

# STEPPING BACK FROM THE NUCLEAR BRINK

by Diane Swords and James Erdman

Maintaining nuclear weapons, especially when kept on hair-trigger alert, is an unacceptable threat to our world.

Since the US devastated Hiroshima, Japan with an atomic bomb on August 6, 1945, all humanity has been in increasing peril. Current stockpiles are estimated at about 14,000 weapons globally, fewer than at the height of the Cold War, yet still enough to trigger nuclear winter, decimating life on earth.

The reduction shows we *can* reduce arsenals. The danger insists we *must*.

Experts say limited nuclear war is extremely unlikely. Unfortunately, that's not because these weapons won't be used, but because use of a single bomb would almost surely escalate, spreading destruction across the globe as countries respond. Daniel Ellsberg, prominent government whistleblower and former nuclear war planner, says even though nuclear weapons were not exploded in war since 1945, the US government uses them like a gun pointed at someone's head, even when not fired. President Trump's 2017 threat to unleash "fire and fury" on North Korea is a recent instance. These threats by the nuclear giant cause heightened tensions, increasing chances of accidental usage.

Nuclear annihilation sounds too huge and hopeless to think about. Like climate change, it seems distant, while other issues are more immediate.

But the ultimate nature and current hostilities around the world make it essential to address. There is a way to do so. SPC is joining the Back from the Brink Campaign, initiated by Physicians for Social Responsibility and the Union of Concerned Scientists and supported by organizations and governments globally. This international campaign combines many nuclear abolition efforts in a comprehensive package, providing a common strategy to bring local organizations and governments together to pressure national governments to:

**1) Renounce the option of using nuclear weapons first.** By advertising a right to use nuclear weapons first, the US increases chances that other countries will initiate nuclear war to use their weapons before they are destroyed.

**2) End the unchecked authority of any US president to launch a nuclear attack.** Checks and balances are basic to US government, but in this one area, there are no constraints on the President, who is not required to answer to or consult

with anyone before launching a nuclear attack. The absurdity of giving one person unchecked control over thousands of nuclear weapons is clearer than ever with the current president. But no one should hold unilateral power to destroy humanity.

**3) Take US nuclear weapons off hair trigger alert.** Weapons are now on high alert, greatly increasing the risk of accidents and close calls, of which there have been many. One example is the false alert in Hawaii in January, 2018. A false alert could trigger "retaliation" and initiate conflagration.

**4) Cancel the plan to replace the entire nuclear arsenal with "enhanced" weapons.** The US currently plans to replace the entire nuclear arsenal with updated, "more usable" nuclear weapons, at the cost of \$1.7 trillion over the next 30 years. Producing new weapons that are claimed to be "usable" (that is, smaller and less destructive) is dangerous and provocative, signaling other countries to arm. It is also absurdly wasteful, taking resources from all our other national needs.

**5) Actively pursue a verifiable agreement among nuclear-armed states to eliminate their nuclear arsenals.** Support the ban treaty for which the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons was recognized with a Nobel Peace Prize in 2017. This treaty is already approved by 122 nations. Rather than blocking this treaty, all nuclear nations, especially the US, should lead this popular effort.

## How You Can Help

The plan of the ambitious Back from the Brink Campaign is to first build grassroots support for the call by gathering endorsements from community groups. This will enable us to lobby local and then federal officials, including candidates for office. The Syracuse Peace Council's Nuclear Free World Committee has already begun to approach community groups. Here's how to help:

1) Go to [preventnuclearwar.org](http://preventnuclearwar.org) to learn more and endorse the campaign individually. The site also has incredible resources, including links to a TED Talk by Dr. Ira Helfand, co-president of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, and an interactive "Wheel of Near Misfortune" of real-life tales of nuclear close calls and screw ups.

2) Know an organization that might sign on? We're happy to make a presentation to your group. Contact [drswords@gmail.com](mailto:drswords@gmail.com) or [margrit.diehl@gmail.com](mailto:margrit.diehl@gmail.com).

3) Help with our Hiroshima Procession (August 6) and Peace Picnic and lantern floating on Nagasaki Day (August 9). These are days to remember, but also look forward with hope. Help carry the large "Step Back From the Brink" banner that will debut at the procession.

4) Contact Michaela at SPC (315-472-5478, [Michaela@peacecouncil.net](mailto:Michaela@peacecouncil.net)) to help.

Nuclear abolition is possible if we all work together!

*James is a student at Syracuse University and a summer intern at the Peace Council. Diane is a longtime anti-nuclear organizer and facilitator of inter-group dialogue.*