

Maranatha Baptist Bible College

**The Impact of Nuclear Warfare on Foreign Policy Throughout
the 20th Century**

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By

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"I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones." – Albert Einstein

Since the deployment of the first weapons of mass destruction in the Second World War, global politics have been overshadowed by the threat of a nuclear attack. Technology has advanced to the point that virtually any nation, with the right connections, can utterly destroy or severely handicap an opposing threat. The reality of nuclear weaponry is relatively new to the global scene, and government personnel are searching for a system in which the arms race is equal, without any one country gaining an advantage. Several incidents in the past century have provoked different responses in the nations involved. The development of nuclear weapons in the latter half of the twentieth century severely impacted modern foreign policy.

The Beginning: Curiosity and Use of Atomic Weapons

In the 1930's Americans were making significant strides in atomic and nuclear science. J.J. Thompson's discovery of electrons in 1897, coupled with Owen Chadwick's discovery of the neutrally charged neutron in 1932 put scientists in a frenzy to quickly create a weapon that utilized this atomic energy. As scientists became more familiar with the product they were dealing with, bombs were manufactured in very small quantities. These bombs were cautiously deployed at test sites such as Bikini Island of the Caribbean, and Almagordo, New Mexico.¹ In

¹ Laurence, William. *Dawn Over Zero: The Story of the Atomic Bomb*. 2 ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947.

almost no time, other leading national powers had gained information on the coveted atomic energy. This was an exciting time for nations, as the bombs were first made, however, the mood would soon become apprehensive as nations realized the great power of the weapons being produced. Similar to a child discovering a secluded room in a new house, the nations with knowledge about atomic energy were thrilled at the onset of their discovery, and immediately cautious due to rival powers' similar success. This attitude directly impacted how nations dealt with each other, particularly near the beginning of their respective discoveries. The United States, while very cautious in its use of the atomic bomb, had confidence that the war in the Pacific could be ended at any time with a certain command.

Initially, the atomic bomb was created for maintaining peace. The pioneers of this revolutionary science embraced Theodore Roosevelt's "Big Stick" mentality. The following is a segment from the New York Times dated June 9, 1946:

At the end of the war we had only scratched the surface of the development of atomic explosives, and no doubt since then some future progress has been made both in development and in understanding. But these are things that cannot be discussed. When, if ever they can be discussed openly, it will be a very different world and to my way of thinking a very much better one.

There is only one future of atomic explosives that I can regard with any enthusiasm: That they should never be used in war. Since in any major total war, such as we have lived through, they will most certainly be used, there is nothing modest in this hope for the future: It is that there be no such wars again.²

² Divine, Robert A. *American Foreign Policy Since 1945*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969.

The events of World War II ended in some form of peace, causing the arms race of nuclear weaponry not to be a pressing matter for several years in the minds of Americans. Since the United States emerged as a superpower in World War II, foreign policy was usually handled with a “Big brother” mentality. The United States saw opposing threats as important, but the sense of national pride that came from the success of the war diminished the supposed vulnerability of the nation. This mindset would quickly change, however, in 1962, when the Cuban missile incident reopened some form of curiosity about weapons of mass destruction.

The Evolution: Incidents Regarding Nuclear Weaponry

The Cuban Missile Crisis was handled differently than past threats, as a result of the weapons being used. Americans, in a form of swift justice, would have dealt firmly with this incident five to ten years earlier. However, the threat of nuclear weapons in such proximity to our nation caused a great scare and careful diplomacy by president Kennedy.³ At the beginning of the nuclear era, the method of deterrence was supposed to be the key to maintaining peace. This situation was a threat to U.S. security, but the threat in Cuba was miniscule in comparison to the threat of Soviet intervention. Since the Kennedy administration was aware of Soviet forces explained by the RAND corporation and the efforts of Albert Wohlstetter, the

³ Dobbs, Michael. *One Minute to Midnight*. New York: Vintage Books, 2008.

tactics used were very cautious, not necessarily because the U.S. was in tremendous danger at the time, but because of the consequences of a future Soviet strike.⁴

Reform would again take place in the 1970s when the nuclear scene had become quiet. During this period, economics, the Vietnam War and Watergate were at the forefront of American politics. However, behind the scenes, American scientists and politicians had fears about the balance of power based simply on knowledge of the technology available. Plans were diagrammed, books were written, and policies were drawn up for the possibility of a nuclear attack. At a much earlier time, Lenin promised the people of Russia that the government was technologically superior in the area of atomic warfare than any other nation. The Soviet dogma, however, made significant strides during the 70s and 80s to keep nuclear progress somewhat of a secret.⁵ The Soviets and Americans were keeping a steady pace in building up biological and chemical weapons until 1979. At this time, President Jimmy Carter of the United States, and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev met in Vienna, Austria to sign the SALT II act, limiting arms production for both sides.⁶ What had once been an exciting, new interest for these countries quickly turned into an enormous responsibility. Arms production in World War II was simply a method

⁴ Smoke, Richard. *National Security and the Nuclear Dilemma*. 2nd ed. New York: Random House, 1984.

⁵ Kissinger, Henry A. *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*. Gordon Dean. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958.

⁶ Hanes, Sharon M. *Cold War Primary Sources*. Lawrence W. Baker. Farmington Hills, MI: Thompson Learning, Inc., 2004.

of quickly ending the war, however, those involved would soon realize that the weapons being dealt with could be a method of quickly destroying human existence. This startling reality brought a somber, untrusting attitude to foreign policy that would greatly affect the post-modern age.

Foreign Policy Today: Changes in Attitude and Ideals

The Cold War between the United States and Russia was different than any other war in the past, based on the availability of weapons of mass destruction. While the war officially ended in 1992, the methods used by both opponents continue to be used today in foreign policy. George Bush said the following in his “End of the Cold War” address:

“Much good can come from the prudent use of power. And much good can come of this: A world once divided into two armed camps now recognizes one sole and prominent power, the United States of America. And they regard this with no dread. For the world trusts us with power, and the world is right. They trust us to be fair and restrained. They trust us to be on the side of decency. They trust us to do what’s right.”⁷

The American mindset shifted from the competitive big brother, to a protective father with this speech. At the end of the Cold War, the United States took pride in being the sole leader in technology, and believed that it would only use such weapons in a way that was decent and becoming of the rest of the world. While this sounds nice to an American, it is easy for one to see how this attitude would upset

⁷ Hanes, Sharon M. *Cold War Primary Sources*. Lawrence W. Baker. Farmington Hills, MI: Thompson Learning, Inc., 2004.

any lesser power. Over the coming decades, the United States would become a target, based on its self-proclamation of superiority.

The past twenty years has seen little use of nuclear weaponry, yet much has been said about their existence as nations seek their own agendas. While some Middle Eastern nations, along with North Korea, pursue arms to become a threat to rival nations, others pursue manufacturing these weapons to maintain an upper hand in the global scene. In the early 1990s, it was believed prior to 9/11, the secular socialist Saddam Hussein passed weapons of mass destruction on to fundamentalist Islamic groups seeking to dethrone regimes of religious rivals across the world. Also, North Korea in the past years has been found on more than one occasion testing their nuclear weapons. While that fact alone seems harmless, the fact that North Korea's weapons were kept a secret from international agencies such as the United Nations obviously was a misstep by the government.⁸ Immediately after World War II, only two nations possessed weapons of mass destruction. Now, anyone in the world, with the right connections, may have an opportunity to inflict severe damage on a nation, people group, or an entire continent.

In conclusion, the development of nuclear weapons in the latter half of the twentieth century severely impacted modern foreign policy. As nations look to the coming years, they can only speculate as to what the use and outcome of weapons of mass destruction will be. Politicians have voiced strong opinions in the last decade,

⁸ Cimballa, Stephen I. *Nuclear Weapons and strategy: U.S. nuclear policy for the twenty-first century*. Abingdon, OR: Routledge, 2005.

and ideas such as complete disarmament and international authority will most likely be put into place in the near future.⁹ While the United Nations exists partly to ensure the safety of nations, and extinguish the threat of a nuclear holocaust, its authority is severely limited. The development of atomic and nuclear weapons has created a sense of anxious fear in almost every nation on earth. Weapons of mass destruction have changed foreign policy much more than any other item known to man. In most cases, the reality that one wrong political move could mean the end of a nation or landmass has caused world leaders around the globe to take a step back and evaluate the weight of their respective decisions. While the future is uncertain, one thing is for sure: the existence of nuclear weapons caused and will continue to cause a dramatic difference in the way countries interact with one another. [1,905]

⁹ Russell, Bertrand . *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959.

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