

Bombs Away

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In my lifetime, I have witnessed two successful titanic struggles by civilized society against totalitarian movements, those against Nazi fascism and Soviet communism. As an arms control negotiator for Ronald Reagan, I had the privilege of playing a role—a small role—in the second of these triumphs.

Yet, at the age of 85, I have never been more worried about the future for my children and grandchildren than I am today. The number of countries possessing nuclear arms is increasing, and terrorists are poised to master nuclear technology with the objective of using those deadly arms against us. The United States must face this reality head on and undertake decisive steps to prevent catastrophe. Only we can exercise the constructive leadership necessary to address the nuclear threat.

Unfortunately, the goal of globally eliminating all weapons of mass destruction—nuclear, chemical and biological arms—is today not an integral part of American foreign policy; it needs to be put back at the top of our agenda.

Of course, there will be those who will argue against this bold vision. To these people I would say that there were plenty who argued against it when it was articulated by Mr. Reagan during his presidency.

I vividly recall a White House national security meeting in De-

ember 1985, at which the president reported on his first “get acquainted” summit in Geneva with President Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union the previous month.

Sitting in the situation room, the president began by saying: “Maggie was right. We can do business with this man.” His reference to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher prompted nods of assent. Then, in a remarkably matter-of-fact tone, he reported that he had suggested to Mr. Gorbachev that their negotiations could possibly lead to the United States and the Soviet Union eliminating all their nuclear weapons.

When the president finished with his report, I saw uniform consternation around that White House table. The concern was deep, with a number of those present—from the secretary of defense to the head of central intelligence to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—warning that our nuclear missiles were indispensable. The president listened carefully and politely without responding. In fact, we did not learn where he stood until October 1986, at his next summit meeting with Mr. Gorbachev, which took place in Reykjavik, Iceland. There, in a stout waterfront house, he repeated to Mr. Gorbachev his proposal for the abolition of all nuclear weapons. Though no agreement was reached, the statement had been made,

More remarkably, it had been made by someone who understood the importance of nuclear deterrence.

In March 1985, before Reagan’s first meeting with Mr. Gorbachev, I received a telephone call on a Friday from the president’s chief legislative strategist telling me that the administration’s request for additional MX missiles was facing defeat in the House of Representatives, and that the president wanted me to return from Geneva (where I was posted as his arms negotiator) for a brief visit. The hope was that I might be able to persuade some of the Democrats to support the appropriation.

I was not and never have been a lobbyist, but I agreed to return to Washington. I wanted my first meeting to be with the speaker of the House, Tip O’Neill, who, I was informed, was the leader of the opposition to the appropriation.

So there I was on Monday morning in O’Neill’s private office. I

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briefed the speaker on the state of negotiations with the Soviets. I made the point that I too would like to live in a world without MX missiles, but that it was dangerous for us unilaterally to reduce our numbers without receiving reciprocal reductions from the Soviets. I then proceeded with my round of talks on the Hill.

At the end of the day, I met alone with the president and told him that O'Neill said we were about 30 votes short. I told the president of my conversation with the speaker and shared with him my sense that O'Neill was quietly helping us, suggesting to his fellow Democrats that he would not be unhappy if they voted against his amendment.

Without a moment's hesitation, the president telephoned O'Neill, and I had the privilege of hearing one side of this conversation between two tough Irishmen, cussing each other out, but obviously friendly and respectful.

I recall that the president's first words went something like this: "Max tells me that you may really be a patriot. It's about time!" Suffice it to say that soon after I returned to Geneva I learned that the House had authorized the MX missiles.

There is a moral to these stories: you can be an idealist and a realist at the same time. What is missing today from American foreign policy is a willingness to hold these two thoughts simultaneously, to find a way to move from what "is"—a world with a risk of increasing global disaster—to what "ought" to be, a peaceful, civilized world free of weapons of mass destruction.

The "ought" is an integral part of the political process. Our founding fathers proclaimed the "ought" of American democracy in the Declaration of Independence at a time when we had slavery, property qualifications for voting and second-class citizenship for women.

Yet we steadily moved the undesirable "is" of our society ever closer to the "ought" and thereby strengthened our democracy. When President Gerald Ford signed the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, he was criticized for entering into a process initiated by the Soviet Union. But the agreement reflected a series of humanitarian "oughts," and over the course of the next 10 years, the Soviets were forced by our

European friends and us to live up to those “oughts” if they were to attain international legitimacy.

An appreciation of the awesome power of the “ought” should lead our government to embrace the goal of eliminating all weapons of mass destruction.

To this end, President Bush should consult with our allies, appear before the United Nations General Assembly and call for a resolution embracing the objective of eliminating all weapons of mass destruction.

He should make clear that we are prepared to eliminate our nuclear weapons if the Security Council develops an effective regime to guarantee total conformity with a universal commitment to eliminate all nuclear arms and reaffirm the existing conventions covering chemical and biological weapons.

The council should be assigned the task of establishing effective political and technical procedures for achieving this goal, including both stringent verification and severe penalties to prevent cheating.

I am under no illusion that this will be easy. That said, the United States would bring to this endeavor decades of relevant experience, new technologies and the urgency of self-preservation. The necessary technical solutions can be devised. Now, as I can imagine President Reagan saying, let us summon the will.