

A realist Millennial's view of nuclear weapons

16 SEPTEMBER 2015

Matthew R. Costlow

The “problem” of nuclear weapons seems to be an intractable one. Since the dawn of the nuclear age more than 70 years ago, great thinkers in every generation have proposed various solutions for how to reduce nuclear dangers while increasing global security. Some have put their faith in technological solutions, such as [“Atoms for Peace”](#) or [“social verification”](#) of arms control treaties. Others place their hope in the social sciences, favoring such methods as the [“rational actor model”](#) to study the functioning of deterrence; or the physical sciences, whose practitioners promote theories such as [neurodeterrence](#), which may help explain how individuals process information relating to deterrence.

A member of the Millennial generation, Natalya Wallin, [recently proposed](#) using the seemingly boundless energy of her generation to focus on “creative problem-solving and innovating for the future” in order to solve the “problem” of nuclear weapons. As a fellow Millennial, however, I find such proposals to be a prime example of all that is wrong with much of my generation's thinking on the issue of nuclear weapons.

Demanding change is not a solution. Unfortunately, my generation is well known for [“hashtag activism.”](#) whereby sharing one's thoughts about current events on social media has become a vacuous and cathartic activity. When my generation shares #BringBackOurGirls or #Kony2012, it makes us feel better because we are “raising awareness.” Yet here we are today: Most of the girls kidnapped by Boko Haram have not been brought back, and Joseph Kony apparently still roams free. Vague suggestions, like “Let's get creative,” do not advance any solutions to problems like these. They merely add to the rhetoric.

Worse still, many Millennials fail to acknowledge previous generations' work, as if they had made no progress on the issues our generation inherits. Remember, it was previous generations who proposed and implemented highly successful diplomatic efforts that

reduced Cold War tensions and stymied nuclear proliferation. Instead of bemoaning “old nuclear arsenals and mindsets,” my generation would do well to learn the lessons of the past, understand why certain nations increased or decreased their nuclear arsenals, and not be so quick to assume that newer ideas are inherently better.

Lastly, my generation has a nasty habit of encountering a problem and insisting that we do something about it. If you press us for specifics, you only hear crickets. So when we are confronted with the problem of, say, nuclear crises, [a Millennial response](#) goes something like this: “If humanity is ever to be free from the threat of nuclear catastrophe, people need to stand up and demand further action on nuclear reductions from their representatives.” What specific actions would free humanity from the threat of nuclear catastrophe? Why were these actions not taken earlier? How would unilateral nuclear reductions enhance our security? Crickets.

The messy reality. Allow me to suggest a radical new mindset for my generation as it confronts the issues of nuclear disarmament, Russian and Chinese aggression, and nuclear proliferation: extreme humility. Instead of “boldly” proclaiming the need to raise awareness, let’s utilize our generation’s greatest asset—access to data—and truly understand the issues before trying to solve anything. Instead of proposing “fresh ideas” for their own sake, let’s recognize that we are not the first generation to deal with these issues and probably will not be the last. Instead of studiously avoiding specifics or hard choices, let’s face a messy reality and not simplify an increasingly complex world to bumper-sticker activism.

A generation of nuclear analysts influenced by extreme humility would acknowledge that we cannot know with 100 percent certainty how many nuclear weapons are needed to deter an enemy, despite [recent assertions](#) to the contrary. Such a generation would also recognize that simple formulas like “fewer nuclear weapons equals fewer accidents” or “fewer nuclear weapons equals fewer crises,” though they may sound intuitive, [do not match](#) the historical record.

Millennials, also called Generation Y (or Generation Why?), are known for questioning many of the fundamental assumptions of previous generations, but my generation needs to ask itself a few tough questions regarding its assumption that nuclear disarmament is always a good thing: Would further US nuclear reductions encourage our allies to consider beginning their own nuclear weapons programs in order to make up for perceived security shortfalls? Would further US nuclear reductions [actually discourage](#) the nuclear

modernization programs in Russia and China? Would fewer nuclear weapons actually reduce the possibility of war or lead to fewer deaths should a nuclear war break out? Would deterrence really function in the same manner after an approximately 80 percent reduction in the number of nuclear weapons in the US arsenal?

An unpredictable future. These questions are not scary rhetoric; instead they are problems with global implications that must be approached humbly and with great caution. Any actions the United States takes with regard to nuclear disarmament will almost certainly have worldwide repercussions, for good or ill. Indeed, one of the most important things this young generation of nuclear analysts can do is consider the unpredictability of the future, and the implications for the US nuclear arsenal.

Blindly accepting the notion that fewer nuclear weapons equals a better world is neither new nor clever. Analysts do not and cannot know what enemies the United States may need to deter in the next 5, 10, or 15 years. Current US nuclear modernization plans include some systems operating into the 2080s, 65 years from now. Looking back 65 years ago and seeing all the political and technological changes that have occurred, are Millennials really so confident in our predictive abilities as to suggest we *know* nuclear disarmament is the best path to take? Is the United States willing to bet its very existence on the promises of disarmament?

The stakes are simply too high and the risks too great to charge full speed ahead on the path of nuclear disarmament in this uncertain world. If Millennials want to make a difference for the better, we should humbly recognize the boundaries of what is knowable, view the world as it is, and propose specific solutions to match specific problems.

Younger generations are prone to being wildly optimistic about what can and should be done while disdainful of past efforts, yet as the philosopher Aristotle taught, “Youth is easily deceived because it is quick to hope.” Let us not confuse what we wish, for what is prudent.

Matthew R. Costlow is a policy analyst at the National Institute for Public Policy. His research focuses on nuclear deterrence and assurance, arms control, nonproliferation, Russian and Chinese defense strategy, and nuclear terrorism. In 2012, while working for the Institute, Costlow graduated from Missouri State University with an M.S. in Defense and Strategic Studies.