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In Joseph Conrad’s 1899 work, *Heart of Darkness*, he wrote that, “It was written that I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice.”\(^1\)

Generations of the past have pieced together a society built around deterrence by nuclear weapons and this was a deliberate choice, not necessarily a wise one. Generation Z is but the latest generation to be subject to this nuclear nightmare. This state of deterrence was never what we most desired, but we are playing the hand we have been dealt. It is a very human phenomenon, to be one’s own worst enemy. So normal in fact, that it is difficult to envision a world without it.

Society rests atop a complex system where we are told our survival depends on deterrence. Ultimately, the very weapon that threatens our whole reality, is supposed to convince us that we are safe from it. The next generation does not have to be loyal to this reality. Generation-Z must ask themselves: *Are they ready to leave this state of deterrence behind?*

Deterrence is often explained in terms of a causal mechanism. Nation A threatens nation B, and nation B threatens nation A, though neither would risk the effects of a nuclear weapon by actually using one. This causes a perpetual state of deterrence.
To most, this deterrence mechanism is invisible—just another pointless structure in international relations. Deterrence as a structure was adopted to manage the capabilities of the atomic bomb, its predicted effects on international relations, and the balance of power between superpowers. What it meant to ‘deter’ quickly evolved, as the reality of nuclear weapons settled in. Every nuclear state had to have the biggest and best. By the late 1980’s it was estimated that there were over 60,000 nuclear weapons in the world’s arsenals. It is akin to an addiction to death, the unending desire for more of the very thing that will likely destroy this world.

The few leaders who govern the world’s superpowers are even more immoral, as they force humans to live on the brink of nuclear winter. Our government boasts claims of moving past these challenges, but current policies would argue otherwise. Generation Z has lived through so many world-altering events while the threat of nuclear weapons has continued to evolve in the background. This generation’s adolescent years were shaped by memories of 9/11 and threats of terrorism, a pandemic, climate change, extreme political polarization, gun violence, and the loss of bodily autonomy for women. Although the nuclear arms race of the 1970s seems like eons ago to them, today’s 1.7 trillion dollar modernization program has become a reprise. The threat is not as far from us as we have come to believe.
Supposed ‘policies’ like mutually assured destruction (M.A.D.) were adopted to deal with the possibility of a nuclear confrontation. They are meant to prevent a nuclear war from occurring, while enabling nuclear weapons to become ingrained in modern society. British international relations specialist Michael McCGwire says that deterrence itself is a purely western social construct. Nuclear weapons served as a deterrent to Soviet aggression by threatening unfathomable punishment. If both sides were too afraid to witness the destructive power of the atomic bomb, neither side would use it. Rather, nuclear weapons were more useful as leverage, and they swiftly became a symbol of power and progress. Although nuclear weapons serve many purposes, fundamentally, the atomic bomb exists to deter the atomic bomb. The logic is circular.

Over time, deterrence has become more ingrained in the fabric of society, unbeknownst especially to Generation Z. The arguments that have survived into 2022 in favor of nuclear deterrence are uncompelling to a generation that has already faced countless threats to extinction and world-altering events—nuclear deterrence serves only to add to the list of avoidable threats to our existence.
One of the most popular rationalizations for deterrence argues that nuclear weapons eliminate the fog of war. They allow nuclear-equipped states to defeat an adversary’s military without significant strategy. By utilizing a nuclear weapon in conflict, the adversary’s destruction is largely guaranteed. In essence, strategizing on how to counter an adversary’s military is unnecessary if the state possesses nuclear weapons.

When examining the effects of nuclear weapons, it is clear that in today’s world, they actually increase the uncertainties and complications of war, and dramatically alter the landscape when reconstructing society after conflict. Nuclear submarine-launched cruise missiles (or SLCM-N), have been discussed in context of uncertainties in conflict.

According to the Council on Strategic Risks, SLCM-N’s are virtually indistinguishable from their conventional counterparts. There is no way to determine whether these missiles are nuclear tipped until they detonate. Not knowing the content of missiles can create misunderstanding between parties, possibly leading to an accidental nuclear war. A typical modern nuclear weapon is more than twenty times more powerful than the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, according to the Comprehensive Test Ban Organization. Depending on geological and meteorological factors, the effect of one nuclear weapon will not only impact the military target area, but also the surrounding territories.
In the health crises report from the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), the organization affirms that a full-scale nuclear war would have multiple targets, which are likely cities with the highest populations. It is estimated that a nuclear war would wipe out these power centers, provoking a public health crisis our systems are not equipped to mitigate. This would be a state completely uncertain of its ability to survive and remain operational. The few nuclear weapons states could dramatically alter existence for all of Earth's inhabitants, in ways that are difficult for us to fathom. A full-scale nuclear war could cause the regression of society to an animalistic state, if not plunge us into extinction. There are facets of war that will always be uncertain, but the potential for mass murder of innocent people, however, is certain.

Nuclear fallout is uncertainty defined. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, detonating nuclear weapons above ground sends radioactive materials as high as 50 miles into the atmosphere, and these targets, which are likely cities with the highest populations. It is estimated that a nuclear war would wipe out massive humanitarian and public health crises. The effects of nuclear weapons trigger massive humanitarian and public health crises. The uncertainty continues.
Other advocates argue that nuclear deterrence preserves peace, prevents coercion, and deters aggression from other adversaries. This peddles the narrative that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to keep people safe— and that we should not be scared of them.

We are witnessing this at the present, with the worsening conflict in Ukraine. The profound, ever-present threat from Russia's nuclear arsenal complicates and confounds options as the rest of the world seeks to prevent further human rights atrocities in Ukraine.

By having nuclear arsenals, any of these states can limit the options of others to respond or intervene in a conflict.

This also brings sole authority into play. Nations can threaten the use of nuclear weapons without any repercussions because it only takes one person to authorize a launch. In recent years, we've seen explicit threats from former President Donald Trump, as well as from Vladimir Putin.

These statements do not come from a place of peace or striving to create a world founded on peacebuilding. They perpetuate a dangerous narrative upholding the Cold War-era competitive nature of world superpowers. This state of ‘peace’ is a detrimental facade. By existing in a world where security structures are built around nuclear weapons, true peace will never be achieved.
Thus far, the “nuclear taboo” has a 100% success rate, so why consider straying from the course of history perceived as successful? Nina Tannenwald coined the term in her book of the same name. She describes it as widespread inhibition on the use of nuclear weapons. Since 1945, there have been no nuclear wars, although it is clear that nuclear-armed states have not learned from the United States' missteps in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The success of nuclear deterrence is an illusion. International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons cites the lack of use of nuclear weapons since 1945 plainly as “good luck.” It is a game of luck, and luck by definition is not a guarantee. As the late Marty Sherwin has ruminated, nuclear weapons are quite literally gambling with armageddon.

Just because a nuclear exchange has not happened since 1945, does not mean deterrence will hold up for another lifetime. This also demonstrates how nuclear-armed states acknowledge that for nuclear deterrence to work, all stakeholders must be perceived to act “rationally” and “predictably.” This question on rationality illustrates the issues with ‘launch on warning.’ The term launch on warning is a part of the U.S nuclear doctrine from the 1970s, where there are seven minutes to decide whether to launch a missile. It has long been met with disapproval, due to concern over human error and the possibilities of accidental nuclear war.

Although the intention would be accidental, the effects would be debilitating. It is not only the principle of one person deciding the fate of the world, but also the assumption that this person is of sound mind, and is a purely rational being. Not all political actors are rational. In fact, one cannot assume anyone to be purely rational. In the event of uncertainty amidst the fog of war, rational choice theory is often thrown out the window. The ‘Doomsday Clock’ from the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists continues to hover dangerously close to midnight, and threats of extinction from every possible avenue are thrown in our faces every day. As this is being written, the clock is set at 100 seconds to midnight, citing the decline in US relations with Russia and China, as well as nuclear weapons modernization and arsenal expansion. Possessing nuclear weapons to deter nuclear war as a result of said possession is keeping the threat alive. In 2022, it seems much harder to convince people that the most radioactive deadly weapon on earth is meant to keep them safe. Indeed, nothing lasts forever. Why should deterrence be the exception? Scott Sagan, in The Limits of Safety, points out: “Things that have never happened before happen all the time.”
These weak arguments among countless others have been the basis for keeping society on the brink of nuclear annihilation, unbeknownst to most. It has been an integral part of our military strategy and governmental structure since the nuclear age’s inception in July 1945. The arguments that keep nuclear deterrence in tow rely on things that are out of our control. Just because this house of cards has not collapsed for the latter half of a century, does not mean that it should be that way.

Progress needs to be made to unlearn Cold War thinking from a time that is far removed from 2022. Even if they are not being wielded in a conflict, nuclear weapons are still harming people. The pain of our nuclear past is still with us.

Deterrence is complicated, and this analysis barely touches the surface. As a structure, it has moulded over time within the fabric of modern life. We don’t know a life without it, nor can we seemingly envision one. It is all this generation has ever known, yet they tend to discount the threat of nuclear weapons—which allows the threat to grow more severe.

With many phenomena of deterrence that occur in nature, there is always some sort of afterward. With nuclear deterrence, there is no after—because we will all be dead; vanished out of thin air, plunged into a radioactive wasteland of our own making. Biologically it is against our nature to destroy ourselves, but humans have proven otherwise. Today, we are still trying to wrestle with the nuclear age of the past, all of its damage, and the new more frightening nuclear age society is blindly walking into. All while urging the next generation to take action. How can we grapple with the past while understanding that this does not have to be our generation’s future?
What is it that really makes us human? There are a million things I could say, though at the moment I feel that it is our ability to create. It may be good, it may be bad, or perhaps both at once. Humans created the atomic bomb, and now it threatens us with extinction if we are not diligent enough to stop it. We are in conflict with ourselves. We were expected to believe that the atomic bomb would save us. But when the glimmer of ingenuity faded, it became clear that the bomb had done anything but.

Humans succumb to this fate a little too easily. It is a fatal flaw, to be able to ignore the threat that threatens us with destroying everything. When faced with threats of extinction, our natural instinct is to hide; duck, and cover in the face of the very thing that will eliminate us. To escape. We’ve proven that Generation Z does not cower. We rise to the occasion, time and time again. My generation was born into an era full of threats—climate change, terrorism, mass shootings, political polarization, political violence, and a government that is supposed to keep us safe but does anything but. We must begin to think about this state of deterrence and nuclear weapons differently, and this begins with facing it head-on.

Deterrence pits humans against each other when in reality we are all humans sharing the same home. As a policy, deterrence is in opposition to the community-building instinct of human nature. Humans are dishonest creatures, convincing ourselves of false safety. Although the knowledge will never be removed from our society (very Promethean, thank you Oppenheimer), that does not mean we have to subscribe to a future with nuclear weapons.

Humans created this mess, but humans are also beginning to create the solutions that will one day undo it. There is more under the surface when it comes to nuclear weapons. They are more intertwined in life than we will ever know. Nuclear weapons are complicated, scary, existential, and awe-inducing all at once—much like life itself.
Notes

7. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
13. Ibid.