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Who stole disarmament? History and nostalgia in nuclear abolition discourse

KJØLV EGELAND*

The history of nuclear weapons changed course in 1986. Navigating out of the Cold War, US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev agreed 'that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought" and began at Reykjavik to seek nuclear disarmament'.[1] The decade that followed became a golden age for nuclear abolitionists, involving the adoption of a treaty banning nuclear explosive testing in all environments, the indefinite extension of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the beginning of an incremental process of reductions in nuclear weapons aimed at the eventual achievement of complete nuclear disarmament. But the international community has since strayed from the road to zero, as 'international consensus over a common path for the elimination of nuclear weapons has been strained'.[2] Accordingly, proponents of abolition must help the international community to rebuild its erstwhile common commitment to disarmament.[3]

That is the narrative I wish to interrogate in what follows. The idea that the end of the Cold War generated consensus on a grand abolitionist project that has since been derailed has given rise to an unwarranted yearning for a past that never was, fostering overconfidence in established approaches to the elimination of nuclear weapons. In fact, far from placing the world on course for abolition, the end of the Cold War saw the affirmation in key states of nuclear weapons as indispensable instruments of statecraft, even in the absence of the existential stand-off that had until then justified their existence. The United States—militarily and diplomatically unrivalled after the collapse of the Soviet Union—continued to invest heavily in its nuclear forces, greatly increasing their overall lethality. As divisions between nuclear and non-nuclear powers continued to run deep, multilateral nuclear disarmament diplomacy remained acrimonious.

Re-examining the supposed 'golden age' of nuclear disarmament is of practical importance as well as scholarly interest. After all, influential members of the

* The author would like to thank Benoît Pelopidas, Thomas Fraise, Heba Taha, Torbjørn Graff Hugo and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on earlier drafts.

[1] Sidney D. Drell and James E. Goodby, 'Nuclear deterrence in a changed world', *Arms Control Today* 42: 5, 2012, p. 8.

[2] United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA), *Securing our common future: an agenda for disarmament* (New York, 2018), p. 17.

[3] In this article, 'abolition' is used to describe a condition of complete nuclear disarmament.

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disarmament community—from governments to high-profile expert groups and the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs—have in recent years argued that the path to a world without nuclear weapons goes through a restoration of the vision and practices that supposedly prevailed in the late 1980s and 1990s.[4] According to the UN Secretary-General, the key to abolition lies in a 'return' to the international community's bygone consensus on 'a common path towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons';[5] and in the words of an international expert group established by the government of Japan, the elimination of nuclear weapons requires 'bridge-building' between nuclear and non-nuclear powers, aimed at both the 'rebuilding' of 'civility and respect in discourse' and the 'restoring' of arrested 'practices of cooperation'.[6] The implication of this stance is that new ideas and approaches are not necessary to achieve the elimination of nuclear weapons; the abolitionist challenge is above all a matter of reconstruction, not of policy innovation or contestation.

Drawing on the sociology of collective memory, I find that the narrative of the post-Cold War period as the beginning of a teleological process towards abolition relies on a biased, nostalgic reconstruction of history. By exaggerating past consensus on and progress towards the elimination of nuclear weapons, this narrative allows states and organizations that are wary of disrupting prevailing power structures to argue that meaningful progress towards abolition has occurred in the past and that policy changes are therefore gratuitous or even detrimental to the goal of eliminating nuclear arms. It is, in other words, a recipe for the continuation of the status quo. My contention in this article is not that the measures carried out in the first decade after the end of the Cold War were facile or lacked merit or instructional value; nor is it that the distinction between arms control and disarmament is straightforward.[7] The argument advanced here is rather that the multiplicity of diplomatic endeavours undertaken in the early post-Cold War period hardly amounted to a blueprint for the elimination of nuclear weapons, and that any successful strategy of abolition must be grounded in a realistic assessment of the limits of past efforts. As scholars of disarmament have observed, eliminating a nuclear arsenal is qualitatively different from regulating or slimming it down, as the possession of nuclear weapons is invariably entangled in economic relations, organizational interests, military postures and deep-rooted conceptions

[4] See e.g. Paul Ingram and Maxwell Downman, *Stepping stones to disarmament* (London: British American Security Information Council, 2019); Christopher A. Ford, 'Lessons from disarmament history for the CEND initiative', paper presented to the preparatory committee for the 2020 NPT Review Conference, New York, 30 April 2019; Switzerland, 'Statement to the Conference on Disarmament', Geneva, 13 Feb. 2018; Netherlands, 'Statement to the Conference on Disarmament', Geneva, 21 Jan. 2019; United Kingdom, 'Statement to the Conference on Disarmament', Geneva, 21 Jan. 2019; Izumi Nakamitsu, 'Keynote speech to the NATO conference on WMD arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation', Reykjavik, 29 Oct. 2018; Lewis A. Dunn, *Perspectives on a nuclear-weapon-free world* (Washington DC: Nuclear Threat Initiative, Jan. 2019), p. 8.

[5] António Guterres, 'UN chief pays tribute to Hiroshima victims and renews call for nuclear disarmament' (Paris: UNESCO, 6 Aug. 2018), https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1866. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 30 May 2020.)

[6] Group of Eminent Persons for Substantive Advancement of Nuclear Disarmament, 'Kyoto appeal' (Tokyo: Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 2019), p. 3.

[7] See Neil Cooper, 'Putting disarmament back in the frame', *Review of International Studies* 32: 2, 2006, pp. 353–76.

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of national identity. While complete disarmament would necessitate the dismantlement of these power structures, more restricted arms limitations do not.[8]

The remainder of this article is divided into three parts. In the first, I lay out both the general notion of a 'golden age' of nuclear disarmament and the more specific narrative of a bygone abolitionist consensus. In the second, I revisit the nuclear history of the first decade after the end of the Cold War, comparing the narratives identified in the first part to the historical record. I focus in particular on the politics and priorities of the United Sates, the world's sole superpower after the end of the Cold War.[9] In the third and final part, I identify the call to achieve abolition through resurrecting a lost golden age as a nostalgic reconstruction of history that serves to obviate the perceived need for new approaches to the creation of a world without nuclear weapons.

The 'golden age' of nuclear disarmament

The end of the Cold War produced, and was itself a product of, high-profile arms control and disarmament diplomacy.[10] The Reagan–Gorbachev summits of 1985–8 fostered significant nuclear arms reductions and a new era of cooperation. At the Reykjavik summit in 1986, Reagan and Gorbachev engaged in serious discussions about large nuclear cutbacks up to and including the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. While the comprehensive disarmament agreement envisioned by Reagan and Gorbachev was not reached in 1986, the Reykjavik summit is nevertheless fondly remembered in the disarmament community as paving the way for a prohibition on intermediate-range nuclear forces—the now defunct INF Treaty—and for 'enlarging the envelope of thinking about nuclear weapons very considerably'.[11] The same year, 1986, would also be the one in which the total number of nuclear warheads in the world reached its highest peak (yet). Among advocates of arms control, Reykjavik is often alluded to as the beginning of a teleological 'road' or 'path' to a world without nuclear weapons.[12]

The process of reducing nuclear arsenals continued after the election of George H. W. Bush to the US presidency in 1988 and the collapse of the Soviet Union: the Bush Senior administration reached agreement on a first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START-1) with Mikhail Gorbachev and the Soviet Union in 1991 and a second (START-2) with Boris Yeltsin and the new Russian Federation in 1993. Both sides also carried out significant unilateral reductions in nuclear arms. Bill Clinton, who succeeded Bush in 1993, entered office on a pledge to continue the work of

[8] Nick Ritchie, 'Relinquishing nuclear weapons', *International Affairs* 86: 2, March 2010, pp. 465–87; Keith Krause, 'Leashing the dogs of war', *Contemporary Security Policy* 32: 1, 2011, pp. 20–39; Benoît Pelopidas, 'Renunciation: restraint and rollback', in Joseph F. Pilat and Nathan E. Busch, eds, *Routledge handbook of nuclear proliferation and policy* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 337–48.

[9] Charles Krauthammer, 'The unipolar moment', *Foreign Affairs* 70: 1, 1990, pp. 23–33.

[10] Jeremi Suri, 'Explaining the end of the Cold War', *Cold War History* 4: 4, 2002, pp. 60–92.

[11] George P. Shultz, 'Preface', in George P. Shultz and James E. Goodby, eds, *The war that must never be fought* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2015), p. xiii.

[12] See e.g. Drell and Goodby, 'Nuclear deterrence in a changed world', p. 8.

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dismantling 'all the nuclear weapons',[13] and when the NPT was afforded indefinite duration in 1995, US Vice-President Al Gore exulted that the act of extension had augmented the nuclear weapon states' 'binding legal obligation under article VI to pursue negotiations in good faith on arms control and disarmament', ensuring 'the conditions for its ultimate achievement'.[14] One year later, the UN General Assembly adopted the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), an agreement prohibiting all nuclear explosive tests. The mid-1990s also saw the adoption of nuclear weapon-free zone agreements for south-east Asia (the Bangkok Treaty) and Africa (the Pelindaba Treaty), as well as successful US–Russian cooperation on the denuclearization of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine. South Africa had dismantled its clandestine nuclear arsenal in 1989.

In recent years, a number of authors have described the wave of activity summarized above as a 'golden age' in the history of nuclear arms control and disarmament.[15] This 'golden age' is typically dated from 1987 to the late 1990s or early 2000s (the Bush Junior administration announced its intention to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in late 2001). The vision of a world without nuclear weapons was revived in 2007, so the story goes, when a quartet of US 'elder statesmen' published the first in a series of widely discussed, nominally pro-disarmament op-eds by former and incumbent policy-makers, inspiring the new US president, Barack Obama, to reinvigorate the cause of abolition.[16] But the movement quickly lost steam after the conclusion of New START in 2010. In the decade since then, leaders of nuclear-armed states have traded open nuclear threats, the United States and Russia have withdrawn from the INF Treaty and accelerated development of previously banned systems, and all nine nuclear-armed states have initiated or continued large-scale nuclear modernization programmes.[17] Popular explanations for what is often presented as a temporary 'setback', 'slowdown' or 'impasse' in progress include the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014,[18] North Korea's continuing missile and nuclear development,[19] the use of divisive rhetoric by disarmament advocates and an attendant 'polarization of the global

[13] Bill Clinton, 'Speech to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council', quoted in 'Excerpts from Clinton's speech on foreign policy leadership', *New York Times*, 14 Aug. 1992.

[14] Al Gore, 'Statement of the United States to the NPT Review and Extension Conference', New York, 18 April 1995.

[15] See e.g. William Walker, 'Nuclear enlightenment and counter-enlightenment', *International Affairs* 83: 3, May 2007, p. 438; Götz Neuneck, 'The deep crisis of nuclear arms control and disarmament', *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 2: 2, 2019, p. 431; Werner Sonne, *Leben mit der Bombe* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2017); Nicolas Roche, *Pourquoi la dissuasion* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2017), pp. 206–207; Alexei Arbatov, 'Prospects for Russo-American cooperation in halting nuclear proliferation', in Stephen J. Blank, ed., *Prospects for US–Russian security cooperation* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2009), p. 156; Sha Zukang, 'Statement on the CTBT', 10th anniversary meeting of the Technical Secretariat of the Preparatory Commission for the CTBT, Geneva, 19 March 2007.

[16] The quartet comprised Henry Kissinger, Sam Nun, William Perry and George Shultz. See Philip Taubman, *The partnership* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

[17] Nina Tannenwald, 'The vanishing nuclear taboo? How disarmament fell apart', *Foreign Affairs* 97: 6, 2018, pp. 16–24.

[18] Neuneck, 'The deep crisis', p. 435.

[19] Moshe Kantor, 'We live in more dangerous times than the Cold War', *Independent*, 10 Dec. 2016; James J. Wirtz, 'Nuclear disarmament and the end of the chemical weapons "system of restraint"', *International Affairs* 95: 4, July 2019, pp. 785–800; Trevor McCrisken and Maxwell Downman, '"Peace through strength": Europe and NATO deterrence beyond the US Nuclear Posture Review', *International Affairs* 95: 2, March 2019, pp. 277–96.

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debate' between nuclear and non-nuclear powers,[20] and 'not simply Trump' but also 'rising geopolitical tensions, a resurgent Russia, arms modernization, and a hawkish Republican Congress'.[21]

How, or in what sense, did the early post-Cold War period constitute a 'golden age' of disarmament? Clearly, the 'golden age' sobriquet is meant to convey that significant progress was made. But progress on or towards what? 'Disarmament', after all, is a notoriously flexible concept. On the one hand, the term is widely used to describe a process of stockpile reductions, or even a broad agenda of regulating the possession and use of arms. On the other hand, it is also frequently used to denote the complete elimination of a particular type of weapon. Returning to the question of the 'golden age' of nuclear disarmament, there is widespread consensus that the early post-Cold War period saw a diminution of the salience of nuclear weapons in international affairs as well as the unlocking of a range of previously immovable items on the broader nuclear disarmament agenda: that is, that the late 1980s and 1990s witnessed progress on nuclear disarmament in the first sense identified above. However, a range of prominent observers within the disarmament community have in recent years made a much stronger claim by implying that the period in question also saw significant progress towards disarmament in the second sense, namely, that the end of the Cold War set the world on course for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. This is the narrative this article investigates. My underlying assumption is that progress *on* disarmament does not automatically translate into progress *towards* abolition. For example, stockpile reductions might serve to appease anti-nuclear critics and reduce demands for complete disarmament overall.[22]

Although there is no consensus among proponents of the stronger of the two views identified above on exactly who 'stole' disarmament—that is, on how or why progress towards abolition was derailed—it is frequently argued that the path to that end lies in a return to a formerly existing consensus. In some cases, a supposed great past is implicitly invoked without any specific dates being attached to it.[23] In other cases, advocates of disarmament are urged to draw lessons from arms control negotiations carried out during the Cold War.[24] Most commonly, however, abolitionists are invited to learn from the 1990s. For example, the UN Secretary-General's 2018 'agenda for disarmament' is designed to 'bring the international community back' to the abolitionist 'consensus' that supposedly was lost in the late 1990s.[25] According to a report by the British American Security Information Council (BASIC) sponsored by the government of Sweden, the end of the Cold War fostered significant progress towards global nuclear disarmament until a 'general

[20] Kjølv Egeland, 'How I learned to stop worrying and embrace diplomatic "polarization"', *Peace Review* 29: 4, 2017, p. 483.
[21] See Tannenwald, 'The vanishing nuclear taboo?', p. 17.
[22] See Cooper, 'Putting disarmament back in the frame'.
[23] See e.g. Group of Eminent Persons, 'Kyoto appeal'.
[24] Alexandra Bell, 'Small steps for arms control and the NPT review process', in *Meeting in the middle: opportunities for progress on disarmament in the NPT* (London: King's College London and Stiftung für Wissenschaft und Politik, 2019), pp. 19–23.
[25] UNODA, *Securing our common future*, p. 19.

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malaise' set in. The challenge now, BASIC asserts, is one of 'rebuilding' the 'habits of cooperation' that prevailed in the early 1990s.[26] In the words of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND), a group assembled on the initiative of the Australian and Japanese governments, the early 1990s saw an 'extremely productive period' for nuclear abolitionists.[27] Accordingly, the task for abolitionists is not to come up with new ideas or to radically transform the status quo, but rather to 'restore the momentum' that was lost in the mid-to-late 1990s.[28] For yet another observer, the United States should 'make arms control great again'.[29] For many years from the mid-1980s onwards, 'it seemed as if the world was on a slow but steady path to eventual disarmament'.[30]

The understanding of the immediate post-Cold War period as a time of significant progress towards complete nuclear disarmament forms the underlying premise for the incrementalist or 'progressive' approach to the elimination of nuclear weapons favoured by the NPT nuclear weapon states and most of their allies.[31] Since the existing institutional machinery once produced major strides towards the elimination of nuclear weapons, so goes the argument, it might do so again. There is consequently no need to rethink either the compatibility of progress towards abolition with the continued practice of nuclear deterrence, or the longstanding list of measures deemed worthy of consideration in the short term, such as the entry into force of the CTBT or the negotiation of a treaty banning the production of fissile material for military purposes. Indeed, according to the permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5), the 'best way to achieve a world without nuclear weapons' is through the 'proven approach' implemented following the end of the Cold War. In this view, attempts at delegitimizing nuclear weapons and deterrence, such as the movement that resulted in the negotiation and adoption of the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), should be abandoned as they merely serve to create 'divisions across the international non-proliferation and disarmament machinery, which could make further progress on disarmament even more difficult'.[32] The path to abolition, in this perspective, goes through compromise and respectful elite-level dialogue within the existing institutional and normative framework.[33] At

[26] Ingram and Downman, *Stepping stones*, p. 11.
[27] International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND), *Eliminating nuclear threats: a practical agenda for global policymakers* (Canberra and Tokyo: Paragon, 2009), pp. 5–6.
[28] ICNND, *Eliminating nuclear threats*, p. 60.
[29] Eric Gomez, 'After the INF: keeping arms control intact is tough, dangerous work', *Washington Examiner*, 25 Oct. 2018, https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/after-inf-keeping-arms-control-intact-tough-dangerous-work.
[30] Eric Gomez, *Taming the destroyer of worlds*, policy report 41: 4 (Washington DC: CATO Institute, 2019), p. 1.
[31] France, Statement to the UN General Assembly First Committee, A/C.1/71/PV.22, 27 Oct. 2016, p. 16; Russia, Statement to the UN General Assembly First Committee, A/C.1/72/PV.4, 4 Oct. 2017, p. 2; United States, Statement to the UN General Assembly First Committee, A/C.1/71/PV.22, 27 Oct. 2016, p. 12. See also the 2018 statement by Australia on behalf of 30 states: UN General Assembly First Committee, A/C.1/73/PV.11, 18 Oct. 2018, pp. 13–14.
[32] United Kingdom on behalf of the P5, Statement to the UN General Assembly First Committee, A/C.1/73/PV.14, 22 Oct. 2018, p. 5; Laura Considine, 'Contests of legitimacy and value: the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and the logic of prohibition', *International Affairs* 95: 5, Sept. 2019, pp. 1075–92.
[33] United Kingdom on behalf of the P5, Statement. See also e.g. UNODA, *Securing our common future*; ICNND, *Eliminating nuclear threats*; Ingram and Downman, *Stepping stones*.

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the heart of this approach lies the assumption that any change will have to take place through the art of persuasion: that is, that those currently opposing disarmament will have to be won over to the other side through 'civil' deliberations between experts and diplomats.[34] Accordingly, as the ICNND put it, proponents of nuclear deterrence strategies must be engaged 'in a way which recognizes and respects' their arguments.[35] For the UN High Representative for Disarmament, progress towards the abolition of nuclear weapons has been balked, in part, by 'rancorous debate' and expressions of 'frustration' by abolitionists.[36] By implication, approaches to disarmament centred on political mobilization, overt contestation or ridicule are framed as unnecessary or counterproductive.[37] However, as suggested above, the notion that the early post-Cold War period constituted a 'golden age' of arms control and disarmament is not *ipso facto* tantamount to a claim that those years produced significant steps towards the elimination of nuclear weapons. The following section investigates the extent to which the end of the Cold War did in fact produce major strides towards elimination.

Nuclear entrenchment after the Cold War

The thawing of the East–West conflict in the late 1980s melted away what had been a crucial structural determinant of international politics for several decades. The superpowers' competition for influence, along with deep-seated mutual mistrust and fears that catastrophic war might break out at any time, had placed significant constraints on the scope of international cooperation since the second half of the 1940s. The end of the Cold War has consequently been identified as a 'critical juncture' in diplomatic and world history,[38] a potential historical turning-point 'at which the interlocked networks of relation that preserve stability come unglued', increasing the causal power of agency and contingency.[39] The disintegration of the Warsaw Pact and end of the Cold War 'unglued' the familiar structure of international politics as a bipolar confrontation between two irreconcilable superblocs,[40] raising the prospect of rapid progress towards denuclearization.[41] After all, the retention and modernization of nuclear arsenals had been explicitly justified as a means of deterring aggression by the opposing bloc.

The opening of a window of opportunity for disarmament in the late 1980s and early 1990s was readily apparent at the time. By 1990, diplomats from a wide range of countries, including the leaders of the former Cold War blocs, were arguing that the international community stood on the brink of an 'entirely

[34] See e.g. Group of Eminent Persons, 'Kyoto appeal', p. 3.
[35] ICNND, *Eliminating nuclear threats*, p. 60.
[36] Nakamitsu, 'Keynote speech to the NATO conference on WMD arms control'.
[37] See Rodger A. Payne, 'Stigmatization by ridicule', in Tom Sayer, Jorg Kustermans and Barbara Segaert, eds, *Non-nuclear peace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 87–113.
[38] Ken Booth, *Theory of world security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 300.
[39] Andrew Abbott, *Time matters: on theory and method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 259.
[40] Odd A. Westad, *The Cold War: a world history* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).
[41] See e.g. Nick Ritchie, *US nuclear weapons policy after the Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 2.

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new world order'.[42] This new order would ostensibly be open for nuclear disarmament, the rule of international law, and economic development fuelled by a 'peace dividend'.[43] According to the president of the NPT review conference in 1990, the international community now had a chance to replace the 'traditional view of international security' with 'a global and planetary view'.[44] In the words of the 1992 Commission on Global Governance, the end of the Cold War had created 'a unique opportunity for strengthening global co-operation to meet the challenge of securing peace, achieving sustainable development, and universalizing democracy'.[45] Renowned American scholars and practitioners declared that nuclear weapons had little or no military utility in the new world order, and that the United States should pursue the creation of a world without nuclear weapons as a genuine, albeit long-term, objective.[46] That said, many in the United States and its allies remained sceptical about both the feasibility and the desirability of abolition.[47] There was little sense in the academic community at the time that complete nuclear disarmament would be implemented in the near future.

In Reykjavik in 1986, Reagan and Gorbachev reportedly came close to agreeing on a loose framework for total nuclear disarmament. The stumbling block, in the end, was the question of whether the United States should be free to test its Strategic Defense Initiative in space or be limited to laboratory testing.[48] What made the radical deliberations at Reykjavik possible? In hindsight, the most striking fact about the summit was that the disarmament proposals had not been planned or prepared in detail in advance of the summit. As Walker and Hunt observe, 'Reykjavik was never meant to be a watershed. The original agenda was modest—to prepare for upcoming summits in Washington and Moscow. American and Soviet negotiators were stunned when their principals raised the prospect of mutual nuclear disarmament.'[49] The near-breakthrough at Reykjavik, in other words, was the product of the direct engagement of two highly unorthodox leaders: Gorbachev, the embodiment of 'new thinking' in the Soviet Union; and Reagan, 'a loose cannon' whose views on foreign policy were often at loggerheads with the Washington Consensus.[50] On the subject of nuclear deterrence in particular, Reagan maintained views in direct opposition to the US foreign policy establishment.[51] Conventional wisdom held that nuclear weapons provided a source

[42] Soviet Union, Statement of the Soviet Union to the UN General Assembly First Committee, A/C.1/45/PV.4, 23 Oct. 1990, p. 3.
[43] See Hebatalla Taha, 'Economic imaginations and peacemaking in the ACRS working group', paper presented to workshop on 'Nuclear policy in the Middle East', American University in Cairo, 9 Jan. 2020.
[44] Oswaldo de Rivero, president's statement to the NPT Review Conference, New York, 20 Aug. 1990.
[45] Commission on Global Governance, *Our global neighbourhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 359.
[46] See e.g. Carl Kaysen, Robert S. McNamara and George W. Rathjens, 'Nuclear weapons after the Cold War', *Foreign Affairs* 70: 4, 1991, pp. 95–110.
[47] See e.g. Stuart Croft, 'Continuity and change in British thinking about nuclear weapons', *Political Studies* 42: 2, 1994, pp. 228–42.
[48] Paul F. Walker and Jonathan R. Hunt, 'The legacy of Reykjavik and the future of nuclear disarmament', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 67: 6, 2011, p. 63.
[49] Walker and Hunt, 'The legacy of Reykjavik', p. 64.
[50] Matthew Dallek, *The right moment* (New York: Free Press, 2000), p. 203.
[51] Beth A. Fischer, 'US foreign policy under Reagan and Bush', in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd A. Westad, eds, *The Cambridge history of the Cold War*, *volume 3: endings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 273; John L. Gaddis, *The Cold War* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), pp. 226–8.

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of authority and guarantee against attack. Accordingly, Reagan's advisers would oppose the president's disarmament advocacy, insisting that nuclear weapons had 'kept the peace all these years'. If he would only listen to his advisers, said Frank Carlucci, Reagan's national security advisor and later secretary of defense, the president might 'understand the issue better'.[52] In fact, several of Reagan's advisers and ministerial colleagues appear to have regarded the president's advocacy for disarmament as a quirky hang-up that needed to be resisted.[53] Richard Perle, assistant secretary of defense, allegedly described nuclear abolition as 'the worst thing in the world'.[54] According to Richard Rhodes, 'no one within the Reagan administration whose opinion counted shared the president's enthusiasm for nuclear abolition'.[55] The disarmament process was thus heavily dependent on the direct participation of Reagan and Gorbachev.[56] Once lower-level officials took over, the logic of disarmament that had prevailed in Reykjavik was overtaken by the familiar logic of suspicious arms control.[57] As recently declassified documents bear out, after Reykjavik the negotiations turned towards slimming down the enormous Cold War nuclear arsenals while at the same time safeguarding 'stability' through the continued operation of mutual nuclear deterrence.[58]

George H. W. Bush, who took up the reins at the White House in 1989, had run for the presidency as a continuity candidate who would stay the course set out by Reagan. However, in contrast to the highly unorthodox Reagan, Bush had been immersed in the US foreign policy establishment throughout his career, serving as ambassador to the UN under Nixon and as CIA director under Ford. In his memoir, Bush states plainly that he was prepared to undertake nuclear reductions if certain conditions were met, 'but not elimination'.[59] In September 1991, as the Soviet Union was in the process of dissolving, Bush declared in a major speech on foreign policy and arms control that regional instabilities and the supposed spread of weapons of mass destruction required the United States to 'maintain a strong military to protect our national interests and to honor commitments to our allies'. He went on to announce a series of steps to slim down the US nuclear arsenal, but stressed that the United States would also 'vigorously' modernize selected components of its strategic nuclear force. Ultimately, he argued, America 'must maintain modern nuclear forces including the strategic triad and thus ensure the credibility of our deterrent'. Air-delivered nuclear weapons stockpiled at US bases in Europe would 'of course' be retained.[60]

[52] University of Virginia Miller Center, 'Frank Carlucci oral history', 28 Aug. 2001, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/frank-carlucci-oral-history. See also Fischer, 'US foreign policy under Reagan and Bush', p. 273; Gaddis, *The Cold War*, pp. 226–8.

[53] Miller Center, 'Frank Carlucci oral history'; Fred Kaplan, *The bomb: presidents, generals, and the secret history of nuclear war* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), p. 173.

[54] Richard Rhodes, *Arsenals of folly* (New York: Vintage, 2007), pp. 222–3.

[55] Rhodes, *Arsenals of folly*, p. 222.

[56] On their relationship, see Nicholas Wheeler, *Trusting enemies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), ch. 6.

[57] William Walker, *A perpetual menace: nuclear weapons and international order* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 109.

[58] See e.g. US State Department Office of the Historian, 'Telegram from the delegation to the nuclear and space talks to the Department of State', Geneva, 9 Feb. 1987; US State Department Office of the Historian, 'Memorandum from Secretary of State Shultz to President Reagan', Washington DC, 14 Nov. 1986.

[59] George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A world transformed* (New York: Vintage, 1998), p. 203.

[60] George H. W. Bush, 'Address to the nation on reducing United States and Soviet nuclear weapons', 27 Sept. 1991.

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Bush's political appointments were revealing of the president's world-view. Perhaps most tellingly, Bush appointed Dick Cheney, a man well known for his 'distaste for negotiated arms control', as secretary of defense.[61] As national security advisor, Bush appointed Brent Scowcroft, a Washington insider who had served in the same role under President Ford. In the Bush administration, Scowcroft would be tasked with resisting the German government's push to eliminate tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.[62] A former air force officer and 'quintessential' cold warrior,[63] Scowcroft was on the record as a believer in the winnability of nuclear war and the necessity of US 'strategic superiority'.[64] By his own account, Scowcroft remained wary of Russian intentions and believed the end of the Cold War had only made the world more dangerous.[65] According to Scowcroft, there was consensus within the Bush administration that the United States and NATO needed 'modern nuclear forces' and that eliminating them 'remained completely unacceptable under any circumstances'.[66] Scowcroft had been 'concerned' by the deliberations at the Reykjavik summit, and thought Reagan's abolitionism misguided.[67] That said, Scowcroft was not opposed to nuclear force reductions *per se*. The strategic arms reduction talks, which resulted in the 1991 START-1 and 1993 START-2 treaties, were seen by the Bush administration as a 'step on the road to rationalizing strategic nuclear forces in a new era',[68] not as stepping stones on the path to abolition. While the number of nuclear warheads in the US arsenal was substantially reduced, the overall potency of the US nuclear force was not. On Lynn Eden's estimation, the lethality of the US nuclear arsenal would continue to increase into the 2000s.[69]

The 1990 NPT review conference failed to reach consensus owing to substantive disagreements between nuclear and non-nuclear powers about nuclear testing and modernization.[70] Five years earlier, the neutral and non-aligned states had accepted a 'compromise' text in which the parties agreed to disagree about the necessity of a CTBT, but in 1990 they were not prepared to continue glossing over profound political differences. This heightened polarization became if anything more acute over the course of the next year, as an amendment conference for the 1963 Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) was convened on the initiative of a group of non-aligned states eager to expand the scope of the treaty to cover underground testing. Since there was no hope of amending the treaty so long as the United States, an 'original party' under the terms of the agreement, resisted

[61] Bush and Scowcroft, *A world transformed*, p. 544.
[62] Bush and Scowcroft, *A world transformed*, p. 55.
[63] David Ignatius, 'Introduction', in Zbigniew Brzezinski, Brent Scowcroft and David Ignatius, *America and the world* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. viii.
[64] Brent Scowcroft, 'Deterrence and strategic superiority', *Orbis* 13: 2, 1969, p. 453.
[65] Brzezinski et al., *America and the world*, p. 242; Brent Scowcroft, 'Foreword', in Roger Z. George and Harvey Rishikof, eds, *The national security enterprise* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), p. xi.
[66] Bush and Scowcroft, *A world transformed*, pp. 150, 166.
[67] Bush and Scowcroft, *A world transformed*, pp. 53–4.
[68] Bush and Scowcroft, *A world transformed*, p. 1168.
[69] See Lynn Eden, 'The US nuclear arsenal and zero', in Catherine M. Kelleher and Judith Reppy, eds, *Getting to zero* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 72.
[70] Rebecca Johnson, *Unfinished business* (Geneva: UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), 2009), p. 34.

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alterations, many understood the conference as an initiative designed primarily to 'embarrass' those opposed to a CTBT.[71]

In 1991, NATO adopted a new 'strategic concept' for the first time since the 1960s. Rejoicing at the 'radically improved security environment' and the 'overcoming' of the supposed root causes of the Cold War, the drafters of the document noted that all of NATO's former adversaries had now 'rejected ideological hostility to the West'.[72] Even so, 'the demonstration of Alliance solidarity' and 'common commitment to war prevention' ostensibly required the continued retention of nuclear weapons, as well as the 'widespread participation' by European allies in 'collective defence planning in nuclear roles, in peacetime basing of nuclear forces on their territory and in command, control and consultation arrangements'. The alliance was faced with 'a great deal of uncertainty about the future', and nuclear forces remained 'essential' to the preservation of security.[73] The new strategic concept, in other words, acknowledged that the Cold War was over, but insisted that nuclear weapons could still not be relinquished. Earlier in 1991, in the lead-up to and during the Gulf War, President Bush and other US officials had repeatedly made veiled threats to use nuclear weapons against Iraq, presumably to deter Saddam Hussein from any use of chemical weapons.[74]

In 1993 Bill Clinton, a Democrat and an avowed proponent of disarmament,[75] assumed the presidency. He immediately shifted the US position in favour of a CTBT. His administration also carried out a sweeping transparency initiative, publishing a suite of previously classified numbers and documents relating to the US nuclear arsenal, and instructed the Pentagon to carry out a fundamental re-evaluation of US nuclear policy. Finalized in June 1994, the Clinton administration's 'nuclear posture review', the first of its kind, concluded that the fundamentals of US nuclear policy should be upheld.[76] This implied, *inter alia*, the retention of thousands of alert nuclear warheads and a full nuclear triad (nuclear-armed bombers, submarines and land-based missiles). However, in a highly significant rhetorical realignment, the Pentagon indicated that the primary function of nuclear weapons was no longer to deter a specific adversary from undertaking specific acts, but instead to hedge against threats that might emerge in the future.[77]

Despite the long-awaited initiation of negotiations on a CTBT in 1994, multilateral nuclear disarmament diplomacy remained acrimonious throughout the 1990s. The highly anticipated 1995 NPT review and extension conference saw bitter debate between nuclear and non-nuclear powers. While many of the latter were eager to use the conference as an opportunity to advance the disarmament agenda, the nuclear-armed states and their allies insisted that the treaty should be

[71] Kevin P. Clements, 'Will test ban conference self-destruct?', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist* 45: 6, 1989, p. 18.
[72] NATO, *The Alliance's Strategic Concept* (Brussels, 1991), para. 1.
[73] NATO, *The Alliance's Strategic Concept*, paras 5, 36, 38, 55. See Kjølv Egeland, 'Spreading the burden: how NATO became a "nuclear" alliance', *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 31: 1, 2020, pp. 143–67.
[74] See McGeorge Bundy, 'Nuclear weapons and the Gulf', *Foreign Affairs* 70: 4, 1991, pp. 83–94.
[75] Johnson, *Unfinished business*, p. 43.
[76] Robert A. Manning, 'The nuclear age: the next chapter', *Foreign Policy*, no. 109, 1997, p. 73.
[77] Ritchie, *US nuclear weapons policy*, p. 24.

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extended indefinitely and without disarmament conditions attached.[78] According to Thomas Graham, who led the US extension effort, the United States was 'very anxious' to prevent a tighter coupling of non-proliferation and disarmament.[79] Two years earlier, the United States and other nuclear powers had engaged in what a senior Swedish official described as the 'most supreme power politics' she had ever seen in an attempt to quash a resolution requesting the International Court of Justice to issue an advisory opinion on the legality of using or threatening to use nuclear weapons.[80]

Like the 1990 conference before it, the 1995 NPT review and extension conference failed to reach consensus on the review of NPT implementation over the preceding five years. However, the parties did agree to extend the NPT indefinitely and without conditions on disarmament beyond a set of aspirational, unenforceable pledges.[81] Some have argued that this was a good result for advocates of disarmament, as progress towards abolition requires a robust and independent non-proliferation regime.[82] Yet it has also been maintained that the indefinite and unconditional extension of the NPT in 1995 helped the nuclear weapon states to legitimize their retention of nuclear weapons. Writing in the late 1990s, Miguel Marín-Bosch, the leader of the Mexican delegation, asserted that 'the results of the 1995 NPT Conference were disastrous for those seeking firm commitments to the elimination of nuclear weapons'.[83] Two decades later, some of the key supporters of indefinite extension, including the conference president, have concluded that 'the warnings of broken promises and lost leverage sounded by some delegates in 1995 and in subsequent years indeed have come to pass'.[84]

In 1996 the UN General Assembly finally adopted a CTBT. The adoption of the treaty was celebrated by proponents of disarmament, yet there were obvious reasons for scepticism. Most importantly, the drafters set an exceptionally high bar for entry into force, requiring all states with operational nuclear energy programmes to ratify the treaty as a precondition for its becoming legally effective. As a result the CTBT is still not yet in force, a quarter of a century after its adoption. The Clinton administration signed the treaty, but was not able to secure support for ratification in the US Senate. According to a commentator writing in 1997, there had occurred a 'largely unnoticed conservative backlash' against the disarmers.[85] The United States ceased all nuclear explosive testing in 1992, but continued to engage in nuclear weapon design and maintenance, as

[78] Jayantha Dhanapala and Randy Rydell, *Multilateral diplomacy and the NPT* (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2005); Thomas Graham, Jr, *Disarmament sketches* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).

[79] Interview with Thomas Graham, conducted by Michal Onderco, 22 March 2017, Wilson Center, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/177539.

[80] The Canadian ambassador described the nuclear weapon states' opposition to the initiative as 'hysterical': see Kate Dewes and Robert Green, 'The World Court project', *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 7: 1, 1999, p. 66.

[81] Dhanapala and Rydell, *Multilateral diplomacy and the NPT*.

[82] Dhanapala and Rydell, *Multilateral diplomacy and the NPT*.

[83] Miguel Marín-Bosch, 'Getting rid of nuclear weapons', *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 13: 4, 1997, p. 283.

[84] Tariq Rauf, '25 years after the indefinite extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty', *In-depth News*, 11 May 2020. See also interview with Jayantha Dhanapala, conducted by Michal Onderco, 7 Feb. 2017, Wilson Center, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/177429.

[85] Manning, 'The nuclear age', p. 73.

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well as subcritical or 'zero-yield' testing. Inside the nuclear weapon laboratories, many had feared that the end of the Cold War would lead to a loss of work and funding. However, in the mid-1990s the US government initiated a so-called Stockpile Stewardship programme, involving huge investments in experimental techniques and simulation.[86] Along with the Reliable Replacement Warhead programme, which would be initiated in the early 2000s, Stockpile Stewardship allowed the nuclear weapons complex to engage in a process of 'sociotechnical repair', entrenching itself in the post-Cold War world.[87]

Progress towards abolition has since the late 1980s typically been measured by reference to the overall number of nuclear warheads in the world.[88] From this perspective the arms race peaked in 1986, after which the world has been on course to total abolition of nuclear arms. Yet the sheer number of nuclear warheads in the world is arguably a poor standard by which to measure arms racing and disarmament. Investments, postures, negotiating mandates, capabilities, and overall lethality and yield are equally, if not more, accurate as indicators of the direction(s) of nuclear history. Perhaps the best indicator of disarmament intentions is spending on modernization programmes. As it happens, nuclear modernization programmes have been carried forward by successive US presidential administrations throughout the nuclear age, including during the so-called golden age of nuclear disarmament.[89] In fact, accounting for inflation, US spending on nuclear weapons research, development, testing and production *increased* between 1989 and 1993.[90] Another significant development in this period was the consolidation of the US defence industry through a series of mergers and acquisitions directly subsidized by the Clinton administration. The respective mergers of Northrop and Grumman, Lockheed and Martin, and Boeing and McDonnell Douglas left the United States with a small number of defence industrial giants with increased bargaining power *vis-à-vis* the Pentagon. According to one analyst, the consolidation process led to a strengthening of the Cold War 'rentseeking triangles' of economic, political and military elites with stakes in the military–industrial complex.[91]

As the 'golden age' for disarmament drew to a close in the second half of the 1990s, US and NATO strategic discourse continued to represent nuclear weapons as indispensable instruments of security and stability. While during the Cold War nuclear weapons had been justified as a necessary evil to deter Soviet aggression, now they were framed as a hedge against abstract 'future uncertainties'.[92] From

[86] Benjamin Sims and Christopher R. Henke, 'Repairing credibility', *Social Studies of Science* 42: 3, 2012, p. 325.
[87] Sims and Henke, 'Repairing credibility', p. 324.
[88] James Goodby, *At the borderline of Armageddon: how American presidents managed the atom bomb* (Lanham, MD, and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), p. 132.
[89] Kingston Reif, *US nuclear modernization programs* (Washington DC: Arms Control Association, Aug. 2018), https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/USNuclearModernization.
[90] Stephen I. Schwartz, *Atomic audit: the costs and consequences of US nuclear weapons since 1940* (Washington DC: Brookings, 1998), p. 75. It should be noted that the unit cost of complex defence equipment tends to increase substantially from one generation to the next. Nevertheless, the increase in spending at the very least indicates an absence of a paradigm shift or radical reorientation in policy. See Cooper, 'Putting disarmament back in the frame', pp. 358–9.
[91] Rachel Weber, *Swords into Dow shares* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001), pp. 10, 100.
[92] See Bryan C. Taylor, '"A hedge against the future": the post-Cold War rhetoric of nuclear weapons modernization', *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 96: 1, 2010, pp. 1–24.

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this perspective, the overarching discursive justification for the retention of US nuclear weapons had over the course of the 1990s been rendered almost completely unassailable, liberated from the constraints of time and geopolitical circumstances. The basic infrastructure for the maintenance and deployment of nuclear weapons had been perpetuated *in toto*.[93] All legs of the US nuclear triad had been retained and were included in the Pentagon's future plans; the national nuclear laboratories enjoyed funding and a steady stream of projects; the major defence contractors were continuing to develop and maintain US nuclear weapon systems; and while explosive nuclear testing ceased in 1992, subcritical testing continued, the CTBT remained unratified, and the Nevada nuclear test site was not irreversibly closed down. In 1997, Jesse Helms and other Republicans ideologically opposed to arms control and disarmament secured a backroom agreement in Congress to permanently dissolve the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, the US government's hub of disarmament expertise since the 1960s.[94] Two years earlier, a Republican faction sceptical of independent scrutiny of weapon programmes had secured the dissolution of the Office of Technology Assessments.[95] Writing in 2001, Robert Ayson concluded that, 'as the 21st century opens, there are few signs of clear progress toward the elimination of nuclear weapons'.[96] Looking back, it is far from clear that the world was closer to the elimination of nuclear weapons in 1997 or 2001 than it was in 1986.

Nostalgia in nuclear disarmament discourse

Based on the Greek words *nostos*, meaning 'to return home', and *algos*, meaning 'pain', the term 'nostalgia' was first coined to describe a supposedly lethal kind of homesickness afflicting Swiss mercenaries in the seventeenth century.[97] Today, the concept is used to denote a yearning for the past. Sociologists have pointed out that such memories are often shared collectively and, by implication, reflect underlying social trends, anxieties and ideologies.[98] Inherently linked to conceptions of the past, nostalgia is usually understood as 'fundamentally conservative in its praxis, for it wants to keep things as they were—or, more accurately, as they are imagined to have been'.[99] Nostalgia narratives are distinguished from other kinds of collective memory in being shaped by 'an active selection of what to remember and how to remember it'.[100] However, nostalgia could also be a force for progressive or even revolutionary change provided that a suitably progressive reference period is selected.[101] According to theorists of collective memory, nostalgia often

[93] See Tom Sauer, *Nuclear inertia: US nuclear weapons policy after the Cold War* (New York: Tauris, 2005), pp. 164–6; Janne E. Nolan, *An elusive consensus* (Washington DC: Brookings, 1999).
[94] Leon Ratz, *Organizing for arms control* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belfer Center, 2013), p. 17.
[95] Bruce Bimber, *The politics of expertise in Congress* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996).
[96] Robert Ayson, 'Management, abolition, and nullification', *Nonproliferation Review* 8: 3, 2001, p. 72.
[97] Linda Hutcheon, 'Irony, nostalgia, and the postmodern: a dialogue', *Poligrafías*, no. 3, 2000, p. 19.
[98] Fred Davis, *Yearning for yesterday: a sociology of nostalgia* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1979).
[99] Hutcheon, 'Irony, nostalgia, and the postmodern', p. 22.
[100] Janelle L. Wilson, *Nostalgia: sanctuary of meaning* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2005), p. 25.
[101] Enzo Traverso, *Left-wing melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

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functions as a vehicle for justifying political arrangements, policing or encouraging specific actions, or allaying fears about the perceived direction of history.[102] Conceptions of the course of history help determine the boundaries of political action and, by extension, future actions and conditions.

As suggested above, much contemporary nuclear disarmament discourse exhibits a strong wistfulness for the past, most often the late 1980s and 1990s. Given that this period saw the end of the Cold War and the adoption of a myriad measures to reduce the number and salience of nuclear weapons, such fond reminiscence is not necessarily unwarranted. However, as discussed above, a number of governments, organizations and analysts contend that the period also produced decisive steps towards the elimination of nuclear weapons, as well as consensus on a blueprint for disarmament. Invariably, these observers implicitly or explicitly counsel against new approaches and advise advocates of abolition instead to engage in respectful elite-level dialogue to 'rebuild', 'restore' or 'bring back' a lost disarmament consensus.

However, as the analysis above documents, the narrative of a bygone golden age of significant progress towards abolition rests on a biased reconstruction of history and is, as such, nostalgic. The reality is that, beyond South Africa's unilateral abandonment of its secret nuclear arsenal, the decade following the end of the Cold War did not produce much clear-cut progress towards the elimination of nuclear weapons.[103] Perhaps the general direction of travel went towards reduced reliance on nuclear arms. But the idea that this direction of travel indicated consensus on a common vision and path leading to the total elimination of nuclear weapons, as suggested by some of the leading actors in the disarmament community, enjoys little empirical support. In fact, even during the 'golden age' of disarmament, there was no such consensus within the US government, let alone in the international community more broadly. Moreover, the notion that multilateral nuclear disarmament diplomacy in the early 1990s was marked by particularly productive practices of cooperation or harmonious dialogue between nuclear-armed and non-nuclear-armed governments has little if any basis in historical fact.

Although nostalgia invokes and draws on the past, nostalgic memory is a function of present social tensions and anxieties. In the words of the historian David Lowenthal, 'nostalgia is a symptom of malaise'.[104] Recent appeals to make arms control and disarmament diplomacy great again may thus be conceptualized as a practice of collective myth-making enacted in response to the current malaise in nuclear politics.[105] In the words of Nick Ritchie, intensifying nuclear competition between major powers and contests over the legitimacy of nuclear deterrence, crystallized above all in the politics of the TPNW, have put the established global nuclear order under stress, giving rise in the United States and industrial-

[102] Davis, *Yearning for yesterday*.

[103] It also bears mention that the implementation of disarmament in South Africa appears to have owed less to respectful arms control deliberations than to sweeping domestic reforms and decades of overt stigmatization and pressure from international and domestic actors. See Peter Liberman, 'The rise and fall of the South African bomb', *International Security* 26: 2, 2001, pp. 45–86.

[104] David Lowenthal, *The past is a foreign country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 13.

[105] See Michael Kenny, 'Back to the populist future?', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 22: 3, 2017, pp. 256–73.

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ized North—the countries that appear most comfortable in the extant system—to 'nuclear ordering anxiety'.[106] Indeed, a growing number of states and observers have in recent decades come to the conclusion that the old order, despite the NPT's formal endorsement of the goal of disarmament, is 'structurally unable to categorically delegitimize nuclear weapons and the practice of nuclear deterrence'.[107] Distinguishing between 'nuclear weapon states' and 'non-nuclear weapon' states, the NPT has allowed members of the former group to portray their indefinite retention of nuclear weapons as internationally sanctioned and thereby legitimate.

The nostalgic narrative identified above provides actors that are nominally in favour of abolition but reluctant to contest the prevailing power structures of the global nuclear order with a means of cognitive and rhetorical escape. Framing the traditional, 'progressive' approach as tried and trusted but momentarily blocked, the nostalgic narrative allows those comfortable with the status quo to argue that novel initiatives such as the TPNW are unnecessary or even detrimental to the goal of elimination, and that the existing course should be maintained.[108] For example, the US assistant secretary of state for international security and non-proliferation argued in December 2018 that the end of the Cold War had produced 'extraordinary progress' towards the elimination of nuclear weapons. Further progress would be made as soon as serious dialogue between states could facilitate a more favourable security environment, he argued. There was therefore no need, in his words, for the 'emptily divisive virtue-signaling' of the TPNW.[109] It might be noted that a range of scholars have found that public appeals to abandon 'divisive' rhetoric and initiatives in favour of so-called respectability politics often function as means of nullifying criticism and discrediting voices for change.[110] Tellingly, the Japanese government—arguably the government that has been most heavily criticized for its unwillingness to sign the TPNW[111]—has made the 'necessity of restoring civility in discourse and respect for divergent views' a key feature of its arms control policy.[112]

Conclusion

A decade into the post-Cold War period, Joseph Rotblat rejoiced at the ongoing reduction of the global nuclear weapons inventory, but warned that 'the basic

[106] Nick Ritchie, 'A hegemonic nuclear order', *Contemporary Security Policy* 40: 4, 2019, pp. 409–34. See also Laura Considine, 'Contests of legitimacy and value: the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and the logic of prohibition', *International Affairs* 95: 5, Sept. 2019, pp. 1075–92.

[107] Nick Ritchie, 'Waiting for Kant: devaluing and delegitimizing nuclear weapons', *International Affairs* 90: 3, 2014, p. 621.

[108] See Michael Hamel-Green, 'The Nuclear Ban Treaty and 2018 disarmament forums', *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1: 2, 2018, p. 441.

[109] Christopher A. Ford, 'The P5 process and approaches to nuclear disarmament', remarks at Wilton Park, UK, 10 Dec. 2018.

[110] Andrew Calabrese, 'Liberalism's disease: civility above justice', *European Journal of Communication* 30: 5, 2015, pp. 539–53; Nina M. Lozano-Reich and Dana L. Cloud, 'The uncivil tongue', *Western Journal of Communication* 7: 3, 2009, pp. 220–26.

[111] Ramesh Thakur, 'Japan and the nuclear weapons prohibition treaty', *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1: 1, 2018, pp. 11-31.

[112] Japan, 'Statement to the UN General Assembly First Committee', New York, 9 Oct. 2018.

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philosophy about nuclear weapons has not changed'.[113] In the general sense that nuclear weapons were still conceived of as indispensable by key states, Rotblat was correct. However, the continuity of a 'basic philosophy' belied the complete transformation of the overarching justification for the retention of nuclear weapons. After all, once the Cold War was over, the strategic narratives justifying the retention of nuclear weapons had to be rewritten. While during the Cold War nuclear weapons were legitimized as tools to deter an easily identifiable, menacing enemy from undertaking specific actions, nuclear deterrence was in the early 1990s reframed as an abstract hedge against future uncertainties. The seeds of the current malaise in arms control diplomacy were in this view sown in the early 1990s.

The end of the Cold War afforded an opportunity to reconstitute international and nuclear order. Yet, as it turned out, the post-Cold War period brought less change than many had hoped for. For the historian Odd Arne Westad, the 1990s 'was a lost opportunity for institutionalizing cooperation … [and] for using the peace dividend globally to combat disease, poverty, and inequality'.[114] Measures to tackle the looming climate crisis ended up being ineffective, as policy-makers proved unwilling to abandon fossil fuel-based growth models and vested interests successfully rewired Cold War ideological tropes.[115] In the nuclear realm, the major powers reduced the sheer number of nuclear warheads in their arsenals, but continued to modernize their capabilities. There was never consensus on a common vision and path to zero. Nobody stole disarmament.

The historical record stands in sharp contrast to recent accounts of the late 1980s and early 1990s as a 'golden age' of consensus on a common vision and path leading to the elimination of nuclear weapons. In this view, the end of the Cold War facilitated constructive multilateral diplomacy and decisive steps towards a world without nuclear weapons. The completion of the process, so goes the story, has been hindered by unenlightened leaders, 'polarization' between nuclear and non-nuclear powers, or unpredictable changes to the security environment. I have argued that this account reflects a nostalgic reconstruction of history that exaggerates past successes while ignoring failures and setbacks. Dovetailing with current anxieties about the demise of nuclear order, the nostalgic narrative identified in this article serves to discredit overt political contestation and innovation by framing the traditional, 'progressive' approach to nuclear disarmament as 'proven' but temporarily off track. In so doing, it helps perpetuate the extant nuclear order and the power structures that sustain it. The conclusion of this article is not that abolition is impossible, or even that nostalgia can have no place in disarmament practice, but rather that any successful approach to the elimination of nuclear weapons must look forward with imagination and backward with humility.

[113] Joseph Rotblat, 'Toward a nuclear weapon-free world as a prelude to a war-free world', in Jozef Goldblat, ed., *Nuclear disarmament* (London: Tauris, 2000), pp. 3–4.
[114] Westad, *The Cold War*, p. 618.
[115] Michael E. Mann and Tom Toles, *The madhouse effect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 74–6, 120.

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