

U.S. and Russia Lead the Way to Zero Nukes

A Dream Fantasy

by *Howard W. Hallman*¹

Summary

In an imaginary conversation the author urges U.S. President Barak Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to take bold leadership to liberate the world from its bondage to nuclear weapons. The author notes that nuclear weapons are archaic, cold war holdovers without legitimate military utility in the 21st century and that the function of nuclear weapons deterring other nuclear weapons can be better achieved by mutual elimination.

The two leaders are urged to honor the de facto, sixty year taboo on the use of nuclear weapons by announcing a no first use policy under all conditions. Because the United States and Russia possess more than 90 percent of the global nuclear arsenal, they should lead the way by de-alerting weapons now on day-to-day alert and steadily deactivating and dismantling all nuclear weapons, including all those in reserve. This should be done with undiminished security for all nations at all stages of the process.

Rather than relying solely on bilateral monitoring and verification of de-alerting and standing down of nuclear weapons, the United States and Russia are urged to encourage and facilitate development of an international system for monitoring and verification of nuclear disarmament.

I've been working hard for the goal of a world without nuclear weapons. It's consumed not only my waking hours but also my dreams at night. Let me tell you about a strange but wonderful dream I had in June 2009.

In this dream I was attending an international peace conference in Geneva, Switzerland as an observer for a citizen peace organization. Many heads of state were there, including U.S. President Barak Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. It was the third day, and I could see that the two presidents were getting bored over procedural haggling. So I sent each of them a note inviting them to spend a day with me on a motor yacht on Lake Geneva. I was very pleased when they accepted.

You might wonder why they would accept an invitation from a stranger like me. Perhaps they googled me, read my [online bio](#)² and reference to my books and my name on sign-on letters, and figured that I was just a friendly, aged peacenik. Perhaps they checked their terrorist lists without finding my name. Maybe there is an archive of contacts I've made over the years at the Russian Embassy in Washington and at the U.S. White House on peace issues. But it really doesn't matter, for it was my dream and I set the terms.

The next morning the two presidents arrived at the dock with a parade of limousines. I had asked that each have only an interpreter, but they each brought along five from the U.S.

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² <http://www.mupwj.org/howardhallman.htm>

Secret Service and the Russian equivalent, the interpreter, an administrative aide, a press officer, and a photographer. President Obama also had a sharply dressed Marine carrying a black briefcase. President Medvedev, too, had a military aide carrying a similar briefcase. I figured that they contained the secret codes for authorizing a nuclear strike. Far too many people for restful cruise on a 50-foot boat. After tough negotiations I consented to allowing each president to have only an interpreter, two security persons, and the code carrier.

As we were getting on the boat, I remarked, "What if I grabbed those nuclear 'footballs' and tossed them in the lake? Would that prevent the U.S. and Russia from launching nuclear weapons?"

"Not at all," President Obama answered. "Automatically the U.S. alert status would go up a notch. Generals at the Pentagon would gain authority to decide where to use nukes without civilian control." Through his interpreter President Medvedev made a similar reply. This reminded me that we peace activists must be careful about what we do because of possible unintended consequences.

I introduced the two presidents to the boat owner and skipper, a friend who made his fortune in Silicon Valley, now lives in Switzerland, and gives generously to peace organizations. As he headed the boat eastward, we could see the UN buildings on the hillside on our left. I asked, "How's the conference going?"

"Not too well," Obama replied. "Too many delegations with their own agendas." Medvedev nodded agreement. "Too many don't believe that I'm serious about my goal for a world free of nuclear weapons," Obama continued.

It was chilly on deck, so I invited the presidents into the cabin along with their interpreters. The security guys and the code carriers could stay outside and still do their duty.

Inside we sat on benches around a table: Obama and his interpreter on one side, Medvedev and his interpreter on the opposite side, and myself at the end. A crew member served us hot coffee and tea and took pots out to those on deck.

Picking up the conversation, Medvedev remarked, "They say we should go first. They claim that we're not living up to the NPT agreement for the possessors of nuclear weapons to cease the arms race and move toward disarmament."

Here was the opener that I wanted. But I pondered whether I should immediately plunge into this issue. Sure, I concluded, that's why I invited them to the boat.

"If I may offer my humble opinion," I remarked, "they're right. The United States and the Soviet Union started the nuclear arms race. You have more than 90 percent of the global supply of nuclear weapons. You should lead the way to global elimination."

"That's what we're doing," Medvedev insisted. "In the Moscow Treaty that my predecessor, Vladimir Putin, and your former president, George W. Bush, negotiated we're

reducing our arsenals by large amounts. We have negotiations underway to update START. I'm willing to consider further cuts."

"So am I," Obama asserted.

"That's progress," I said, "but it's not good enough. It doesn't go far enough or fast enough to rid the world of these useless, cold war holdovers."

"Holdovers?" Medvedev repeated.

"Yes, holdovers. They are instruments of the Cold War that started before you two were born and ended eighteen years ago when you were just entering public life. You're from a new generation. You've inherited these useless but dangerous relics and the obsolete doctrines that go with them. You are the ones who could lead the liberation from our bondage to these outmoded monstrosities."

"You keep saying they are useless," Obama remarked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean they have absolutely no military utility," I answered. "They are not needed to block rogue nations from acquiring nukes. Rather than having a legitimate use, their existence encourages proliferation."

But Obama insisted, "They still serve as deterrent against other nuclear weapons."

"That's a non-use," I rebutted. "And if that's their only function, abolition is a much safer course. Then there would be nothing to deter."

Obama wasn't convinced that nuclear weapons have no utility. Nor was Medvedev. They wanted evidence.

"Let me start with the United States," I replied, "starting with testimony of admirals and generals. For instance, when [Admiral Noel Gayler](http://www.zero-nukes.org/militaryleaders.html#admiralgayler)³ was made commander of all U.S. forces in the Pacific Command in 1972, he could find no area where it would conceivably have made sense to explode nuclear weapons in order to achieve military objectives. This included the Middle East. After [General Colin Powell](http://www.zero-nukes.org/militaryleaders.html#generalpowell)⁴ completed four years as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1993, he reflected that during his term the United States fought wars in Panama and the Persian Gulf and had 22 other military encounters without resorting to nuclear weapons. That's two examples, and there are [many more retired officers](http://www.zero-nukes.org/militaryleaders.html)⁵ who have voiced the same opinion."

Obama interrupted, "Opinions aren't evidence."

³ <http://www.zero-nukes.org/militaryleaders.html#admiralgayler>

⁴ <http://www.zero-nukes.org/militaryleaders.html#generalpowell>

⁵ <http://www.zero-nukes.org/militaryleaders.html>

“Okay,” I said, “let me provide pragmatic evidence. In the more than 60 years since atomic bombs destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the United States has found no use for nuclear weapons in numerous wars and other military engagements. None of your eleven predecessor presidents going back to Harry Truman (post-Hiroshima/Nagasaki) has authorized use of nuclear weapons. For instance:

- Truman and Eisenhower accepted stalemate in Korea rather than resorting to nuclear bombs.
- In Vietnam Johnson and Nixon rejected the use of nuclear weapons in a war that was headed for defeat.
- George Herbert Walker Bush found that they weren’t needed in the Gulf War.
- His son, George W. Bush, found that they weren’t necessary to defeat Saddam Hussein and had no utility in dealing with insurgents in Iraq and al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. I’m guessing that you have come to the same conclusion.”

“Furthermore,” I concluded, “nuclear weapons are totally useless against terrorists hiding in caves and scattered in villages and urban neighborhoods. They are simply too powerful and have too many harmful human and environmental side effects for battlefield use.”

“All right, all right,” Obama responded. “Even so, there may be some future contingency where they could have some use.”

“If you think so, I suggest that you ask the Joint Chiefs to offer you a list of possible targets, specifying location and circumstance where nuclear weapons would have military utility that couldn’t be handled by conventional weapons. The burden of proof is upon those who claim that nuclear weapons are useful.”

Obama replied “But there are folks in the States who say we should use nukes to take out North Korea’s and Iran’s nuclear potential.”

“Yes, I know that crowd of neo-conservatives. But I also know that [Paul Nitze](#)⁶, who was once part of them, toward the end of his life came to the conclusion that the U.S. could handle every such contingency with precision conventional weapons. So much so, he concluded that there is no compelling reason why the United States couldn’t unilaterally get rid of its nuclear weapons.”

The Russian interpreter asked me to repeat “Nitze”. This led Medvedev to remark that in secondary school he had learned about Nitze as an author of the Cold War. I acknowledged his role, but pointed out how intelligent persons can adjust to changing times.

“Unilateral sounds too daring,” Obama observed. “I could never get the support of Congress.”

“But what about Nitze’s point that the U.S. has sufficient conventional weaponry to deal with rogue states which are developing nuclear weapons?” I asked. “Not that I would personally

⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/10/28/opinion/a-threat-mostly-to-ourselves.html?scp=9&sq=nitze&st=nyt>

recommend this approach. Would you rule out use of nuclear weapons against Iran and North Korea?"

"We are doing our best to use diplomacy, sanctions, and incentives," he replied. "We can succeed if we get full support from all nuclear weapons states." He stared at Medvedev, who looked away.

I decided to press harder. "Sir," I said to Obama, "it's been over sixty years since the first and only nuclear bombs were exploded. Therefore, it's become virtually taboo to use them. Would you be willing to break that taboo with a first strike against Iran or North Korea? That would be a serious moral burden to bear."

Obama looked annoyed. "I don't answer such hypotheticals."

I could see that Obama wasn't willing to depart from the deliberate ambiguity of U.S. intentions for those two states. So I decided to turn to Medvedev, who had been enjoying my grilling of Obama.

Looking at Medvedev straight in his eyes, I asserted, "Mr. President, what I've said about the United States also applies to Russia. Your nuclear weapons have no military utility."

"What makes you think so?" he wanted to know.

"First of all," I answered, "I'm aware that like their U.S. counterparts many retired Russian military officers favor the end of the nuclear arms race. For instance, in 1996 seventeen of them signed a [statement by international generals and admirals](#)⁷ calling for the complete and irrevocable elimination of nuclear weapons."

"I didn't know that," the Russian president remarked.

"I'll send you a reference," I noted. "Furthermore, since the U.S.S.R. conducted its first nuclear test explosion, all ten Soviet and Russian heads of state from Joseph Stalin to you have declined to authorize use of nuclear weapons. For much of this period, the Soviet Union supported communist regimes in Eastern Europe. When there were uprisings, such as in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, your government sent in tank reinforcements. This was part of what became known as the Brezhnev Doctrine, specifying an obligation to intervene to protect socialism. I don't know whether this ever envisioned use of nuclear weapons, but it certainly never occurred. This became moot in 1989 when Gorbachev abandoned the doctrine and allowed free elections in Eastern Europe. By then the Soviet army had failed to conquer Afghanistan and suffered defeat without calling on its nuclear arsenal. Over the years you're had border disputes with China where nuclear weapons never came into play. And nuclear weapons didn't prevent the Soviet Union from dissolving in 1991."

"Yes, I know all of that," Medvedev acknowledged.

⁷ <http://www.gsinsitute.org/archives/000014.shtml>

“Since then,” I continued, “Russian military action has involved solely encounters in breakaway regions and in states that gained independence from the old Soviet Union. In the First Chechen War the Russia military devastated Grozny with conventional forces but couldn’t defeat guerillas based in the mountains and the rebels prevailed. Nuclear weapons didn’t come into play. In the Second Chechen War Russian forces won, again without nukes. Your incursion into Georgia last year was small scale. Ask your generals to tell you where they would consider nuclear weapons anywhere in the foreseeable future. My guess is that answer will be ‘nowhere’. But even if they have some use in mind, would you be willing to break the sixty-year taboo against the use of nuclear weapons?”

Medvedev responded, “With NATO on our borders in the Baltic Republics and flirting to add Ukraine and Georgia to its membership, we fear an invasion from the west where you now have conventional superiority. As last resort we might have to use some tactical nuclear weapons.”

“NATO has no intent to start a war with Russia,” Obama objected.

Medvedev retorted, “As George Shultz, secretary of state under President Reagan, has said, states design policy not on the basis of intentions of other states but rather on their capabilities. You still base troops and planes in Western Europe and store a couple hundred nuclear bombs. Other NATO members are heavily armed. What are we to think?”

“Purely defensive,” Obama shot back.

“Why are you erecting missile defense in Poland and the Czech Republic? To make it easier to attack Russia?”

“The Bush administration started that. It’s against Iran, not Russia.”

“Besides that,” Medvedev added, “we still need nuclear weapons to deter your long-range missiles and those of other nuclear weapon states.”

Obama sighed deeply. “That’s a whole other subject. Before we talk about deterrence, why don’t we take a break and get some fresh air?”

When we came out on deck, we found the two military aides, briefcases strapped to their ankles, competing in a video game on their cell phones. A Russian security guard and an American counterpart, obviously of a previous generation, were playing chess while the other two looked on. Standing near the cabin sheltered from the wind, Obama lit a cigarette and walked back to the stern. The interpreters with bottles of water in hand watched the chess game.

Medvedev and I went to the cockpit to visit with the skipper. The Russian president, sans interpreter, conversed in English with a British accent. I asked about his family and otherwise showed my friendship, for I had noted his discomfort with my line of questioning. The skipper let him steer the boat. He made a slow turn to the right and then back to the left.

As Medvedev was doing this, I slipped into the galley and rummaged around until I found some boxes of plastic spoons, which I put on a shelf near where we had been sitting.

Medvedev asked the skipper, "Is there some cove where I could have a swim?"

"The water's too cold," the skipper replied. "This time of year it's around 15°."

"That's not cold for a Russian."

"It's all right with me if your security folks will let you."

"That's hopeless. I'm a prisoner of my handlers."

As Obama and the interpreters returned to the cabin, I asked the skipper what 15° was in Fahrenheit. 59° he told me. I had an involuntary shiver because I know that's cold enough to make one's ankles hurt wading at the beach.

As we took our seats again in the cabin I told the two presidents that I wanted to take them on an imaginary journey in their minds' eyes. "Imagine," I began, "that you are in a small urban park with trees, green grass, a formal garden, and broad sidewalks. Nearby you see a church with a tall tower with a gold, onion-shaped dome topped by a cross. In front of the tower is a large bell, 20 feet (6 meters) tall. Beyond you can see other churches with similar gold, onion-shaped domes."

And lo and behold through dream magic we were there: the two presidents, the two interpreters, and me.

"Welcome to the Kremlin!" Medvedev exclaimed.

"The Kremlin?" Obama wondered. "Where's the fortress wall and Red Square?"

"We are above it. Inside the Kremlin," Medvedev explained. "If you want to see Red Square, follow me."

We walked to the end of the park and looked over a wall. Directly in front of us was St. Basil's Cathedral, to the left the broad expanse of Red Square, and on the other side was GUM, Moscow's famous department store.

"Why did you bring us here?" Obama asked me.

"To show you ground zero for one of your missiles."

A woman nearby overheard me. She demanded, "What do you mean ground zero?"

"Where a U.S. missile will strike if the U.S. and Russia engage in nuclear war," I told her.

Medvedev said, "I would like to introduce my wife, Svetlana Vladimirovna. She's out for her daily walk." Pointing to some teenage boys kicking a soccer ball, "That's our son, Ilya, the one in the blue sweater."

Mrs. Medvedev scowled at President Obama. "Shame on you! We want friendship, not your bombs."

To get away from this touchy situation I said, "Now let us imagine that we are in a vegetable garden. A woman in a straw hat is hoeing corn. Two girls are picking green beans."

Quickly the five of us were in this garden. Beyond we could see a white mansion with six columns in a gentle arc in the middle and what looked like a porch on the second floor.

"Welcome to our White House," Obama proclaimed. "And meet my wife, Michelle, and my daughters, Malia and Sasha."

"The pleasure is mine," said Medvedev. Turning to me, he continued, "Don't tell me. You brought us here to show us ground zero for one of our missiles."

"Ground zero!" Mrs. Obama exclaimed. "Shame on you! We want friendship, not bombs."

I snapped my fingers. We were back in the boat cabin. A crew member came out of the galley with a platter of sandwiches and cans of soda.

As we started to eat, I said. "I hope I've made my point. The foolishness of keeping missiles on alert to strike one another from afar."

"You don't give us credit for what we're doing," Medvedev objected. "We have negotiators working out an extension of START verification. We may even be able to reduce deployed nuclear warheads to 1,500 apiece."

"Don't get me wrong," I replied. "I support these negotiations as a step in the right direction. However, they maintain the obsolete deterrence doctrine. They operate in the cold war framework in which each side seeks advantage for its remaining nuclear weapons."

"Nuclear deterrence has kept us out of war for sixty years," Obama asserted. "You can't put it aside so easily."

"With all due respect, Mr. President," I replied, "there are complex reasons why we haven't had a nuclear war. To give the deterrence doctrine the credit is a stretch. It's flawed logic. You're both lawyers and probably know the Latin phrase, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. There's no way you can prove that a previous happening caused a particular happening, or a non-happening."

The Latin stumped the Russian interpreter, so I wrote it out. He handed my note to Medvedev. He nodded his understanding.

“Anyway there are other reasons for discarding the deterrence doctrine.”

“Such as?” Medvedev asked.

“High on the list are moral reasons,” I answered. “Numerous religious leaders have condemned nuclear deterrence. My denomination, the [United Methodist Church](#)⁸, has stated that the doctrine of nuclear deterrence is morally corrupt and spiritually bankrupt because it holds innocent people hostage for political and military purposes. On the secular side Fred Iklè, an American national security scholar who served in the Nixon, Ford and Reagan administrations, once observed that ‘our method for preventing nuclear war rests on a form of warfare universally condemned since the Dark Ages – the mass killing of hostages.’ ”

“You can’t blame us,” Medvedev declared, “we didn’t invent nuclear deterrence. We’re doing our best to contain the nuclear arms race. We’re both committed to achieving a nuclear free world.”

“Yes,” Obama joined in, “I foresee the day when Earth will be free of nuclear weapons, even though it may not happen in my lifetime.”

“Me, too,” Medvedev chimed in.

I replied, “I’m much more optimistic. I believe that it could happen within six to eight years. That’s two presidential terms in the U.S. I’m 81 and in good health. It might even live long enough to see the completion.”

Obama looked at me. “From all you say, I take it that you are an abolitionist. You think that nuclear deterrence is immoral, that nuclear weapons are useless, that we ought to abolish all of them as soon as we can.”

Smiling I replied, “I confess that I am! I’m convinced that there is a practical route to zero nukes.”

“What do you think, Dmitry?” Obama asked his counterpart. “Shall we let him offer his scenario?”

“Sure, Barak. It might be interesting,” Medvedev responded.

“I was hoping you’d ask,” was my reply.

They laughed and gestured for me to go ahead.

⁸ <http://www.zero-nukes.org/religiousstatements2.html#sayingno>

“Before I begin,” I said. “I’d like to rearrange our seating. Let me explain why. Years ago when I worked for a citizen organization in Philadelphia, I noticed that when we met with city officials at city hall they typically sat on one side of the table and citizens on the other. Then I discovered that we could make more progress if a few citizens claimed sits on their side of the table and some of them had to sit among the citizens. This encouraged more discussion and less argument because it’s difficult to shout at a person sitting next to you.”

Obama’s eyes brightened when he realized that I might have been a community organizer like himself. He asked, “Did it work?”

“Sometimes but not always. But even if not wholly successful at the table, it opened opportunities for helpful conversation on the side.”

“I don’t think this would have succeeded in Chicago.” He pause a moment then added, “Well, it might have worked with a few agencies.”

I continued, “Now I know that you gentlemen aren’t going to shout at one another, but suppose you sat on adjacent sides rather than opposite.”

So I got Obama to sit one end with Medvedev around the corner from him. I took the boxes of spoons from the shelf, placed them on the table, and sat down at the opposite end from Obama.

“This will let you address your common challenge together: how to get rid of the global nuclear arsenal represented by these boxes of spoons. No one knows for sure what the total inventory is, but one estimate is 24,000 warheads.”

I opened a box of spoons and poured the contents on the table.

“Let’s say that each spoon represents 100 warheads. There are ten spoons in a box. So here are 1,000 warheads.”

“My source says that Russia possesses 13,000 nuclear warheads including those in reserve and those awaiting dismantlement.” I placed 13 boxes in a pile. “And the U.S. has 10,000.” I put ten boxes in another pile. “France has about 300 warheads.” From the ten spoons I had previously dumped, I took three for France. “The UK and China have about 200 each.” I took two spoons apiece. “Israel and India may each have around 100 warheads.” It placed one spoon for each. “Pakistan fewer that than.” I broke off a bowl of a spoon. “And North Korea perhaps a few.” I broke the spoon handle in half.

The table now contained Russia’s 13 boxes and the U.S. 10 boxes looming over the smaller piles.

I looked from one president to the other and asked, “So where’s the problem? Who has the greatest responsibility for getting to zero?”

“You mean us?” Medvedev asked.

I replied, “How can you tell other nations not to have nuclear weapons when you have so many and seem to cherish them? If you really want zero nukes, you’ve got to lead the way with bold initiatives.”

Obama told me, “Upon reflection I’m willing to admit there’s some truth in what you said earlier. In a sense they are cold war relics that we’re stuck with.” He put his hand on the American pile. “I don’t like them anymore than you do, but you can’t just bury them and say we’re done with them. I’m waiting for your specifics.”

“All right,” I answered. “Here’s what I would do if you put me in charge. I would start with your [joint statement of April 2009](#)⁹ in which you committed your two countries to achieving a nuclear free world. I like the term ‘free’. If we are to be free from nuclear weapons, we need liberators. That’s you two. Liberation must begin in your own countries as you free yourselves from your addiction to nuclear weapons.”

“Do you expect us to go cold turkey?” Obama demanded.

The Russian interpreter had a problem with translation until Medvedev explained the colloquialism.

I responded, “Even I recognize that it’s not quite that easy. But that’s in the right direction. You can start by acknowledging the uselessness of nuclear weapons except for deterring other nukes. In that framework you should announce a policy of no first use against any adversary under any circumstance.”

“That was Russian policy for many years,” Medvedev claimed, “but the U.S would never make a similar pledge.”

“But now you’ve pulled back from your no first use commitment,” I observed, “claiming that NATO conventional superiority endangers you.”

In English Medvedev explained, “Hedging our bets, as Americans would say.”

“And you, President Obama,” I asked, “would you make a commitment to no first use. George W. Bush wouldn’t and even made the case for first use. That made lots of nations very nervous.”

Obama answered, “Do you mean for me to make the pledge if he does?” He gestured toward Medvedev. “Or do it unilaterally?”

“Preferably together,” I said. “But I believe that you could safely do it alone.”

⁹ http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Joint-Statement-by-President-Dmitriy-Medvedev-of-the-Russian-Federation-and-President-Barack-Obama-of-the-United-States-of-America/

“I’ll talk it over with my advisers,” Obama indicated. “What’s next in your scenario?”

“De-alerting,” I said, “simultaneously with deep cuts in the strategic arsenals.”

I looked at the Russian interpreter to find out if he knew how to translate “de-alerting”. He quickly said in English, “Mr. Hallman, of course I know what de-alerting means. In Russian it’s...” and gave the Russian term, which I can’t remember.

Continuing I said, “De-alerting is a process with mutual benefits. It’s a way to step back from the risk of accidental launch or action of a rogue commander. It offers extra protection if either nation’s early warning system malfunctions. It provides more breathing and thinking time during a crisis. Both of you would find that a great asset.”

Medvedev indicated, “Yes, we know about the de-alerting proposals. We’ve studied them. But total de-alerting is more difficult and riskier than START reductions. START leaves a sizable arsenal in place in case there are any setbacks. The course of de-alerting would leave us more exposed to cheating by the other side, to armed missiles that are hidden away or not fully taken off high alert.”

“I have the same concerns,” said Obama.

“They are legitimate concerns,” I acknowledged. “They can be met by application of two basic principles: fairness and undiminished security. Plus careful monitoring and verification.”

Obama remarked, “I know about undiminished security. It was part of the [Thirteen Practical Steps](#)¹⁰ adopted by the 2000 NPT Review Conference. I agree. It should be an essential component of building down. And I’m for fairness, but what does it mean in this context?”

“Yes,” Medvedev added. “Who determines what’s fair?”

“You do together,” I replied. They looked at one another.

“If you’ll permit me to offer a homey example, let me tell you about my mother, Cecile Hallman, and her friend, Muriel Gibson, who divided peaches every summer to can and freeze. They would pick up a bushel of peaches from the local produce distributor and take them to one of their kitchens to divide. They each took two at a time. Although they were good friends, good Christians, and would never cheat one another, they were reassured that one didn’t get more than the other, that if some peaches were better than others, they had equal chance to select them. For all I know Mother might have even told her friend, ‘Muriel, here’s a really nice one. You take it.’ And vice versa. Years later when my sister and I would tease Mother about their process, she explained that she was brought up to be fair.”

“What if it came out uneven?” Obama asked mischievously. “Who got the extra one?”

¹⁰ <http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/legal/npt/13point.html>

“My guess is that the sliced it in two and ate it!”

“That’s a touching story,” Medvedev remarked. “We Russians love those folk tales and learn from them. But Mr. Hallman with all due respect to your mother, getting rid of nukes is much more complex than dividing peaches. And negotiating partners are tougher than gentle housewives.”

“True,” I acknowledged. “But the attitude of fairness is highly relevant. That’s the difference between the abolitionist perspective and the old cold war bargaining paradigm. During the Cold War each side was highly suspicious of the other side, who was viewed as enemy. Each wanted to get the best of the other at the bargaining table. Each wanted to block the other from finding out too much about its weaponry. It mattered because both sides were maintaining a huge nuclear arsenal and wanted to retain deterrence capability.”

I saw affirmative nods from the two presidents.

“But as you said in your April statement, ‘the era when our countries viewed each other as enemies is long over.’ If you are no longer enemies, you can work out a de-alerting process that is fair for both sides. And bring in persons with mediation and peacemaking experience instead of leaving it entirely to hard-nose diplomats and lawyers trained for adversarial relationships.”

“You know, we’re both lawyers,” Obama noted.

“No offense intended.”

“I get your point,” he said.

I continued, “There are a bunch of [proposals](#)¹¹ in circulation that you can look at, such as one by [Bruce Blair](#)¹² the foremost American authority and one by the [Russian Academy of Sciences](#)¹³.”

Medvedev wrote a note.

I said, “We could even do a trial run right now.”

I picked up two boxes of spoons from the Russian pile and two from the American and dumped their contents into two piles on the table.

“Let’s say that you each have 2,000 missiles on day-to-day alert. Together you determine a fair way to simultaneously de-alert sets of missiles so that neither side feels insecure as the process goes along. Each looks at every proposed step from both its own and the other side’s perspective.

¹¹ <http://www.zero-nukes.org/howtogettozero3-dealerting.html>

¹² http://media.hoover.org/documents/Drell_Goodby_Schultz_Reykjavik_Revisited_25.pdf

¹³ <http://www.ieer.org/russian/pubs/dlrbk-e.html>

. “Let’s say you decide to start by taking 200 warheads off alert on each side.” I pulled back two spoons from each pile

With a twinkle in his eye, Medvedev said, “This isn’t realistic, working with these spoons.”

“They’re just symbols,” I explained.

“That’s okay,” he replied. “What I mean is we have different kinds of missiles. If we’re going to play this game, we need some knives and forks, too.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. I went to the galley and found some plastic knives and forks. In each pile I substituted some knives and forks. “There you are: sub-launched, land-launched, air-launched missiles!”

“All right,” said Medvedev, “suppose we get down to 800 or so missiles on alert on each side. Then an imbalance becomes visible.” He took away enough knives, forks, and spoons so that there were eight left on each side. “When you figure in the British and French, NATO would now have 1,300 missiles on alert compared to 800 for Russia.” He put five spoons back in the U.S. pile.

“That’s a fair point,” Obama admitted. “We’ll have to bring in the British and French.”

I pointed out that there was strong public sentiment in the UK for returning the Trident subs to port and removing their missiles. The French, though, had a lot of national pride in their nuclear arsenal and might be more difficult.

“They could keep them in the South Pacific, well out of range,” Obama suggested.

I had an additional suggestion. “What if the United States totally removed the 200 nuclear bombs it has on six airbases in Western Europe?”

“We’d have to consult with our allies,” Obama responded. “But maybe we could work it out.”

“That would help,” Medvedev responded. “But then there is China. Wouldn’t they have to de-alert, too?”

“Yes, at some stage they should,” said Obama. “Perhaps during the final stage when U.S. and Russia take their last 200 missiles off day-to-day alert.”

I noted, “That could help move toward a nuclear-free East Asia with China cooperating to end North Korea’s nuclear ambitions.”

“But what if China refuses to cooperate?” Medvedev worried.

“They still wouldn’t be an overwhelming threat,” Obama indicated. “They don’t have many long-range missiles compared to the number we could return to active duty. Our reserve would be sufficient deterrent.”

“That would be true with us, too,” Medvedev added.

“Good,” I said. “You can see from our brief exercise that solution-oriented discussion can yield results. Instead of glaring across the table at one another in confrontation, you are looking at the problem that stands in front of you and are working together for mutually satisfactory results.”

The two presidents seemed comfortable with the process.

I further commented, “It’s June 2009 now. I believe that you could have a workable plan ready to go by the end of the year and start implementing it next January. That way de-alerting would be underway by the time the NPT Review Conference convenes in May 2010. That would demonstrate your good faith to honor your NPT obligations.”

Medvedev commented, “Okay, suppose we can work out at de-alerting plan, how are we going to monitor what the other side is doing and achieve verification?”

“I wonder about that, too,” Obama added.

“It’s a proper concern,” I agreed. “I’ll be honest with you. I don’t have a lot of expertise on details, but I’ve got some general ideas.”

“Let’s hear them,” said Medvedev.

“This was a major issue during the Cold War,” I began. “Remember how President Reagan kept saying, ‘Trust but verify.’”

“Yes,” Medvedev responded in English. “He borrowed an old Russian proverb, ‘doveryai, no proveryai.’”

“In those days,” I continued, “neither the Russians nor the Americans wanted the other side snooping in their country. So they relied on so-called national technical means of verification, which referred to spy satellites and other intelligence measures. However, in the INF Treaty and in START I they added data exchange and limited on-site inspection but with lots of restrictions.”

Obama noted, “Our negotiators are working now to improve this arrangement.”

“What if you internationalized the process?” I asked. “Break away from the cold war pattern of mutual suspicion and distrust. You say you want a world free of nuclear weapons. To get there bring in the international community for monitoring and verification.”

“Such as?” Medvedev asked.

“You can build on experience of IAEA and the Joint Compliance and Inspection Commission that functioned in Iraq in the 1990s under challenging conditions. You’re demanding international inspection for Iran and North Korea. To help get to zero nukes, apply the same standards to yourself. After all, what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.”

“You’re full of old sayings,” Medvedev chuckled.

Obama frowned. “There would be lots of opposition in Congress.”

“Our intelligence people would have serious objections,” Medvedev added. “So would the military.”

“Ours, too,” said Obama.

“Remember, you are liberators,” I told them. “Try boldness. Maybe your academies of science could jointly design an international inspection system to monitor de-alerting, deep cuts, storage, dismantlement of nuclear weapons. Get the advice of Rolf Ekéus and Richard Butler who headed the work in Iraq. Consult with Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei about their experience with IAEA. Bring in the UN. If you big guys are willing to accept international monitoring teams, there will be a much stronger case for doing the same with Iran, North Korea, and all the other wannabes. It will provide an effective means for carrying out safeguards in states developing nuclear power.”

“Whew!” Obama sighed. “That’s a big agenda you’re offering us. You probably know that there are folks in the U.S. who say it is not only too ambitious but also too dangerous.”

“What’s their problem?” I asked.

“They say that if we remove the nuclear umbrella that shields Japan and countries in Europe, they will no longer be protected by extended deterrence. Then they will build their own nuclear weapons. What do you say to that?”

“Sounds like these critiques are stuck in the Cold War,” I replied. “It’s hard to believe that Japan, which knows first hand the destructive power of nuclear weapons, would want to enter the nuclear arms race. Besides Japan’s true security is a world free of nuclear weapons based upon regional security arrangements designed to assure mutual safety and well-being. The same applies for Europeans. India and Pakistan need to learn this lesson. So do Israel, Iran, and other states in the Middle East.”

“I’ll buy that,” Obama commented.

“Yes, I agree,” said Medvedev.

I told them, “Elsewhere I’ve written about the need for [regional strategic peacemaking](#)¹⁴ to go along with global efforts to rid the world of nuclear weapons. Here’s another area where you two can provide constructive leadership by bringing other nations into this venture that is ultimately beneficial to all of humankind.”

“Piling more on our agenda!” Medvedev exclaimed.

“That’s the responsibility of world leaders,” I told them. “It’s a case where action speaks louder than words. You can lead by example toward a world free of nuclear weapons by making substantial cuts in your nuclear arsenals.”

Obama nodded agreement, “It’s like the African proverb says, ‘When deeds speak, words are nothing.’”

Medvedev gave a thumbs up, “Good!”

I commented, “If you go about this task openly and with conviction, I believe that you will receive substantial public support. I know my colleagues in the peace movement in the U.S. and abroad will get behind your initiatives.”

I could see out the porthole that we were now cruising along the far side of Lake Geneva and coming to Geneva suburbs. I knew our journey would end soon. I would have liked to talk more about deeper cuts, dismantling the reserves, and nonproliferation activities. But I had covered a lot.

“We’re almost back to Geneva,” I observed. “It’s been a pleasure to have an opportunity to talk with you and share my ideas. I thank you.”

Medvedev remarked, “It’s refreshing to meet an optimist on this dismal subject.”

As we made our way out of the cabin to the deck, Obama asked me, “Why are all you grayheads -- which I use as a term of respect -- so suddenly pushing to get rid of nukes? You know, Shultz, Kissinger, Perry, Nunn and others.”

“I’ve always been against them, since Hiroshima. For the others I think it’s like the words in a poem by James Russell Lowell:

‘New occasions teach new duties,
Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still and onward,
Who would keep abreast of truth.’”

Obama remarked, “I believe I’ve sung that in a hymn.”

From the deck we could see Jet d’Eau, the large water spout in Geneva harbor.

¹⁴ http://www.strategicpeacemaking.org/Regional_Strategies_index.html

“Before we dock,” I remarked, “may I offer a final old saying? Where there’s a will, there’s a way. If the two of you exercise your best political will with courage and steadfastness, you’ll find the way.”

Medvedev shook my hand. “Thanks for the boat ride.”

“Me, too,” Obama added. He put his arm around my shoulder.

As the boat made its way toward the dock, the security guys scanned the waiting crowd with their binoculars.

One of the U.S. Secret Service proclaimed, “I see Secretary of State Clinton, Secretary of Defense Gates, and General Jones, the National Security Adviser.”

His Russian counterpart indicated, “I see Prime Minister Putin, Foreign Affairs Minister Lavrov, and Defense Minister Serdyukov.”

Medvedev laughed. “It’s just like with Reagan and Gorbachev at Reykjavik. Letting the presidents meet alone makes their advisers very nervous.”

“Yeah,” Obama agreed. “Millions of voters have enough confidence in us to elect us to this high office, but our appointed advisers are reluctant to trust us. They’re afraid we’ll give away the store.”

Medvedev looked puzzled. One more Americanism to comprehend.

Obama noticed this. “I mean that we might give up too much in negotiations.”

Medvedev shrugged his shoulders and said in English, “Not to worry.”

The two presidents embraced.

Suddenly there was ringing. Many pulled out their cell phones. I reached out and turned off my bedside alarm. Then I rolled over toward my wife.

“Sweetheart,” I told her, “I just had a fantastic dream.”

“Let me guess. You threw the winning touchdown in the Super Bowl. Or you made a last second shot from midcourt to win the basketball tournament.”

“Better than that. I ended the nuclear arms race and brought about world peace!”

She rolled her eyes. But with affection.

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