

The Atomic Cloud that hangs over our 'peace'

By Tim Garden

The Unfinished Twentieth Century

By Jonathan Schell

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Britain and the H-Bomb

By Lorna Arnold

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As two nuclear powers, India and Pakistan, stand on the brink of war, and the risk of nuclear terrorism seems more real, the role of nuclear weapons is a hot topic once more. Jonathan Schell has written a brief but powerful monograph arguing the urgent need for the United States to take the lead in abolishing all nuclear weapons. He categorises the 20th Century as a period of mass extermination. He divides that century into a time of global mayhem from the start of the first world war to the end of the second in 1945. In the Cold War that followed, stability was only preserved at the risk of even greater death and destruction if nuclear deterrence failed. While some commentators would close this period with the fall of the Berlin Wall, Schell argues that we are still in the grip of a nuclear threat, which grows worse each year.

Attempting to gain historical perspective for the 20th Century is difficult. Certainly the demise of the confrontation between the West and the Soviet Union was a watershed. We are still learning the lessons of the post -Cold War decade, and conflict has not been eliminated. Schell wrote his book before the events of 11 September, which some are already characterising as the overture for the new reality of the 21st Century. He however sees the continuing reliance on nuclear weapons for security as the defining mark of the unfinished century. He argues that we cannot move forward to a new era and better world, while democracies are prepared to countenance that our protection requires the threat of extermination of other communities.

In making his argument, he lists the failures of American policy over the past decade. His litany of disasters in the arms control world will be familiar to the specialist. However, the way in which he weaves the many threads together is imaginative and convincing. He divides nuclear arms control into four strands: reduction in weapons; constraints on defensive systems; control of proliferation; and elimination of testing. He outlines the painstaking progress made in all these areas over the past thirty years. But this progress has been reversed in the past three years. For those who question why the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty still matters, Schell spells out the dangers of its loss. Those dangers are not just about Russia's reaction, but also dangers to the other aspects of arms control. Events have to an extent overtaken him since George W. Bush has now given notice that the USA will withdraw from the ABM treaty next summer. Taking this with the Senate's failure to ratify the comprehensive test ban treaty and the President's unwillingness to use a treaty to formalise further weapons reductions, Schell's pessimism over the direction of arms control is well founded.

Having outlined the current despair in the arms control world, Schell goes on to make an arguable generalised proposition. He states that any development of nuclear systems creates pressure for others to do the same; and that, conversely, any reductions or constraints encourage similar actions in others. While there is reasonable evidence to support the first half of his proposition, his corollary of a virtuous circle of reductions is more an act of faith.. As he says: "The world's safety ultimately

number that can but decide not to." Most of the European Union nations have the money and technology to be nuclear weapon states if they wanted to be, but only France and Britain have followed the route.

The motivation for developing nuclear weapons is more varied than perhaps Schell can cover in his very focused short book. It will certainly include perceived nuclear threats from elsewhere. For Israel it is a deterrent to conventionally armed foes set on its destruction. It may have to do with regional, or even global, power status. It may be, perhaps in the case of Iran, seen as a replacement for conventional military capability. One of the more interesting case studies among the nuclear powers is Britain. Why would an economically devastated post war Britain pursue not just a basic nuclear fission bomb capability, but even the much more difficult fission-fusion H-Bomb? Lorna Arnold has interviewed the survivors of the H-Bomb project, and had access to all the official documentation to produce a fascinating insight into this most secret area.

In 1946, the USA severed the intimate nuclear co-operation that it had with Britain through the war. Yet in 1948, American nuclear bombers were stationed in Britain making it a prime target for the Soviet Union. Concern that an atomic attack might be launched by the USA from airfields in Britain without prior consultation was a problem for the government. On top of this was the worry that America might not take on targets which were important to the defence of Britain. Finally, there were concerns that British interests might be ignored by the USA. These issues made the acquisition of an atomic weapon capability of political importance to the Attlee government, and the priority continued under Churchill. Just four weeks after Britain tested its first 25 kiloton fission weapon in October 1952, the USA detonated its first thermonuclear device with a yield of over 10 megatons. The gap in capability was too wide for Britain to get back into bed with America on nuclear matters. Churchill wanted to be in the big league.

Arnold describes the difficulties of turning the political wish for a British H-Bomb into a reality. It is rare to come across such a technically detailed book, which manages to capture the human dimension so well. The scientists saw themselves as making a weapon not for military but for diplomatic purposes. It is a useful reminder that nuclear weapons have since their first days been acquired for many reasons. None of this undermines Schell's arguments for continuing the campaign to reduce and ultimately abolish such weapons. However, we should not be surprised if it proves more difficult than he suggests.

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