

BACK TO THE FUTURE WITH NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Written by John Hallam
Friday, 27 November 2015 14:42 -

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The year 1983 was a very very important year. It even felt so at the time, with my beloved with whom I've spent the next 32 years walking into my life early on that year, by far the most important thing I was aware of at the ripe age of 30, in my own life.

We didn't know it at the time (though it was 'in the air', and public consciousness of the possibility was indeed very high), but later that year, the world nearly ended, twice – once on September 26 half past midnight Moscow time, and in a more prolonged crisis in November as the Able Archer exercises came to a climax that was more terrifying than anyone had thought possible, with Russia planning on the basis that this was to be a NATO first-strike.

Nobody exactly knew at the time these things had taken place – the details and the hero of the Sept26 incident at Serpukhov-15 emerged only in 1998 -

But people DID understand very well that the world was in danger. I remember my parents friends saying things like 'I'm going to see Europe while it's still there', (and later saying they'd decided not to because it was too dangerous).

By 1986, demonstrations in Sydney coordinated by a coalition of groups including People for Nuclear Disarmament (PND) numbered hundreds of thousands. Even larger numbers attended demonstrations in the US and Europe.

It turns out that the Serpukhov15 incident and the Able archer exercise are by no means the only occasions on which the world has nearly ended.

There are disturbingly many such events including the mistaking of a Norwegian research rocket for a US First strike in 1995, (Boris decided not to launch but the apocryphal wisdom is that we were saved by an unknown Presidential adviser who uttered the immortal words 'excuse me Mr President, lets wait another minute'), and a bunch of computer glitches in the US in the late 70's and early '80s that indicated thousands of incoming Soviet warheads but turned out to be a malfunctioning microchip. In addition there were at least two major 'near misses' in the Cuban Missile Crisis, plus an event in 1964 in which some idiot in STRATCOM (who it was is unknown) managed to inadvertently and unknowingly (!!) transmit a valid order to launch to the entire US strategic nuclear forces.

We are, it seems, lucky or blessed by divine providence, (according to General Lee Butler, whose finger was on the nuclear button for a decade or so) to have made it to 2015 at all. Bracketing the question of whether divine providence actually exists, if we assume it does, the next question gets to be 'when does the miracle supply dry up?'.

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists both in 1983 (in fact, since 1946), and in 2015, operates an iconic symbolic timepiece known as the 'Doomsday Clock'.

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In 1983, the year the world nearly ended twice, the doomsday clock stood at 3 minutes to 'midnight'. The closest it ever got was two minutes to midnight in 1954, immediately after both the USSR and the USA exploded their first thermonuclear weapons, and amid mutual threats (and active military planning for on the US side) – of a 'disarming' first strike.

Today, the Doomsday clock sits at 3 minutes to 'midnight'.

'Midnight' is of course, the apocalypse, the end of 'civilization', and of much much more than mere 'civilization'.

We now know that the global climatic effects of even a relatively small number of nuclear weapons, numbered in the hundreds, are sufficient to cause a 'nuclear winter', or at least a 'nuclear autumn' in which up to 2 billion of the world's poorer people could die of famine caused by global crop failure.

The use of the roughly 1800 of the US and Russian nuclear arsenals that are kept in silos on high ('day – to – day') alert, would bring about conditions of global freezing and darkness colder than those of the last ice-age.

We actually didn't know any of that for sure back in 1983, when the research into nuclear winter was in its infancy, and computer global climatic simulations were also in their infancy.

We also didn't know, though we should have, that the entire techno-structure/cyberstructure of contemporary (2015) 'civilization' will disappear in the first milliseconds of a nuclear confrontation between either NATO and Russia or the US and China, as large warheads are exploded high in space and the resultant electromagnetic pulse fries the microchips of everything. The global financial system literally disappears. In an instant.

It's also worth a reminder, though it may seem brutal, that of course, the 180 million or so tonnes of very dark black smoke lofted into the upper stratosphere does of course consist of US, (and of course, 'THEM') our friends and enemies, our houses, cars, and our cities which have been converted into firestorms that burn till there is nothing left to burn. Up to a billion people thus get to die in the first 90 minutes or so.

While there are places that might escape the immediate holocaust, (The South Island of NZ – The Falklands – Patagonia – some of Africa – Tasmania - the subsequent cold and darkness that makes agriculture all but impossible, combined with the total destruction of the ozone layer, would make the majority of complex land-based life – forms extinct.

Humans would be very lucky to make it at all. Our own extinction would be definitely on the agenda.

The doomsday clock, now as in 1983, stands at 3 minutes to midnight for an event sequence that has been known for decades as in every real, meaningful sense, the end of the world.

In 1983 this was the very top of everyone's political agenda.

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Now.....?????

If we stood in 1983 as we now stand, there would be again hundreds of thousands in the streets.

Expressions of alarm at the possibility of a world-ending conflict are not uncommon. These days they tend to come from rooms-full of nobels or former foreign ministers, or from organizations consisting of famous people who have been people. They come also from retired military including from most recently, Generals Cartwright and Vladimir Dvorkin, respectively at one time leaders of US and Russian strategic missile forces. And of course, from the indefatigable Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, whose moving of the hands of the clock remains a highly scripted and iconic media event, even if it is now a little 'Ho hum, end of the world again...!'.

Yet the threat of nuclear weapons use and the threat of the end of 'civilization' and of possible human extinction is as real as it has ever been, and just got a bit closer with the Turkish shoot-down of a Russian aircraft over Syria (or maybe for 17 seconds, over Turkey). Yet they seem to meet with expressions of blank incomprehension.

That is why Professor Peter King and I set up the Human Survival Project (A joint project between PND and the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies, both solidly 1980's organizations).

That is why we are holding an International Tribunal on nuclear weapons, human survival and human extinction in 2016. Preparations by the Human Survival Project, CPACS and PND are under way. Our aim and object is to put the issues of nuclear abolition, and human survival firmly on peoples agendas.

And that is why both NGOs and 135 governments at the UN are holding discussions in 2016 at an Open Ended Working group aimed at charting a course whereby the world might eliminate nuclear weapons forever and take the apocalypse off the global agenda, where it has remained for far too long.

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