

## Apocalypse Soon

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by Robert S. McNamara

*[In the following article, published in the May/June 2005 issue of FOREIGN POLICY, Robert McNamara makes a powerful case for ending the U.S. government's reliance upon nuclear weapons as an instrument of U.S. policy. Pointing to their enormous destructiveness, the likelihood that they will be employed deliberately or accidentally, the immoral and illegal nature of their maintenance and use, and their incitement to proliferation, the former U.S. secretary of defense argues for prompt action "toward the elimination -- or near elimination -- of all nuclear weapons." Unfortunately, he argues, the Bush administration is moving in precisely the opposite direction, by turning its back on treaty commitments to nuclear arms control and disarmament and, instead, promoting a U.S. nuclear buildup.]*

*In fact, the Bush administration's nuclear policy is even more retrograde than McNamara implies. At the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference of 2000, the U.S. government joined other declared nuclear powers in making an "unequivocal commitment" to ridding themselves of their nuclear weapons. Toward this end, they agreed upon thirteen "practical steps," including strengthening the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and negotiating a fissile materials cutoff treaty. But the Bush administration has withdrawn from the ABM Treaty, opposed ratification of the CTBT, and*

*failed to negotiate a fissile materials treaty. It has reneged on twelve of the thirteen "practical steps."*

*All the Bush administration can point to with respect to nuclear disarmament is the Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty of 2002. This toothless agreement between the United States and Russia is supposed to "de-alert" several thousand nuclear warheads. But the treaty provides for placing the warheads in storage (rather than destroying them), sets a deadline of ten years for its implementation (after which it immediately expires), and has no verification procedures.*

*The Bush administration's most egregious violation of the U.S. government's "unequivocal commitment" is its plan to build new U.S. nuclear weapons. In 2004, the administration presented Congress with a proposal to fund the development of two new nuclear weapons systems -- "mini-nukes" and "bunker busters." The "mini-nukes" are about a third as powerful as the bomb that annihilated Hiroshima. The "bunker buster," despite its rather modest name, is a devastating weapon, with an explosive power of about 70 times that of the Hiroshima bomb. Ultimately, Congress refused to fund the Bush administration's proposal for new nuclear weapons, apparently because both Republican and Democratic lawmakers concluded that the world would be a safer place with fewer nuclear explosives rather than with more of them.*

*Nevertheless, this administration is not easily discouraged. Thus, undeterred by last year's rebuff, it recently returned to Congress with a new proposal for funding the "bunker busters."*

*It is also seeking funding for the "Reliable Replacement Warhead" -- a weapon that, if its development continued beyond the planning stage, would lead to the upgrading of U.S. nuclear warheads and might foster the resumption of U.S. nuclear testing, which has not been conducted since 1992.*

*Other nations are quite aware of this record, and do not seem likely to accept the Bush administration's nuclear double standard, one in which the United States readies itself for nuclear war while demanding that other countries disarm. As a recent U.N. report warned, we are on the brink of a "cascade of proliferation."*

*McNamara, then, is all too correct. We have reached a potential turning point. We can employ universally applicable arms control and disarmament measures to move toward a nuclear-free world. Or, as the Bush administration proposes, we can plunge forward with a nuclear arms race -- a race that will almost certainly lead to disaster.*

*Lawrence S. Wittner, professor of history at the State University of New York/Albany, prepared this introduction for Japan Focus. His latest book is [Toward Nuclear Abolition](#).]*

*[Robert McNamara is worried. He knows how close we've come. His counsel helped the Kennedy administration avert nuclear catastrophe during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Today, he believes the United States must no longer rely on nuclear weapons as a foreign-policy tool. To do so is immoral, illegal and dreadfully dangerous. Foreign Affairs]*

It is time - well past time, in my view - for the United States to cease its Cold War-style reliance on nuclear weapons as a foreign-policy tool. At the risk of appearing simplistic and provocative, I would characterize current US nuclear weapons policy as immoral, illegal,

militarily unnecessary, and dreadfully dangerous. The risk of an accidental or inadvertent nuclear launch is unacceptably high. Far from reducing these risks, the Bush administration has signaled that it is committed to keeping the US nuclear arsenal as a mainstay of its military power - a commitment that is simultaneously eroding the international norms that have limited the spread of nuclear weapons and fissile materials for 50 years. Much of the current US nuclear policy has been in place since before I was secretary of defense, and it has only grown more dangerous and diplomatically destructive in the intervening years.

Today, the United States has deployed approximately 4,500 strategic, offensive nuclear warheads. Russia has roughly 3,800. The strategic forces of Britain, France, and China are considerably smaller, with 200-400 nuclear weapons in each state's arsenal. The new nuclear states of Pakistan and India have fewer than 100 weapons each. North Korea now claims to have developed nuclear weapons, and US intelligence agencies estimate that Pyongyang has enough fissile material for 2-8 bombs.

How destructive are these weapons? The average US warhead has a destructive power 20 times that of the Hiroshima bomb. Of the 8,000 active or operational US warheads, 2,000 are on hair-trigger alert, ready to be launched on 15 minutes' warning. How are these weapons to be used? The United States has never endorsed the policy of "no first use," not during my seven years as secretary or since. We have been and remain prepared to initiate the use of nuclear weapons - by the decision of one person, the president - against either a nuclear or nonnuclear enemy whenever we believe it is in our interest to do so. For decades, US nuclear forces have been sufficiently strong to absorb a first strike and then inflict "unacceptable" damage on an opponent. This has been and (so long as we

face a nuclear-armed, potential adversary) must continue to be the foundation of our nuclear deterrent.

In my time as secretary of defense, the commander of the US Strategic Air Command (SAC) carried with him a secure telephone, no matter where he went, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. The telephone of the commander, whose headquarters were in Omaha, Nebraska, was linked to the underground command post of the North American Defense Command, deep inside Cheyenne Mountain, in Colorado, and to the US president, wherever he happened to be. The president always had at hand nuclear release codes in the so-called football, a briefcase carried for the president at all times by a US military officer.

The SAC commander's orders were to answer the telephone by no later than the end of the third ring. If it rang, and he was informed that a nuclear attack of enemy ballistic missiles appeared to be under way, he was allowed 2 to 3 minutes to decide whether the warning was valid (over the years, the United States has received many false warnings), and if so, how the United States should respond. He was then given approximately 10 minutes to determine what to recommend, to locate and advise the president, permit the president to discuss the situation with two or three close advisors (presumably the secretary of defense and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), and to receive the president's decision and pass it immediately, along with the codes, to the launch sites. The president essentially had two options: He could decide to ride out the attack and defer until later any decision to launch a retaliatory strike. Or, he could order an immediate retaliatory strike, from a menu of options, thereby launching US weapons that were targeted on the opponent's military-industrial assets. Our opponents in Moscow presumably had and have similar arrangements.



Robert S. McNamara as Secretary of Defense,  
1964

The whole situation seems so bizarre as to be beyond belief. On any given day, as we go about our business, the president is prepared to make a decision within 20 minutes that could launch one of the most devastating weapons in the world. To declare war requires an act of congress, but to launch a nuclear holocaust requires 20 minutes' deliberation by the president and his advisors. But that is what we have lived with for 40 years. With very few changes, this system remains largely intact, including the "football," the president's constant companion.

For the complete article see the [Foreign Policy website](#).

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*bombing of Japanese cities in the final months of World War II. He served as Secretary of Defense in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations during the Korean War and subsequently as President of the World Bank. He recently was the subject of Errol Morris's documentary film, The Fog of War.*