

## From Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the New Nuclear Age

**Tom Engelhardt, Jonathan Schell**

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*by Tom Engelhardt and Jonathan Schell*

On August 6, 1945, the day that was to prove the blindingly bright dawn of the atomic age, Little Boy, a 9,700 pound baby with the look of "an elongated trash can with fins," had already been loaded into the specially prepared bomb bay of a B-29. The night before, in large letters, mission commander Col. Paul W. Tibbets, jr., had had painted under the pilot's window, "Enola Gay," the name of his beloved mother, who had supported him against his father in his desire to enter the U.S. Air Force. The mission was blessed on the spot by a Protestant chaplain, who delivered an impromptu prayer he had scrawled on the back of an envelop, asking the Almighty Father "to be with those who brave the heights of Thy heaven and who carry the battle to our enemies."

The 12-man crew out of any World War II movie, including a Jewish technician from Baltimore, a Brooklyn-born staff-sergeant wearing a Dodgers cap, and a tree surgeon from Michigan (Little Boy reminded him of a tree trunk), was officially photographed before the Enola Gay took off on its history-busting mission. At 7:30 that morning, once in flight, the plane's weaponeer Parsons visited the bomb bay to arm Little Boy. Another crewman, overhearing Parsons tell Tibbets that Little Boy was "final," wrote in his flight journal, "The bomb was now independent of the plane. It was

a peculiar sensation. I had a feeling the bomb had a life of its own now that had nothing to do with us." If we of another age could speak to that young man, we would certainly want to assure him that the eerie, inhuman feeling that overcame him was a prescient one. Sooner or later, it was to creep up on all of us.

At 8:15, over Hiroshima's centrally located Aioi Bridge, the bomb bay opened and the first weapon of the atomic age fled the pregnant belly of the Enola Gay and all the small human touches that surrounded it, taking with it only the "autographs and messages" the men had inscribed on it. These scribblings were, in effect, the last human acts of the pre-atomic age. Some of them were obscene, Richard Rhodes informs us in his monumental study, [The Making of the Atomic Bomb](#) (from which most of the above details were taken). "Greetings to the Emperor from the men of the Indianapolis," went one message to those about to die. (The Indianapolis, a cruiser which had transported parts of Little Boy to the island of Tinian for assembly, had been torpedoed by a Japanese submarine only a week earlier and most of its crew had died at sea under gruesome circumstances.) And so Little Boy plummeted downward on its mission to incinerate or kill at least 90,000 human beings and obliterate a city.

The end of one of the bitterest wars in history, a "war without mercy" in historian John Dower's phrase, was approaching. The bomb was meant, by the Enola Gay's crew, as a message of revenge; and while the airmen thought with bitterness of their dead comrades from the Indianapolis, so, as the Boston Globe's James Carroll reminds us in another of his

striking columns (America's Mortal Secret), the President of the United States was harboring similar thoughts: "When Harry S. Truman announced the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima in an Aug. 9 radio address, he offered three justifications: the second was to shorten the war, and the third was to save American lives. But the first thing he said was that the atom bomb was used 'against those who have starved and beaten American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international laws of warfare.'"

Our superweapon was then, in part, payback. And that's human indeed. But here was the odd thing: Americans have had a long, long history of dreaming about superweapons and imagining them not as payback, not as instruments of anger, but as ultimate peacekeepers in an otherwise fractious and bloody world. Just at the edge of the 18th century, for instance, Robert Fulton -- you all associate him with the steamboat -- dreamed of, and then designed, a weapon that he believed would end war for all time and "accelerate human progress." What he invented was, according to H. Bruce Franklin in his book *War Stars*, "a remarkably engineered forerunner of the modern war submarine" meant to furl the sails of the world's warships and bring all nations to the negotiating table to disarm. In the early 20th century the bomber was to be such an instrument of progress; and then, of course, came that ultimate superweapon, the atomic bomb, or just, as we would come to say more familiarly early in the atomic age, the Bomb (with the appropriate caps).

Dreams of peace historically float around the idea of superweapons, but so do dreams of omnipotence, not to speak of depths of revenge and hatred. Nuclear weapons, too, were supposed to be the weapons to end war, though more accurately, they were the weapons that would end war by threatening to end all human life on the planet. The distinction, it turns out,

is a subtler one than we might imagine. But dropped in a spirit of revenge, they would prove the most addictive of weapons, opening to leaders everywhere alluring vistas of global power, ultimate destruction, and darkness. From the moment Little Boy left that bomb bay, no major power (and few regional powers) were going to be without such weapons forever -- unless all of them were. As weaponry, they proved so strangely seductive and addictive that they burst the bounds of the Cold War effortlessly and have simply continued to multiply in our world.

Unfortunately, the modest 12-step program for global nuclear addiction that we humans set up in 1968 -- it went by the name of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) -- has proven unable in recent years to rein in that addiction and the Treaty signatories are now gathering for a month-long meeting in New York City under the gloomiest circumstances, as Jonathan Schell describes in his latest *Nation* "Letter from Ground Zero" (posted at Tomdispatch thanks to the kindness of that magazine's editors).

The world is again on a nuclear binge. Though a few countries (like Brazil and South Korea) started down the atomic path years ago and turned back, a number of others haven't been able to bear to do so; and once any country has such weaponry, all its government is likely to do is upgrade. These days, we hear much about North Korean and Iranian bombs, but the Indians, Pakistanis, Israelis, and Chinese are all upgrading. And, of course, the Bush administration has been hot to trot -- not only when it comes to creating new generations of "mini"-nuclear weapons and resuming underground nuclear testing, but also on making the weapons already in our vast nuclear arsenal a more active part of our war-planning process.

Of course, our planning for such weaponry has a long and satanic history: The American

military's initial Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) for the use of its nuclear weapons imagined -- this was 1960 -- us delivering over 3,200 nuclear weapons to 1,060 targets in the Communist world, including at least 130 cities which would then, if all went well, cease to exist. Official estimates of casualties ran to 285 million dead and 40 million injured (and this undoubtedly underestimated radiation effects). Sci-fi-style Death Star planning of just this sort has never ended. Only this week, the Japan Times reported on a paper prepared by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff which calls for the possible preemptive use of nuclear weapons in regional or terrorist conflicts of various sorts: "There are numerous nonstate organizations (terrorist, criminal) and about 30 nations with WMD programs, including many regional states,' the paper says in recommending that commanders in the Pacific and other theaters be given an option of pre-emptive strikes against 'rogue' states and terrorists and 'request presidential approval for use of nuclear weapons' under set conditions."

If you want to get a sense of our nuclear legacy, the weaponry that weighs down any imaginable future, visit the "Nuclear Weapons Data" page of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists to check out the various arsenals on this planet for yourself.

Nuclear weapons, as they proliferated, were history-changing in many senses. They might, in fact, be considered the first and most powerful globalizing instruments of the modern age. In the wake of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the sense that there was a single world to be destroyed preceded in popular consciousness the sense that there was a single planetary-wide global (economic) organism to be created. It is often said that the first beautiful photos of Earth from space gave us our initial, powerful image of ourselves as living on a single, fragile, expendable planet, or later inspired the ecological idea that our planet was Gaia, a single "breathing," living organism. But the

truth is far grimmer. It was the bomb and its fearful planet-busting potential that first gave us a sense of ourselves as a fragile globe spinning in space, one breathing organism to be lost forever. Nuclear weapons brought the whole planet under one ominous cloud of destruction and one thumb (so to speak).

And yet they proved the most deceptive of weapons. Essentially -- since Hiroshima and Nagasaki -- they have been unusable (though the United States came close to use more than once). They gave their possessors a god-like sense of power, a feeling of omnipotence, and yet that feeling could never be put into practice. Nuclear weapons could never be given a realistic war-mission. While they made the leaders of any country possessing them the instant equivalents of destructive demi-gods, the power they held over enemies lay only in their threatened use. They were, as Chinese Communist leader Mao Ze Dong used to claim, "paper tigers."

They may, at a less than conscious level, have created another sort of confusion and so done another sort of damage. They made a long-held dream of global conquest and dominion that had proved beyond the grasp of Romans legions, Mongol khans, Chinese emperors, English imperialists, and the Nazis among others, seem possible, if not plausible. They made the world seem smaller and more unified -- and so more potentially capable of being dominated -- than ever before. And so they perhaps created a basis for more recent dreams of a global Pax Americana in the country that, since 1991, has been called -- and in some cases proudly called itself -- "the lone superpower."

In this sense, the bomb proved a liar among weapons. It made the world seem a militarily smaller and less complex place than it actually is. In fact, as our leaders have only recently learned (or should I say, learned again?), the fantasy that techno-war of any sort can

dominate the planet is just that. We all know that the United States has staggering amounts of staggeringly advanced military power, enough theoretically, to crush any of its enemies many times over. But, as it happened, that was a formula which only remained self-evident as long as it remained a threat.

Since 2001, use has destroyed that illusion. As we now know, two wars -- one against a near-medieval force of warriors in Afghanistan and the other against a desperately weakened, third-rate regional power in Iraq, followed by a fierce insurgency by a rag-tag set of Iraqi rebels and an exceedingly low-level guerrilla war in Afghanistan, have tied down the U.S. military in unexpected ways. As the Los Angeles Times tells it, a classified report sent to Congress recently by Gen. Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, claimed that those two ongoing wars have "made it far more difficult for the U.S. military to beat back new acts of aggression, launch a pre-emptive strike or prevent conflict in another part of the world... The assessment stated that the military is at 'significant risk' of being unable to prevail against enemies abroad in the manner that Pentagon war plans mandate." A "senior [military] official," quoted anonymously on the report in the New York Times, put things more colorfully when he said that, in case of armed conflict elsewhere, "[t]here is no doubt what the outcome would be... But it may not be as pretty." (In cases like this, beauty, of course, is in the eye of the beholder.)

Who better than the author of *The Unconquerable World*, with which any "senior military official" would have been able to predict just how unconquerable our planet really is (no matter the nature of the arms available), to remind us of the endless nuclear conundrum we find ourselves in? T.E.

## **Nuclear Renaissance**

By Jonathan Schell

The review conference of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), a five-yearly event, opened in New York on May 2 without benefit of an agenda. The conference had no agenda because the world has no agenda with respect to nuclear arms. Broadly speaking, two groups of nations are setting the pace of events. One -- the possessors of nuclear arms under the terms of the treaty, comprising the United States, Russia, Britain, France and China -- wants to hold on to its nuclear arsenals indefinitely. The other group -- call them the proliferators -- has only recently acquired the weapons or would like to do so. Notable among them are North Korea, which by its own account has built a small arsenal, and Iran, which appears to be using its domestic nuclear-power program to create a nuclear-weapon capacity.

As the conference began, Iran announced that it would soon end a moratorium on the production of fissile materials and Pyongyang declared that it had become a full-fledged nuclear power -- a declaration buttressed by testimony in the Senate from the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Vice Adm. Lowell Jacoby, that North Korea now has rockets capable of landing nuclear warheads on the United States. If the two countries establish themselves as nuclear powers, a long list of other countries in the Middle East and North Asia may seek to follow suit. In that case, the NPT will be a dead letter, and the gates of unlimited proliferation will swing open.

The two groups of nations are in collision. The possessors want to stop the proliferators, and the proliferators want to defy them as well as ask them to get rid of their own mountainous nuclear arsenals. One of the liveliest debates at the conference concerns the nuclear fuel cycle, whereby fuel for both nuclear power and nuclear bomb materials is made. In the possessor countries, proposals abound to restrict this capacity to themselves, thus digging a moat around not only their arsenals

but their nuclear productive capacities as well. The proliferators respond that the world's nuclear double-standard should not be fortified but eliminated: In the long run, either everyone should have the right to the fuel cycle -- and for that matter to the bombs -- or no one should. (This was the view of Pakistan and India until, in May 1998, they remedied the inequity in their own cases by testing nuclear weapons and declaring themselves nuclear powers.)

Far more contentious is the new American military doctrine of pre-emptive war, aimed at stopping proliferation by force, as the United States said it sought to do by overthrowing the government of Iraq. Inasmuch as the Bush administration has suggested that even nuclear force might be used, the new policy represents the ultimate extreme of the double standard: The United States will use nuclear weapons to stop other countries from getting those same weapons. The proliferators accordingly fear a world whose commanding heights will be guarded by the nuclear cannons of a few nations, while the rest of the world cowers in the planet's lowlands and back alleys. Nuclear disarmament, once the domain of the peace-loving, would become a prime engine of war in an imposed, militarized global order.

The debate between the nuclear haves and have-nots is probably unresolvable anytime soon. Certainly it will not be settled at the review conference. And yet, as is true of so many adversaries, the two groups of nations have more in common with each other than with other nations: They both want nuclear weapons. And if one looks at what is happening on the ground, a remarkable uniformity appears. All the parties in this quarrel are expanding their nuclear capacities and missions. In a sense the two groups, even as they threaten each other with annihilation, are cooperating in nuclearizing the globe.

The end of the cold war was supposed to be the beginning of a farewell to nuclear danger, but

now, fifteen years later, it's clear that a nuclear renaissance is under way. China, India, Pakistan, North Korea and Britain are all increasing their arsenals and/or their delivery systems. (In an amazingly undernoticed development, the shadow of danger from Chinese nuclear weapons is falling over larger and larger areas of the United States.) The United States, even as it reduces the number of its alert nuclear weapons -- though not the total number of nuclear weapons, alert or otherwise -- is rotating its nuclear guns away from their traditional Cold War targets and toward Third World sites. (The United States and Russia built up such an excess of nuclear bombs during the Cold War that they can string out their dismantlement almost indefinitely without carving into their joint capacity to finish off most of human civilization.) Britain likewise is redirecting its targeting. Its Defense Secretary has stated that even the modest step of declaring no-first-use of nuclear weapons "would be incompatible with our and NATO's doctrine of deterrence, nor would it further nuclear disarmament objectives." In other words, Britain may find it necessary to initiate a nuclear war to achieve nuclear disarmament. Finally, individuals and terrorist groups are reaching for the bomb and other weapons of mass destruction. Osama bin Laden, for instance, has declared that obtaining such is the "religious duty" of Muslims, and September 11 gave us an example of how he might use them.

All but unheard in the snarling din are the true voices of peace -- voices calling on the one group of nations to resist the demonic allure of nuclear arms and on the other group to rid themselves of the ones they have, leaving the world with a single standard: no nuclear weapons. Of the countries represented at the conference, fully 183 have found it entirely possible to live without atomic arsenals, and few -- barring a breakdown of the treaty -- show any sign of changing their minds. In the UN General Assembly the vast majority of them

have voted regularly for nuclear abolition. Behind those votes stand the people of the world, who, when asked, agree. Even the people of the United States are in the consensus. Presented by AP pollsters in March with the statement, "No country should be allowed to have nuclear weapons," 66% agreed. In other countries, the percentage of supporters is higher. On the day their voices are heard and their will made active, the end of the nuclear age will be in sight.

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