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The Role of Nuclear Weapons:
Arguments for a U.S. Declared No First Use Policy

The United States built the world's first nuclear arsenal via the Manhattan Project during World War II as a result of fears that Nazi Germany, with its world class nuclear physics capability would get them first and win the war.

After the war, the U.S. built only a few weapons until the first Soviet test in 1949, supported by Soviet espionage in the United States. Instead of seeking some limiting arrangement with the Soviets—which likely would have failed—the U.S. went in the other direction. The U.S. began to build nuclear weapons at an “industrial rhythm” as the French commented. America also developed what was then called the “Super,” the hydrogen bomb. By the early 1960s the U.S. had constructed some 72,000 nuclear weapons, the later Soviet high point was 55,000.

The two countries claimed they would use these devices only as weapons in a second strike, launch under attack, mode. But this was not true. Both sides had launch on warning policies, which meant that a country initiates general nuclear war if its early warning technology indicates that strategic nuclear missiles launched by the other superpower are on the way. Pursuant to U.S. early warning procedure, the national command would expect to detect Soviet strategic nuclear missiles coming

over the Pole about 20 minutes before they arrive and strike the United States. There would be an emergency conference call among the senior national security advisors to the President who would discuss this situation for ten minutes and if, during this discussion the threat was verified and confirmed, then the President would be contacted wherever he was, fishing in Idaho or sound asleep in his bed. He would be briefed on the situation and told he had seven minutes to decide whether to launch the U.S. strategic nuclear forces and initiate general nuclear war in response to this attack. The last three minutes of the 20 minutes were to be utilized to get the order to our missile sites should the President decided to launch our strategic nuclear forces. In theory this would have our missiles launched before the Soviet missiles arrived and possibly destroyed them. Many believe that every time the U.S. practiced this procedure during the 45 years of the Cold War, the President always said “launch” at the end. President Ronald Reagan strongly denounced this reckless practice in his memoirs and presumably elsewhere.

This, of course, created a serious risk of a nuclear war taking place by miscalculation or accident. Indeed, during the Cold War there were at least four well documented such incidents, two on each side. Indeed in one, because of certain U.S. actions and policies, in 1983 the Soviet Union became convinced that the U.S. planned a first strike with nuclear weapons to eliminate the Soviet Union if the

disparity in the strength of the two forces—the strategic balance—represented an increase in the American margin of superiority to a certain level. The KGB was directed to set up a computer program to inform the Politburo should that point—as they estimated it—be neared. The computer system would then warn the Soviet leadership. It was Politburo policy if the KGB computer estimate ever fell below 40 for the Soviet side versus 100 for the U.S. and NATO to then immediately launch their entire nuclear arsenal at the United States in a preemptive first strike which would initiate general nuclear war. They had concluded it was their only chance to survive.

At around the same time a Soviet early warning station one night received reports from a newly installed Soviet satellite-based missile launch detection system. It reported the launch of first one, then five more, U.S. strategic nuclear missiles headed toward the Soviet Union. The senior officer at the station looked at reports from his other instruments; there was nothing. He didn't trust the satellites because they were new. Directly contrary to his orders—he was supposed to simply report everything and send no comments—he reported it to the headquarters of the General Staff as a “false alarm.” The duty officer replied “got it”. If he had not violated his orders, given the anxieties of the times, general nuclear war would almost certainly have followed. He was the right man in the right place at the right time.

Nuclear weapons are going to be with us for a long time. Heightened nuclear weapon fears generated by the Iran question, the North Korea issue, and the nearness of chaos caused by rapidly advancing global warming from climate change as well as other issues have made the possibility of nuclear war greater than it was 10-15 years ago. And one of the four nuclear weapon near misses that I mentioned took place after the Cold War in 1996. President Yeltsin for the only time in the Nuclear Age activated the nuclear keys and came within 2-3 minutes of launching Russian nuclear forces at the U.S. as a result of a faulty radar report. Nuclear crises are not just a Cold War problem.

We simply must find a way to make the world a safer place. And one of the most important goals must be to establish more arrangements that will have the effect of reducing the risk of nuclear war resulting from accidents, miscalculations, or misunderstandings. Crises lie ahead for sure. We can't always be sure that the right man or woman will be in the right place at the right time.

One way we can improve the situation—one very significant way we can do this would be to have the United States formally declare in a major public statement that it will not ever use nuclear weapons first in a conflict. The other nuclear weapon states could be asked to join the United States in a joint pledge to follow this policy.

This issue has a long history. NATO reserved the right to use nuclear weapons first rather than spend the money to build conventional forces to match those of the Warsaw Pact backed by the Soviet Union in Europe. U.S. officials expanded the reservation of first use or “calculated ambiguity” as it was called to buttress the nuclear umbrella for our allies in Europe and Asia. But whatever its effect in the early years, Germany and Japan now deny the necessity of this doctrine and support the U.S. adoption of a no first use policy along with retaining full confidence in their alliance with the United States. In today’s world what is needed is clarity, not ambiguity. The U.S. adoption of a no first use policy would bring an element of order and clarity to the control of nuclear weapons and strengthen peace and non-proliferation. Nuclear disarmament remains a long way off, even small reductions are unlikely in the current international political climate. But no first use which is important to peace, nuclear weapon disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation can be done now. This year. The President supports it. The stars are properly aligned for it. Its time has come! Let’s do it!