

The Word as Arrow

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In truth, the power of words is neither unambiguous nor clear-cut... Words that electrify society with their freedom and truthfulness are matched by words that mesmerize, deceive, inflame, madden; words that are harmful, lethal even. The word as arrow.

Václav Havel¹

One might add to Václav Havel's truism that the more dangerous a subject is, the more circumscribed it is likely to be by words that mesmerize and deceive. Take *non-proliferation*, for instance, and do a simple test. The next time a friend or acquaintance asks, "What are you working on these days?", say "Getting rid of nuclear weapons" and watch their reaction. Chances are it will be something like "That's good; I'm for non-proliferation also." Then explain to your interlocutor that he is on all fours with GW Bush, whose idea of non-proliferation is nuclear apartheid, i.e. "We have'em, we're going to keep'em and you're never going to get'em."

Here, then, is a short guide to the proper use of words in the nuclear context.

Disarmament. You might think this means going down to zero. But you would be wrong. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines disarmament as "1. the act or an instance of disarming. 2. the reduction or limitation of the size, equipment, armament etc. of the army, navy or air force of a country." That, indeed, is the sense in which the United States claims to be complying with its nuclear disarmament obligation: by going down from about 30,000 nuclear warheads in 1967 to about 10,000 today.² But ten thousand warheads can still cause a fair amount of damage when you consider that a medium-sized one can kill millions of people, depending on the target.³ That is why the addition of the words "in all its aspects" after "nuclear disarmament" in the International Court of Justice opinion is so important.⁴ And that's why it's important to be clear that the aim must be elimination—abolition—of every single nuclear weapon. The absurdity of a numerical nuclear arms race was first brought to the public's attention in Daniel Lang's classic *An Inquiry Into Enoughness: Of Bombs and Men and Staying Alive*.⁵

Deterrence. It is customary these days for advocates of nuclear arsenals to say that they are "only for deterrence." In other words, there is no need to worry about nuclear weapons actually being used, since their only function is to deter an enemy from using its weapons of mass destruction or engaging in other military activities calling for an overwhelming response. Those using the word in this sense point to the fact that nuclear weapons have not been

used against an enemy since Nagasaki as proof that “deterrence works.” The fallacy of this approach, which casts a benevolent hue over the term, is that its effectiveness depends on credibility: if the deterring party is not prepared to use nuclear weapons in this or that situation, deterrence cannot work. It is useful, in this connection, to recall that the original context of deterrence was MAD, Mutual Assured Destruction.

Security. This abbreviation for the more comprehensive term *national security* has become the justification for the abrogation of any number of long accepted legal and moral norms. We now have torture and preventive war in the name of security. And yet “security” is, for the uninitiated, another of those warm, cozy words. Who would not want to be secure? Politicians are frequently heard to say that the security of the nation, or of the American people, is their primary concern. Yet their definition of security rarely amounts to more than keeping the terrorists, or “rogue” states’ long distance weapons, away from our shores. Thanks largely to Lloyd Axworthy, Canada’s former foreign minister, a different concept of security, which goes by the name of *human security*, is contesting this narrow view. It is a concept that transcends military boundaries and envisions a world in which security dispenses with nuclear weapons but includes social, economic, environmental, and human rights dimensions (*see section 4.3*).⁶ It is increasingly recognized as well that human security requires a commitment to the absolutely essential role that women must play in bringing about a just and secure world (*see section 4.2*).

Ultimate. Another favorite verbal trick practiced by spokespersons for nuclear weapon states is protesting that they are for the “ultimate” elimination of such weapons. This is supposed to take the wind out of the sails of nuclear abolitionists and make it appear that everyone, pro and con nukes, is on the same page. Another look at the dictionary will expose the hypocrisy of this tactic. The first of seven definitions in the Random House Dictionary of the English Language reads, “last; furthest or farthest; ending a process or series” and the synonyms given are “extreme, remotest, uttermost.” In other words, the bargain struck between the nuclear weapon states and the rest of the world in Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty is reduced to a nullity. The elimination of nuclear weapons, to be negotiated in good faith, is put off to the uttermost point in time, perhaps to coincide with the last judgment. Note also that *Ultima Thule* in medieval geographies denotes any distant place located beyond the “borders of the known world.”⁷

Let these examples suffice as a call to attention to the tyranny of words. Perhaps they may be of some use in the ongoing dialogue between civil society and the nuclear warriors concerning the fate of the earth.

Recommendation for Society and Change

- Civil society should reframe the language used regarding nuclear instruments of mass destruction as follows: refer to their “elimination”

or “abolition” instead of using the term “nuclear disarmament,” and redefine the term “nuclear disarmament” to mean “elimination”; eschew use of the term “ultimate” regarding when this elimination will be achieved; and abandon use of the term “deterrence” in describing policies contemplating use of nuclear weapons.