

Realism and Nuclear Abolition

Excerpt from David Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 325-333.

The most authoritative and detailed report on how to end the danger of nuclear weapons was issued by the Canberra Commission in 1996, at a moment of unprecedented opportunity for nuclear arms reduction. It came in the wake of a parade of international arms control agreements, including the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty (1987), the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty (1990), the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START) I and II (1991 and 1993), the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC, 1993), the indefinite extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (1995), and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT, 1996). In this hopeful atmosphere of accelerating denuclearization, Australia's Prime Minister Paul Keating and Foreign Minister Gareth Evans established an independent international commission to explore the prospect of reducing nuclear weapons to zero.

The creation of the Canberra Commission was motivated in part by the political reaction within Australia to the resumption of French nuclear testing in the South Pacific. The French tests that began in June 1995 sparked worldwide protests, including boycotts of French wine. The reaction in the Asia-Pacific region was especially sharp, and Australia's Labor government joined with other nations to apply diplomatic and moral pressure on France. Keating and Evans framed their opposition in the context of a broader argument against nuclear weapons in general.ⁱ They responded to mounting antinuclear pressures in Australia and around the world by creating a commission to advocate nuclear weapons elimination. Evans was already skeptical of nuclear weapons, and he and other officials used the public reaction to renewed testing to make the case for a nuclear weapons free world.ⁱⁱ

The seventeen members of the Canberra Commission were drawn mostly from the five nuclear weapons states and included several former senior commanders and defense officials. Among the major players were General George Lee Butler, former commander-in-chief of US Strategic Command; retired field marshal Michael Carver, former chief of the British General staff; Robert McNamara, former US secretary of defense; and Michel Rocard, former prime minister of France. The commission also included long-time advocates of disarmament, such as Nobel Peace Prize winner Joseph Rotblatt and former Swedish disarmament ambassador Maj Britt Theorin. Butler played a crucial role in building consensus within the commission and was the major voice for several years

afterward in carrying the commission's message to the public. Butler had supported nuclear reductions as senior nuclear commander and adviser to the first Bush administration but he came to the commission as a skeptic of abolition. The depth and seriousness of the commission's deliberations were a transformative experience that allowed him to see the merit of a nuclear reduction process that would lead to zero.ⁱⁱⁱ Carver experienced a similar conversion. His discussions with fellow commissioners convinced him that abolition was feasible, and that the absence of tension between the superpowers created an historic opportunity to strive for a nuclear weapons free future.^{iv} Rocard too was persuaded by the commission process to endorse the final report. The political views of the commissioners varied widely, but in the end this eminent group of former policy makers from diverse backgrounds agreed on a concrete plan for a step-by-step process of reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons.

The Canberra Commission report concluded that "immediate and determined efforts need to be made to rid the world of nuclear weapons and the threat they pose to it." The proposition that nuclear weapons can be retained in perpetuity and never be used, accidentally or by design, "defies credibility." Reflecting the military experience of its authors, the report emphasized that nuclear weapons are too destructive and indiscriminate to achieve military objectives on the battlefield. The possession of nuclear weapons has not prevented wars involving the major powers. The only legitimate purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter their use by others. If nations agreed to their elimination, there would be no need for such weapons. The commission report emphasized both the opportunity created by the end of the cold war and the urgency of addressing the growing threat of possible acquisition of nuclear weapons by terrorists. They emphasized that the elimination of nuclear weapons must be a global endeavor involving all states. It should proceed in a series of stages involving phased verifiable reductions that would allow states to satisfy themselves each step along the way that further movement toward elimination can be made safely and securely. The necessary first step is for the five nuclear weapons states to "commit themselves unequivocally to the elimination of nuclear weapons and agree to start work immediately on the practical steps and negotiations required for its achievement." The commission recommended the following specific steps:

- Taking nuclear weapons off alert
- Removing warheads from delivery vehicles
- Ending deployment of nonstrategic weapons
- Ending nuclear testing
- Negotiating further US-Russian reductions

- Establishing no-first-use policies
- Preventing horizontal proliferation
- Strengthening verification arrangements
- Halting the production of fissile material.^v

Sparkling the Debate

Although the United States, Russia, and the other nuclear weapons states were indifferent to the Canberra Commission's report, many other countries supported its recommendations. Several so-called middle powers joined together to form the "New Agenda Coalition" to press for greater progress toward disarmament. In June 1998 the foreign ministers of Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Slovenia, South Africa, and Sweden issued a statement declaring their full support for the conclusions of the Canberra Commission and calling upon the governments of each of the nuclear-weapons states and the three nuclear-weapons-capable states (Israel, India, Pakistan) to develop plans for nuclear abolition. Slovenia later withdrew from the coalition, but the other states continued to work together in promoting the recommendations of the Canberra Commission. The New Agenda Coalition states, supported by a coalition of disarmament activists, played a key role in the 2000 NPT review conference. They succeeded in gaining agreement in the final conference declaration on language calling for concrete steps toward the elimination of nuclear weapons.

The Canberra Commission report generated considerable enthusiasm among nongovernmental groups, nuclear policy experts, and think tanks. It was a major morale builder and source of encouragement for advocates of nuclear arms restraint. The report sparked efforts to push the question of nuclear disarmament onto the international policy agenda and became the inspiration for a growing worldwide movement for nuclear weapons abolition. For a brief time the movement showed promise of being able to mobilize public awareness and support, but it was cut short by the terrorist attacks of September 2001 and the deterioration of international relations following the US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The Canberra Commission report prompted a number of follow-up efforts to examine and promote plans for the elimination of nuclear weapons. The recommendations of the Canberra Commission were incorporated into two major studies that were released in 1997. The Stimson Center in Washington, DC produced a report, *An American Legacy: Building a Nuclear-Free World*, and the Committee on International Security and Arms Control of the National Academy of Sciences released the study, *The Future of U.S.*

Nuclear Weapons Policy. Both acknowledged the work of the Canberra Commission and adopted many of its proposals. In 1998 the Japan Institute of International Affairs, the Hiroshima Peace Institute, and the Japanese government created the Tokyo Forum on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament, which released a report the following year that reiterated many of the recommendations of the Canberra Commission.

In December 1996 George Lee Butler joined with retired general and former NATO commander Andrew Goodpaster to release a statement urging the United States and Russia to move toward “the complete elimination of nuclear weapons from all nations.”^{vi} The Butler-Goodpaster appeal was followed the next day by the release of a *Statement on Nuclear Weapons by International Generals and Admirals*, which was signed by sixty retired generals and admirals from seventeen countries. The generals and admirals statement declared support for the “principle of continuous, complete and irrevocable elimination of nuclear weapons.”^{vii} For the next several years Butler devoted himself to public education and advocacy on behalf of nuclear arms reduction and elimination. He gave numerous presentations before prestigious audiences throughout the world and met with government officials of the nuclear weapons states and many other countries to argue the case for nuclear disarmament. In nearly every presentation, Butler mentioned the Canberra Commission report and extolled its recommendations for reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons.

“Weapons of Terror”

In 2003, in the wake of intensive international attention to disarmament issues in Iraq, Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh took the initiative to create a new international commission to focus on the broader problem of disarmament. The original idea of the commission came from Jayantha Dhanapala, then UN Under-Secretary General for Disarmament. Lindh was subsequently murdered, like Palme the victim of assassination, but Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson and Foreign Minister Laila Freivalds carried on the project. The Commission on Weapons of Mass Destruction as it was called was chaired by Hans Blix, the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency and former chief of the UN disarmament mission in Iraq. Its June 2006 report, *Weapons of Terror*, addressed all forms of deadly weapons and examined the danger posed by potential terrorist acquisition of such weapons. The Blix report proposed a world summit at the United Nations in New York to provide global leadership for efforts to eliminate weapons of mass destruction. In releasing the report, Blix made a special point of emphasizing that policies of unilateralism and military action had failed to stem the dangers of terrorism and weapons proliferation. He called for a renewed emphasis on international cooperation in reducing these threats.

The Blix Commission issued sixty recommendations for preventing nuclear proliferation, reducing the threat from existing weapons, controlling biological and chemical weapons and toxins, limiting weapons delivery systems, preventing the weaponization of space, and strengthening the disarmament verification and enforcement role of the United Nations. The commission called on states to start preparing for a process of outlawing nuclear weapons. It urged the existing nuclear weapons states to fulfill their NPT commitments to implement disarmament in conformity with principles of verification, irreversibility, and transparency. In a veiled reference to the United States the report urged states to abide by the UN Charter prohibition on the threat or use of force except in self-defense or as authorized by the Security Council. It called for a verified ban on the production of fissile materials and urged states to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). The commission called for a new strategic nuclear weapons reduction agreement between Russia and the United States, specifically proposing a further 50 percent cut in weapons levels and the dismantlement of warheads withdrawn under the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT).^{viii}

The *Weapons of Terror* report also offered proposals for dealing with nuclear proliferation challenges in Iran and North Korea and addressing the threat posed by global terrorist networks. To induce Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment program, it called for security assurances that would take into account Iran's perception of threats. It urged the renunciation of regime change as a goal of policy. It proposed a freeze on the production of fissile materials in the region, including by nuclear-armed Israel, as a step toward the creation of a regional zone free of WMD. To induce North Korea to dismantle its nuclear weapons program, it called for similar security assurances to the Pyongyang government. It urged the reinstatement of the previous commitment to ban the production of fissile materials by both North and South Korea as a step toward making the Korean peninsula a zone free of WMD. To prevent terrorists from gaining access to nuclear weapons or materials, the commission called for an effective worldwide accounting and control of weapons and weapons-related materials. It urged greater compliance with United Nations conventions and Security Council Resolution 1540 (2005) to prevent terrorists from acquiring deadly weapons.

What is Zero?

The goal of abolishing nuclear weapons faces unavoidable technical and political uncertainties. It is an obvious fact that nuclear weapons cannot be uninvented. The materials, technologies, and scientific know how to make nuclear weapons will remain a permanent fixture of the human experience. Even after the weapons themselves are abolished, the scientific knowledge and equipment necessary for their creation will

remain. The risk that rogue actors might seek to “breakout” and redevelop nuclear weapons can never be eliminated. Permanent vigilance is the price humankind must pay for having developed these weapons.

Because of this reality, the 1997 National Academy of Sciences report, *The Future of US Nuclear Weapons*, recommended the use of the term “prohibit” rather than “abolish.” The term prohibit is better than abolish because it does not create the false impression that nuclear weapons can be eliminated absolutely. The report called for consideration of a global prohibition of nuclear weapons, and emphasized the need for realism in assessing the challenges of disarmament.^{ix} A prohibition agreement implies a legal commitment and an enforcement duty. Such an agreement would explicitly outlaw the possession and use of nuclear weapons. It would universalize the denuclearization process and create an obligation on all states, nuclear and nonnuclear alike, to renounce reliance on nuclear weapons. It would signify the determination of nations to break their dependence on nuclear weapons without qualification or reservation, and to rely entirely on other means for achieving security.

In *The Gift of Time* Jonathan Schell distinguished between technical zero and political zero. At a technical level, the capability to develop nuclear weapons will always exist, but latent potential is very different from actual nuclear capability. As Schell wrote, “it is unquestionably possible, through technical means, to turn something that is a nuclear weapon into a collection of materials that plainly is not.”^x It is technically feasible to dismantle nuclear weapons and to establish systems of scientific monitoring, verification, and control to reach a point of zero nuclear weapons.

The greater challenge is reaching political zero, that stage of political relations where nations have no desire or need to possess such weapons. Schell defined political zero as the “complete disavowal by political authorities of the intention to use nuclear weapons, in any circumstances.” The United States and Britain have nuclear weapons but would never think of using them against each other “because their confidence in their political zero is so strong.” When political animosity is low, so is the motivation to develop nuclear weapons. Cooperative political relations and mutual democracy are the greatest assurance of security and the best guarantee against war and weapons proliferation. The development and strengthening of cooperative political relationships can help to create the mutual political confidence, the political zero, that would allow nations to end their reliance on nuclear weapons.

The process of disarmament cannot be separated from the requirement for strengthened systems of international cooperation and conflict resolution. The legal prohibition against nuclear weapons must be backed up by effective enforcement mechanisms and a

sustained commitment to nonviolent dispute resolution. This will require the creation of more reliable and effective international security mechanisms, and greater efforts to prevent and resolve conflicts before they degenerate into war. The general history of collective security efforts through the United Nations and the earlier League of Nations is not a hopeful one, but there are many examples of successful cooperative action. There is no shortage of lessons that can be gleaned from experience to enhance cooperative security. The 1997 report of the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict contained an array of proposals, examples, and recommended policies for reducing the frequency and intensity of armed violence. Knowledge of what causes conflict and how it can be prevented has increased enormously in recent decades. It is now possible, if the political will exists, to prevent and resolve most conflicts before they reach the stage of war. It is only through such measures to strengthen international cooperation and resolve armed conflict that nuclear disarmament can succeed in lifting the threat of mass annihilation that still clouds the human future.

As Michael Howard noted, a disarmed world will not automatically be more peaceful. Nations will still be vulnerable to the underlying historical forces and security dilemmas that contribute to armed conflict.^{xi} Even the most successful disarmament process cannot guarantee security if the political relations among nations are confrontational rather than cooperative. Hans Morgenthau was right to emphasize the primacy of settling political differences as the precondition for disarmament. Bertha von Suttner and nineteenth century peace advocates were right to link disarmament to the creation of a more secure international order based on the rule of law and the resolution of interstate conflict. Disarmament is a dynamic process, not an absolute end-state. It is an essential part of the strategy for peace, but it must be accompanied by a wide range of other peacemaking measures. To achieve lasting disarmament, it is necessary to prevent war itself. Nuclear pacifism leads unavoidably to general pacifism, to a rejection of war and a commitment to enhancing cooperative security and building structures of peace.

ⁱ Marianne Hanson and Carl Ungerer, "The Canberra Commission: Paths Followed, Paths Ahead," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 53, no. 1 (1999): 7.

ⁱⁱ Marianne Hanson and Carl J. Ungerer, "Promoting an Agenda for Nuclear Weapons Elimination: The Canberra Commission and Dilemmas of Disarmament," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 44, no. 4 (1998): 539.

ⁱⁱⁱ George Lee Butler, interview by the author, 10 August 2004.

^{iv} Michael Carver, "A Nuclear (Elimination) Exchange," *Royal United Services Institute Journal* 141, no. 5 (1996): 51–4.

^v All text citations from Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, Australia, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Report of the Canberra Commission on*

the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1996), 9-12.

^{vi} Tim Weiner, "Rejection of 'Star Wars' Not Political, Inquiry Says," *New York Times*, 5 December 1996.

^{vii} Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, "Statement on Nuclear Weapons by International Generals and Admirals," 5 December 1996. Available online at *Nuclear Files* <<http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/key-issues/ethics/issues/military/statement-by-international-generals.htm>> (accessed 30 March 2007).

^{viii} All citations of text from Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, final report, *Weapons of Terror: Freeing the World of Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Arms* (Stockholm, Sweden, 1 June 2006), 18, 25, 56-57, 64-65, 67-72, 83-87, 93, 105-108, 167-69. Available online at the *Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission* <http://www.wmdcommission.org/files/Weapons_of_Terror.pdf> (accessed 30 March 2007).

^{ix} National Academy of Sciences (U.S.), Committee on International Security and Arms Control, *The Future of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1997), 8-10.

^x Schell, *The Gift of Time*, 218.

^{xi} Michael Howard, "Problems of a Disarmed World," in *Studies In War And Peace* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 224-234.