

Return to: [Opinions](#)

## In A Nuclear Shadow

Aaron Scherb

August 07, 2006



Aaron Scherb is a legislative assistant at the Friends Committee on National Legislation and works on defense and foreign policy issues. He helped write the FCNL booklet [Still in the Shadow of Nuclear Weapons](#), which discusses U.S. nuclear weapons policy and what can be done to change it.

“Those poor little people, those poor little people.”

The secretary for nuclear physicist Robert Oppenheimer [overheard him](#) pacing back and forth dejectedly repeating this phrase in late July 1945. Only several weeks later, several hundred thousand of “those poor little people” would instantly be killed by two atomic bombs.

This week marks the 61st anniversary since the United States used nuclear weapons on August 6 and August 9, 1945, in Japan. Most survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are now dead, and the fact that the United States remains the only country to have used nuclear weapons has faded from our historical memory. The Bush administration’s policy to try to expand the U.S. nuclear arsenal and sell [nuclear fuel](#) to other countries jeopardizes the many years of hard work and progress this country has made to reduce the role that nuclear weapons have in international politics.

In 1947, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists established a nuclear doomsday clock to gauge how close the world is to nuclear war. According to the clock, the closer it gets to midnight, the closer the world is to nuclear war. Since 1947, it has fluctuated between two minutes to midnight—1953, when both the U.S. and Russia were testing nuclear weapons—to 17 minutes—1991, when the U.S. and the Soviet Union signed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and announced unilateral cuts in tactical and strategic nuclear weapons. Since 2002, the clock has remained at seven minutes to midnight, but rhetoric from a few U.S. nuclear hawks about using nuclear weapons against Iran suggests it should move closer to midnight.

After the United States opened the nuclear Pandora’s box, hundreds of atmospheric nuclear tests were conducted between 1945 and 1963. Alarmed by the proliferation, the world’s leaders sought to regulate nuclear testing, initiating a series of nuclear agreements that have been essential to controlling the spread of nuclear weapons. In 1963 the Partial Test Ban Treaty was signed by 113 countries. The treaty banned nuclear tests in the atmosphere, underwater, and in space. The same year it entered into force, President Kennedy predicted that by 1975, some 15 to 20 countries would have nuclear arms. However, so far only four countries have acquired and maintained nuclear weapons. This is in large part due to the 1970 nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the international agreement signed by 188 countries that bans the export of nuclear technology to nations that don’t agree to international inspections of their nuclear programs. The NPT has been the bedrock of future arms control agreements, but it did not prevent an arms race during the Cold War between the United States and the U.S.S.R.

The end of the Cold War heightened the momentum to reduce the role nuclear weapons play in foreign policy. In addition to START greatly reducing the number of U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons, the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR), or “Nunn-Lugar,” program was adopted by Congress in 1991. CTR secures loose nuclear materials in the former Soviet Union and in recent years has expanded to other countries. Further progress was achieved in 1996 with the signing of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which bans underground nuclear tests. Although

### LATEST

- [Hands On The Internet](#) August 07, 2006
- [The Progressive Future Is Now](#) August 07, 2006
- [Israel's Neocon Nightmare](#) August 07, 2006
- [Yanquí Cuba](#) August 04, 2006
- [Positive Energy: Your Letters](#) August 04, 2006

### ARCHIVES

### SUBSCRIBE

Sign up for our free daily dispatch.  
[Privacy Policy](#)



ENRICH PUBLIC DISCOURSE,

**Tax Free.**Give to [TomPaine.com](#).

President Clinton signed the CTBT, the Senate refused to ratify it in October 1999 because some senators wanted to leave open the possibility for future testing.

Even after significant achievements at the end of the Cold War, about 27,000 nuclear weapons exist worldwide today. Of these, Russia possesses around 16,000, and the U.S. holds approximately 10,000. The remaining 1,000 or so are owned by North Korea, Pakistan, Israel, India, China, France and Great Britain. And the Bush administration has done little to reduce the nuclear danger. While at the State Department, John Bolton tried to remove the U.S. signature from the CTBT, and nuclear hawks in the Defense and Energy Departments wanted to resume nuclear testing. They backed off, concluding that Congress would not support these measures.

Nonetheless, the Bush administration has attempted to build several new nuclear weapons over the last few years. Efforts to build one such weapon, the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator, or the nuclear “bunker buster,” were defeated in Congress the last two years. The Bush administration is now seeking to redesign its current nuclear arsenal by claiming that it may become unreliable. The proposed new nuclear weapon program, given the misnomer the “Reliable Replacement Warhead,” would overhaul current nuclear weapons with new warhead designs. Congress has allocated some money for design work for the program, but redesigned warheads are years and billions of dollars away. Attempting to build a new nuclear weapon, while telling other countries not to, creates a double standard and undermines U.S. legitimacy worldwide in trying to prevent the nuclear weapons danger.

With the 61st anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the public should press the Bush administration to reduce the role that nuclear weapons play in foreign policy. In a March 2005 [Associated Press-Ipsos poll](#) , 66 percent of Americans surveyed said they believe that no country should possess nuclear weapons. In the 2004 presidential debates, President Bush stated that proliferation of weapons of mass destruction poses the biggest threat to security in the world. President Bush should follow the American public and support his words with actions by pushing the doomsday clock farther from midnight.