A good case can be made that the U.S. government, the first to develop nuclear weapons, would be much better off today without them. They fail to deter war (which has raged on ceaselessly among nuclear and non-nuclear nations since World War II), they are enormously costly, and—thanks to the nuclear arms race that followed the U.S. nuclear weapons breakthrough of 1945—Americans, for the first time in their history, face the prospect of total annihilation. In addition, the U.S. government has vast superiority over all other countries when it comes to conventional war.

Yes, the nuclearhawks admit, but nuclear weapons deter a nuclear attack on the United States by other nations. But do they? And, even if they do provide a deterrent to a nuclear attack, how many are needed for this purpose?

Recent action by British officials casts new light on this issue. Based on a Strategic Defense and Security Review, Britain's new Conservative-headed government decided this October to cut its stockpile of nuclear warheads by 25 percent, reducing it from 225 to 180.

Can 180 nuclear warheads create enough mass destruction and chaos to deter a nuclear aggressor? A 2002 study estimated that, if 300 of the weapons in the Russian nuclear arsenal struck targets in U.S. cities, 90 million Americans would die within the first half hour. Also, in the ensuing months, the vast majority of survivors would die of disease, exposure, and starvation. The same consequences would follow if there were a comparable U.S. nuclear attack on Russia. With this example in mind, we can estimate that Britain's use of 180 nuclear weapons against country X would almost immediately kill 54 million people and leave the remainder of the Xites (if there were any) dying slowly or, perhaps, wishing they were dead.

Most other nuclear powers also seem to have recognized that even a small nuclear arsenal is enough to create hell on earth for the population of any nation foolish enough to engage in a nuclear war. Thus, for example, specialists estimate that France has 300 nuclear warheads, China 240, Israel 80, Pakistan 70 to 90, India 60 to 80, and North Korea fewer than 10.

Despite the limited number of nuclear weapons possessed by most nuclear powers, two nations have much larger nuclear arsenals—indeed, possess roughly 95 percent of the world's nuclear warheads. They are the United States (with 9,600 nuclear warheads) and Russia (with 12,000). Even assuming the logic of nuclear deterrence, do they really need arsenals of this magnitude? With its 9,600 nuclear warheads, for example, the U.S. government could instantly massacre 2.88 billion people and leave...
most of the rest slowly dying in a nuclear wasteland. Isn't this a bit ... excessive?

Not surprisingly, then, as even U.S. military planners agree, there's a good deal of room for dramatic cutbacks in the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Earlier this year, Colonel B. Chance Saltzman, chief of the U.S. Air Force's Strategic Plans and Policy Division, argued that "the United States could address military utility concerns with only 311 nuclear weapons in its nuclear force structure while maintaining a stable deterrence."

In fact, the 2010 New START Treaty signed by the United States and Russia does provide for a reduction of some 30 percent in deployed strategic warheads on the part of these two dominant nuclear powers. But strategic warheads constitute only a minority of their nuclear arsenals. Furthermore, it is far from clear that the treaty will garner the necessary two-thirds vote for ratification by the U.S. Senate. At this point, at least, most Republican senators seem more interested in maintaining large numbers of U.S. nuclear missiles pointing at Russia than in reducing the number of Russian nuclear missiles pointing at the United States. Also, of course, they tend to automatically oppose measures promoted by the Obama administration.

Nor has the president entirely lived up to his rhetoric about creating a nuclear weapons-free world. Perhaps as an incentive to Republican senators to ratify the New START Treaty, the administration has announced plans to spend $180 billion to upgrade the U.S. nuclear weapons complex in the next two decades.

Overall, then, it appears that the U.S. government's desire for nuclear weapons far outruns its need for them—even by the logic of nuclear deterrence.

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