

Disarmament: Missing in Action

Western States Legal Foundation Commentary

Spring 2015

Senator Markey of Massachusetts will introduce legislation this spring (the “Smarter Approach to Nuclear Expenditures Act”) that would terminate development of new nuclear-armed long range bombers and missiles, limit spending on modernization of nuclear bombs and warheads, and reduce spending on modernization of nuclear weapons infrastructure. A letter urging support for the Markey legislation was circulated to peace and disarmament groups for signature.

The legislation and the letter are useful because they provide an opportunity to consider once again the role of nuclear weapons and the unique threat they represent, in a time when the danger of nuclear war is seen by many as a thing of the past. We declined to sign the letter supporting the Markey SANE nuclear legislation, however, because we do not believe that the ways it frames the issues are appropriate to a moment characterized by renewed and rapidly growing tensions among nuclear-armed countries.

The letter does not take a position that advocates either nuclear disarmament or a more peaceful foreign policy. On the contrary, it advocates cuts in nuclear weapons spending that “could be realized without reducing U.S. nuclear warheads below the level set by the 2010 New START Treaty” in order to “allow the United States to spend limited defense dollars on the most pressing needs.” Any definition of these “most pressing needs” is left to the kind of bellicose thinking that prevails on these matters in Washington, DC.

The spending cuts proposed here would not change the main characteristic of the U.S. arsenal: that it could destroy human civilization in a day. These cuts also are quite compatible with sustaining a civilization-destroying arsenal for decades to come. Those dominating mainstream “national security” debates envision “pressing” military priorities that include not only open-ended war making in the Middle East, but expanded funding for infrastructure and forces to confront Russia in Europe and China in the Western Pacific. They have seized on the Ukraine crisis to push for ballistic missile defenses, forward-based forces, and funds for a buildup of NATO forces, and to marginalize discussion of further nuclear disarmament progress at a moment when it is growing more urgent.

Continued development of high-tech weapons, from conventional missiles with global range to cyberwarfare capacities, proceeds with little debate at all. This is so despite the fact that the militaries of both Russia and China have for years expressed concerns about U.S. “conventional” superiority including the expansion of U.S. global long range precision strike capabilities. It also allows the nuclear establishments and military-industrial complexes of those countries to use U.S. pursuit of superiority in missile defenses and long-range precision strike as a rationale for their own continued reliance on nuclear weapons and their own nuclear weapons modernization programs.

This kind of superficially reasonable incremental position, explicitly advocating spending less on nuclear weapons while acceding to (and perhaps even advocating) spending more on other military forces, is different from a compromise program on things like social programs. For

example, advocating for a small increase (or a smaller cut) in food stamp funding, if successful, will assure that more people can eat. Spending somewhat less on nuclear arms but more on conventional forces does not necessarily reduce the risk of nuclear war—and may in fact increase it, by increasing the war-making capacity of military and foreign policy elites who have shown a marked propensity for risk-taking and war-making. Further, a more affordable nuclear arsenal still of civilization-destroying size should not be represented, even implicitly, as an acceptable goal—or even an acceptable compromise.

Nuclear weapons do not pose an unacceptable danger because they crowd out spending on conventional forces. Rather, nuclear weapons long have been recognized to constitute an unacceptable threat to humanity's future, with a unique capacity to wreak destruction that is global in scope, long-lasting, and inherently indiscriminate. The need for visible commitment and concrete actions towards disarmament grows more urgent, not less, in a time when the most powerful countries once again are brandishing their nuclear arms, with every new forward military deployment and nuclear exercise providing a potential spark for an unstoppable conflagration.

Our role as human beings and participants in movements for peace is not to try to anticipate what deals can be cut under current conditions in centers of power. Our task is to change those conditions, however difficult that may seem. A first step is to be clear on what we want. This is necessary to give a context and sense of direction to near-term goals. We should make clear that we want the complete elimination of nuclear arsenals, the cessation of all kinds of arms racing, and the end of war as an instrument of state policy. Incremental demands should be placed in that context—and should make sense in that context. The technologies of mass death have become too powerful for humanity to live with for much longer. The immense resources devoted to them are needed to address the damage we already have done and continue to do to our planet, and to remedy the global inequities that continue to drive conflicts both within and among countries. These realities are the standards against we must measure the “reasonableness” our demands, the performance of our elected representatives, and our own progress.

by Andrew Lichterman and Jacqueline Cabasso, Western States Legal Foundation

*see “Smarter Approach to Nuclear Expenditures Act,”
www.markey.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2014_SANE_Act.pdf

Western States Legal Foundation • Working for Peace & Justice in a Nuclear Free World
655 13th Street, Suite 201 • Oakland, CA 94612 • (510) 839-5877
www.wslfweb.org • www.facebook.com/WesternStatesLegalFoundation