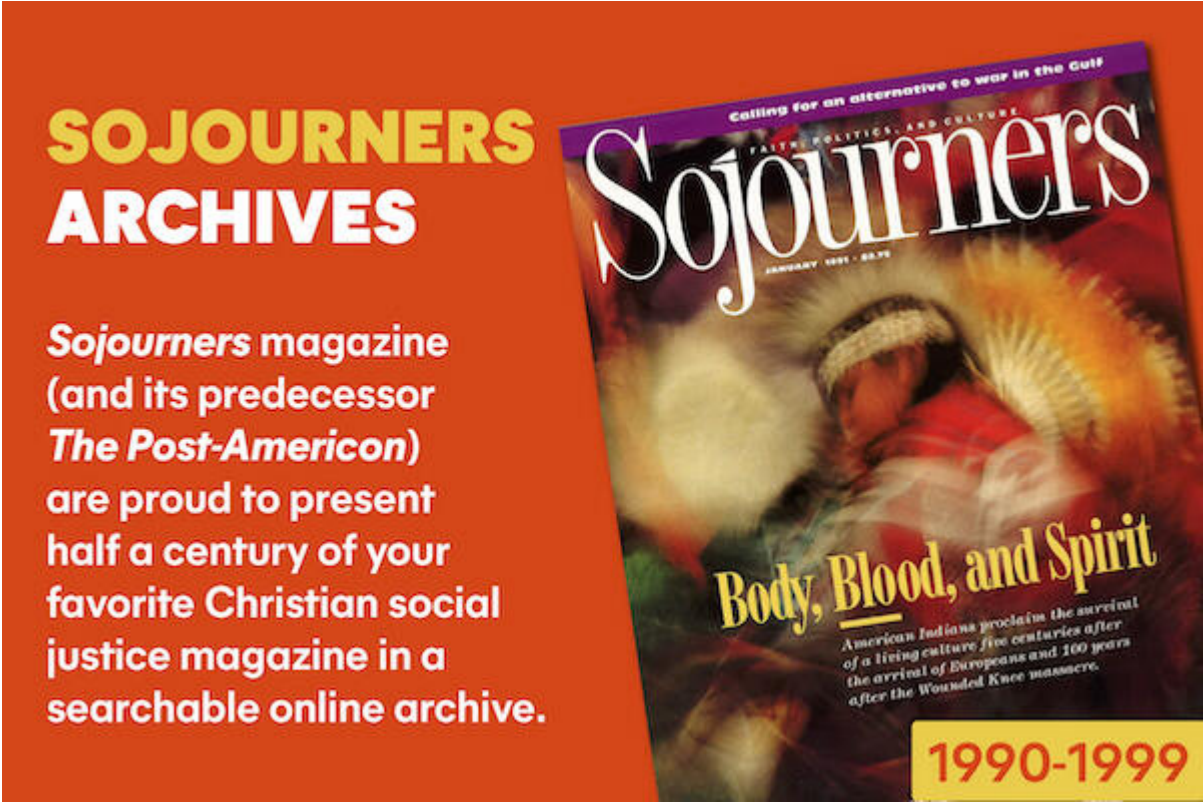


Magazine

AN UNEXPECTED CALLING

BY DAVID CORTRIGHT, GEN. GEORGE LEE BUTLER



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Gen. Lee Butler was head of the Strategic Air Command, the military structure that managed the nation’s nuclear arsenal, from 1991 to 1994. Butler was interviewed on September 1, 1998, by David Cortright, former director of the peace organization SANE and currently president of the Fourth Freedom Forum, a private foundation based in Goshen, Indiana. -- The Editors

David Cortright: Would you please describe the process by which you went from commander of nuclear forces to advocate of nuclear weapons abolition?

Gen. George Lee Butler: If you have read my public statements, you’ll know that I sometimes start my remarks by recalling a quote from the Southern novelist Flannery O’Connor, who once observed, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.” People trying to come to grips with how the former commander of the nation’s strategic nuclear forces could become a proponent of nuclear abolition must surely think this is quite odd. But the quote begs the question: What truth did I come to know that would lead me to make such a seemingly sharp reversal in my attitude with respect to the role and utility of nuclear weapons?



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The first thing that I would say is that this was not an epiphany. It was not a road-to-Damascus insight, some blinding revelation. It just doesn’t work that way in the nuclear business. For me it was the product of a career spent largely in the nuclear arena that led me from service as a young cadet and officer in the Air Force, caught up in the anxiety and tensions of the early Cold War era in the late 1950s and early 1960s, to commander-in-chief of the organization that had responsibility for the operation of all strategic nuclear forces and planning for

their employment. Over the course of that 37-year journey, I went from wide-eyed, ill-informed neophyte who only understood nuclear issues in terms of the mythology that had grown up around them to an appreciation of the price and the risks associated with having nuclear weapons in one's arsenal—as well as the frailties and the flaws of both people and machines that over time turned theory and strategy on its head.

Because of the extraordinary size of the arsenals that were amassed by both East and West, there was a very great danger that a crisis would spin out of control and invoke the use of nuclear weapons. If that were the case, I learned ultimately that what was at stake was not just the survival of one or both of the antagonists but virtually the entire world. And so there were a series of insights that became increasingly profound as my responsibilities grew.

Cortright: What role did your religious, spiritual beliefs play in this process of growing awareness and shifting emphasis?

Butler: It was really fundamental. I was raised in a very spiritual environment. I was a child of the Deep South. My father was a career military officer and was often gone. During his frequent absences, I lived in a small town in rural Mississippi. There was a very strong Christian value system among the people in our tiny community.

I was raised to believe in the innate goodness of humanity, developed a deep sense of the dignity of the individual human being, and had a great appreciation for the miracle of life and our existence on this earth. Although that sense of values was deeply embedded in my psyche, what later struck me and what ultimately came to give me great pause—indeed I would have to say alarm—is how readily for so many years of my life I suspended the tenets of that value system in the belief that the threat we perceived during the Cold War was so great it justified a security construct called “mutual assured destruction” that promised the death of hundreds of millions of people.

I have spent a great deal of time the last several years reflecting on nuclear deterrence theory and how it is that we amassed arsenals in the tens of thousands and put them on hair-trigger alert, wondering how it is we reconcile the belief system of deterrence, its operational practices and the obvious willingness to employ this arsenal, with our own value system and the underlying premises of a democratic society with regard to the worth of the individual. I've struggled with that for some time now and continue to do so. I think it's a sad commentary on the present state of the human condition that this tortuous dichotomy continues to this very day.

Cortright: I understand that when you were applying for the Air Force Academy from your hometown in Mississippi, your other choice of possible careers was the ministry. What connection if any did you see between those two possible career choices?

Butler: I had a very strong attraction to the ministry. I suppose part of it is simply that I was in church so often: every Sunday, every Tuesday for Bible study, two weeks of every summer for the classic Southern revival. In fact I used to make the rounds of various churches in our home town to hear the different preachers and observe their style. I had a strong sense of being called to the ministry.

Joining the military was a product of necessity. My parents were not well-to-do. Given our limited family income, I had a fairly stark set of choices. It was either get a scholarship or join the Army, as my dad did during the Depression. Almost in desperation, I applied for the Air Force Academy and to my utter astonishment was accepted. This met the challenge of getting a scholarship, but it also took me down a very narrow path, since military schools quite obviously are designed to prepare future officers for a career. By the time I graduated from the Academy, I was very predisposed in that direction.

If there is any connection between the two careers, it is that I consider both the ministry and the military to be professions, even callings. They each have unique sets of demands and sacrifices, encompass personal belief systems, and require great commitment and dedication. I was prepared to make that commitment in either case.

Cortright: Perhaps your moral appeal now for getting rid of the threat of nuclear annihilation might be a calling that combines the two professions.

Butler: I think that my career in the military, if not preordained, certainly endowed me with a set of experiences and insights but most importantly a credibility that ensured my voice would not be ignored. My career was unique in terms of the scope and depth of my exposure to the vast and complex world of nuclear policy making, planning, weapons acquisition, and operations. By the time I retired I was the nation's leading spokesman in nuclear matters. More to the point, the concerns that led me to embrace nuclear abolition were well advanced. During the last years of active military service, it became clear to me that we had lost all sense of proportion regarding the theory and practice of nuclear deterrence. Ultimately what mattered was how I chose to respond to my dismay. Finally, I simply answered the voice of my conscience. That's where my religious beliefs intersected most strongly with my sense of professional obligation.

Cortright: From your experience in Mississippi growing up in the 1950s, what if any reactions did you have to the civil rights developments of that time? What was it like growing up as a white boy in Mississippi at that time when civil rights consciousness was beginning to emerge?

Butler: That's a very compelling question. I've wrestled periodically with the issue and with what I see as a striking parallel. The parallel begins with the terrible moral burden of growing up white in the deepest South. As a child, it was a burden that I never understood, and did not perceive or feel until my later formative years, after I had gone off to the Academy. Only then did it dawn on me that the society in which I had grown up was so tortured and morally debased by its deep racial divisions.

I have spent years going back over that historical terrain trying to imagine how it was that I was so indifferent to a world where blacks and whites went to different schools, drank from different water fountains, rode in different seats on public transportation. Where blacks were considered chattel property, were abused and even murdered on whims. All of that was accepted as not just normal but the rightful scheme of things. It was not until I was a young adult and had left that environment permanently that it finally came crashing home how despicable were these circumstances. I have examined time and again the process whereby I became inured to this environment and had come to accept it as normal.

The parallels with respect to my attitudes toward nuclear weapons are very strong, as today I strive to understand how we came to normalize the process of shearing away an entire society, to accept as a routine price of deterrence slaughtering populations wholesale. We not only treated these policies and practices as normal, but invented sophisticated theoretical schemes and strategic underpinnings to structure this normalcy. In many respects, we elevated it to theology. I think that there are very powerful analogies between dealing with the legacy of racism and the belief systems of nuclear deterrence. Perhaps the first prepared me for the second. And perhaps coming to grips with my earlier acceptance of racism in its worst form prepared me intellectually to question the underlying premises of nuclear deterrence.

Cortright: I wonder if there is another parallel. We now have an emerging nuclear abolition movement. But of course the word abolition in the United States is most prominently associated with the struggle against slavery in the 19th century. Do you see any connection between the two?

Butler: I think it is a remarkably strong and positive correlation. I really hadn't thought about it until this conversation, but the word conveys precisely the same sense in both instances. What I think strikes all of us now, from the perspective of a hundred years or so, is the moral courage of the people who risked life and limb in order to give some hope, some exit to those who were enslaved.

The cause of nuclear abolition has important parallels, if not in physical risk, then in terms of the price for espousing a cause still at odds with conventional wisdom. It certainly has been spiritually challenging for me and I'm sure for many others. In fact as I have learned about the efforts of people who've been involved in the cause of nuclear abolition going back decades, I must say that my admiration for them has deepened. I can now see more clearly their alarm and their moral outrage, their indignation at the almost cavalier manner in which nuclear weapons were added to our arsenal and their numbers increased beyond any reason. So yes, I think there are very important parallels between those two causes.

Cortright: What role did you play in the latter years of your career to de-alert and reduce some of our nuclear capabilities?

Butler: History in some ways played a capricious trick on me. I was appointed to be the commander of the strategic nuclear forces of the United States at the very moment the Cold War was ending. I took charge of what was then known as Strategic Air Command, the nation's premier military organization, in January 1991. I found myself in charge of tens of thousands of strategic nuclear weapons, and systems for delivering them, and the people trained and dedicated to that task. More to the point, having been in the strategy business for many years and having previously been the director of strategic planning for the armed forces, I was intimately involved in the events that led up to the momentous changes in 1989-91 when the Soviet Union collapsed, the Warsaw Pact dissolved, and arms control agreements were accelerated. While for many that seemed a time of great upheaval with unpredictable consequences, I felt a flood of relief from what I saw as the end of an era of unprecedented risk. I saw this as an opportunity, a challenge, and indeed my responsibility to take immediate steps to scale back the nuclear confrontation at the heart of the Cold War.

I felt a compelling obligation to reduce the role of these forces, to shrink their numbers, and to begin to change the mindsets that had grown up around them for decades. As you would suspect, there were not more than a handful of people like myself, one of them fortunately being Colin Powell, then the Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who saw matters this way. The vast majority of people, including virtually everyone in my command, felt that while the end of the Cold War was certainly a significant event, the role of nuclear weapons as the cornerstone of national security policy would not and should not change.

When I informed my staff of my views and how I saw my purpose as the commander, it came as a great shock. The three years I spent in that position were marked by a continuing series of steps and decisions that led to the wholesale restructuring of nuclear weapons policy, planning, forces, and postures. I personally made the recommendation to President Bush to take the bombers off alert in order to enhance our security relationship with Russia and to demonstrate that we could make bold and significant changes in the aftermath of the Cold War. Happily that recommendation was accepted. I canceled almost all of the strategic modernization programs that were then extant to the tune of about \$40 billion. Most important, as the director of nuclear target planning, I shrank the number of targets in the war plan by 75 percent. So I felt that I helped initiate what I assumed would be a continuing process of stepping back from the unprecedented cost and risks associated with the amassing and posturing of nuclear forces. I could see the path whereby the world would regain a sense of normalcy, could conduct its security affairs on a more rational basis.

Cortright: Now, however, it appears that the process of denuclearization has slowed, that momentum for these reductions has ebbed. How do we carry on the process and bring it to its rightful conclusion, a world without nuclear weapons?

Butler: I think the single most important challenge in front of us now is to maintain perspective. It is easy to be discouraged or disheartened in the current environment, where national leaders and nations themselves appear to be overwhelmed by forces beyond their control. The spectacle of India and Pakistan testing, arms control agreements gridlocked, governments that perpetuate Cold War policies and practices—

all of this obviously is alarming and dismaying.

But at the same time what strikes me is that over the course of the last two years the concept of nuclear abolition, the prospect and the possibility of zero as a legitimate and serious goal, has become widely accepted. This is a very different state of affairs than when I retired in February 1994. At that time, I believed the best that could be achieved was a more rapid scaling back of arsenals. I had not yet begun to think seriously about elimination as not just a legitimate goal but a practical one. It was only after a long period of reflection, reading, and very serious study of the efforts and initiatives that have been underway for years, such as the nuclear non-proliferation regime, that I came to understand how much work had already been done: the draft conventions already on the table, the number of nations that had already foregone the so-called right to have nuclear weapons, and the number of people of outstanding ability and character working in this arena. I began to appreciate how much of the foundation had already been laid. In my discussions now with officials in the U.S. government and others around the world, with very senior people in the nuclear weapons states, I’m struck by the fact that many if not most of these policy makers truly understand that we have to find the path to eliminate nuclear weapons.

Thus, I find the debate now turns on timing and modality. In working with my colleagues on the Canberra Commission or the U.S. National Academy of Science, we have suggested step-by-step approaches to abolition, under the rubric, for example, of a “regime of progressive restraints”: practical, safe steps that can be taken in phases bounded by improvements in political atmospherics, verification measures, and enforcement mechanisms. So I’m encouraged by what I see as a much broader understanding, appreciation, and acceptance of the fact that the goal is and must be zero.

Cortright: You’re in the process of making career choices about your future. Having gone through a military career and a business career, you are now considering a role for yourself in the ongoing nuclear abolition debate. Can you describe the commitment you’re making and the considerations you have weighed in coming to this choice in life?

Butler: It is a bit unusual, I suppose, at a still fairly robust age, not yet 60, to have retired twice from two very separate walks of life, the military profession and the business world. Happily I’m in a position where if I chose I could live a life of quiet reflection, focused on my family and personal growth. But I find that my conscience and my sense of social responsibility require more. I am experiencing something of the earlier calling to the ministry. The voice is clear and insistent: “You know too much and you have abiding concerns that make it irresponsible for you to sit on the sidelines while others grapple with this matter of such overriding importance.”

So simply by yielding, as I suppose I always have, to the voice of conscience, I find myself reluctantly drawn back into this arena in the belief that ultimately the voices of reason will prevail, must prevail. I have begun to come to grips with how to deal with this calling. My wife and I have concluded that whatever else we do, we have to maintain some sort of meaningful involvement. We are working with a number of extraordinary people and organizations who themselves provide such a powerful role model.

In the meantime, our goal is to use the experience and the credibility that attaches to my years in the nuclear arena to inform new generations of policy makers and politically attuned publics. Over time nuclear fear fades from experience and memory, mythology displaces reality, and we lose sight of the price, risks, and dangers of the Cold War era. I already find that many people are not aware the United States and Russia have retained much of the nuclear trappings of that era in the form of thousands of warheads and systems on alert. And so the short answer is that I’m going to stay in this arena and work on this issue. I am persuaded that right and reason are on the side of abolition, and that the tide of global opinion can and will be turned toward this end.

For more information, check out these sites:

- [Abolition 2000](#) - A Global Network to Eliminate Nuclear Weapons
- [Canberra Commission](#) - Contains the report of the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons.
- [The Fire Still Burns](#), an interview with historian Gar Alperovitz - Alperovitz is a leading expert on the decision-making process around the use of nuclear weapons.

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