

74 years after Hiroshima, are Americans addicted to nuclear weapons?

Jerald Ross

Today is Hiroshima Day. Seventy-four years ago, August 6th, the US ushered in the reality of atomic warfare with the annihilation of that city and 100,000 of its inhabitants. Given the grisly fact ours was the country that dropped the bomb, and the possibility nuclear apocalypse is more likely today than at any time since,[i] how do we explain the seeming lack of concern on the part of so many Americans?

Denial is a powerful phenomenon. I spent much of my career in the alcohol and drug recovery field. The first step in any recovery program is overcoming denial. That is why every AA meeting begins with the statement, "My name is So-and-So, and I am an alcoholic." Denial is what permits addicts to engage in self-destructive behavior, to frighten and infuriate the ones they love, to ignore overwhelming danger that others can clearly see.

It's very hard to get Americans' attention about the extreme and obvious dangers posed by our own nuclear arsenal. Maybe we are in denial?

For instance, many people believe nuclear weapons have largely "gone away" since the end of the cold war. In fact, while we have reduced stockpiles, we retain over 5000 weapons (Russia about the same), most of which are vastly more capable than they were in the past.[ii] Many remain "on alert and targeted" as they were a generation ago.

Many Americans seem to believe nuclear weapons keep them safe, yet recent studies have shown even a limited nuclear exchange on the other side of the world could lead to global famine and the deaths of billions.[iii] Nuclear weapons kill indiscriminately without regard to borders, have profound environmental consequences, continue killing over generations, in fact risk Armageddon. How does that make the world safe?

There seems to be an enduring belief in nuclear deterrence, yet there is little evidence these weapons have deterred anything.[iv] Actually, there have been a number of instances where our nuclear arsenal seems not to have been a factor at all --- I am thinking of Viet Nam, Beirut, Iraq and Afghanistan. Nor has it deterred nations we would like not to have nuclear weapons from obtaining them: I'm thinking China in 1964, both India and Pakistan in 1998, and now North Korea.

Americans would like to believe their nuclear arsenal is safely managed and under strict control. The reality is that there have been an enormous number of documented accidents and incidents where nuclear weapons have been mishandled and even lost.[v] (*Lost nuclear weapons!?*) And the more nuclear weapons there are, the greater the risk of one falling into the hands of terrorists. Imagine 911 with a nuclear bomb.

Some who recognize the dangers of nuclear weapons may yet believe they are a prudent and cost-effective investment in defense. In fact, nuclear weapons development and deployment have required the third largest expenditure of our *total tax dollars* since 1940, behind only non-

nuclear military expenses and social security.[vi] We have sacrificed money for our children's education, short-changed the quality of our health care, and forsaken necessary investments in our nation's infrastructure for weapons that, if ever used, endanger the very people who bought and paid for them.

Then there are those who believe it's not worth worrying about because "it'll never really happen." Actually, reasonable studies have shown the probability of a child born today dying in a nuclear war is frighteningly far from zero.[vii] That's your grandchild we're talking about. I think most people actually know these things, but if so, how do we explain their apparent disinterest? Wouldn't any rational person be terrified by this state of affairs, or outraged by leaders who propose expanding this insanity?

So, Americans may or may not actually be addicted to our nuclear weapons, but we are certainly in denial.

The author is the former executive director of Cornerstone, Inc. a mental health and alcohol treatment agency in New Haven, CT. Since his retirement in 2010, he has been a nuclear disarmament activist. He is currently the Treasurer of the Campaign for Peace Disarmament and Common Security in Cambridge and a member of the Mass Peace Action Nuclear Disarmament Working Group. Last August he traveled to Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a delegate to the World Conference Against A&H Bombs.