

KEITH B. PAYNE

AUTHOR ARCHIVE | LATEST

JANUARY 18, 2010 4:00 A.M.

Precision Prediction

The Doomsday Clock is not a credible gauge of the nuclear threat.

A noted journal, *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, hosts a “Doomsday Clock” that symbolically counts down the minutes to nuclear doomsday; the editors occasionally adjust it with worldwide fanfare to show that the planet is a few minutes closer to or further from midnight, which represents the point of nuclear catastrophe. In a 2007 issue, for example, the hands of the clock were advanced two minutes, from seven minutes until midnight to five minutes until midnight. This change was intended to show that during the Bush administration the world had come dangerously closer to nuclear holocaust. This month, again amid great fanfare, the Doomsday Clock was set back by a minute to suggest that the end of time had retreated. This happy change was attributed largely to President Obama’s wise leadership in the nuclear-arms-control arena.

The journal boasts that the adjustment of the “Doomsday Clock” is done in consultation with many Nobel laureates. The problem with such dramatic timekeeping, however, is that the journal’s “keepers of the clock” — no matter how prize-worthy — cannot credibly offer fine-grained predictions about the imminence of nuclear war. It is laughable to expect the onset of nuclear war to be so predictable. As with the rest of us mere mortals, the clock-keepers cannot know enough about the myriad of possible perceptions, motives, beliefs, and behaviors of nuclear powers to predict with any precision the onset of a nuclear war. The many possible proximate causes of great risk-taking and crisis-escalation may be wholly unrecognizable or visible only in part, and thus the timing of war resists close prediction. This limitation is evident in pertinent history. Careful observers of international relations were surprised by two of the 20th century’s potential nuclear-war triggers, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Other less well known but extremely dangerous crises also came as surprises to careful Western observers.

The uncertainty at work here may be reduced via dogged efforts to understand opponents and contexts, but the *Bulletin*’s atomic timekeeping is showmanship without substance. The keepers of

the clock do not and cannot know whether it should be set at five minutes or five hours to midnight, or how it subsequently should be adjusted. The keepers themselves recognize the lack of precision underlying their showy claims: Kennette Benedict, publisher of *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, apparently observed that the Doomsday Clock originally was set “at seven minutes to midnight because that’s where it would look best in a design sense.” One can only wonder: Where was the scientific substance in this aesthetically pleasing timekeeping?

Yogi Berra noted, “It’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.” Prediction is a particularly inexact business when the subject is as complex, idiosyncratic, and opaque as the possible roads to war. A review of past issues of the journal, for example, reveals that there was no change in the “Doomsday Clock” immediately prior to the Chinese attack on U.S. forces in Korea in 1950, the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, or the Yom Kippur War in 1973. In 1969, at the time of the violent Sino-Soviet border clashes, which apparently precipitated a Soviet inquiry to the United States about a pre-emptive strike against Chinese nuclear facilities, the journal actually had set the clock *back* three minutes, as if the prospects for nuclear war had become more remote. In fact, the movement of the clock seems to have been affected only by developments in the areas of nuclear testing and formal arms control. Whether these developments have much, if anything, to do with the probability and timing of war is questionable; what is unquestionable is that there are many other potentially significant factors, and those who set the clock cannot have an adequate level of knowledge about them to adjust it with any accuracy.

The point here is not simply about the “Doomsday Clock” per se. It is about a charade that politicizes and exploits one of the most serious of fears: nuclear war. The keepers of the clock are free to throw a bouquet to the Obama administration after throwing a stone at the Bush administration. They ought not, however, continue with the pretense of credible insight into the likelihood and timing of nuclear war; that much is pure political flimflam.

— *Keith B. Payne is head of the Graduate Department of Defense and Strategic Studies at Missouri State University and president of National Institute for Public Policy. He is a former deputy assistant secretary of defense.*