

Two Minutes to Midnight

Speech by Joseph Gerson
In New York on May 12, 2018

These are treacherous times, and we are called to respond with the moral vision, integrity and courage of friends, colleagues and forbearers have in the past, to Nazi and fascist rule, Jim Crowe apartheid, the genocide of the Vietnam War and midst the nuclear madness of the Cold War. Our movement strategies must address the challenges we face as they are, not by repeating decades old habits or blinking away harsh realities.

That said, let me begin on some hopeful notes.

As a consequence of the three humanitarian consequences conferences that engaged 158 governments, a number of the world's young diplomats learned about, and with the Ban Treaty began to address, the urgent dangers posed by nuclear weapons. One of my favorite moments came during the Humanitarian Consequences conference in Nyarit, Mexico when, after hearing the testimonies of nuclear weapons victims and experts a young Zimbabwean diplomat, stood and waving his hands in shock and anger at what he had learned cried out "What are these people thinking?"

In recent months, South Korean President Moon's brilliant Olympic diplomacy has walked us back from the brink of cataclysmic war. We can finally envision the possibility of a peace system replacing the 1953 Armistice agreement, ending the state of war that has prevailed since then. We could even see a reduction of the number of U.S. warriors and the abuses and usurpations that accompany them in South Korea. And for the time being, President Moon and Kim Jung-un have tied the hands of Trump and his war cabinet. These are the results of decades of popular organizing and demands.

We are encouraged by the Walk for Our Lives students, by the changes wrought with the me-too movement, by the popular pressure that led more than 80 members of Congress to co-sponsor the Markey-Lieu bill to remove the President's ability to initiate first-strike nuclear war on his sole authority. We see hope in the members of Congress who co-sponsored legislation to prevent an unconstitutional war against North Korea. Let's hope they do the same to prevent war with Iran. And it is there in the more than forty Global Days of Action on Military spending across the United States last month. And then there's the legal noose tightening around Trump and his cronies.

But the deeper reality, as we saw when Trump opted out of the Security Council mandated deal with Iran, is that under Trump, Bolton and Pompeo, the U.S. has become a still more dangerous rogue nation. Little but the technology has changed since Martin Luther King denounced our country as "the world's greatest purveyor of

violence.” In addition to taking us most immediately to the brink of war with North Korea and Iran, we face growing and dangerous great power tensions with Russia and China. The *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* had it right with its two minutes to midnight warning. A corrupt, deceitful and ignorant tyrant and his coterie are at the helm of the world’s most powerful and dangerous nation.

But we are also dealing with systems. The military-industrial complex has had nearly sixty years to deepen its subversive tentacles into communities and institutions across the country since President Eisenhower issued his valedictory warning. The alliance between the military-industrial complex and plutocrats, whose wealth and power have vastly increased with the support of Congress and the Supreme Court, has brought us to what has been described as a proto-fascist moment. The U.S. is at war in at least seven countries. We have no guarantees about the outcome of the Trump-Kim summit, and with Trump’s withdrawal from the Iran deal, we are approaching the cusp of yet another catastrophic regime change war. Despite this winter’s Congressional budget deal the forced march to still greater economic inequality means more people’s homelessness and living on the streets, more people without health care, lost educational opportunities and thus less security for millions more.

I appreciate the work that has gone into the single issue organizing in support of the Nuclear Prohibition Treaty – the Ban Treaty – across the Global South and to a lesser degree in the umbrella states. But our international disarmament movement isn’t concentrating sufficiently on the urgent necessity of preventing great power war, nuclear war, or the structures of power that drive preparations for such wars.

Several years ago, on the anniversary of 1914’s guns of August, we were reminded that the great and lesser powers of that era went sleepwalking into a World War. There are more than a few parallels between that time and ours. This is an era of rising and declining powers - the Thucydides Trap. It’s a time arms races with new technologies, of resurgent nationalism, territorial disputes, resource competition, complex alliance arrangements, economic integration and intense economic competition, and wild card actors from Trump and Bolton to Duterte, Al Qaeda and Netanyahu.

No wonder the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* moved the hands of their Doomsday Clock to two minutes to midnight, the closest to apocalyptic nuclear war since they began in 1953. With references to the Trump administration's Nuclear Posture Review designed to reinforce U.S. first-strike war fighting, they decried increased U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons; the staggering investments in new nuclear weapons which are driving the so-called modernization of the world's other nuclear arsenals; the return to Cold War rhetoric and the total absence of US-Russian arms control negotiations. The New START Treaty is winding down toward its expiration in 2021, and the Cold War ending INF Treaty looks increasingly fragile. They warned about the dangerous lack of coherent US foreign and military policies that undermine global security, North Korea’s

nuclear weapons program; South Asian rivalries; Trump's threat to the nuclear deal with Iran and the dangers attendant to global warming.

That was before John Bolton became National Security Advisor and Mike Pompeo, became secretary of state. Recall that Bolton wrote that a first strike attack against North Korea would be legal, and both men joined Trump in their commitment to undoing the Iran nuclear deal and, in alliance with Saudi Arabia and Israel, pressing regime change in Iran— possibly militarily.

Most immediately, as Medea Benjamin has outlined, we are going to have to prevent Trump's drive to regime change war with Iran. Just as the 2003 invasion of Iraq was not about weapons of mass destruction, Trump's withdrawal from the P5+1 deal has created a crisis where none existed and could lead Iran to become a near-nuclear power. Iranian spokesmen have been clear that their country is more secure as a non-nuclear weapons state than it would be with a small nuclear arsenal, and they repeat that possession and use of nuclear weapons are anathema to Islam. Let's hope those commitments hold. But, as in 2003, this U.S. initiated crisis is really about reconsolidating U.S. hegemony in the oil-rich Middle East.

While the South China Sea seems to have replaced the Middle East as what Eqbal Ahmad termed the geopolitical center of the struggle for world power, domination of China's, other East Asian nations' and Europe's oil supplies would again have Washington's hand on their economies' jugular veins.

The U.S., of course, is not the world's only culprit, something the U.S. sectarian Left needs to bear in mind. In response to NATO's reckless expansion to Russia's borders, and building from Russian long identity as a great Christian European and Middle Eastern power, Putin's Russia is compensating for Washington's overwhelming conventional and high-tech military superiority with greater reliance on its nuclear arsenal. The Kremlin is building its own new generation of omnicidal nuclear weapons and the missiles to deliver them. It is competing with the U.S. in supporting right-wing racist authoritarians, and it has murderously reasserted itself in Syria, where the dangerous proximity of U.S. and Russian warriors could ignite an incident leading to uncontrolled escalation.

We can be hopeful that Moon-Kim summit will, at the very least, lead to a Freeze-for-Freeze arrangement with Pyongyang, halting its nuclear and ICBM testing while the U.S., South Korea and Japan halt their regime change-oriented joint military exercises and reduce sanctions. We can certainly support and press for more. But remember that Kim, whose nuclear arsenal is designed to preserve his family's dynasty as well as North Korean independence, has talked about "denuclearization" in "phased and synchronous measures." This means Pyongyang will remain the world's ninth nuclear power for some time to come. Even if the U.S. agrees to reduce the number of

troops it has based across South Korea, it will be loath to take steps that weaken its 75-year Northeast Asian hegemony.

In time, freeze for freeze could lead to a peace treaty replacing the 65-year-old Armistice Agreement and ultimately to a North East Asian nuclear weapons free zone. But, it may also reinforce Japanese and South Korean ambitions to become nuclear powers. Abe, his possible successor Ishiba Shiguru, and the Japanese military all believe that the Japanese constitution permits them to possess nuclear weapons. And, since the fall of Park Guen-hye, the right-wing South Korean opposition has pressed revive the nation's pursuit of nuclear weapons.

Remembering the dangers of accidental nuclear detonations and the possibility of nuclear war resulting from miscalculations, we need to call for the end of provocative U.S., Russian and Chinese military exercises. In response to the new deployments of U.S. warships to the Black Sea on Russia's southern border, Russian pilots have dangerously buzzed U.S. warships there and in the Baltic Sea. Japanese, Chinese U.S. and even Australian air and naval forces have repeatedly confronted one another in the South and East China Seas. And you may have noticed the increased military tensions over Taiwan, with U.S. B-52 nuclear-capable bombers again making their presence known over the South China Sea.

Friends, with all due respect to our disarmament partners in Europe, Japan and the Global South, it is necessary to say that it's not enough to bank on the Ban Treaty. The correlation of power is such that the structures and systems of power and privilege in the nuclear weapons states are not going to simply melt away. To be overcome or transformed, they must be challenged by intense and not always polite international pressure – possibly including a sanctions regime, or by powerful popular pressure from within their own countries, much as we did with the Euromissile and Freeze movements of the 1980s.

We also need to find ways to better engage forces in Russia and China. More, as Zia Mian has reminded us, Indian-Pakistani tensions haven't lessened. We know that up to two billion people could perish from global cooling if Pakistani terrorists again attack the Indian parliament, and the Indian military responds with its Cold Start offensive. Our movement is woefully ignorant of political, military and nuclear dynamics in South Asia and about possible partners there. It's long past time to be playing catch up.

And, as Reiner Braun has been warning militarism, as well as right-wing authoritarianism, is rising across Europe. Pressed by the United States, military spending and a new military-industrial complex are rising there. And Merkel, Macron and their minions are looking toward the creation of a European – not only French or British - bomb.

Friends, if we are to be honest with ourselves, we have to admit that even with the Ban Treaty and ICAN's Nobel Prize, we lack a meaningful strategy to win the nuclear powers' signing and ratification of the Ban Treaty. With the indefinite postponement of the U.N. High Level Meeting on Disarmament, which was to begin on Monday, the challenges of the NPT process, and the total absence of any U.S.-Russian arms control or disarmament negotiations, we need to acknowledge the nuclear disarmament diplomacy is in shambles. As, Noam, Sergio Duarte, Taka and the millions of people who have signed the International Hibakusha Appeal have urged, it is incumbent upon us to do the imaginative and demanding work of bringing the nuclear powers into compliance with their Article VI NPT obligation to negotiate the complete elimination of their nuclear arsenals.

On the eve of the 2010 NPT Review, U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon warned that governments alone will not deliver us to a nuclear weapons-free world. It can, he advised, only be achieved with massive popular movements from below.

I can't claim to have the answers, but it's clear that if we are to prevent nuclear war and leave a nuclear weapons-free world to our children, we must strategize on the basis the power relations arrayed against us. Naming and confronting those dangers and the madness inherent in the nuclear age's geopolitical struggles for power are critical places to begin. Much as we did in the late 1970s and early '80s and as we saw in the Humanitarian Consequences conferences, they can serve as the basis for building the people's power needed to reassert democracy, and to halt and prevent wars, including possible nuclear cataclysm.

Clearly, our most immediate tasks are to support the Korean diplomacy, to support efforts to keep the Iran deal alive, and to prevent regime change war against Tehran. But we also need to address the potential danger of great power war. Even as Washington and Moscow ratchet up the tensions between them, much as they did during the Cold War, but this time with NATO having expanded to Russia's border, we must press them to resume nuclear disarmament negotiations, beginning – as Moscow has urged – by extending the New START Treaty and its verification requirements.

Our culture constantly looks for something new and disregards history. But some of us are beginning to think that one way to address the dangers of great power and nuclear war may include building on the legacy of E.P. Thompson and the European Nuclear Disarmament movement's inspired West-East nuclear disarmament movement building that built bridges across civil society at the height of the Cold War.

It also seems to be time for us to revitalize the concept Common Security diplomacy which was that paradigm that served to end the Cold War. As the Palme Commission taught us, it is a concept that applies not only to international peace and security but also to social, economic and environmental justice.

Finally, we are unlikely to prevail as a single issue movement. How successful do you think we can be in a still less democratic society in which there is no respect for truth, in

which racism and xenophobia are encouraged, in which social and economic mobility are only memories of the past, and where the plutocracy and the military rule? As professor Mark Solomon has advised, in this proto-fascist moment we need to relearn the lessons of Weimar Germany, finding common cause despite our differences and building unity with all sectors of society that value democracy

To build the movements we need, we are going to have to move transcend our single issue nuclear disarmament silos. The Poor People's Campaign, which begins on Monday and will include teach-ins, lobbying and civil disobedience actions over the next 40 days in 41 states, provides us with both, an opening and a model. Launched on the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr's last campaign, it is rooted in the five pillars of opposing systemic racism, poverty, the war economy, and ecological devastation and the commitment to building unity across lines of division.

Friends, conferences like ours today are important. But most important is what each of us will do tomorrow, next week and in the coming months. I wish us all wisdom, imagination, perseverance and courage.