

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE BOMB

Why civilian nuclear power is merely a cover for producing more nuclear weapons.



MILLENNIUM IMAGES

BY ALFRED MEYER

The Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Station in southeastern Ukraine, Europe's largest nuclear power plant, has the world's attention right now, and rightly so. For the first time in history, six nuclear reactors and thirty-seven years' worth of high-level nuclear waste are in the middle of a battlefield in an active war zone—one artillery shell, on site or off, could interrupt the control and cooling of the operational reactor, or the cooling of the waste in storage, leading to a catastrophic release of radiation that could spread throughout the Northern Hemisphere. How in the world can nuclear power reactors be considered clean and safe sources of electricity?

Russia, a nuclear-armed nation that invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has said that it would use nuclear weapons if needed. And strong

allies of Ukraine—the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, all NATO members—are also armed with nuclear weapons.

You likely are aware of what has happened in the weeks since this magazine went to press, and whether or not the world is in the midst of another major radioactive disaster, as happened at Fukushima in Japan in 2011, Chernobyl in northern Ukraine in 1986, and Three Mile Island in the United States in 1979. I assume that if you are reading this, nuclear weapons have not been used in the war in Ukraine. So how has the world ended up in such an existentially threatening situation? Why does the nuclear enterprise have the world's future so tightly in its grip?

The short answer: nuclear weapons. It is all about the bomb.

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In 1939, Albert Einstein wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt urging him to pursue nuclear research in the United States. It was crucial, Einstein wrote, to counter Germany's efforts to harness the magic of radioactivity and develop a super weapon. A few years later, the Manhattan Project was born in secrecy in 1942. A sprawling and tightly controlled academic, military, industrial, and governmental infrastructure was built to accommodate an entirely new industry equal in size to the American automobile industry at the time. Secrecy was so thorough that when Vice President Harry Truman ascended to the presidency on April 12, 1945, upon Roosevelt's sudden death, he was unaware that the atomic bomb program even existed, much less that it was on the verge of testing a plutonium weapon in July.

During World War II, the United States succeeded in developing atomic weapons, while Germany was defeated before it could do so. Even though Japan was essentially defeated by then, Truman, some three months after he learned that the United States did possess the super weapons, chose to use them. Although the firebombing of Tokyo in March 1945 had burned to death more than 100,000 people and left more than a million people homeless, it did not occasion the global outcry that followed the use of the uranium bomb on Hiroshima, on August 6, 1945, and the plutonium bomb on Nagasaki, three days later. Nuclear weapons are a special kind of horror opposed by most rational people around the world.

Yet the U.S. military and successive Presidents have unequivocally pursued global domination through the possession of nuclear weapons and the consistent support of the academic, military, industrial, and governmental infrastructure needed to enable their production. This capacity has been the guiding force of our military security strategy since 1945, and it remains in place today. It is the *raison d'être* of the nuclear enterprise. Even the United Nations gives special status to the countries "recognized" as possessing nuclear weapons; the five permanent members of the Security Council—the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom—are vested with veto power over any U.N. Security Council resolution.

However, following the use of nuclear weapons in Japan in 1945, there has been significant ongoing public opposition to them. In the earliest days of the United Nations, there were various efforts to abolish or control nuclear weapons. It was clear that they constitute an entirely different type of military threat

that includes the likelihood of ending life on earth as we know it. Abolishing nuclear weapons is the way to end this existential threat.

When World War II hero General Dwight D. Eisenhower became President in 1953, the dilemma for the military, and for Eisenhower, was how to grow the atomic bomb programs, in light of negative public opinion toward the nuclear enterprise. At the same time, the United States wanted to be recognized as the leader of the "free world" in the postwar years. In the early 1950s, the military needed to recast nuclear enterprise activities to appear to be peaceful, beneficial parts of our modern life, very distant from the wartime horrors.

In August 1953, Eisenhower was worried about the Soviet Union's successful test of a sophisticated hydrogen bomb—which signaled to the United States that the nuclear arms race was officially on. Eisenhower considered delivering a type of "fireside chat" to the American public—or perhaps a "mushroom cloud chat"—to level with citizens about the truly horrific existential threat that nuclear weapons posed to the world.

But by December of that year, a different strategy appeared to take effect. In a now famous speech on December 8, 1953, titled "Atoms for Peace," Eisenhower proposed to the U.N. General Assembly an international program of sharing "peaceful" nuclear materials and know-how for untold bounty, to encourage development of nuclear programs around the world.

The United States also proposed an international agency under the United Nations to promote and oversee nuclear activities, which today is the International Atomic Energy Agency, or IAEA. While acknowledging the IAEA's important oversight role, such as inspecting the Zaporizhzhia reactors and fuel pools at this perilous time in history, one should also recognize that the IAEA's bluntly stated mission is to promote nuclear technology. The first leaders of the IAEA were from the United States, to ensure that U.S. interests were protected.

Nuclear enterprise infrastructure is an outgrowth of World War II. These new endeavors drew international interest in creating the huge nuclear marketplace now in existence. Atoms for Peace—a plan to share nonmilitary nuclear technology with other countries to "win hearts and minds"—placed nuclear materials and reactors in more than forty countries, including Iran. This generated ongoing business for many American nuclear enterprise companies while supporting and expanding the U.S. military's nuclear infrastructure and capacity in the United States.

Having nuclear activities under the auspices

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of the United Nations conferred upon them the legitimacy and respect of that international body. While Eisenhower was making his “Atoms for Peace” speech at the United Nations, he was in the middle of planning the largest hydrogen bomb test ever in the United States, the fifteen-megaton “Bravo” test, on March 1, 1954, which was more than 1,000 times bigger than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

The generally favorable response to Atoms for Peace was a trifecta for the nuclear enterprise. U.S. nuclear activities were repackaged as the “peaceful” atom and given the patina of social acceptance through United Nations oversight. Eisenhower was lauded as a good leader for sharing the atom with the world, and the U.S. nuclear infrastructure got new business and growth, which supported more U.S. nuclear weapons and nuclear Navy programs.

Atoms for Peace also served geopolitical ends. For instance, one reason the United States provided Iran with a research reactor in 1967 was to saddle that country with significant financial obligations, including paying for ongoing parts, services, and technical support from American companies. These financial obligations would then, theoretically, force Iran to sell more oil on the world market, regardless of OPEC actions, a kind of atoms-for-oil program—but only peaceful atoms, mind you!

As Atoms for Peace was taking shape, a major policy change was made via the Atomic Energy Act of 1954. The top-secret, tightly controlled Manhattan Project to build the atomic bomb was a governmental endeavor. Nuclear reactors produce the plutonium needed for atomic bombs. With the passage of this new bill by Congress, the operation of nuclear power reactors by privately owned corporations was allowed.

The Atomic Energy Commission was created in 1946 to promote and regulate the development of this new industry. With the commission led by Wall Street banker Lewis Strauss for five critical years, it is not surprising that the scales heavily favored promotion over regulation. Encouraging private investment in these risky reactor projects was assisted by minimizing regulatory safety and operational demands upon the private operators.

But why was it so important for the U.S. government to develop and subsidize civilian nuclear power? Because it allowed the military, in essence, to spin off its nuclear reactor activities to private financing and corporate operations. Like Atoms for Peace, this repackaging of a military activity as a civilian one succeeded in making the endeavor socially acceptable and somewhat self-funding—although government subsidies are still perennially needed to carry on, and taxpayers are still

covering the liability insurance costs of the private corporations. Most importantly, as detailed in a 2017 report by former U.S. Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz, civilian nuclear power is an “essential enabler” of our national security. The Atlantic Council calculates the value of this contribution to national security to be \$42.4 billion a year. Businesses contributing to the nuclear Navy’s supply chain are in forty-four U.S. states.

The essential nature of civilian nuclear power for national security would suggest that if the United States has the largest national inventory of civilian nuclear reactors in the world, then it also has the largest nuclear enterprise infrastructure to support nuclear weapons production and a nuclear Navy.

Being the biggest nuclear enterprise on earth encourages the circular, self-sustaining dynamic of the nuclear arms race. The United States is busy modernizing its nuclear weapons infrastructure to be “strong enough” to negotiate the elimination of nuclear weapons. This is presented as official doctrine in the nonproliferation world. In reality, the United States is actually driving the growing international nuclear arms race.

Atoms for Peace and the nuclear enterprise employ particularly successful advertising campaigns, greatly influencing public opinion and shaping our cultural consciousness of the nuclear world.

Presenting civilian nuclear power as the answer to climate change, as clean and safe electrical generation, or as energy “too cheap to meter” is simply a sales pitch. What is actually delivered by a robust nuclear energy fleet is the capacity for nuclear weapons and a nuclear Navy.

Over the decades, there have been numerous expert critiques of nuclear power, authoritatively debunking these misleading and false promises, yet these critiques seem to have no effect on the trajectory of the nuclear enterprise. I suggest that these sales pitches are diversionary techniques aimed at sapping our energy. It does not matter if nuclear power can really solve climate change, it just has to be seen as an essential part of the solution to attract bright, young talent into what is made to appear as the cutting edge of technology and climate solutions, even though the civilian nuclear power industry worldwide has been in decline since 2002.

To protect ourselves from the dangers of the nuclear enterprise, we need to stop the nuclear weapons and nuclear power reactor programs—a tall order, for sure. But if we seek success in our efforts, we are well advised to understand the forces we are engaging with. It is all about nuclear weapons. ♦

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