species. You have 182 out of about 190 countries in the world that have agreed to do without nuclear weapons. All of South America does without nuclear weapons. Kenneth Bolding liked to say that if it exists, it is possible. Both Brazil and Argentina have the capacity to build nuclear weapons and took several steps down that road, but backed off.

Now if you ask yourself is it imaginable that all the countries would go down to zero, well again obviously it's a very tall order, it's a kind of revolution in international affairs, a limited revolution I would say, but nevertheless a kind of revolution. But once again, it seems a little less formidable if you remember that we're only asking eight to do what the 182 have already done. So even there I would say it's a long-term goal, it's a difficult goal, it's a very tall order, but it's something that must be on the map of our future. Because without it I don't think it's going to be possible to stop proliferation. I don't think that the countries without nuclear weapons are going to continue that way for long if the eight that have them declare to the world that they're going to have them indefinitely. I think in one way or another that's going to break up the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and lead to a kind of full nuclearization of the world, in which case another use of

nuclear weapons is going to be not just possible, but extremely likely.

BardPolitik What is the likelihood that Americans would sign on to your proposal of denuclearization?

Schell Well, these are pre-September 11 figures, but if you go out and ask the public, are you in favor of getting rid of nuclear weapons, more than 80 percent will say yes. Now that doesn't mean a lot, I'll admit, because the argument hasn't taken place, the debate hasn't taken place, nevertheless it doesn't indicate entrenched resistance to the idea. It's more in official circles that the resistance to the idea is entrenched.

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I think what we need right now is a change of direction. Right now the United States has either pulled out of, or is seriously damaging, *all* of the current arms control treaties. We have pulled out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, we won't sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, we have, in effect, pulled out of the START agreement, because we insist on reducing unilaterally rather than by agreement. That's really as important as pulling out of the ABM Treaty, but people talk about it less because the direction is down. And finally, the new Nuclear Posture Review reverses a whole series of undertakings that the United States promised to the nonnuclear nations when the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was ratified. Thus,

for example, we vowed at that time that we would not target any country that did not itself possess nuclear weapons or was not allied with a nuclear power. Now we've reneged on that and we've announced to the world that we will attack them if they use chemical or biological weapons, or in other vague circumstances that we refuse to define. We've gone back on the NPT bargain and that's putting pressure on that treaty. It hasn't broken down yet, thank God. But we're heading in the direction of a breakdown [of NPT] if we keep on this path. That's what I fear.

BardPolitik Can you explain why you chose the title *The Unfinished Twentieth Century*?

Schell In the immediate post-Cold War period, Francis Fukuyama wrote *The End of History*. There were many people who believed that the fall of the Soviet Union marked the end of the terrible spiral of violence that had really begun with the First World War, continued with the rise of the totalitarian regimes in the Second World War, and sort of culminated with the nuclear standoff. It seemed to me that this was palpably untrue, as long as there were nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction left in the world. Also there's another dimension of that that I didn't really go through much in the book. That is, that the practice of genocide actually continued in the 1990s. I'm speaking of course of the Hutu and the Tutsi in Rwanda, of Saddam Hussein's attack on the Kurdish population in Iraq, of the Serbian campaign in Kosovo. So it was pretty clear on that local level too. I think there's a very interesting comparison with the International Criminal Court (ICC). The concept of crimes against humanity, which is a 20th-century invention (that is, both the crimes and the concept of the crimes), is a point of convergence between democracy and the human rights movement on one hand, and nuclear disarmament on the other. Nuclear weapons are not mentioned in the treaty for an international court. However, there is simply no way to use a nuclear weapon under current strategies without committing what is clearly a crime against humanity under that definition. I'm not imagining that people are going to give up

nuclear weapons because a court has told them to. The whole movement for international accountability, which included the ICC and much else, will intersect at a certain point with a disarmament movement, because they really pertain to one and the same thing: the right to survive or, as someone put it at an antinuclear march, "I demand the right to be survived."

BardPolitik Can you explain the most recent argument that the Bush administration has come up with to reject nuclear disarmament?

Schell It looks to me as if they have decided that in its approach to the world, the United States should rely primarily on force. We've seen the long string of treaties that they've refused to ratify, or have withdrawn from. There's a definite tendency for the United States to take a unilateral route and at the same time to look for a military solution. Now in that context, if the United States is going to become the greatest military power in the world, and it's going to use that power to have its way in the world, then why on earth would it be willing to move with other countries to get rid of the most powerful military weapon? That's just a contradiction. Now I'd argue with them, and in fact this is the argument that Paul Nitze made, that the United States would in fact be far more powerful in relation to other nations if the world was dependent on conventional weaponry, because the U.S. lead in conventional weaponry is really just insuperable at this moment, whereas even a weak country can equalize the imbalance quite quickly by developing just a few nuclear weapons. But that argument, which would be one made in their own terms, just doesn't cut any ice with them. I don't think I really understand it. But I think you really have to look at the entire direction of the administration's foreign policy. I think it's only in that context that you can even begin to understand it.

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