Apocalypse sooner or later?

Robert McNamara knows all about the threat of nuclear annihilation - he was US defence secretary during the Cuban missile crisis. Forty-three years later, he believes the danger from nuclear weapons is still very real. He talks to Julian Borger

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In an old pair of corduroy trousers and battered trainers, Robert Strange McNamara walks the streets of downtown Washington like the ghost of wars gone by - America's Banquo reminding the country's rulers of its guilty past and its perilous future. The formerly cocksure defence secretary, who helped mire the country in Vietnam, warned a few years ago against the folly of invading far-off lands with shaky intelligence and lofty aspirations of bringing freedom with bombs.

That battle lost, the 88-year-old veteran of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations has refused to fade away. He has now given his life over to ringing alarm bells around the US and the rest of the world over a far greater threat with which he was once intimate - imminent nuclear apocalypse. In his Washington office, he makes calls and pens speeches and articles on the subject, amid stacks of files and papers on a vast wooden desk he took with him when he left the World Bank, of which he was president from 1968 to 1981. But once more, McNamara is being ignored by his successors in government.

Nuclear armageddon is a peril most people here and in the US complacently associate with McNamara's cold war generation, now safely consigned to fuzzy newsreel memories of the Cuban missile crisis. It is McNamara's mission to tell them they are very wrong.

"Neither the American people nor the British people really understand the dangers today," he says, jabbing at the air, every bit as passionate and cogent as when he left the Ford Motor Company to work for John Kennedy, only far more aware of the pitfalls of power. "This is very, very dangerous for the world. This is a problem for the world, and the world must become active, and it is not."

The dangers, in McNamara's eyes, are twofold. First, there is the possibility of an accidental launch while the US and Russia still have thousands of warheads on a hair trigger, 14 years after the end of the cold war. He describes the nuclear-readiness policy as "immoral, illegal, militarily unnecessary, and very, very dangerous in terms of the risk of accidental use".

Second, and even more seriously, McNamara thinks, there is the increasing chance that al-Qaida or some other terrorist group will one day put together its own bomb.

"During the cold war period there were very, very great dangers but . . . the danger and the risk were controlled by the political leaders. Here, the danger may be outside the control of political leaders."

McNamara is not the only former Pentagon overlord concerned about the direction in which events are moving. Last year, Bill Clinton's defence secretary William Perry made a speech in which he admitted he was more fearful of the nuclear threat than ever before, and estimated that the chance of a nuclear detonation on US soil over the next decade was as high as 50%. McNamara shies away from putting figures on the risk, but he agrees with Perry, beliving the world's current plight is "intolerable".

May could have been the month that something was done to contain these growing existential dangers. In New York, little noticed and little covered in the media, delegates from around the world sat down to try to strengthen the 1970 Non Proliferation Treaty. Unusually for such gatherings, there was a high degree of consensus on what should be done. Broadly speaking, there should be stricter controls on civilian nuclear power programmes to prevent them being used as a cover for building a bomb, and penalties for states such as North Korea who walk away from the NPT. On the other side of the equation, the club of five nuclear states should keep past promises to disarm.

Straightforward, almost all the delegates thought. But progress was blocked by the intransigence of the US and Iran. The Americans refused to contemplate keeping past disarmament pledges like Clinton's signature on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. The Iranians refused to countenance any mention of their nuclear programme as a subject for concern and surveillance.

The conference was a disaster. It took a fortnight to agree an agenda. By the time McNamara arrived in New York last week to appeal to the delegates and suggest paths out of the impasse, it was already too late. Failure was guaranteed. "I felt they'd

accomplished nothing," he says.

McNamara believes the United Nations secretary-general, Kofi Annan, should pick up the challenge and bring NPT violators to account before the security council. That idea drew some support from member states, but none so far from the most powerful.

Curbing the nuclear ambitions of radical states such as Iran and North Korea is not going to be easy, McNamara acknowledges, but he suggests that combining demands for disarmament with threats of regime change, as the Bush administration is doing, is not the best diplomatic approach. As far as the threat of a terrorist nuclear bomb is concerned, the most practical course of action, most experts agree, is to attempt to squeeze some of the atomic toothpaste back in the tube by gathering up and guarding the fissile material left over by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

After the end of the cold war, two US senators, Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar, designed a programme to do just that, funding security around the old nuclear stockpiles and paying to keep weapons scientists in gainful employment. But today, that programme is woefully under-funded - at a recent conference, Nunn told McNamara the scheme was short a billion dollars. "Now with a $400bn defence budget which we have at the present time, excluding Iraq and Afghanistan . . . I can't think of a more important use of $1bn than to pursue Nunn's programme to control fissile materials," says McNamara.

Meanwhile, US strategic policy is still built on the cold war foundations of constant nuclear readiness. "While we are speaking, we, the United States, have 6,000 strategic warheads deployed, each one on average the destructive power of the nuclear bomb that killed 100,000 human beings at Hiroshima," he says. Two thousand of those warheads are ready to launch on 15-minute warning - a state of affairs McNamara describes as "so bizarre as to be beyond belief".

The strange world of mutually assured destruction is one with which McNamara is intimately familiar. When he was defence secretary, the commander of the US strategic air command carried a special telephone with him day and night with a secure connection to the president.

If that call was made, the general's orders were to answer by no later than the end of the third ring. If he was told a nuclear attack on the US was under way, he had between two and three minutes to decide if it was a false alarm and then recommend how to respond. The president then had 10 minutes to ponder what to do next. McNamara says it is only by luck that call was never made, given the inherent likelihood of mistakes in such a system. Throughout the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, after the Soviet Union smuggled nuclear warheads on to America's doorstep, he was at President Kennedy's side as the fate of the world hung in the balance.

"On 4.30 in the afternoon on Saturday, October 27 1962, after a full day of meeting of the president's executive committee with President Kennedy, the joint chiefs recommended that we undertake a strike on Cuba within roughly three days," he recalls. The CIA did not think the missiles had yet reached Cuba and the Pentagon did not think the Soviets would put up much of a fight on such a distant battlefield. They were both wrong.

"It wasn't until 29 years later that we learned at that specific moment - 4.30 in the afternoon, Saturday October 27 62 - that the Soviets had something in the order of 170 nuclear warheads on the soil of Cuba," McNamara says. "It would have been total disaster if we'd moved ahead. And it was just by a hair that we avoided it."

Until the crisis was defused and the missiles were withdrawn, McNamara wondered if each day would be the last. "I didn't leave the Pentagon for 10 days. I slept there. And I remember one Saturday night that I said ... 'We might not be alive to see another Saturday night'." Arguably, only someone who has known first hand how close the world has come to self- destruction can convincingly sound the alarm this time around. McNamara is prepared to try. The question is whether anyone is ready to listen to an old man with such a heavy conscience and such a long memory.

· Robert McNamara appears at the Guardian Hay Festival on June 5, www.hayfestival.com

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