U.S. in the World
TALKING GLOBAL ISSUES WITH AMERICANS

Talking about Nuclear Weapons with the Persuadable Middle

BACKGROUND

Once again, there is a real conversation about nuclear weapons — their role in the world, safety and morality concerns surrounding them, and the potential use of nuclear weapons and/or theft of vulnerable fissile materials.

In late 2008 through mid 2009, three separate research projects were undertaken to gauge public understanding and acceptance of these weapons: Topos Partnership (done on behalf of the Union of Concerned Scientists)[i], American Environics[ii] and Greenberg, Quinlan and Rosner[iii](GQR). Each research project had distinct goals and objectives; research participants and methodologies were selected based on those goals and objectives. While some recommendations and findings were similar in all of the research reports, others seemed to be in conflict – partly because the different research audience and objectives/policy goals greatly affected the research outcomes (*please see addendum for more information on each of the research projects).*

As is the case with all things related to policy and politics, much has taken place since these projects were completed. President Obama, along with the United Nations Security Council member states, have brought nuclear weapons to the forefront of international debate in a manner that has not been seen for over 20 years. And while progressive peace and security advocates clearly have an ally in President Obama— who has declared that it is U.S. policy to pursue the elimination of all nuclear weapons— there is much work to be done with the Presidential advisors, Members of Congress, and (the target of the recommendations in this report) the American public, to ensure that this vision becomes a reality.

Research shows that one of the biggest challenges peace and security advocates face is the American public's perception of nuclear weapons as a "shield" and the "best/strongest" weapon in our arsenal. Another challenging factor, for reasons which will become clear in this report, is that

In the summer of 2009, the U.S. in the World Initiative was asked to synthesize, analyze and develop messaging recommendations based on three recent research projects that examined public opinion on nuclear weapons issues: Topos Partnership (done on behalf of the Union of Concerned Scientists), American Environics and Greenberg, Quinlan and Rosner.

The recommendations in this report build upon these research projects, insights from leaders of the peace and security community and other research projects undertaken on behalf of USITW, as well as upon recommendations from U.S. in the World: Talking Global Issues With Americans.

The highlights offered here aim to help communicators reach the mainstream American public.

the public tends to see countries as people – bad or good, friends or enemies – and to fear a "bad" country getting nuclear weapons.

This report highlights USITW's recommendations based on the analysis of the three research projects mentioned above and on other research projects undertaken on behalf of USITW (in particular those relating to USITW's "Managing the Fear Factor" project), as well as on recommendations from U.S. in the World: Talking Global Issues With Americans. These recommendations have been significantly influenced by conversations with and insights from leaders in the peace and security community; we believe that our recommendations support what we understand to be a broadly shared goal of the peace and security community — *a public education campaign that pursues short-term policy gains while advancing the long-term objective of the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The recommendations in this report are designed to help advocates avoid making the debate around nuclear weapons about *us vs. the "scary other"* – because that promotes irrational fear and encourages people to embrace a default frame in which we need to hold on to all of the weapons available to us, consider preventive strikes against bad countries that might get nuclear weapons, etc.

The following is a list of key recommendations for advocates. More information on each of these recommendations – including some sample language – can be found in the report that follows:

> ➢ Peace and security advocates should work to help the public think about nuclear weapons in a new way – "re-frame" the issue to help people see that it is the existence of the weapons themselves—not who has them—that poses the primary threat to global and national security. The fact that *nuclear weapons are a source of risk* – not the fact that they are morally wrong – should be presented as the underlying reason why the issue of nuclear weapons matters.

> ➢ *Reducing risk* should be underscored as the *goal* of peace and security advocates. Reducing the number of—and eventually eliminating—nuclear weapons should be framed as a *means* to achieve this goal (a means to an end); and advocates should emphasize that there is a *process* by which we can reduce/eventually eliminate these weapons. USITW recommends stressing that reducing/eliminating nuclear weapons is "a" means to achieve this goal (and obviously one on which peace and security advocates focus) because it must be understood as part of a larger strategy to address the overarching challenge of reducing risk.

> ➢ *The Risk Reduction Frame* is different from the *Safety Frame.* A Risk Reduction Frame points to a *process* by which we can enhance security. A Safety Frame points to security under threat and suggests an either/or state—we are either safe or unsafe. While both frames ultimately are ways of talking about enhancing our national security, if we *start* with a Safety frame (one that is often used successfully, in fact, by those who favor maintaining or enhancing our nuclear arsenal), the public will default to feeling unsafe, which can lead people to want to hold onto our "strongest/best" weapons.

- "Getting to zero" should *not* be presented as the primary focus of advocates; the goal, again, is to reduce risks to global stability and national security. "Morality" arguments should not be key elements of advocates' frame; for most of the public, these are losing arguments in this context because they seem to place principles over safety. And when talking about any reductions in nuclear weapons, it is essential to describe these actions as "mutual"—actions that the U.S. is taking in concert with other nations.

- Advocates should be able to describe all of the shorter-term policy goals of the peace and security community (reauthorization of Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty or a similar bi-lateral agreement between Russia and the US; the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; securing vulnerable fissile materials; a review of the Nuclear Posture Review which results in significantly reducing the role of nuclear weapons; a considerably strengthened global nonproliferation regime; and direct talks and negotiations with Iran and North Korea) as steps to reaching the overarching goal of reducing the risk posed by nuclear weapons.

- When introducing the Risk Reduction Frame, advocates should be focused on the risk posed by nuclear weapons – not just the risk of vulnerable fissile materials (i.e., nuclear terrorism). The risk posed by the weapons should be the frame under which to advance all nonproliferation policies. Using nuclear terrorism as our starting point, as the umbrella under which to discuss all nonproliferation policy issues, may increase the willingness of politicians to turn their attention to nuclear weapons policies in the short term. But when politicians and other opinion leaders evoke serious national security threats like nuclear terrorism, the public starts seeing the entire world as a scary place, full of enemies whose behavior cannot be modified or controlled in any way except through crushing them – a worldview that does *not* favor advocates' ultimate goal of eliminating nuclear weapons.

- Public skepticism about verification has the potential to cost us support even from those who, in principal, are our supporters; advocates should therefore be relatively proactive in addressing verification. However, in an attempt to avoid feeding into an "us vs. them" mentality, the conversation should frame verification as being part of a global effort to counter a global threat, not as a matter of preventing "bad" countries from "cheating."

- In order to effectively reach the public with these messages, advocates must also understand the public's perception of peace and security advocates and their agendas (pushing a particular ideology, promoting pacifism, etc.) and the role that validators and outside messengers can play.

Understanding how the public thinks about nuclear weapons and those who advocate nuclear disarmament, and figuring out what that implies for effective communications, are critical tasks if we are to help create the political space that President Obama – and other world leaders —need to achieve the objective outlined by the UN Security Council, and ensure that our grandchildren and great grandchildren do not have to continue fighting an uphill battle to reduce, and eventually eliminate, nuclear weapons.

PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

All of the research projects indicate that there is strong public support, in the abstract, for deep reductions in the number of nuclear weapons in the United States' arsenal and globally —and according to Topos' research, there is promise that, with effective framing and policy recommendations, the public will conclude, on their own, that it makes sense to work toward the elimination of all nuclear weapons.

However, there are deeply engrained perceptions and patterns of thinking about the world and nuclear weapons that undermine prospects for strong, sustained support. The research shows that the greatest challenge peace and security advocates currently face is that the public sees nuclear weapons as a metaphorical "shield"; they are not seen as being significantly different from conventional weapons, and are in fact described by the public as the "best/strongest" weapon in our arsenal. In essence, the public views nuclear weapons as the ultimate protective weapon – nuclear weapons make us safe.

> *The public sees nuclear weapons as a metaphorical "shield"...the "best/strongest" weapon in our arsenal.*

Partnered with the fact that the public continues to view the world as a dangerous place—full of crazy, evil, unpredictable countries/people (some of whom wish to cause the U.S. significant harm) -- the public, naturally, wants to hold fast to those things that they feel will keep America safe.

Historical research has repeatedly shown that people who are not experts on foreign policy tend to understand security threats in interpersonal terms, personifying other countries as friendly or malevolent, motivated by anger or kindness or some other psychological state (like "hating us for who we are")—and to fear a "bad" country getting nuclear weapons.

Public's Lack of Awareness: A Benefit or a Drawback?

All of the research reports conclude that nuclear weapons are not top of mind for the public — they are not on the public's "radar" screen. Additionally, there is a lack of understanding about the weapons themselves and a lack of "urgency" about the issue.

GQR's research suggests that issues that are seen as "urgent needs" often transcend partisan divides, while those that are seen as having lower priority by the public are susceptible to becoming politicized. President Obama and his Administration have openly discussed disarmament and the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons, thereby drawing attention and criticisms from his political opponents.

Implications for Communicators: Advocates must work to increase the public's understanding about the dangers of nuclear weapons, thereby increasing the "urgency" of this issue, while reaching out to bipartisan spokespeople and validators. Help link this issue with the goal of reducing risk and not simply with the President's agenda.

THE FEAR FACTOR

There is an enormous body of literature on the way in which fear influences public thinking and our worldview, including original research conducted recently by the Topos Partnership on behalf of USITW and the National Security Network[iv] and a great deal of research conducted by American Environics. This research, along with a large bibliography from other scholars, helps explain the cognitive dissonance that is a critical barrier to sustained progress on disarmament and many other progressive foreign policy objectives. As American Environics describes it, cognitive dissonance is "the psychological and emotional discomfort that results from trying to hold contradictory opinions and attitudes at the same time—because of the conflict between what [people] believe on the one hand is moral and American [support for reductions and eventual elimination of nuclear weapons] and on the other hand what they believe is necessary to do to keep Americans safe—and therefore is also moral."[v]

> *...when under the influence of fear, even sympathetic audiences will follow unhelpful paths of reasoning...long-range consequences of our policy decisions are likely to be acknowledged but dismissed as irrelevant to the current situation...*

Existential fear – fear of the sort that is triggered by threats to personal safety and the safety of loved ones (like nuclear weapons) – inclines people instinctively to favor a certain kind of leadership and a certain approach to defining and meeting security threats. The research conducted by Topos (on behalf of USITW and NSN) confirmed what other researchers have found and articulated in a variety of different ways. When our personal safety or the safety of loved ones seems to be threatened, our lens on the world narrows to the most immediate factors in the environment. We go on heightened alert for possible dangerous intentions on the part of others – and we also become more inclined to assume the worst about others' intentions.

Even *if* nuclear threats from Iran and North Korea were not front and center in public discourse, peace and security advocates must take account of the fact that public fears about safety are readily activated in light of the continuing terrorist threat, the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, etc. In fact, the exploratory research conducted by the Topos Partnership for USITW and NSN showed that serious fears of a more general nature (for example, concerns about the "cultural disruptions" caused by economic insecurity or demographic changes) may have similar effects as traditional national security threats -- so the public may be feeling particularly anxious these days.

The implications of this research tell us that even sympathetic audiences will follow unhelpful paths of reasoning when they are under the influence of fear. Additionally, *when people are operating in threat mode, any suggestion that they should put principles over safety will be rejected as, at best, a nice idea that is unrealistic, and at worst, a dangerously irresponsible delusion.* Arguments about the long-range consequences of our policy decisions (losing the trust of our allies) are likely to be acknowledged but dismissed as irrelevant to the current (emergency) situation. In general,

solutions that cannot be connected directly to safety ("how does this protect me and my family?") are likely to be rejected in favor of more instinctive responses that promise immediate impact. More often than not, cognitive dissonance is resolved by justifying status quo (certain things are deplorable/immoral but necessary when lives are at stake).

FRAMING NUCLEAR WEAPONS ISSUES

Risk to global stability and therefore to national security should be presented as the underlying reason why the issue of nuclear weapons matters. *Reducing risk should be seen as the goal of the peace and security community*. Reducing the number of—and eventually eliminating—nuclear weapons should be framed as a *means* to achieve this goal (a means to an end). If reducing risk is to be the overarching frame and reducing/eliminating nuclear

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weapons is to be seen as an essential means to that end, then advocates obviously need to help the public understand that it is the weapons themselves (not primarily who has them) that pose a risk to our security. As explained above, the research shows that the frame we are currently "up against" is one in which the public sees nuclear weapons as a "shield" and the "best/strongest" weapon in our arsenal.

In describing nuclear weapons as a threat – in "re-framing" them – USITW recommends using the argument presented in the Topos research, which highlights the fact that the more nuclear weapons in existence, the more likelihood for theft or an accident. In other words, acknowledge the threat of terrorists obtaining a nuclear weapon (or the more likely scenario of them obtaining fissile material) without making this the only reason that nuclear weapons present a risk. USITW also suggests highlighting the fact that nuclear weapons are uniquely destabilizing to critical regions (as opposed to talking about being at the crossroads of another nuclear arms race, which the public may see as a direct threat against the U.S., raising the public's fear level and causing them to want to hold onto our own arsenal as "protection").

A Role for Conventional Weapons?

When discussing the fact that we have better ways to ensure our security, it is important to remember public understanding of the issues.

Implications for communicators: If military strength is not part of your alternative security strategy, people may feel that you are asking them to replace our "strongest weapon" with a "non-military" option, which is unlikely to persuade people to see your point of view.

Again, the focus of this frame is that the risk lies with the weapons themselves and not primarily with who has them, otherwise there is no real case to be made for the U.S. addressing our own nuclear arsenal since most Americans view the U.S. to be a good and decent country (which is sometimes

forced to do things that go against its values). In addition to creating risk, advocates should underscore that nuclear weapons are ineffective against modern security threats and a liability in today's security environment. *Nuclear weapons create risk rather than reducing it*.

Because of the public's lack of in-depth understanding about the difference between nuclear weapons and conventional weapons, it is also important for advocates to explain the uniquely destructive powers of these weapons. However, we cannot rely on this argument alone. For many people, the very destructiveness of these weapons is the reason for having them (for deterrence purposes). Instead of just talking about their destructive nature, advocates should be emphasizing the *unintended and shared/widespread consequences* that their use would create – consequences (humanitarian, environmental, etc.) that the United States inevitably would have to help deal with.

Discussing the Threat of Nuclear Terrorism

All three research reports address nuclear terrorism — however due to the goals and objectives set forth by the each project, the research findings, collectively, are not straightforward.

The fear of nuclear terrorism will, of course, raise the issue of nuclear weapons in the public's mind and therefore may increase the salience of nuclear weapons issues. However, when serious national security threats loom, people start seeing the entire world as a scary place, full of enemies whose behavior cannot be modified or controlled in any way except through crushing them. Immediate concerns take precedence (after all, this is an "emergency") and even a single violent event feels like "war." This worldview does not allow people to see the importance of working with other countries, laying the groundwork for long-term solutions, etc.

Implications for Communicators: There is an obvious role for a discussion about nuclear terrorism when discussing the specifics about securing vulnerable nuclear materials, but the threat of nuclear terrorism (or the potential of the U.S. being attacked by a "dirty bomb)" should not be the umbrella under which all other nonproliferation policies are advocated. Instead, advocates should frame nuclear weapons as the problem — a risk to global stability, therefore the more weapons that exist the greater the risk to all of us. And when discussing the important issue of securing vulnerable nuclear materials, it is important to point to the solutions at-hand, and the fact that we have had great successes in the past.

Do:	Don't:
"Nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons material pose a risk to global stability. We know how to secure vulnerable materials and keep them out of the hands of those that want to cause harm…"	"Nuclear terrorism is the greatest threat to our national security. We need to keep nuclear weapons and materials out of the hands of those that want to destroy America…"

IT MATTERS WHERE WE START THE CONVERSATION

There are two very different ways to frame security: A Risk Reduction Frame points to a *process* by which we can enhance security. A Safety Frame points to security under threat and an either/or state—we are either safe or unsafe.

The Safety Frame is about the threat of physical harm from an external hostile force—which can inadvertently raise fear and may cause people to instinctively want to hold onto what the public considers to be our "best/strongest" weapon (i.e. nuclear weapons). By encouraging people to fear harm from an external threat, this frame evokes such default notions as "us. vs. them" and thinking in interpersonal and personal terms (countries as people, threats to personal safety and the safety of loved ones.) This "little picture thinking" makes it difficult for people to stay focused on systems/structures (like treaties and international agencies) or on the big policy picture that progressives support.

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>
> *A Risk Reduction Frame points to a process by which we can enhance security.*
>
> *A Safety frame points to security under threat and an either/or state— we are either safe or unsafe.*

In fact, the Safety Frame has been and continues to be used successfully by those who have a very different view of foreign policy than most progressive advocates. "Keeping America Safe" has been the mantra under which many problematic foreign policy choices—including changes in torture and surveillance policy, entering into the Iraq War, and the illegal detention of suspects at the Guantanamo facility, as well as the continued reliance on and enhancement of our nuclear weapons arsenal—have been justified. In essence, outside threats have been used as the rationale for changes in policy that were previously unthinkable to American policy makers and the public. While it is tempting to believe that we can turn this frame to our own purposes, it is actually extremely difficult to change the impact of a frame from within that frame.

Progressives—at large—need an alternative story, an alternative way of describing for the public the policy prescriptions that we suggest. *The Risk Reduction Frame, is about creating a more manageable and stable world by reducing the risks posed by threats including nuclear weapons* (which then increases the security of the U.S.). The Risk Reduction Frame ultimately is about increasing our security - everyone is safer in a world that is more manageable and stable. But the Risk Reduction Frame helps people understand security in a different way, thereby enabling our audiences to follow a different path of reasoning and increasing the chances that our listeners will end up sharing our conclusions. By not starting with language that evokes default understandings of safety and security, the Risk Reduction Frame makes a more constructive public conversation possible.

It encourages the public to embrace a wide range of nonproliferation policies, and in many instances, prompts people to conclude themselves that our goal should be the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. It reinforces the notion that we need to work with others to reduce these risks, that there are multiple pieces of the puzzle (i.e. no one type of weapon, no one tool, etc.) and many steps that can be taken as part of the process. This concept is fairly familiar to people from personal experience but also can be easily applied to the collective/national experience.

USITW therefore suggests that, whenever possible, advocates open dialogue about nuclear weapons policy using a Risk Reduction Frame. Of course, advocates often do not have the luxury of beginning a dialogue about an issue, and are asked to respond to frames/stories being invoked by opponents. In such cases, USITW suggests that advocates try to *bridge* from the Safety Frame to a Risk Reduction Frame, using the following tips:

- *Try to make this about "all of us" working to address the risk, and less about "them"* (those that wish to inflict harm on the U.S.). Talk about the need to work globally to address this global risk; other nations need the help of the U.S. and the U.S. needs the help of other countries to prevent the spread and/or theft of nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons materials.
- *Focus on the process by which we can help address this risk.* Describe your policy proposals as steps in a longer process that can address the risks to safety that your opponent is laying out.
- *Underscore the fact that it is nuclear weapons themselves that pose a risk to stability and security.* Reinforce the fact that nuclear weapons are more of a liability than an asset.

As USITW and other communications advisors have suggested, common phrases like "In fact,..." "Actually,.." "Look,..." or "The real issue here is..." can be pivot points that help advocates bridge to a different frame.

Safety Frame:	Risk Reduction Frame:
"We are on the brink of a nuclear arms races in every region of the globe, and are at grave risk that terrorists will obtain nuclear weapons and commit attacks of unimaginable horror. America is at risk and we need to be equipped to face these threats and those of the future…"	"The more weapons that exist, the more regional instability leads to conflict and the more likely it is that nuclear weapons or weapons materials will be stolen or cause an accident. We need to work with partners around the world to address the risks that nuclear weapons pose to global stability and therefore our national security. While it will take time, we know the process that needs to take place to address these risks. X policy helps address this risk by XYZ…"

WHO SHOULD SPEAK ON BEHALF OF DISARMAMENT

Even if we start with a frame that can lead people towards our solutions, re-framing nuclear weapons in the public's mind as a risk rather than an integral part of our security structure, is a long-term goal that cannot be reached by traditional peace and security advocates alone.

Research has shown that once a listener or reader puts you in a mental box (as a liberal/progressive, in this case), s/he will listen to the rest of what you say with that stereotype in mind. The research on public opinion regarding nuclear weapons solidly indicates that traditional peace and security advocates are seen as wanting the U.S. to put principles over safety – an unrealistic, dangerous stance – and are therefore not the best messengers for the community's goals and objectives (assuming the aim is to go beyond our base and reach the persuadable middle of the public).

Retired military leaders and security experts – whose perceived objective is to keep America safe – have proven to be more effective messengers. This doesn't mean peace and security advocates should not speak up about this issue (although obviously the ideal is to have security experts themselves speak directly to the public). But it does strongly suggest that virtually the first words out of an advocate's mouth –when speaking to the general public –

> *...virtually the first words out of an advocate's mouth should be a reference to validators who are retired military or seen as security experts...*

should be a reference to validators who are retired military leaders or seen as security experts. These should be bipartisan experts whose support demonstrates that it's about security and not politics – which means that referencing President Obama can backfire, by making our objectives seem like part of a Democratic/partisan agenda. In fact, the GQR research indicated that overall support for reducing the number of nuclear weapons fell when it was described as a policy objective of the Obama Administration; instead, former military figures, such as retired Generals Colin Powell and Jim Jones, were the strongest messengers for this policy—more effective than Obama, or even the "Gang of Four/Four Horsemen."

GETTING TO ZERO

All three research reports agree that *it is preferable for advocates to begin their discussion focused on reducing of the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, rather than eliminating it entirely*. This is not to say that fully eliminating weapons cannot be discussed, but rather that advocates should emphasize that there is a process by which we can reduce and eventually eliminate these weapons. There are two main reasons for this conclusion: skepticism and fear of being vulnerable.

There is a great deal of skepticism among the public about how realistic it is to ever eliminate nuclear weapons entirely; they are viewed as an inescapable part of the modern world and convincing people otherwise is an uphill climb. *When advocates begin their pitch by stating that the goal is the complete elimination of nukes, it leads to skepticism about all related claims and proposals*, even if those are more focused on reductions than elimination. This skepticism is

paired with the reality that, since their inception and especially during the Cold War, nuclear weapons have been sold as our "strongest" deterrent against an enemy attack. A substantial portion of the population still holds to this belief (see section on Deterrence/Sufficiency and Lending Credibility to Nuclear Weapons for more on the public's fear of being vulnerable).

However, as Topos states in their report: "Emphasizing that we create a more manageable world by reducing the overall number of weapons is effective and avoids triggering the same backlash – while leading many subjects to talk about zero on their own."[vi] USITW realizes that getting to zero is the ultimate goal of the peace and security community—and now the official policy of the U.S. Therefore there are some important things to keep in mind when discussing nuclear weapons; in addition to the question of where to start, as mentioned above, *advocates should emphasize that the goal of getting to zero is based on the need to reduce risk and create a more manageable world and not on moral concerns (s*ee "Safety trumps Morality" for more, below)*.

SAFETY TRUMPS MORALITY: FRAMING ZERO

Psychologists examining the role that fear plays in human reasoning and rational thinking have undertaken a body of experimental research that examines a phenomenon called "mortality salience" – that is, what happens to people's thought processes and policy preferences when they are reminded of their own mortality or prompted, even subliminally, to think about death. The research on mortality salience tells us that *even sympathetic audiences will follow unhelpful paths of reasoning* when they are under the influence of fear (and it should give us pause about using fear to advance our own arguments). This research also alerts us to the possibility that *some communications tools which might ordinarily be effective – like appeals to morality and value -- may be anything but in the context of safety and security* — regardless of political affiliation.

Implications for Communicators: When advocates discuss the moral obligation to eliminate nuclear weapons they may convey that they believe the only reason to get rid of the weapons is one of ethical responsibility; this means that the facts that nuclear weapons present a safety risk to the U.S. and globally and that they are ineffective in dealing with today's security threats are lost in the conversation. Communicators are then immediately seen as having their own "agenda" and placed into the stereotypical "mental box" of a progressive who is weak on security and focused on abstract moral considerations at the expense of "keeping the country safe".

Do:	Don't:
"Reducing the number of nuclear weapons will help create a more manageable and stable world…"X" policy will help do this and will put us on a path toward eventually eliminating these dangerous weapons…"	"The U.S. needs to lead by example, it is our moral obligation as the sole superpower and the country that invented the bomb, to lead the world in eliminating nuclear weapons…"

DETERRENCE/SUFFICIENCY AND LENDING CREDIBILITY TO NUCLEAR WEAPONS

When discussing the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons, advocates need to remember the reality that a substantial portion of the public believes that the U.S. nuclear arsenal is an effective deterrent—for many people the most effective deterrent—which dissuades enemies from attacking. This leads people to believe that eliminating the arsenal would leave the country vulnerable to attack. This perception does not prevent people from supporting the idea of reducing the size of the arsenal, though, because a smaller arsenal can still be just as effective a deterrent.

Two of the research reports concluded that the idea of "sufficiency" —i.e., that a reduced arsenal of

> *...any message that highlights an effective use of nuclear weapons...undermines the larger frame that nuclear weapons pose a risk and are a greater liability than an asset...*

1,000 or so nuclear weapons would still be able to "withstand and deter future attacks"[vii] — would garner public support and help advocates reach the short-term goal of reducing the number of nuclear weapons. These researchers therefore suggested that advocates frame our current arsenal as too large and duplicative — a waste of resources.

USITW is not comfortable with this recommendation. If —as it is understood to be by USITW— the goal of the advocacy community is to eventually eliminate nuclear weapons, then any message that lends credibility to the idea that nuclear weapons are effective or useful in deterring future attacks gives a purpose for their existence and undermines the larger frame that nuclear weapons are ineffective, outdated, and a greater liability than an asset.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WORKING WITH OTHERS

It is important for messengers to underscore the fact that any steps in the process of reducing the number of nuclear weapons, and eventually eliminating them, will be taken in concert with other countries – not unilaterally. GQR found that discussing reductions in stages, in which the U.S. will reduce its arsenal in stages *as other nuclear weapons states reduce their arsenals*, increases support for reductions.

And, when discussing the importance of the U.S. role in global negotiations, advocates first need to help the public understand why global negotiations matter (i.e. nations *can* work together to address these issues, we have done so successfully in the past, etc.). We also recommend making the point that *U.S. leadership will give us important leverage in these negotiations.* In other words, leadership is not primarily about "practicing what we preach" or "leading by example" (messages which USITW itself has recommended in the past). Both of these messages can trigger the perception that we are advocating

principles over safety. Instead, advocates can talk about leadership in terms of gaining the leverage we need to reduce the risks posed by nuclear weapons.

Finally, advocates must remember that the public does not trust a lot of other countries, particularly those with whom we are negotiating or need to negotiate around nuclear arms control. It is therefore important to connect the dots for people as to what significance these treaties will have for reducing risks and creating a more manageable world and to use examples of successful bi-lateral (with Russia) and multilateral agreements that have brought real changes and real solutions to nuclear weapons dangers and other security challenges.

VERIFICATION

All three research reports found that most Americans distrust that other countries will adhere to international nuclear treaties and have doubts about our ability to verify their compliance. In fact, GQR states in their report that "The top vulnerability that the policy (reducing the amount of nuclear weapons in the world) needs to overcome centers on worries about verification." This was true even among those who initially support a reduction in the number of nuclear weapons.

Talking Treaties

When discussing treaties with the public, it is important to remember that for non-expert Americans, international relations are understood in terms of interpersonal relations. Structures (like treaties and institutions) and systemic conditions are "cognitively invisible."

Implications for Communicators: Advocates should not promote treaties in and of themselves (i.e. advocates should not just argue for "a strengthened Nonproliferation Treaty") but instead focus on the principles and policies that would be put in place should a treaty be ratified, the reasons behind the treaties, and the leverage they will give the U.S. and other nations in addressing global problems.

Because of the important role that verification plays in the potential loss of supporters, advocates should be relatively proactive in addressing verification. However, in an attempt to avoid feeding into an "us vs. them" mentality, the conversation should frame verification as being part of a global effort to counter a global threat; explain that there is an international effort to ensure effective monitoring and verification—led by a Nobel Prize-winning entity (International Atomic Energy Agency) — that is working in the right direction, taking action and making net progress.

PROGRESSIVES AND SECURITY

There are certain inherent biases prevalent in the public's thinking which make it particularly difficult for progressives—even a popular President— to promote the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons. While it may be that no one party "owns" the public's trust on national security, progressives are still often seen as "not tough enough." The perception of progressives as caring

The Cost of Nuclear Weapons

Advocates need to remember the stereotypes that the public has about progressives—caring more about domestic/social programs than national security.

And, research has repeatedly shown that the American public is willing to pay any price to keep the U.S. safe.

Implications for Communicators: If advocates are going to make the case that the U.S. nuclear arsenal is a drain on our pocketbook, advocates first must overcome the perception that nuclear weapons are a necessary and valuable part of our security apparatus. Additionally, advocates must steer clear of anything that could sound like a "guns vs. butter" argument and instead focus on more effective and efficient ways to safeguard the U.S.

more about domestic/social issues than national security and of liberal advocates as being pacifists and, therefore, weak on defense is still prevalent among a sizeable portion of the population; these listeners will put all comments on disarmament in that mental "box" unless proven otherwise**.**

Additionally, as mentioned above, it was consistently found throughout the research that it is harmful if people perceive the policy of reducing/eliminating nuclear weapons to be identified with any one political party or partisan person (including President Obama).

It is therefore far more effective for the policy to be presented as a means to reduce risk, rather than being affiliated with any ideology or political considerations. *So while advocates should support President Obama's nonproliferation initiatives when warranted, they should be careful to do so because those policies will help manage risks, and they should not identify the policies with him specifically any more than necessary* (because while currently popular, he is still ultimately viewed as a partisan figure).

CONCLUSION

The fact that the public does not think about nuclear weapons issues —yet still supports deep reductions in the number of weapons, and in some cases, concludes on their own that we need to eliminate all nuclear weapons—is a real opportunity for advocates. Coupled with the reality that the current Administration has set forth a policy of eliminating all nuclear weapons, there is real reason to celebrate. However, much work still needs to be done.

Advocates must take advantage of the public's initial support by "blocking" concerns about policy before those concerns can be inflamed by opponents. This means that advocates must be proactive in re-framing nuclear weapons as themselves a source of risk, and advancing the idea that there are tangible steps (or a process) by which reductions (and eventual elimination) can occur. In addition, advocates must avoid some tempting pitfalls – like discussing good vs. bad

countries and allowing for the need to retain our arsenals for deterrence purposes. The story we are telling hangs together and research suggests that it can promote a different kind of public thinking about nuclear weapons that leads to support for some of the policy choices we advocate. Now the challenge is to tell that story consistently, coherently, and over time.

ADDENDUMS

Note: The "Do's and Don'ts" below are based on research and are practices that, if used and reinforced, will help advocates become more effective communicators for lasting (and significant) changes to nuclear weapons policies. The "Keep in Minds" are meant to be a guide to help advocates work through communications challenges they may confront while remaining consistent and reinforcing the practices outlined in the "Do's and Don'ts" and the advice shared throughout this report.

Do ○ ○ ●

- Let the public know that it is **nuclear weapons themselves—not who has them—that is the problem**.

- Inform people that **reducing risk and creating a more manageable world is your ultimate goal**; reducing/eliminating nuclear weapons is one way (among others) to help accomplish that goal.

- **Discuss shorter-term policy objectives** (START, CTBT, securing vulnerable fissile materials, etc.) **as steps in a process to reduce risks posed by nuclear weapons**.

- Let people know that **nuclear weapons are ineffective in addressing today's security challenges.**

- Remind people that **the more of these uniquely destructive weapons that exist in the world, the more chances there are for accidents and for weapons to get into the wrong hands.** Taking steps to reduce the risk created by nuclear arsenals is part of creating a safer, more manageable world.

- Emphasize that **reductions in the U.S. nuclear arsenal** – and other proposed changes in U.S. nuclear policy – **will be undertaken mutually**, in concert with other nations, **as part of a broader effort to reduce the global risk** created by nuclear weapons.

- Present **concrete, achievable steps that can be taken to reduce the nuclear weapons danger.** Advocates must counter doubts that reducing the threat of nuclear weapons is unrealistic by demonstrating what can be done in the short-term to improve the situation.

- **Rely heavily on validators (or references to validators**), pointing out that there is bipartisan support for reducing our nuclear arsenal, as other nations take steps to reduce theirs. Respected military leaders, national security experts, and former government officials from both parties have endorsed this idea as part of a smart security policy.

- Remind people that **we've had great success working with other nations to limit the spread and reduce the number of nuclear weapons in the world.** Highlighting past achievements dispels doubts about whether future agreements can be reached.

- **When presented with the Safety Frame as your starting place, try to bridge to a Risk Reduction Frame** by explaining that nuclear weapons themselves pose a threat to security or by talking about working with others to address a given threat as part of a larger process of reducing the risks to stability and security.

Don't ● ○ ●

- **Don't lead with moral arguments against nuclear weapons.** Doing so risks activating the natural public resistance to putting abstract principles ahead of safety. Moral arguments can be good supporting points, but they should be framed as being in line with clear-eyed considerations about security.

- **Don't present "getting to zero" as your primary goal**; the goal, again, is to reduce risks to global stability and national security (getting to zero is one way to reduce risks and should be couched as such). Research showed that with effective framing and policy recommendations, the public will conclude, on their own, that it makes sense to work toward the elimination of all nuclear weapons.

- **Avoid making the U.S. solely responsible for the lack of progress on nonproliferation.** Make it clear that you understand the need for other countries to step up and do their part.

- **Don't make this into a partisan issue—including by relying too heavily on President Obama as a validator of your policy proposal.** The argument should be made in a manner that is non-partisan and solely focused on reducing risk and enhancing global stability and national security. Politicizing the matter makes it seem less important and leads to doubts about the security value of the change in policy.

- **Avoid making all nonproliferation goals "about" preventing nuclear terrorism.** Beginning with nuclear terrorism can increase the public's fear and may lead them to want to rely on our "strongest/best" weapons (nuclear weapons). Save conversations about the prevention of nuclear terrorism for policy goals that are directly related to that threat.

Keep in Mind ○ ● ○

- **There are two very different ways to frame security:** The Safety Frame is about fear of physical harm from an external hostile force—which can inadvertently raise fear and may cause people to instinctively want to hold onto what the public considers to be "best/strongest" weapon (i.e. nuclear weapons). The **Risk Reduction Frame**, one the other hand, while ultimately about increasing our security - everyone is safer in a world that is more manageable and stable -- **encourages the public to embrace a wide range of nonproliferation policies, and in many instances, prompts people to conclude themselves that our goal**

should be the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. It reinforces the notion that we need to work with others to reduce these risks.

- Talking about responsible countries versus irresponsible countries creates an "us vs. them" mentality; the emphasis is on *who* has the weapons rather than on the weapons themselves. Instead, **frame nonproliferation efforts (including those focused on Iran and North Korea) as being part of a global effort to counter a global threat.**

- Emphasizing the possibility of another nuclear arms race (as an argument for addressing nuclear weapons issues *now*) may lead people to feel that there is a **direct** nuclear threat against the U.S., increasing the public's fear and perhaps causing them to want to hold onto (or even enhance) our own arsenal. Instead, **talk about the uniquely destabilizing impact that nuclear weapons have on regions of the world, and emphasize the successes that we have had in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons/technology. This will help the public understand that nuclear weapons pose a global threat and therefore require global solutions/actions.**

- Talking about our nuclear arsenal as *too big* or suggesting that a smaller arsenal would be *enough* places value on the arsenal and undermines the Risk Reduction Frame, which locates the risk to global stability squarely with the weapons themselves and not the number of weapons or who has the weapons. **If the policy goal is to eventually eliminate all nuclear weapons, then the focus must be on the fact that nuclear weapons are ineffective, outdated and a greater liability than an asset.**

RESPONDING TO TOUGH QUESTIONS

Wouldn't getting rid of all of our nuclear weapons put us in grave danger?

- Discuss the fact that reducing (and eventually eliminating) nuclear weapons reduces risk and helps create a more manageable world.

- Highlight the fact that it is nuclear weapons themselves that are dangerous and the more weapons in existence the more likely it is for theft or an accident to occur; discuss the fact that these weapons are uniquely destabilizing to regions of the world.

- Talk about the unique destructiveness of nuclear weapons (as opposed to conventional weapons) and the fact that if an accident occurred or one was used, the U.S. would have to help deal with the horrific and widespread consequences – even if the explosion did not occur on our territory, since the destructive impact of an explosion (physical, human, environmental, economic) could not be contained to the site of the blast.

- Remind people that you are not suggesting that it is just the U.S. that should work towards eliminating nuclear weapons. Stress the fact that the U.S. would be working with other countries, outlining a step-by-step, mutual/reciprocal process (they take a step, and then the U.S. takes a step).

Example: "Nuclear weapons themselves are a danger — their very existence creates risk. We need to reduce risks to global stability; one of the most important steps we could take to reduce risk would be for the U.S. and other nuclear powers to make serious, coordinated reductions in the size of their nuclear arsenals. Military experts [insert names here] agree that these weapons cannot address current security concerns. And the more in existence, the more likely it is that an accident will occur or that nuclear materials will be stolen and possibly used. The U.S. needs to work —mutually— with other countries to take the immediate and necessary steps to address this global threat…"

Aren't you being naïve in believing that we can get rid of nuclear weapons and still be safe?

- Remember that once someone places you in a "mental box" (i.e. pacifist, liberal, etc.) it is very difficult to escape the stereotypes associated with it (weak on security, wants to put principles over our safety, hates the military, etc.). You risk making this about "your agenda" vs. the risk posed by nuclear weapons.

- Quickly bridge out of this frame and, when possible, directly quote retired military leaders and retired statesmen/stateswomen. Be sure to highlight the bipartisan nature of the consensus on nonproliferation policy.

Example: "This really isn't about me or my beliefs. Retired General [insert name here] states that "nuclear weapons are a greater liability than an asset." …"

Don't we need at least a few nuclear weapons to keep us safe?

- Remember if we talk about needing even a limited number of nuclear weapons we are tipping our hat to there being a meaningful use for these weapons. And if we reinforce the notion that these weapons have a legitimate purpose, why then would we propose to eliminate all of them?

- Quickly bridge to the points above about the risk posed by nuclear weapons (see Tough Question: *Wouldn't getting rid of all of our nuclear weapons put us in grave danger?)*

How would we ever *really* know if other countries gave up their nuclear weapons?

- Discuss verification as part of a global effort to counter a global threat; talk about the fact that there is an international effort to ensure effective monitoring and verification and remind people that the lead organization in this effort (the IAEA) received a Nobel Prize for its efforts.

- Point out that our ability to monitor and verify is stronger than ever – our tools continue to evolve and improve, but already they're capable of giving the international community a very good picture of what's going on where.

- Be descriptive when discussing verification — what does it entail? What does it look like? Help people create a mental image of this unfamiliar process.

- Cite successful models of verification that have worked (i.e. our agreements/treaties with Russia) and that have already begun helping to reduce the risk posed by nuclear weapons.

Example: "All U.S. nuclear reduction efforts would be taken in concert with other nuclear weapons states and would require verification of those efforts. We have done this before, with Russia for example, with a great deal of success. Scientists with the international agency that oversees nonproliferation efforts were permitted to X, Y, and Z [insert example here]; for their efforts, this agency was actually awarded the Nobel Peace Prize; they know what they are doing…"

In late 2008 through mid 2009, three separate research projects were undertaken to gauge public understanding and acceptance of these weapons. Below, please find summaries of each of these reports:

American Environics

American Environics was seeking to study ways in which fear and security concerns shape public attitudes on national security policy, with nuclear weapons as a facet of that. AE then looked into the most effective ways to shape the public discourse on this subject. Research participants were recruited psychographically into four focus groups in Atlanta and two in suburban Chicago, and were composed of swing segments of the population that were deemed most likely to be receptive to progressive positions. The focus groups were designed to explore the reasoning behind people's attitudes toward civil liberties and national security, not to test specific policy proposals or messages.

AE's key findings include:
- Fear leads people to justify the status quo and support a strong military and weapons complex, including nuclear weapons.
- Linking terrorists with nuclear weapons provokes fear, therefore causing negative reactions including accepting and embracing nuclear weapons.
- Nuclear weapons are predominantly thought of as a shield which protects the country against attack and therefore this "shield" should not be weakened.
- Non-proliferation efforts are viewed to only work with "reasonable" states.
- Rogue states cannot be reasoned with; in these cases military force is acceptable if they have or are trying to acquire nuclear weapons.

AE's key messaging guidance includes:
- Do not link terrorists and nuclear weapons.
- The U.S. nuclear stockpile should be framed as duplicative and unnecessary.
- India and Russia should be featured as disarmament examples (i.e. countries we can work with and formulate successful disarmament agreements).
- The moral argument against nuclear weapons is counterproductive, as it leads people to believe that the weapons are effective and the only argument against them is the moral one.

Greenberg Quinlan Rosner

GQR's research subjects where those they classify as opinion elites; this was done for strategic reasons because they believe the goal of advocates should be to prevent this subject from emerging as a topic of public controversy, and that elites will emerge as the arbiters of this issue. Therefore, their focus was on discerning how to strengthen elite support while maintaining initial public support, and how to close off mental "exit ramps" that present opportunities for support to wane. To accomplish this they conducted a survey of 1,300 likely voters, including an oversample of 500 opinion formers. In addition they held focus groups with opinion formers in Washington, DC and Los Angeles, composed of likely swing voters on this issue.

GQR's key findings include:

- There is a great deal of support in the abstract for reducing the number of nuclear weapons in the world.
- Nuclear weapons are viewed as a low priority issue.
- Most people believe eliminating all nuclear weapons is unrealistic.
- Cuts in the nuclear arsenal are perceived as weakening the U.S.
- People are uncomfortable with unilateral action on this subject.
- There is a great deal of skepticism that the U.S. can verify the compliance of other nations to non-proliferation agreements.
- Advocates should emphasize legislation and seek to trigger policy support.

GQR's key messaging guidance was that advocates should promote a message that reinforces the positive aspects of existing public opinion by:

- Working to keep nuclear weapons out of the hands of terrorists, rather than working to eliminate them.
- Making verification believable.
- Proving the sufficiency of a smaller arsenal.
- Remaining non-partisan.
- Assuring that any cuts are multi-lateral and focused on enhancing security.

Topos (*conducted on the behalf of the Union of Concerned Scientists*)

Topos sought to discover the approaches with the greatest potential to move the public dialogue on nuclear weapons towards a consideration of reductions and even a global ban. Topos did this by identifying key patterns in current thinking that shape opinions on the issue, and testing messages to see how well they navigated those patterns in order to create a more constructive conversation. Their research combined two methods: They convened four focus groups in Indianapolis with "engaged citizens" of mixed demographics, which provided windows into patterns of thinking. These included two "before" groups early in the process, and two "after" groups later, after promising message approaches had been identified. Indianapolis was chosen because it is a middle American city in a swing state with no particular connection to nuclear weapons. Before, during and after the groups, they conducted what Topos refers to as TalkBack Testing, with several hundred subjects. TalkBack Testing is a way of assessing the effectiveness and "stickiness" of core messages, and of developing and refining more effective messages. Subjects are presented with a brief text, typically a paragraph, and then asked a set of questions about the content. One consistent focus of the questions is that subjects are asked to repeat the message they have heard or to pass it along to other subjects (like the game of Telephone). When a message is effective, it can not only be passed along and explained successfully, it can be elaborated in helpful ways, and subjects can reconstruct it even when they have heard it poorly explained by others.

Topos' key finding was that advocates will not be able to gain traction on this issue unless nuclear weapons are reframed as a liability (and ineffective tool), not a solution to a problem. Their research indicates that no supporting points for reductions and/or elimination will be effective as long as people still view the weapons as achieving an important purpose (i.e. as our "biggest and best" weapons), so a sustained effort needs to be undertaken to change that thinking. In order to accomplish this, Topos recommends that advocates consistently reinforce the frame that *nuclear weapons create risk in today's world, rather than reduce it*. They recommend the following supporting points to assist in this reframe:

- Nuclear weapons don't help against the current national security threats faced by the U.S., like terrorism
- More nuclear weapons (e.g. "20,000 around the world") mean greater risk of one of them being detonated, either on purpose or by accident.
- Nuclear destruction is unique and even a "small" conflict could affect everyone on the planet.
- Nukes are unnecessary because we have better ways to ensure security.
- Trusted and surprising authorities, from both sides of the aisle, agree with this position.

ENDNOTES

[i] FROM ASSET TO LIABILITY: Developing a Message Strategy on Nuclear Weapons, Produced by the Topos Partnership for the Union of Concerned Scientists, January 12, 2009.

[ii] National Security and Human Rights Report on Focus Groups (Atlanta and Chicago September and October 2008), Produced by American Environics, November 2008.

[iii] Framing the Debate on Nuclear Weapons Policy, Report on Research, Produced by Jeremy Rosner and Kristi Fuksa (Greenburg, Quinlan and Rosner) for Morton Halperin, Open Society Institute, February 23, 2009.

[iv] Promoting Progressive Thinking About Policy in Fearful Times, Produced by the Topos Partnership for the U.S. in the World Initiative, July 2009

[v] National Security and Human Rights Report on Focus Groups (Atlanta and Chicago September and October 2008), Produced by American Environics, November 2008, page 13.

[vi] FROM ASSET TO LIABILITY: Developing a Message Strategy on Nuclear Weapons, Produced by the Topos Partnership for the Union of Concerned Scientists, January 12, 2009, page 4.

[vii] Framing the Debate on Nuclear Weapons Policy, Report on Research, Produced by Jeremy Rosner and Kristi Fuksa (Greenburg, Quinlan and Rosner) for Morton Halperin, Open Society Institute, February 23, 2009.