

# **Nuclear Disarmament: Ideal and Reality**

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This article is based on the author's profound conviction that it is necessary to eliminate nuclear weapons and all other means of mass destruction which threaten the existence of human civilization.

### *The Reality Gap*

The unique nature of today's situation creates greater possibilities in the world than ever before for turning the ideal of nuclear disarmament into political practice. Yet the profound difference between this ideal and the political reality has in no way disappeared. Rather, while the popularity of the ideal grows, the infrastructures promoting the arms build up and the maintenance of the nuclear arms race are still powerful and actively at work throughout the world. The forms of traditional thinking and psychological principles stimulating the arms race still retain their inertia.

This obvious disparity between the ideal and the current reality creates the possibility for a personality type characterized by a seemingly sincere acceptance of the ideal of nuclear disarmament coupled with acceptance of all the prevailing forms of political practice which are in contradiction with the ideal.

*The Ideal as Shield and Camouflage*

This coexistence of contradictory trends within the same person may manifest itself in various neuroses, psychoses, or other unhealthy states of the psyche. Or it may take the form of psychological compensation in which attachment to the ideal neutralizes critical self-reflection of one's own practices which contradict the ideal. Such a person has a sudden temptation, and later a habit, of justifying himself, to silence within himself a feeling of guilt for such forms of practice. This psychological compensation manifests itself by the person constantly proclaiming the ideal, and by his reminding himself and others of his agreement with the ideal. And the greater the contrast between words and deeds, the louder, the more insistent, and even more sincere these words may sound.

We know from history that there have been both Christians and Marxists who have sincerely accepted noble ideals proclaimed by Christianity or Marxism, but who have been involved in practices inconsistent with those ideals. And, for many of them, their own subjective adherence to the ideal has not been a stimulus for critical self-reflection and a source of mobilization of their energy for putting their ideals into practice. On the contrary, the ideal becomes a shield for blocking critical self-reflection. This type of ideologue sees the contradictions in the world, but not in his own practice.

We also know that a person in this state of conflict between the ideal and his own practical behavior may experience severe fits of self-critique. But these fits will be in the style of repentance characteristic of religious revivalism: By loudly confessing his "sins" (the incompatibility of his conduct with the ideal) and praising the ideal, a person can feel purified and "forgiven," in order to return once more to the habitual and incompatible forms of behavior.

Another very dangerous psychological and behavioral feature is the purposeful and cynical proclamation of the ideal of nuclear disarmament, only to disguise military preparations and camouflage actions which are, in reality, aimed at preserving and expanding the nuclear arms race. Often this is done under the pretext of "rearmament for the sake of subsequent disarmament."

*Long- and Short-Range Goals*

Even among those who actively work to eliminate the threat of nuclear disaster, the obvious discrepancy between ideal and reality can generate contradictory types of behavior. One reaction, typical of some arms control advocates, consists of concentrating attention on concrete and very important steps such as reducing one or another type of weapon, or increasing confidence and mutual understanding between people, but with a

complete lack of faith in the ability to achieve the long-range goal of total nuclear disarmament.

Another type of reaction is the mirror image of the first. Here, the necessity of achieving the ideal of nuclear disarmament is stressed, but without paying adequate attention to the immediate, concrete measures needed to restore confidence - confidence without which nuclear weapons will not be reduced significantly, much less eliminated.

Today, as never before, it is important to have a twofold combination in the peace movement - theoretical and practical, short range and long range. Working for the ideal of nuclear disarmament is not enough by itself. Neither is working to bring about concrete, immediate improvements. Only together do these beliefs and actions provide an effective means for step-by-step advancement along the difficult, contradictory, and lengthy road that leads to the ideal.

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#### *Politicians as Idealists*

The existence of the potential for nuclear annihilation creates, for the first time in history, a situation in which the traditional, practical concern of a professional politician for the security of his own nation may prompt him to a new, nontraditional way of thinking. The threat of the death of the entire human species, his own country included, may prompt the use of such heretofore idealistic concepts as “unity,” “integrity of mankind,” and “the preeminence of general human interests over any private interests” as working tools in the search for effective ways of resolving the very practical problems of national security of his own state. The problem of security for one’s own state is vividly seen as the problem of creating conditions for universal and equal security for all nations. Political idealism and pragmatism have become one.

While there is much hope to be gained from this need for agreement between theory and practice, it makes the previously discussed psychological accommodations all the more dangerous. Vigilant self-reflection will be needed to realize the potential benefit that has been unlocked.

*The Possibility of Revelation*

In the philosophy of twentieth-century German and French existentialists (notably K. Jaspers), the term “grenzsituation” (border situation) has been used to designate an experience in which an individual comes face-to-face with the real possibility of death. Death is no longer merely an abstract thought, but a distinct possibility. Life and death hang in the balance.

Different human beings respond to the grenzsituation in different ways. Some become passive and put their heads on the chopping block, so to

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speak. Others experience something akin to a revelation and find themselves capable of feats they never before would have thought possible. In a grenzsituation, some timid individuals have become heroes; some selfish individuals have become Schweitzers. And sometimes, in so transcending their normal personalities, they cheat the grim reaper and survive where normally they would not.

Until now, this notion has been applied only to individuals. But I am convinced that today it can be purposefully applied to the world as a whole. The present day global grenzsituation resides in the possibility for global death and global life.

This situation, for the first time in history, directly, practically, and not purely speculatively, confronts human thought with the possibility of death for the entire human race. The continuity of history, which earlier had seemed to be a given, suddenly becomes highly questionable.

As with the individual, this global grenzsituation may contribute to a “revelation” in human thinking and to a positive change of character previously thought impossible for our species. The global grenzsituation could give rise to the critical self-reflection needed to resolve the contradictions between ideals and political reality. It could prompt rethinking the essence and importance of everything that constitutes the “human experiment.” In this unique situation, and the hope that humanity will come to comprehend it, lies the real possibility for ideal to finally be translated into practice.

Of course there is also the possibility that, faced with a grenzsituation, mankind will go passive and put its collective head on the nuclear chopping block. But before we can learn our true mettle, we must bring the global grenzsituation into clear focus for all humanity. Society must see that it has

but two possibilities, global life or global death. It is my sincere hope that this book will contribute to that goal.

*Beyond Disarmament*

Complete nuclear disarmament is an ideal. But it is not the ideal, the end state at which humanity can rest on its laurels, assured of a future. The

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destructive potential of conventional armaments is approaching that of nuclear weapons. Conventional bombs are even more destructive than many nuclear weapons if they are targeted on the hundreds of nuclear power plants in Western Europe, the USSR, and the US. Such attacks would release large amounts of radiation and poisonous materials into the environment. Radiation sickness would ensue. Crops would be damaged. Each of these hundreds of reactors could have worse effects than Chernobyl, where the fire fighters and clean-up crews had only to contend with nature, not hostile aircraft.

If we look further, we find that the fragility of humanity's existence extends beyond nuclear weapons, or even conventional war. When the complexity and fragility of the systems needed today to feed, clothe, and nurture humanity are considered, we have all reason to say that the global grenzsituation will hardly disappear after the elimination of nuclear weapons or war. Rather this condition is a new and essential feature of our existence. But nuclear disarmament will be a critical step in that it will show that mankind really is capable of learning to overcome the threats created by his own technological genius.