

Two Minutes to Midnight
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Future of Humanity By Noam Chomsky

Dan Ellsberg describes his remarkable new book – essential reading – as “a chronicle of human madness.” The record reviewed lives up to the title – and raises serious questions about whether Homo Sapiens is an evolutionary error.

An objective and informed observer might conclude that since World War II, the species has been dedicated to establishing the thesis that humans are just a mistake. That should have occurred to those with eyes open on August 6 1945, a day I remember all too vividly, both the horrifying news and the casual reception. It resonated when I read William Perry’s comment recently that he is doubly terrified: both by the extreme dangers and the lack of concern over the mounting threat of terminal destruction.

The awful events of August 6 taught us that human intelligence, in its glory, had devised means of destruction that would very likely escalate to the point where mass suicide would be imminent. Those familiar with the record are aware that it is a near miracle that we have survived so far – and such miracles are not likely to persist. It’s all too easy to list flash points around the world right now that might explode to terminal conflagration. When the Doomsday clock was first set in 1947, the minute hand was placed at 7 minutes to midnight. Halcyon days, from our perspective.

In 1945 we did not yet know that the nuclear age coincided with the onset of a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, in which humans are dedicated not only to destroying organized human life, but many other species too as the accompanying Sixth Extinction proceeds on its lethal course.

There have been debates about the onset of the Anthropocene. The World Geological Organization settled on the beginning of the postwar period, because of the sharp escalation in environmental destruction. When the Doomsday Clock was moved forward to two minutes to midnight last January, the accompanying statement opened by warning of the failure “to respond effectively to the looming threats of nuclear war and climate change, making

the world security situation more dangerous than it was a year ago—and as dangerous as it has been since World War II.”

Our prime concern here is on the first of these threats, nuclear war, but we should at least mention the utterly astounding fact that the most powerful state in history, with unparalleled advantages, is not only refusing to join the rest of the world in making at least some effort to address the imminent and devastating threat of global warming, but worse yet, is devoting its energies to accelerating the race to destruction for the exalted purpose of stuffing a few more dollars into some overstuffed pockets before we say goodbye to hopes for decent survival.

And the no less astounding fact that so little notice is taken of this amazing spectacle and what it tells us about our society and culture.

But let’s keep to the nuclear threat. There will be little disagreement here on the compelling need to rid the earth of the scourge of nuclear weapons, and others today will surely discuss the many ways that can be pursued to approach this goal. I’d therefore like to say a few words on a different though closely related matter, which doesn’t receive the attention I think it deserves.

We might approach the topic I have in mind by formulating a simple question: What would happen if political leaders decided to pay attention to their obligation to respect the Constitution and to obey the Supreme Law of the Land? In particular, to obey the UN Charter, a treaty made by the United States, in the words of the Constitution – a treaty that obligates us to resort to peaceful means in the event of international disputes and to refrain from THREAT or use of force in international affairs.

We might ask when that legal obligation was last observed by the President and other high officials. And we might also want to reflect on what that means.

Adherence to the Supreme Law of the Land in the past would have saved us and the world from many tragedies, as well as from very near super-tragedies. It would have saved us from “the most dangerous moment in history,” to borrow Arthur Schlesinger’s plausible reference to the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. The frightening story should be familiar. I won’t go into it here except to mention that Washington’s serious violation of the Charter was a significant factor in inducing Khrushchev to undertake the reckless act of placing missiles

in Cuba. Dan Ellsberg, who followed the events closely from a privileged position inside the government at the time, now concludes that Kennedy's terrorist war against Cuba was the prime factor in Khrushchev's decision. Cuba historian Jorge Domínguez also concludes that contrary to earlier interpretations, "the defense of Cuba against U.S. aggression" was a leading motive for the Soviet deployment.

Kennedy's official plan was formalized in National Security Memorandum 181, September 1962. The plan was "to engineer an internal revolt [in October] that would be followed by U.S. military intervention." Terror was being escalated in preparation, and was "no laughing matter," as Domínguez observes. More than enough was surely known to Cuba and Russia.

Respect for the US Constitution would have very likely averted the most dangerous moment in history – and it was dangerous indeed.

Legality aside, there are plainly other questions that can be raised about a murderous and destructive terrorist war. Or so one might assume. Mistakenly. In a review of released documents on the terrorist war, Domínguez observes that "Only once in these nearly thousand pages of documentation did a U.S. official raise something that resembled a faint moral objection to U.S.-government sponsored terrorism": a member of the National Security Council staff suggested that raids that are "haphazard and kill innocents... might mean a bad press in some friendly countries." So perhaps they are not such a good idea. The terrorist war, a prime, if not *the* prime fact that engendered the crisis, is never mentioned in the ExComm transcripts.

Respect for elementary moral values as well as respect for law would have spared the world this close brush with terminal disaster, not for the first or last time.

The same guiding principles offer promising ways to deal with the crises that have led to a "world security situation ... as dangerous as it has been since World War II," in the words of the announcement of the latest setting of the Doomsday Clock – a setting matched only in 1953, when the US and then the USSR tested H-bombs. Let's take a look at the cases mentioned in the Doomsday Clock statement.

The first is North Korea. Is there a diplomatic path?

One possibility, advanced by China for years with broad international support, including NK intermittently, has been a double freeze: NK would freeze its development of nuclear weapons and missiles, and the US would cease its threatening military maneuvers on NK's borders, including menacing flights by the most advanced nuclear capable bombers, again no laughing matter in a country that was flattened by merciless US bombing, even destruction of major dams, within easy memory.

A double freeze could have opened the way to further negotiations, perhaps reaching as far as what was achieved in 2005. Under international pressure, the Bush administration agreed then to turn to negotiations, which achieved substantial success. North Korea agreed to abandon "all nuclear weapons and existing weapons programs" and allow international inspections. The words are worth close attention, because of constant misrepresentation. In return, the US was to provide a light water reactor for medical use, issue a non-aggression pledge, and join in an agreement that the two sides would "respect each other's sovereignty, exist peacefully together and take steps to normalize relations."

At once, the Bush administration tore the agreement to shreds. It renewed the threat of force, froze North Korean funds in foreign banks and disbanded the consortium that was to provide North Korea with a light-water reactor. Bruce Cumings, the leading US Korea scholar, writes that "the sanctions were specifically designed to destroy the September pledges [and] to head off an accommodation between Washington and Pyongyang."

That path could be pursued again. But now, there are even better options.

A few weeks ago, on April 27, North and South Korea signed a historic document, the Panmunjeom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula. It's worth reading carefully. In the Declaration, the two Koreas "affirmed the principle of determining the destiny of the Korean nation on their own accord - important words -...to completely cease all hostile acts against each other in every domain, ..[to]...actively cooperate to establish a permanent and solid peace regime on the Korean Peninsula... to carry out disarmament in a phased manner, [in order to achieve] the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula... to strengthen the positive momentum towards continuous advancement of inter-Korean relations as well as peace, prosperity and

unification of the Korean Peninsula.” They further “agreed to actively seek the support and cooperation of the international community [meaning, the US] for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

Furthermore, as Korea specialist Chung-in Moon reviews in *Foreign Affairs*, Moon and Kim did not just make high-level commitments. They also laid out specific timetables for implementing them and took concrete steps that will have immediate effects in facilitating cooperation and preventing conflict, something quite new and very significant.

It’s important to read the words of the Declaration carefully. Their import is clear. The US should back off and allow the two Koreas to achieve peace, disarmament, unification, and complete denuclearization. We should accept the call for support and cooperation in this endeavor by the two parts of the Korean nation to determine its destiny “on their own accord”.

To put it more simply, the Declaration is a polite letter, saying “Dear Mr. Trump, declare victory if you want to prance around in public, but please go away and let us move towards peace, disarmament and unification without disrupting the process.

The plea could hardly be more clear. It is far from the interpretation here, and to remedy that serious flaw is one of the tasks of those committed to mitigating the indescribable threat of nuclear war. The general interpretation here was lucidly articulated by Mark Landler in the NY Times. The Declaration complicates Washington’s strategy. “Mr. Trump will find it hard to threaten military action against a country that is extending an olive branch.” It is entirely true that threatening military action – a criminal act -- is hard when the target is extending an olive branch.

Clearly, peaceful means are available to mitigate one of the most serious of the threats that is bringing the world as close to terminal disaster as it has been since the beginning of the nuclear age. And citizen efforts can be significant, maybe even decisive, in realizing the prospects for peace in Northeast Asia that now lie before us.

It’s worth noting that US analysts have been clear and frank about the real nature of the NK threat. NYT foreign affairs commentator Max Fisher writes that NK “has achieved what no country has since China developed its own

program a half-century ago: a nuclear deterrent against the United States,” and Trump’s threats and sanctions have not succeeded “to stall or reverse those gains.” Clearly we must act to prevent anyone from deterring our resort to force and violence.

Let’s turn to Iran, which poses a problem rather like North Korea. Among specialists, across the political spectrum, few would disagree with the conclusion of the respected and properly conservative International Institute of Strategic Studies in 2010 that “Iran’s nuclear program and its willingness to keep open the possibility of developing nuclear weapons is a central part of its deterrent strategy.” US intelligence concurs. Again, that is intolerable to the two rogue states that demand the right to rampage freely in the region, as they regularly do.

There is much talk about Iran’s possible JCPOA violations, even though the IAEA has repeatedly given Iran a clean bill of health, and US intelligence agrees. There is, however, virtually no talk about US violations, which are constant. The US has regularly sought to block Iran’s reintegration into the global economy, particularly the global financial system, and to undermine “the normalization of trade and economic relations with Iran.” All in violation of the JCPOA, but ignored, on the prevailing tacit assumption that “the indispensable nation” stands above the law. Trump may renew sanctions, effectively withdrawing from the agreement. That might Iranian hardliners to return to nuclear programs that they had abandoned, providing an opening for Bolton, Netanyahu and the rest to realize their goal of direct aggression, with consequences that range from awful to horrendous.

Are there peaceful options? In this case, the question doesn’t even arise. Clearly, the US could join the world and permit the JCPOA to function and perhaps even refrain from its serious violation of the agreement.

But we can do better than that. There is much talk of the need to improve the agreement, and there are some obvious and highly constructive suggestions. The agreement could be extended to establishing of a Nuclear Weapons-free Zone in the Middle East. The spread of such zones is valuable in itself, and also has symbolic value as an expression of the global determination to rid the world of these monstrous devices. And in the troubled Middle East region, it would be particularly important.

As an aside, we might bear in mind that these positive steps have been impeded by the refusal of one country to permit the zones to go into effect. The Africa NWFZ is held back by Washington's development of nuclear facilities in Diego Garcia, particularly under Obama, and the Pacific NWFZ by US insistence that its military bases there accommodate nuclear weapons systems. More work for us to do.

Returning to the Middle East, serious steps towards a NWFZ would undercut any nuclear threat that Iran is alleged to pose. There is no need to obtain Iran's acquiescence. Iran has long been in the forefront of those calling for establishment of a NWFZ, particularly as the spokesperson for G-77, which strongly advocates this development. The Arab states, with Egypt in the lead, initiated this proposal and have strongly urged that it be implemented. There is overwhelming international support. The matter regularly comes up in the review sessions of the NPT countries every five years, with full agreement – almost. One country regularly blocks the effort, most recently Obama in 2015. The reason is not obscure: Israel's nuclear weapons systems must not be subject even to inspection, let alone steps towards dismantlement. The purported reasons are not convincing, to put it mildly, and have indeed been strongly challenged by the prominent Israeli strategic analyst, Ze'ev Maoz. But so matters stand.

It is important to add that the US and UK have a special responsibility to work to establish a ME NWFZ. They are committed to this goal by Security Council Resolution 687, Article 14 – a commitment that takes on even greater force because it is this Resolution to which they appealed when seeking desperately to create some legal pretext for their criminal invasion of Iraq in 2003. Another example that illustrates the value of observing the Supreme Law of the Land.

Case by case, serious investigation reveals the wisdom of the principles of the Charter, and of the Founders who created the constitutional obligation to abide by valid treaties. It may be argued, and indeed often is, that law, including international law, is a living instrument and its substance changes depending on prevailing practice. That would, of course, include the practice of the global hegemon, and we need not tarry on the conclusions that follow from this line of argument. But concerned citizens should not tolerate these conclusions. And a great deal is at stake in reversing them, reaching as far as safeguarding the future of humanity.