Preface

Alva Myrdal

International disarmament’s first real leader, Alva Myrdal, was born in Uppsala in 1902 and died in 1986, a day after her 84th birthday. She led a rich and varied life, becoming an active and important figure in sociology, child education and (most notably) international disarmament. Her university studies included psychology and family sociology. She graduated from Stockholm University in 1924 with a Bachelor of Science and the same year married Gunnar Myrdal, who became a well-known sociologist. The couple came to the United States in 1929, courtesy of a Rockefeller Scholarship. Alva used this opportunity to deepen her studies in the fields of psychology, education and sociology. She was particularly interested in early childhood education. Both Myrdals were impressed by the huge economic and social disparities in the United States. This inequality affected both of their political outlooks significantly—in their words, making their views “radical.”

They both went on to study in Geneva for a time. After their return to Sweden, Alva Myrdal came to public attention as a prominent figure in the establishment of the Swedish welfare state in the early 1930s. In 1934, she coauthored an important book with her husband Gunnar entitled “Crisis in the Population Question.” The book explored social reforms needed to provide more liberty to Swedish women so that they could have more children—population decline at the time being a concern in Sweden and many other European states. The book also emphasized the importance of parents and the community sharing responsibilities for the education of children.

In the mid-forties Gunnar Myrdal published a book entitled “An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy.” This well-known study of American racism was influential in the decision and the language of the U.S. Supreme Court decision Brown vs. the Board of Education, which provided the legal basis for desegregating public schools in America. In addition, the book added considerably to the fame of both Myrdals.

In 1936, Alva Myrdal became Director of the National Education Seminar, a position from which she could put into practice her theories about childhood and preschool education. After more work on the issue of domestic liberty for women in Sweden and living in the United States for some years, Alva became politically active as a long-time member of the Swedish Social Democratic Party. She focused on international issues. From 1950-56, she held senior positions at UNESCO and for several years thereafter held diplomatic posts for Sweden in South Asia. In 1962, Alva Myrdal was elected to the Riksdag and became the Swedish delegate to the UN disarmament conference in Geneva. This was when the door truly opened for her and she kept this role until 1973⸺for eleven years.

During this time disarmament and arms control—particularly nuclear weapon arms limitation—moved past rhetoric and street demonstrations into possibility. During this vitally important time she provided seminal leadership in the effort to bring East and West, North and South together in the successful effort to negotiate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the most important of all disarmament treaties and the most significant world security treaty (after the UN Charter) of all time.

What eventually resulted in the NPT began in 1961 with the so-called Irish Resolution. A number of world statesmen by this time had expressed the fear that existing and developing nuclear weapon stockpiles could lead to worldwide nuclear war. President John Kennedy of the U.S. had issued a warning in a 1963 press conference: by 1970, there could be ten nuclear weapon states with nuclear weapons integrated into national arsenals instead of the then current four and, by 1975, the number could be 15 to 20. That would be, he said, “the greatest possible danger and hazard.” Alva Myrdal became a central figure in international disarmament at about this time, her prior experience in several fields having prepared her well to lead.

As mentioned, the watershed for arms control came with the passage by the United Nations General Assembly of the Irish Resolution of 1961. Introduced by Ireland, the resolution passed unanimously. It called for an international agreement pursuant to which

…the nuclear states would undertake to refrain from relinquishing control of nuclear weapons and from transmitting the information necessary for their manufacture to states not possessing such weapons and…states not possessing nuclear weapons would undertake not to manufacture or otherwise acquire control of such weapons.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Many expected that the unanimous vote for the Resolution would mean action soon. This did not prove to be the case. Nothing happened. Then Alva Myrdal arrived on the scene in 1962 to head the Swedish delegation to the Geneva Conference on Disarmament, titled (in English) “the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee.” The ENDC, had been created by the UN in 1961 and was where the NPT was negotiated from 1965 to 1968.

The first big step toward success in the NPT negotiation was the passage of the Swedish-India Resolution by the General Assembly in 1965 after four years of inaction. This Resolution established the outline of the NPT. It provided that the NPT would have five basic objectives:

a) The treaty should be void of loopholes which might permit nuclear or non-nuclear powers to proliferate, directly or indirectly, nuclear weapons in any form.

1. The treaty should embody an acceptable balance of mutual responsibilities and obligations of the nuclear and non-nuclear powers.
2. The treaty should be a step towards general and complete disarmament; especially nuclear weapon disarmament,
3. There should be acceptable and workable provisions to ensure the effectiveness of the treaty, and
4. Nothing in the treaty should adversely affect the right of any group of states to conclude regional treaties in order to ensure the total absence of nuclear weapons in their territories.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The ENDC grew out of the Ten Nation Disarmament Committee which operated in 1960 and was designed to bring East and West together—the United States and some of its allies and the USSR and some of its allies—to negotiate disarmament. It was expanded into the ENDC the following year, 1961, by adding eight neutral Cold War nations. These additional eight were: Brazil, Burma, Ethiopia, India, Mexico, Nigeria, Sweden and the United Arab Republic. The first two groups essentially promoted the East and West positions in the Cold War. The eight neutrals were less predictable.

In general, it could be said that Sweden and India led on disarmament issues from time to time beyond where the U.S. and USSR wanted to go while Mexico championed the Nuclear Weapon Free Zone movement. At one point, India concluded that it could not accept the definitional standard of the NPT for nuclear weapon states—that the five states—the U.S., the USSR, the United Kingdom, France and China—the same as the Permanent Five of the UN Security Council—who had built and tested nuclear weapons prior to January 1, 1967 would be the nuclear weapon states recognized by the NPT while all others were to be non-nuclear weapon states. India left the disarmament movement, built a large nuclear weapon stockpile, and never became party to the NPT. Sweden went the other way. Sweden had had an active nuclear weapon program but gave it up and under Ambassador Alva Myrdal became the leader of the neutral, pro-disarmament states during the NPT negotiations and thereafter for many years. Article VI, the disarmament article, became part of the NPT in part as a result of Swedish leadership. The U.S. and USSR had wanted only a treaty prohibiting further proliferation—that is, non-transfer of weapons and technology as well as non-acquisition of weapons by non-nuclear weapon state. Sweden and other neutrals made the NPT a disarmament treaty as well. States such as Germany and Belgium in addition made the NPT a promoter of the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Further, Mexico led in the field of establishing regional treaties, explicitly safeguarded in paragraph (e) of the Swedish-India Resolution through the work of Ambassador Alfonso Garcia-Robles. These regional disarmament treaties became known as nuclear weapon free zone treaties and through the Latin American Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty of 1967, whose official title was the Treaty of Tlatelolco (the region of Mexico City where the Foreign Ministry is located), García-Robles achieved the complete elimination of nuclear weapons in South and Central America; as well as Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, part of the United States. It is fitting that these two outstanding individuals were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize together in 1982.

But in a sense, while both García-Robles and Alva Myrdal were at the absolute top in diplomatic skill and influence, the principal disarmament official of the age was Alva Myrdal. She was not only co-honoree of the 1982 Nobel Peace Prize, but also the winner of the Albert Einstein Peace Prize in 1980, the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding in 1981 and a number of others. She pursued a very broad agenda, including leader of the neutrals in the NPT negotiations, and subsequently an advocate of the comprehensive test ban, as well as founder of the Stockholm Peace Research Institution in 1960. SIPRI was created to estimate the cost of the arms race and it still is a highly regarded source of such information today. She was the first Chairman of the Governing Board of SIPRI and, in 1967, she was named a consultative Cabinet Minister for Disarmament. In 1976, Ambassador Myrdal wrote the highly influential book, “The Game of Disarmament.”

To her must go the gratitude of the world community for the survival of the disarmament issue and, reasonably often, for its having prevailed. Thus President John F. Kennedy’s nuclear nightmare did not take place.

1. Mohamed I. Shaker, *The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty: Origins and Interpretation, 1959-1979* (London, Oceana Publications, 1980), 933. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shaker, *The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty,* 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)