

Faith and Science Leaders Agree: Reduce the Threat of Nuclear Catastrophe Now May 2016

Nuclear weapons remain a real and urgent threat to humanity and our planet. If there is even a limited nuclear exchange, millions—if not billions—of people could perish, large swaths of the planet could be contaminated, and the global economy could collapse. As President Obama said in his historic April 2009 Prague speech, the United States has a moral responsibility to lead the world in a life-affirming effort to reduce the risks posed by nuclear weapons and pursue the peace and security of a world free of them.

We the undersigned—representing organizations of faith and science—share that goal and urge President Obama to take meaningful, practical nuclear risk-reduction steps.

First, we are deeply concerned about the administration’s proposal to spend more than \$1 trillion building a new generation of nuclear warheads, missiles, bombers and submarines. These new programs are inconsistent with the vision the president outlined in the Prague speech, and likely will lead to a dangerous and costly nuclear arms race. Spending money we don’t have on weapons we don’t need won’t make us safer. The president should scale back these plans and cancel the new nuclear-armed cruise missile, which is destabilizing and unneeded. Congress should refuse to fund such dangerous and unnecessary weapons programs.

Second, as a concrete step toward the eventual multilateral elimination of nuclear weapons, President Obama should reduce the U.S. deployed strategic arsenal by a third, which is a level the Pentagon agrees is adequate to maintain security. He should call on Russia to follow suit. Reducing nuclear arsenals worldwide will also reduce the risk that these weapons could fall into the hands of terrorist groups.

Third, the United States and Russia each keep hundreds of nuclear weapons on high alert, so they can be launched within minutes. This practice makes the risk of an accidental, mistaken or unauthorized launch unacceptably high. Over the last several decades, there have been numerous near misses when human or technical errors—combined with a short amount of time in which to respond—increased the risk of a nuclear catastrophe. Faith and science leaders understand human frailty. We must guard against both human error and hubris.

To greatly reduce the risk of catastrophe, President Obama should remove U.S. land-based nuclear missiles from their current hair-trigger status and eliminate the option in U.S. war plans of launching them on warning. He should urge Russia to reciprocate. As he noted back in 2008, just before taking office: “[K]eeping nuclear weapons ready to launch on a moment’s notice is a dangerous relic of the Cold War. Such policies increase the risk of catastrophic accidents or miscalculation.”

Each of these steps would help fulfill U.S. obligations under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, in which the nations of the world have agreed to work together toward the eventual elimination of all nuclear weapons. Heightened tensions between the United States and Russia, and the growing risk of nuclear use worldwide, are all the more reason for the president to take these meaningful steps to strengthen national and international security.

As faith and science leaders, we stand ready to support these steps toward a safer world. We call on all Americans to join us.



Leith Anderson, president, National Association of Evangelicals



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