

On nuclear weapons, 'silence is indefensible'

David Krieger | Mar. 5, 2009



Arundhati Roy, the great Indian writer and activist, has said, "There's nothing new or original left to be said about nuclear weapons." Nonetheless, she speaks out because, in her words, "silence would be indefensible." Silence is the norm. We live our day-to-day lives with these weapons capable of destroying our cities, our countries, our civilizations, even our species. How can silence be the norm?

This is what Roy herself says about nuclear weapons, "Whether they're used or not, they violate everything that is humane. They alter the meaning of life itself. Why do we tolerate them? Why do we tolerate the men who use nuclear weapons to blackmail the entire human race?"

Do we really trust our political leaders and those leaders who might come to power in the future to never unleash the fury of nuclear war? Do we believe that all leaders under all conditions, no matter how rushed or stressed, will refrain from using this power of annihilation? Perhaps we do, and this would explain the widespread complacency and silence.

Perhaps we just feel impotent to change the situation. This resignation is often summed up with the phrase, "the genie cannot be put back into the bottle." So, we have loosed the genie of atomic might on the world, and we appear content to let it roam. We seem to lack the cleverness or motivation even to try to trick the genie back into the bottle.

What were the odds of sudden economic collapse of powerful financial institutions? What were the odds of the collapse of the former Soviet Union, or the odds that the Berlin Wall would be peacefully dismantled? Why does virtually no one see big changes such as these on the horizon? While they are rarely foreseen, in hindsight they seem perfectly understandable.

What about the odds of two nuclear armed submarines colliding in the ocean? The chances of this occurring are infinitesimally small. Yet, it happened. Such rare occurrences happen. What are the odds of a nuclear war being unleashed on our planet? Could such a war begin by accident? Could it occur by miscalculation or overreaching? Perhaps the odds are small, but they are not zero and therefore they are above the acceptable level.

Are we silent because we believe that nuclear weapons actually keep us safer? This wouldn't be surprising because we have been taught to believe that we are protected by nuclear weapons, but this isn't the case. Nuclear weapons cannot protect their possessors. They can only be used to inflict massive retaliation and such retaliation is not protection. If nuclear weapons protected their possessors, missile defenses would not be needed. But they do not, and missile defenses are faulty tools for protection as well. In fact, those that possess nuclear weapons are guaranteed to be targeted by someone else's nuclear weapons.

The only safe number of nuclear weapons is zero, and to reach this level will require international cooperation, like every significant global problem. It will also require leadership and, as the possessors of over 95 percent of the nuclear weapons on the planet, the countries that must lead are the US and Russia. If they fail to lead, the nuclear genie will continue to roam.

Why do we waste our resources on such weapons? Why do we use our scientists in such dehumanizing ways? Why do we debase ourselves with our implicit threats of mass murder?

Are we silent because we are numb? Have we become so distracted that we will not raise our voices because we cannot imagine consequences so horrific? Have we become so fearful of giving voice to our fears that we are dumb as well as numb?

Nuclear weapons diminish our humanity, and our silence condemns us in the eyes of those who will follow us on this planet.

I and others have said all of this before. Like Arundhati Roy, I continue to speak out, often repeating myself, in the belief that silence is indefensible.

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