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# Two Minutes to Midnight: The Nuclear Peril

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Publication date: Tuesday 20 June 2006

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Published on Monday, June 19, 2006 by [the CommonDreams.org](http://www.CommonDreams.org)

The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists set its doomsday clock to seven minutes before midnight on February 27, 2002, and despite the growing precipitous nuclear crisis since, the clock remains unchanged. The doomsday clock represents the global level of nuclear danger and has been as close as two minutes to midnight in 1953 when the "United States and Soviet Union tested thermonuclear devices within nine months of one another" and as far away as seventeen minutes on December, 1990, when it was redesigned to reflect democratic movements in Eastern Europe signaling the end of the Cold War. Nuclear Armageddon is one of two swords of Damocles hanging by a single horse hair over civilization, the other being the reckless destruction of the ecosystem that sustains life on earth.

The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists are overly optimistic in leaving the clock at seven minutes to midnight given the Bush administration's wanton disregard and reckless withdrawal from important nuclear arms regimes which manage the risk of nuclear war, the dangerous proliferation of nuclear weapons and fissionable material and the mindless, irrational blueprint for the increase and miniaturization of nuclear warheads. The purpose of building smaller but still very powerful warheads is to expand the scope of their usage to any war or pseudo-war waged by the U.S. In addition, the United States is embarking on a program to weaponize space which will only provoke potential competitors such as China to add to their own arsenals. The Bush energy policy of transferring dependence on oil to nuclear power poses a number of risks including a nuclear power plant breakdown, disposal of nuclear waste and the creation of additional targets for terrorists. One of the least understood perils of nuclear proliferation is the high probability of a nuclear accident reflecting the number of accidents which have occurred to date but have not yet resulted in the detonation of a nuclear weapon. Primarily because of the ignorant power-hungry actions of the Bush administration, the doomsday clock is closer to two minutes to midnight in the last six years since the beginning of his presidency.

It could be argued that during the Cold War when both the U.S. and U.S.S.R were scrambling to build bigger and more powerful nuclear warheads and more accurate delivery systems, the risk was greater than today. During the Cold War, both the Soviet Union and the United States possessed an absurd overkill capacity which spawned the bizarre and demented concept of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) whereby no side would launch a first strike for fear of massive retaliation. The only chink in the armor of MAD was the effort by the United States to build a first strike capability which forced both sides to accelerate the decision-making process about whether to push the nuclear button. The new system was largely automated and was referred to as launch-on-warning. The argument that the world is safer today than during the Cold War is meretricious because both the U.S. and Russia still have an overkill capacity and continue to be on a launch-on-warning basis with the additional risk of an aging Russian system which is in a state of dangerous disrepair.

It is impossible to assess the extent to which the various treaty and conventions have reduced the risk of nuclear war but both sides have adhered to the arms control regimes to avoid the menace of annihilation. President Bush has already demonstrated his belief that international laws are optional when American interests are at stake but he has now clearly exhibited his ignorance and utter contempt for some of the most important arms control treaties whose purpose has been to protect human civilization from the scourge of nuclear war.

During the Cold War, the U.S. and U.S.S.R. signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty which prohibited the development and deployment of defensive systems with the exception that each country was allowed one location, presumably to protect their capital city. The principle of the AMB Treaty has been to avoid the inevitable increase in the nuclear arsenals on both sides in an attempt to overcome the other side's defensive system.

On June 13, 2002, Dr. Strangebush officially withdrew from the ABM Treaty declaring that the treaty impeded the ability of the United States to defend itself from an Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) attack. American

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withdrawal from the ABM treaty was in preparation for developing and deploying a Nuclear Missile Defense (NMD). The U.S. government planned to convey to the Chinese that they would not object to China expanding its arsenal as a counterweight to an American missile defense system if China would not object to the American NMD.

Without the ABM Treaty and with the American intention of ignoring the Outer Space Treaty (OST), there is no obstacle to the weaponization of space. The weaponization of space will only provoke other nuclear powers to devise a nuclear strategy to overcome a U.S. defensive system in order to avoid being at the mercy of the American arsenal. Therefore, another result of abandoning the ABM Treaty and the Outer Space Treaty will be a further buildup of nuclear warheads.

A further danger in rescinding the ABM Treaty and deploying weapons in space is the threat posed to Russian spaced-based early warning systems. With American weapons in space, the Russians will be fearful of the vulnerability of their spaced-based monitoring systems resulting in a more nervous trigger finger. The withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and Outer Space Treaty moves the clock to six minutes to midnight.

The lynchpin of the arms treaties regime to guard against nuclear war has been the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which prohibits non-nuclear signatory states from developing nuclear weapons in exchange for the five official nuclear powers committing to a reduction in their arsenals and prohibits nuclear states from transferring nuclear components, devices and technology to non-nuclear states. Although the United States has not withdrawn from the NPT, it has violated it in very significant ways.

In the year 2000, the NPT Review Conference committed to an "unequivocal undertaking...to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals." Although a majority of NPT member states at the 2005 Conference were seeking an agreement to completely dismantle all nuclear weapons based on the 2000 conference, the U.S. obstructed any progress towards that goal by impeding development of a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and 13 other steps to achieve nuclear disarmament. According to David Krieger, president of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, "Current US nuclear policy comes down on the side of an indefinite commitment to nuclear weapons."

Bush unmasked his hypocrisy about his commitment to the NPT regime when he struck a deal with India in which the U.S. would transfer nuclear fuel, technology and parts to India in exchange for India spending billions of dollars on American defense industries. The hypocrisy began with the fact that India is not a member of the NPT and therefore is outside of the inspection and control regime of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In negotiating the treaty, the U.S. ignored virtually every single proliferation constraint allowing India to process weapons grade material at eight of their reactors without the required IAEA inspections. By transferring nuclear fuel, the U.S. is in violation of Article I of the NPT which states that "Each nuclear-weapons State Party to the treaty undertakes not to transfer to any recipient whatsoever nuclear-weapons or other nuclear explosive devices..." and Article VI which states that "Each of the parties to the treaty undertakes to pursuit negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to the cessation of the nuclear arms race." Violations of the NPT move the clock to five minutes to midnight.

Another deterrent to the development of new weapons and ensuring the reliability of old ones is the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) which bans all testing of nuclear weapons in order to prevent further developments in weapons technology and specifically the miniaturization of warheads. The miniaturization of weapons would widen the scope of possible usage of nuclear devices to include, for example, the destruction of underground facilities such as the nuclear reactors in Iran. To test these new weapons, the United States and France have developed a sophisticated computer system which allows either country to redesign weapons without an actual test.

Although it doesn't violate the letter of the CTBT, the decision by Congress to launch the Reliable Warhead Replacement program violates its spirit. By developing more sophisticated and miniaturized nuclear warheads, the U.S. is precipitating further development of nuclear technologies by both nuclear and non-nuclear states. Violating

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the spirit of the CTBT and developing new weapons moves the clock to four minutes to midnight.

With the end of the Cold War, the U.S. had no justification for expanding and upgrading its nuclear arsenal yet every year the American government has spent billions of dollars enhancing its nuclear capability. According to the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, "As of January 2006, the U.S. stockpile contains almost 10,000 nuclear warheads...The Defense Department is upgrading its nuclear strike plans to reflect new presidential guidance and a transition of war planning from the top-heavy Single Integrated Operational Plan of the Cold War to a family of smaller and more flexible strike plans designed to defeat today's adversaries." The sheer madness of Bush's nuclear policy reflects a severely distorted and inaccurate perspective of the global nuclear configuration where only Russia, which is no longer an enemy, even remotely approaches the strength of the American arsenal. It would be suicide for any nation to launch even the feeblest of nuclear attacks against the United States.

On the other hand, there are 27,000 nuclear warheads distributed among the official and non-official nuclear powers all of which can be launched within half an hour. (IAEA) The American arsenal, the total worldwide inventory of nuclear warheads and the new nuclear weapon's strategy moves the doomsday clock to three minutes to midnight.

The threat of a nuclear accident is possibly the greatest threat to a nuclear catastrophe. Supposedly, the Titanic would not sink. Compared to the complexity and the number of mechanical, electronic and chemical components in a nuclear arsenal underlying all of which is the potential for human error in addition to the sheer numbers of warheads worldwide, the probability of a nuclear accident is infinitely greater than the risk of the Titanic sinking. Any argument about the world's success in avoiding a nuclear accident ignores the fact that there have been a frighteningly large number of near misses, many of which could easily have moved the doomsday clock to zero. Consider the following accidents:

" February 1958 at Greenham Common airbase, England, a U.S. Air Force B-47 jettisoned two 1700-gallon wingtip fuel tanks just missing a parked B-47 armed with nuclear weapons;

" February 1958 near Savannah, Georgia, a B-47 armed with a nuclear weapon collided with an F-86 fighter plane and jettisoned its bomb just before making a nuclear landing;

" January 16, 1961, an F-100 armed with a thermonuclear weapon caught fire scorching the nuclear weapon before it was extinguished;

" January 1968, the Defense Department announced publicly that between 1958 and 1968, there had been 13 major aircraft accidents involving nuclear weapons;

" 1973, a Sandia Laboratories report stated that between 1950 and 1968, there had been a total of 1,250 nuclear weapons accidents of varying severity including cases where the bombs conventional high explosives had been detonated;

" November 1977, in West Germany, a U.S. Army CH-47 helicopter carrying nuclear weapons crashed after takeoff; -since 1988, 96 U.S. nuclear warhead accidents have been reported. (2006 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists)

With 27,000 warheads deployed in so many countries, it is virtually inevitable that human or non-human error will eventually be responsible for a nuclear accident. Any nuclear accident would be a catastrophe of major proportions, but an accident that triggers a nuclear exchange could precipitate nuclear winter and would sentence all life on earth to a very painful death. The possibility of nuclear accidents moves the doomsday clock to two minutes to midnight.

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Testosterone-overloaded, power hungry, greedy and psychopathic men and a few women have created a world where many if not all life is threatened by nuclear weapons so that their nations will, in a meretricious irony, be secure from nuclear attack. These madmen and women lack any perspective or insight into the long-term amelioration of life on earth as they focus, like little boys, on who has the biggest nuclear arsenal. The tragic commentary of an arms buildup and the nuclear arms buildup in particular, is that leaders in most nations and institutions are immature and lack the ability to transcend the historical tendency to resolve disputes by force to a higher plane where negotiations, cooperation and compromise replace force as the means to settle differences.

It is extremely ironic that Albert Einstein, the man who discovered the theory that led to nuclear weapons, also warned that "The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking and we thus drift towards unparalleled catastrophe."

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David Model has been a Professor of Political Science and Economics at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada for 31 years. His third book "Lying for Empire: How to Commit War Crimes with a Straight Face" was just published by Common Courage Press in August 2005. His articles have appeared in several publications including CounterPunch and Z Magazine.