

Editorial Page

The editorial policy of Neighbors Times is based on Neighbors for Peace's mission statement (established in 2001) and printed on the bottom of page 4 and at www.neighborsforpeace.org.

The public is invited to participate at all levels of this newsletter project. To submit articles for consideration and for our newsletter meeting schedule, email pallist3-n4ptimes@yahoo.com - or mail to:

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The public is also invited to join in all aspects of Neighbors for Peace (see bottom of p.12 for meeting information)

The Force is Against Us

In his brilliant essay, "Thinkability"⁽¹⁾, Martin Amis reported that nuclear war was "seven minutes away." That was in 1987. Now, according to the Doomsday Clock, it's "five minutes to midnight." We are two minutes closer than we were twenty-two years ago.

What does this mean, precisely? Does it mean anything at all?

Writing in the year 2009 about the prospect of nuclear war is surprisingly difficult. Not because there is nothing to say but because so much has been said in the past. Amis's own observations in 1987 had already been made, one way or another, ever since Hiroshima.

Between 1945 and 1987, as well as countless news reports on the subject—not to mention all the arguments "pro" and "con" the proliferation of nuclear weapons—there were many novels, films, and plays dramatizing the consequences of a nuclear holocaust. For those of us growing up during the Cold War era, the threat of annihilation was a basic fact of life. We read the novels and saw the movies and the TV dramas. Some of us learned (perhaps many years later) that, like "The Day After,"⁽²⁾ all the more "realistic" treatments seriously underestimated the effects of nuclear war. Nuclear scientists knew better, but either they weren't talking or nobody was listening.

Science fiction, in a sense, has been more accurate. At least some stories, such as *Planet of the Apes*, have done justice to the scale of the event. Novelists like John Wyndham⁽³⁾ have written stories showing a few remnants of human society still affected by "fallout" resulting from a catastrophic war that took place generations, even centuries, in the past. It is always *one* terrible war. The archetype is Armageddon—though not the Armageddon spoken of by the Religious Right. There are no "chosen people," no "elect." There are just survivors, some of them desperate enough to resort to cannibalism. And there is certainly no God.

Instead of God, what we see is the human capacity for willful self-destruction. Freudians describe this as our "death wish" or "death drive." The writers of Greek tragedy saw our chief weakness as a kind of arrogance they called *hubris*. Today, we don't inhabit a world that fosters a tragic sense of life. Nietzsche observed that the creation of tragedy by the Greeks was a sign of health, but our society is too sick for tragedy. Instead, we prefer cynicism. A black comedy like Stanley Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove* is something most of us can appreciate: "How I learned to stop worrying and love the Bomb."

The Bomb. In a sense, there is only one. It is a new archetype. Born in 1945, it was built in the US and tested in the US and dropped on a city halfway round the world whose name became a symbol for a new era.

The Internet is overflowing with news about developments in nuclear-arms strategy and reactions to that news. Some articles have received thousands of comments and replies. The report on the push for NATO

to maintain a preemptive nuclear strike policy as a form of deterring nuclear weapons proliferation is one such example.⁽⁴⁾ The article drew responses that repeatedly referenced “Dr Strangelove”. The prevailing tone was one of cynicism and despair:

We’re at the point, I think, where people just have no faith in the Government, and are aware that the world has and always will be ruled by a group of conniving elitists, moblike in their methods—so to them any of these imperialist adventures don’t matter, just so long as we keep our jobs, big screen TV’s, ipods, etc.

I’m still in a state of shock. I sit here at my desk and wonder what’s the point. Why work? Why pay bills? The only thing to do maybe is just stop working and try to enjoy our once beautiful Homeworld while it lasts.⁽⁵⁾

Ronald Reagan is also frequently referenced in relation to nuclear weapons. “Twenty-five years after Reagan’s Star Wars speech” and “It’s 5 minutes to midnight” are phrases that recur endlessly. Turning again to Martin Amis’s essay, we read the following:

If we look at the controversy over the Strategic Defense Initiative, we find this, for instance, is Ronald Reagan’s tone: “[SDI] isn’t about fear, it’s about hope, and in that struggle, if you will pardon my stealing a film line, the Force is with us.” No, we will not pardon his stealing a film line. And the Force is not with us. The Force is against us.

Amis is right. Such irresponsible frivolity on the part of a President is frightening. Some of us can still laugh at Dr Strangelove—but that was satire, and it was made back in 1964. Also, it seems a little dated; it belongs to a more optimistic era. Reagan is dead, but his legacy is part of today’s world. And he isn’t funny. Nor, in spite of the way he talks, is George W Bush. They have gone too far to warrant even the blackest humor.

President Obama has now paid lip service to the idea of reducing nuclear weapons. His speech in Prague was well received by the press. But as Joseph Gerson astutely points out,

His Prague speech provided a remarkable opportunity for him to reinforce his declared commitment to abolition by using his Commander in Chief authority to order the withdrawal of the estimated 400 Cold War nuclear weapons that are still based in Europe and targeted primarily against Russia. He could have announced a no first-strike policy. To satisfy the majority of people in the Czech Republic and elsewhere in Europe, he should have declared an end to U.S. plans to base first-strike related “missile defenses” in Central Europe, rather than reserving this possibility as a negotiating chip with Russia. And he should have offered to include the estimated 10,000 U.S. stockpiled nuclear in the disarmament negotiations with Russia. (5)

It appears that the plan for first-strike “missile defenses” will be abandoned for the time being – the U.S. will instead rely on a strong naval presence in Poland and the military bases in the Czech Republic. However there is no guarantee that this administration will maintain this policy. And other issues threaten the planet’s future. Climate change is progressing at a rate that surpasses the predictions of the scientific models published only five years ago. Dwindling energy resources fuel the U.S. buildup to more invasions in order to gain control over the planet’s oil and natural gas. Access to clean water as well as shrinking food supplies have become matters of life and death for increasing numbers of people living in Africa and Latin America.

The threat of Nuclear Weapons has not gone away. Now we are confronted with yet another version of the Bomb: the “bunker buster.” It’s a new and improved model: it’s smaller and said to be more “accurate.” Which means it is more likely to be used—and used in a “pre-emptive” way. Moreover, it may be used in space. This, perhaps, is why it’s now five minutes to midnight instead of only seven. The Force is against us.

- 1 Martin Amis, *Einstein's Monsters*, 1987.
- 2 "The Day After," much-publicized TV drama, 1983
- 3 John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids*, 1964.
- 4 Source for both the article and the responses: www.CommonDreams.org, 22/01/08
- 5 Amis, *Einstein's Monsters*
6. Joseph Gerson, Obama, "Nuclear Weapons, and Abolition", Common Dreams.org, May 21, 2009*

***Joseph Gerson plans organized resistance:** Sunday, May 2, 2010 has been designated "International Action Day for a Nuclear Free World" and will feature a mass international demonstration and rally in New York City, including several thousand abolitionists from other countries.

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