

# Western States Legal Foundation

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## **Civil Society, Disarmament and the Need for New Beginnings**

by Andrew Lichterman

In May, disarmament organizations will assemble alongside government delegations meeting for the 2010 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference. Coming together in side events between attempts to pursue and persuade diplomats has become a familiar practice among the world's nongovernmental organizations, and should provide an opportunity to reflect and to develop strategies together. The focus on governments, however, often overshadows our own discussions, limiting their scope to what those in power might be persuaded to do in the near term and how we might persuade them to do it.

As we gather this year, humanity is confronted with several crises, each different but all ultimately intertwined. We face the decline of our natural environment, with climate change being only one of the human-induced transformations destroying natural and man-made systems from which we draw our sustenance today, and limiting our options for how we will live in the future.

These changes strike the poorest first — those who cannot afford to move, build expensive new infrastructure, or import the means of existence from afar when their locale is devastated by a global mode of production dedicated to short-term growth heedless of the long-term consequences. As competition for key nonrenewable resources intensifies, essentials of food and energy devour an increasing portion of their income, creating a rising cycle of misery exacerbated by a two tier global economy in which immensely powerful private corporations destroy local markets while ultimately raising the price of many necessities, pumping up profits by pushing costs off on ecosystems and future generations.

At the same time, the economic crisis persists, precipitated by the collapse of the latest and largest financial bubble and prolonged by the immense gulf between those few who control most of the world's wealth and productive assets and the millions who can neither find productive work nor pay for what might be produced by others. What recovery there has been consists mainly of securing more of the world's wealth and social product for the top 20 percent or so, the increasingly self-contained top-tier economy of government organizations and giant corporations that buy and sell most of the world's goods to each other and their upper echelons, inhabiting fortified islands of wealth amidst a global sea of poverty.

The growing chasm between the minority who hold secure places in the economy of large — and largely authoritarian — organizations and the rest of humanity is the defining social fact of our time. Unless it is directly confronted and overcome it will define the limits of the politically possible, driving increased conflict and with it expenditure by the wealthy sectors of society on "security." Both pervasive conflict and the misdirection of ever more resources in an effort to contain it (rather than removing its causes) will make the transformation of global energy, transportation, agriculture, and industrial systems essential for long-term human survival more difficult, perhaps impossible.

IN THE FIRST DECADE of the new century, we have wars and threats of wars, with nuclear weapons moving ever closer to the center of conflict. Nuclear weapons and nuclear

“nonproliferation” serve as the justification for wars and as the stalking horse for the economic and geopolitical agendas of largely unaccountable elites who control the most powerful states. They are already nuclear armed and have shown themselves, as in the case of the United States, ready to threaten nuclear weapons use against those who have none. And nuclear weapons — the all too real national arsenals, not the theoretical ones that the demonized states du jour or “terrorist” groups might or might not be trying to acquire — remain the machinery of ultimate catastrophe. They are still there, waiting at the end of some as yet unforeseen chain of great power elite contention and confrontation as those in power attempt to “manage” the multiple crises in ways that apply ever more technology and violence, while stubbornly refusing to address the fundamental causes of deteriorating ecosystems and proliferating social conflict. This systematic exclusion of discussion about root causes, enforced myriad ways in forums world wide, creates a pervasive feeling of inertia, a sense that political systems everywhere are not working.

DESPITE ALL OF THIS, most of the visible “disarmament work” generated by “civil society” organizations, proceeds with little change from one year, and one decade, to the next. The principal focus remains on three kinds of things:

The first is the weapons themselves: the effects of their use, their legal status, the effects on “stability” of various weapons systems when possessed by one or another combination of adversaries, the ecological effects of designing, testing, and producing them.

The second is the mechanics of disarmament: how to dispose of weapons when no longer desired, how to verify their destruction or their continued existence, how to track the materials and technologies that can be used for their manufacture.

The third is how to prevent anyone new from obtaining them. Efforts to mobilize support for elimination of nuclear arsenals concentrates on long-familiar litanies within these limits: the horrors we already know from the U.S. atomic bombings of Japan, informed speculation regarding their civilization-destroying capacity, the elaboration of convincingly plausible, and by now endlessly tweaked and refined, proposals for verifiable step-by-step elimination of nuclear arsenals, and a shifting array of related issues regarding the economic, social, and ecological costs of maintaining them.

WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS, the analysis and recommendations offered by the visible layers of “civil society” stay on the terrain favored by professionals and experts: the description of social ills, and technical prescriptions for their elimination. Even moral appeals have narrowed to a kind of specialization, with only those expert in religion or who hold irrefutable status as victims qualified to be heard. When connections between issues are made, they usually are made regarding the effects of nuclear weapons and the institutions that sustain them, rather than the causes for their existence. Mirroring the top-down “management” approaches to controlling the “nuclear danger” of those who control the most powerful states, scrutiny of fundamental causes is consigned to the margins.

The questions of precisely who finds it useful to devote vast resources to maintaining civilization-destroying arsenals and the immense array of institutions that sustain them, and

exactly what they find them useful for, are seldom asked. Rather than holding those in power to account for their actions, the experts and professionals who dominate “civil society” arms control and disarmament discourse look for every opportunity to take them at their word. They grasp eagerly at the latest endorsement of “disarmament” by those who hold or have held power, no matter how abstract or contradictory. This year no doubt we will hear repeated quotations from U.S. President Barack Obama echoing in the halls of the United Nations, as a few hundred miles south his administration’s proposals for massive increases in funding for nuclear weapons research and production march in bipartisan lockstep through the halls of the U.S. Congress.

MARTIN LUTHER KING OBSERVED that “all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation demands.” We are in another moment like that now, a time of great dislocation and upheaval. We need a new conversation amongst ourselves about how we must order our societies and economies if we are going to make it through these times. We need to stop looking always upward towards those in power for what they might be willing to give us.

Moments of great social transformation are characterized — in many ways, defined — by the failure of the existing political, cultural and intellectual institutions to meet the needs of the majority of the population and to make decisions in ways we believe legitimate. Today, the professionals who inhabit these institutions have little to say about what is most important. The “practical” too often has come to be equated with asking only for what can be had within the existing institutional contexts, which means not challenging the existing distribution of wealth and power. If these constitute fundamental causes of the problems we are trying to solve or key obstacles to their solution, this is a doomed strategy.

We need to have the courage to turn our attention and our efforts away from the states and their forums and back to each other. The discussion, analysis, and political course of action that bring real disarmament will not come from refining the discourses dominated by those who currently hold power and control debate, but by rendering them irrelevant. We must focus our efforts on building and sustaining solidarity, mutual support, and a common political program amongst those who suffer from an unjust and undemocratic global order of things that is enforced by overwhelming violence. As long as that order of things remains, nuclear weapons will be there, and likely in civilization-destroying numbers. The work of “reducing the nuclear danger” needs to be less about fewer weapons and more about greater justice.

How do we accomplish this? No one person can point the way forward; the kinds of work that are needed will vary from place to place. The first step is to admit that the predominant professionalized single-issue politics is not working. In addition to beginning a new conversation, we need to redirect our time and resources to the settings and kinds of activities where that conversation might actually take place.

Here in the United States, we need to take our resources and our attention back down from the centers of power to the cities, towns and neighborhoods where the effects are felt of decisions made at a distance (often geographically and always socially). This is necessary because human scale organizations where people can build trust and support, and can practice the skills of

democracy — of making decisions together about things that matter — are the essential building blocks of any larger, sustainable movement for a world that is more fair and democratic. It is necessary because propaganda thrives in social settings where people are fearful and isolated, and places where we work together to understand the world and to support one another in the face of violence and injustice are the strongest defense against the powerful institutions that ceaselessly strive to manipulate us. Finally, it is necessary because the hard questions about how we will remake a failing social order from within ultimately are felt and understood in the way they affect our livelihoods and the people and places we love.

Whether our community should accept the lure of the next military contract or the next manufacturing link in a global chain of corporate production making ecologically unsustainable products that only a minority of human beings can afford, or instead should start to discuss and plan for a future that might allow us to live well within the ecological limits of our locale, region, and planet is a hard conversation to start, and harder to sustain. But it is also the kind of conversation from which a new way forward might emerge. When the debates that matter are limited to NGO experts, corporate lobbyists and professional politicians hovering around the apex of power in political systems dominated by concentrated wealth, the first order of business is to assure that the most powerful interests will be taken care of. After that, those who claim to represent the rest of us go forth and portray the dividing up of the remaining scraps as the only “practical” steps towards a better world.

THE INTRACTABLE CHARACTER of the nuclear dilemma is not an aberration or deviation from the “natural” or “healthy” path of the current order of things, but rather its penultimate expression. The immensely destructive wars of the last century on all sides manifested, accelerated and set irreversibly in motion processes for the pursuit and accumulation of power by large, authoritarian organizations both “public” and “private” at a pace and scale that dwarfed anything that had come before. It is the nature of these power dynamics to grow and intensify at an ever-accelerating rate, despoiling the planet and consuming its resources at a pace that has become impossible to comprehend, much less control. The development of the atomic bomb was just a loud punctuation point, a marker of a much broader process nearing totality, the beginning of an ending, whether the bomb is to be the means of our ending or not. Who will oppose these forces? That is the question we must ask.

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