

The Imminent Threat of Nuclear War –
And What We Can Do To Prevent It

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Note: A longer initial draft of this presentation, complete with references, is posted on the Nuclear Weapons page of the website of the Sacramento Chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility at www.sacpsr.org.

Thank you, John (John Hara), for that kind introduction. My wife, Diane, and I would also like to thank everyone for the gracious welcome that we've received to your beautiful island of Maui. And thank you all for coming today. It's an honor for me to invited to be the keynote speaker at today's remembrance of the atomic bomb attacks on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

When Mele (Mele Stokesberry) first contacted me in January about being your keynote speaker, we decided that we should keep the title of my talk generic, to allow me to alter the focus depending what was most prominent in the news at the time of the event. We agreed on the title, "The Ongoing Threat of Nuclear Weapons: And What We Can Do About It." The more research I did on the topic, though, the more I came to realize that this title seriously understated the urgency of the threat we face today from nuclear weapons. I'm glad to see that on your printed program, the title of my talk is listed as "The Threat of Nuclear War: What We Can Do to Prevent It." I think that an even more appropriate title might be, "The **Imminent** Threat of Nuclear War: And What We Can Do to Prevent It."

On September 25, 1961, 13 months before the Cuban missile crisis, President John F. Kennedy spoke at the United Nations concerning the threat of nuclear war. In that speech, he stated:

Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness. The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us.

There have been multiple accidents and miscalculations since 1961 in which an apocalyptic nuclear war caused by accident or miscalculation was narrowly averted,

more by luck than by skill. We can talk about some of those accidents and miscalculations in detail, if you like, during the discussion period after my talk. Today, however, I believe that it is under the category of “madness” that we face the greatest and most imminent threat. Specifically, I believe that the mental state of the President of the United States, combined with his power to singlehandedly order the launch of a nuclear attack, poses an extreme and immediate danger for the initiation of a nuclear war that could end human civilization.

Whether or not you believe in the American Psychiatric Association’s “Goldwater Rule,” which states that it’s unethical for a health care professional to diagnose a public figure with mental illness unless the health care professional has personally examined the person, I believe that it’s undeniable that Trump exhibits characteristics that should preclude him from having any authority to order the launch of a nuclear weapon.

When a false alarm was sent to the cell phones of all Hawaii residents warning them of an incoming nuclear missile on January 13 of this year, it’s fortunate that Donald Trump was on the golf course and wasn’t informed about the alarm until the alert was already known to be false. There have been numerous other incidents since 1961, though, in which leaders of the United States, the former Soviet Union, and Russia received much more credible false alarms and had only minutes to decide whether to launch a nuclear counterattack. Some analysts have claimed that Trump’s response to a such a false alarm would be unpredictable. Given what we know about Trump’s belief in his own infallibility, his paranoia, his impulsiveness, his vindictiveness, and his inability to distinguish fact from fiction, I believe his response to a nuclear false alarm is very predictable. I believe that he would jump at the chance to order a nuclear counterattack without first considering the possibility that the alarm might be false or that a counterattack would probably result in all out nuclear war. Moreover, if Trump were to feel cornered and on the verge of being humiliated as a result of an entirely unrelated matter, such as the Mueller probe or the coverup payments for his illicit affairs, I believe that he is entirely capable of ordering a nuclear first strike against a country like North Korea in order to divert attention from his own personal disgrace.

I’m not alone in believing that Donald Trump’s mental state, combined with his power to singlehandedly order the launch a nuclear attack, threatens the survival of all humanity. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists recently moved its “Doomsday Clock” up to two minutes to midnight, the closest it’s ever been to the moment at which the human race destroys itself through nuclear war, citing the danger that Donald Trump poses.

Another individual who is extremely concerned about Trump’s mental state is Joseph Cirincione, who has spent over 35 years working on the nuclear weapons issue. Mr. Cirincione was the keynote speaker at our PSR/Sacramento annual dinner in 2007, and he is currently president of the Ploughshares Fund, an organization that has been working to reduce and ultimately eliminate the threat of nuclear weapons for over 35 years. In his keynote address at our 2007 annual dinner, and in his 2007 book, *Bomb scare: The History and Future of Nuclear Weapons*, Josephn Cirincione was

optimistic. He wrote that as a result of international agreements, the breakup of the Soviet Union, reductions in nuclear arms stockpiles, and improved détente between the United States and Russia, “The threat of a global thermonuclear war is now near zero.”

In his chapter in the 2018 book, *Rocket Man: Nuclear Madness and the Mind of Donald Trump*, though, Mr. Cirincione struck a very different tone. The chapter is entitled, “The Greatest Danger to America is Her Commander in Chief.” Mr. Cirincione concluded his chapter by stating:

Such a temperament, such a mental state in a president is enormously dangerous on many fronts. When it comes to nuclear weapons, it is horrifying. An irrational, impulsive decision by Donald Trump taken in a manner of minutes could threaten the survival of all that humanity has constructed over the millennia. This cannot stand.

As the first step in reducing the threat of a nuclear war, we need to urgently remove the authority of Donald Trump to order the launch of a nuclear weapon under any circumstances.

There are currently two bills in Congress, S.200 in the Senate and H.R.669 in the House of Representatives, that would prohibit the President from initiating a first strike nuclear attack without first obtaining a declaration of war from Congress, unless the President has first determined that an enemy has launched a nuclear attack against the United States or an ally. These bills are a good start, but neither goes far enough. As I’ve discussed, Trump cannot be trusted to make a factual determination concerning whether a nuclear attack has actually been launched against the United States. We need to remove his ability to order the launch of a nuclear weapon without a declaration of war by Congress under any and all circumstances.

The definitive step, of course, to reduce the threat a nuclear weapon ever being used again is to abolish nuclear weapons altogether. The same people who claim that nuclear weapons are a necessary deterrent and who point out that the parable of *The Sword of Damocles* is only fiction also usually add, “And by the way, the genie is already out of the bottle.” The origin of this phrase is a story from *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. In the story, a fisherman discovers an oil lamp and removes the cork, upon which a large, mean-spirited genie comes out and threatens the fisherman. When people use the term, “The genie is out of the bottle,” they usually mean that something bad has occurred that can’t be reversed. In the story from *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, though, the clever fisherman tells the large genie that he can’t believe that he could actually fit inside the little lamp, and he tricks the genie into showing him how he does it. As soon as the genie goes back into the lamp, the fisherman sticks the cork back in, sealing the genie inside forever.

There are clever people all around the world working toward the abolition of nuclear weapons. An international opinion poll conducted by the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation in 21 countries in 2008 showed that 76% of respondents, including 77% of respondents

in the United States, were either somewhat in favor or strongly in favor of the complete abolition of nuclear weapons. On July 7, 2017, 122 of the 193 member nations in the United Nations General Assembly voted to completely ban nuclear weapons. The United States boycotted the vote and the negotiations that preceded it and strong-armed many of its allies into doing the same. The vote to ban nuclear weapons in the UN General Assembly was due in large part to the work of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), founded in 2007. ICAN currently has over 450 partner organizations in 101 countries. Physicians for Social Responsibility and International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War are among those organizations. ICAN was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017.

There are many actions that you and I can take at the grass roots level to advance the movement to abolish nuclear weapons. These actions include informing one another about issues related to nuclear weapons, which is one of the reasons why we're here today, and informing friends, families, and colleagues as well about the imminent threat of nuclear war and the need to work urgently to reduce that threat.

There's another important action that I'd like to invite you to join me in taking this week. Every year around the time of the anniversary of the atomic bomb attacks on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, inspired by the story of *Sadako and the Thousand Cranes*, children in the Sacramento area fold at least 1,000 paper cranes in memory of those who perished in the atomic bomb attacks and in the hope that nuclear weapons will never be used again. I've always thought that if the children can fold 1,000 cranes, we adults should be able to make at least 1,000 phone calls or other contacts with our elected representatives to help make the hope for a nuclear free world a reality.

I hope that you'll join our PSR/Sacramento 1,000 Call Campaign by [contacting your U.S. Senators and U.S. Representative](#) this week and urging them to openly advocate and do everything within their power to accomplish the complete abolition of nuclear weapons. We know from direct discussions with the staff of U.S. Representatives and U.S. Senators that as few as 20 phone calls on a single issue can influence the position that politicians take on the issue and the way they vote on it. Working together, nuclear abolition activists in Maui and in Sacramento should have no problem in making at least 1,000 contacts with our respective elective representatives in a short period of time. In order to tally how many contacts we're making collectively, I'd appreciate it if you'd [click on the link](#) on the PSR/Sacramento website to complete a simple online form to document the contacts you make. I'll keep you posted on how close we are getting to our goal.

In conclusion, despite what some people claim, it's not naïve to believe that we can abolish nuclear weapons. On the contrary, it's naïve to believe that if we don't abolish them, there won't some day be an all out nuclear war. We are the country that invented the nuclear weapon. We're the only country to ever use a nuclear weapon on human beings. The president of our country, who lost the 2016 presidential election by almost 3 million votes, is probably the greatest single threat in the world today to start a nuclear

war that could end human civilization. Despite the fact that more than three quarters of Americans favor the complete abolition of nuclear weapons, our current federal leadership is presently one of the greatest obstacles in the world to the international effort to abolish nuclear weapons. We are not powerless. We owe it to ourselves, to our children, and to the rest of the world to take back control of our country on a wide range of issues, with the issue of taking control of and eventually abolishing the nuclear weapons that threaten our very existence being at the top of the list.

Thank you.