

Are Nuclear Weapons Necessary?

By General Lee Butler, USAF (Ret'd)

The following is the transcript of a presentation made by General Lee Butler USAF (Ret'd) during a Roundtable held in Ottawa, Canada on March 11 1999. The Roundtable was organized by the Canadian Network to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (CNANW). General Butler's presentation is also available on video.

Let me begin by simply expressing my appreciation to those of you in the room who have labored in this vineyard for so many years, most I suspect, simply understanding intuitively what took years for those of us, presumably experts in this business, to appreciate.

And that is, that at the heart of the matter, nuclear weapons are the enemy of humanity. Indeed, they're not weapons at all. They're some species of biological time bombs whose effects transcend time and space, poisoning the earth and its inhabitants for generations to come.

So for those of you in the NGO community, I tell you right at the onset, that I personally take heed and encouragement from what you have done so assiduously all these years. I say in the same breath that for most of my life, certainly my years in uniform, I'd never heard of NGOs, and now I suppose I am one!

I think in that regard that I would begin by recalling a comment from what I understand was a Reform Party member at the hearing yesterday, who observed at the outset of his comments (a bit acerbic I might add, but that's okay, we tend to be a lightning rod for that kind of view): "Say, weren't you and McNamara two of those folks who used to advocate all this business, deterrence, etc.?" I think Bob would join me in saying that we're guilty as charged, if the charge is that we now consider it our responsibility to reflect, free from the emotional cauldron of the Cold War, and with greater access to the principals and the archives of that period. Guilty of the responsibility to reappraise our positions and certainly guilty of a keen sense of obligation to understand and to expound upon the lessons that we draw from that experience.

I recall the words of a wonderful American novelist of the Deep South, Flannery O'Connor, who once put this delicious line in the mouth of one her characters. "You should know the truth and the truth shall make you odd." And in deference to our interlocutor yesterday, yes it can certainly appear odd. I appreciate that and that is why I am infinitely patient with people who are either surprised, shocked, or in some cases outraged that someone like myself or perhaps like Bob McNamara now express views that in an earlier part of our life we might have seen as antithetical.

But truth, in my own case, took me almost 40 years to grasp. What I now see as the truth of the nuclear era as I understand it in retrospect. It required 30 years simply to reach the point in my career where I had the responsibilities and most importantly, the access to information and the exposure to activities and operations that profoundly deepened my grasp of what this business of nuclear capability is all about.

What I have come to believe is that much of what I took on faith was either wrong, enormously simplistic, extraordinarily fragile, or simply morally intolerable. What I have come to believe is that the amassing of nuclear capability to the level of such grotesque excess as we witnessed between the United States and the Soviet Union over the period of the 50 years of the Cold War, was as much a product of fear, and ignorance and greed, and ego and power, and turf and dollars, as it was about the seemingly elegant theories of deterrence.

Let me just take a moment and give you some sense of what it means to be the Commander of Strategic Nuclear Forces, the land and sea-based missiles and aircraft that would deliver nuclear warheads over great distances. First, I had the responsibility for the day-to-day operation, discipline, training, of tens of thousands of crew members, the systems that they operated and the warheads those systems were designed to deliver. Some ten thousand strategic nuclear warheads. I came to appreciate in a way that I had never thought, even when I commanded individual units like B52 bombers, the enormity of the day-to-day risks that comes from multiple manipulations, maintenance and operational movement of those weapons. I read deeply into the history of the incidents and the accidents of the nuclear age as they had been recorded in the United States. I am only beginning to understand that history in the former Soviet Union, and it is more chilling than anything you can imagine. Much of that is not publicly known, although it is now publicly available.

Missiles that blew up in their silos and ejected their nuclear warheads outside of the confines of the silo. B52 aircraft that collided with tankers and scattered nuclear weapons across the coast and into the offshore seas of Spain. A B52 bomber with nuclear weapons aboard that crashed in North Carolina, and on investigation it was discovered that one of those weapons, 6 of the 7 safety devices that prevent a nuclear explosion had failed as a result of the crash. There are dozens of such incidents. Nuclear missile-laden submarines that experienced catastrophic accidents and now lie at the bottom of the ocean.

I was also a principal nuclear advisor to the President of the United States. What that required of me was to be prepared on a moment's notice, day or night, 7 days a week, 365 days a year to be within three rings of my telephone and to respond to this question from the President:

"General, the nation is under nuclear attack. I must decide in minutes how to respond. What is your recommendation with regard to the nature of our reply?"

In the 36 months that I was a principal nuclear advisor to the President, I participated every month in an exercise known as a missile threat conference. Virtually without exception, that threat conference began with a scenario which encompassed one, then several, dozens, then hundreds and finally thousands of inbound thermonuclear warheads to the United States. By the time that attack was assessed, characterized

and sufficient information available with some certainty in appreciation of the circumstance, at most he had 12 minutes to make that decision. 12 minutes. For a decision, which coupled with that of whatever person half a world away who may have initiated such an attack, held at risk not only the survival of the antagonists, but the fate of mankind in its entirety. The prospect of some 20,000 thermonuclear warheads being exploded within a period of several hours. Sad to say, the poised practitioners of the nuclear art never understood the holistic consequences of such an attack, nor do they today.

I never appreciated that until I came to grips with my third responsibility, which was for the nuclear war plan of the United States.

Even at the late date of January 1991, when the Cold War had already been declared over with the signing of the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty in Paris in December of 1990, when I went downstairs on my first day in office to meet my war planners in the bowels of my headquarters. I finally for the first time in 30 years was allowed full access to the war plan. Even having some sense of what it encompassed, I was shocked to see that in fact it was defined by 12,500 targets in the former Warsaw Pact to be attacked by some 10,000 nuclear weapons, virtually simultaneously in the worst of circumstances, which is what we always assumed. I made it my business to examine in some detail every single one of those targets. I doubt that that had ever been done by anyone, because the war plan was divided up into sections and each section was the responsibility of some different group of people. My staff was aghast when I told them I intended to look at every single target individually. My rationale was very simple. If there had been only one target, surely I would have to know every conceivable detail about it, why it was selected, what kind of weapon would strike it, what the consequences would be. My point was simply this: Why should I feel in any way less responsible simply because there was a large number of targets. I wanted to look at every one.

At the conclusion of that exercise I finally came to understand the true meaning of MAD, Mutually Assured Destruction. With the possible exception of the Soviet nuclear war plan, this was the single most absurd and irresponsible document I had ever reviewed in my life. I was sufficiently outraged that as my examination proceeded, I alerted my superiors in Washington about my concerns, and the shortest version of all of that is, having come to the end of a three decade journey, I came to fully appreciate the truth that now makes me seem so odd. And that is: we escaped the Cold War without a nuclear holocaust by some combination of skill, luck and divine intervention, and I suspect the latter in greatest proportion.

The saving grace was that truly the Cold War was ending at this very moment and therefore I was faced with a decision of great personal consequence. Now having fully to appreciate the magnitude of our nuclear capability and what it implied, when joined in an unholy alliance with its Soviet counterpart, what was I to do? Awaiting in my inbox were \$40 billion of new strategic nuclear weapons modernization programs, wanting only my signature. What should be our goals for the next rounds of arms control

negotiations? How hard should I fight to maintain the budget of strategic forces, to keep bases open in the face of base closure commissions? And what to do with the nuclear war plan in all of its excess? My conclusion was very simple, that I of all people had the responsibility to be at the forefront of the effort to begin to close the nuclear age. That mankind, having been spared a nuclear holocaust, had now as its principle priority to begin to walk back the nuclear cat, to learn the lessons of the nuclear dimensions of the Cold War, in the interest that others might never go down that path again.

The substance is that I withdrew my support for every single one of those \$40 billion of nuclear weapons programs and they were all cancelled. I urged the acceleration of the START I accords and that Minuteman 2 be taken out of the inventory at an accelerated pace. I recommended that for the first time in 30 years bombers be taken off alert. The President approved these recommendations and on the 25th of September 1991, I said in my command center and with my red telephone I gave the orders to my bomber troops to stand down from alert. I put 24 of my 36 bases on the closure list. I cut the number of targets in the nuclear war plan by 75%, and ultimately I recommended the disestablishment of Strategic Air Command, which the President also approved. I took down that flag on the first of June 1992.

As you can imagine, I went into retirement exactly five years ago with a sense of profound relief and gratitude. Relief that the most acute dangers of the Cold War were coming to a close, and gratitude that I had been given the opportunity to play some small role in eliminating those dangers. You can also imagine, then, my growing dismay, alarm and finally horror that in a relatively brief period of time, this extraordinary momentum, this unprecedented opportunity began to slow, that a process I call the creeping re-rationalization of nuclear weapons began, that the bureaucracy began to work its way. The French resumed nuclear testing, the START 2 treaty was paralyzed in the US Senate for three years and now in the Duma for three more. The precious window of opportunity began to close, and now today we find ourselves in the almost unbelievable circumstance in which United States nuclear weapons policy is still very much that of 1984, as introduced by Ronald Reagan. That our forces with their hair-trigger postures are effectively the same as they have been since the height of the Cold War.

Even if the START 2 treaty were ratified, it is virtually irrelevant, its numbers 3000 to 35000 works meaningless. The former Soviet Union, today Russia, a nation in a perilous state, can barely maintain a third of that number on operational ready status, and to do so devotes a precious fraction of shrinking resources. NATO has been expanded up to its former borders, and Moscow has been put on notice that the United States is presumably prepared to abrogate the ABM treaty in the interest of deploying limited national ballistic missile defense.

What a stunning outcome. I would never have imagined this state of affairs five years ago. This is an indictment. The leaders of the nuclear weapons states today risk very much being judged by future historians as having been unworthy of their age, of not

having taken advantage of opportunities so perilously won at such great sacrifice and cost of reigniting nuclear arms races around the world, of condemning mankind to live under a cloud of perpetual anxiety.

This is not a legacy worthy of the human race. This is not the world that I want to bequeath to my children and my grandchildren. It's simply intolerable. This is above all a moral question and I want to reiterate to you and to those who may be watching these proceedings a quote that I gave yesterday to the joint committees. I took this quote to heart many years ago. It is from one of my heroes, one of my professional heroes - General Omar Bradley, who said on the occasion of his retirement, having been a principal in World War II and having witnessed the aftermath of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: "We live in an age of nuclear giants and ethical infants, in a world that has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. We have solved the mystery of the atom and forgotten the lessons of the Sermon on the Mount. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about dying than we know about living." We have a priceless opportunity to elevate, to nudge higher, the bar of decent, civilized behavior, to expand the rule of law, and to learn to live on this planet with mutual respect and dignity. This is an opportunity we must not lose. My concern was such that I could not sit in silent acquiescence to the current folly. And so, I have come back into the arena to join my voices with yours, to serve in the company of distinguished colleagues like Bob McNamara and Ambassador Tom Graham who share these concerns and convictions.

Thank you for the opportunity to join you today. Thank you for the work you have done over these many years. It is a privilege to have this opportunity to talk with you.

Thank you.

CANADIAN NETWORK TO ABOLISH NUCLEAR WEAPONS (CNANW)
c/o 145 Spruce, Ste. 208, Ottawa, Ontario, K1R 6P1
Telephone: 613-233-1982 FAX: 613-233-9028
E;mail: cnanw@web.net

