

What We Believe

Our principles derive from a knowledge of the consequences of thermonuclear explosions.

We first investigated the effects on a major city of a single one-megaton blast. Nearly one million people would die and hundreds of thousands would be burned and wounded. Medicine would have little to offer. We then calculated the probable consequences of larger yields. We found that the detonation of only one-half of one percent of the nuclear arsenals could cause suffering without precedent. We learned that a nuclear war would destroy civilization and might extinguish human life.

Since there could be no cure for a nuclear war, we felt it was our duty to prevent it. This duty demanded the cooperation of physicians of different backgrounds and beliefs. We did not try to discard those personal and national differences; instead, we concentrated on activities which addressed a common peril.

In the process, we gained a sense of urgency. We learned, for example, that fifty thousand nuclear warheads are on constant alert, restrained by systems of men and machines. Whether through miscalculation or malice, those systems — like all systems — will one day fail. Those who argue that nuclear deterrence promotes peace ignore the mathematical certainty that nuclear deterrence inevitably impels a nuclear catastrophe.

We believe, therefore, in the abolition of nuclear weapons. They are lethal viruses with no justifiable use. They hold billions hostage to the threat of genocide, and thereby degrade all human relations. They give rise to mutual dread and distrust, and thereby contribute to a culture of permanent mobilization. They do not, as some claim, preserve peace. They propel a dynamic by which the world remains an armed camp.

We therefore agree with those who speak of the elimination of nuclear weapons, not merely reductions in their numbers. We disagree with those who claim or imply that nuclear weapons are now part of this planet's inheritance. We believe that humans can control what humans have created.

As abolitionists, we support any interim act of prudence which slows the nuclear arms race or engenders the trust needed for its cessation. Our prime recommendation to the governments of the USA and the USSR has been and remains the declaration of a mutual moratorium on all nuclear explosions, to remain in effect until the negotiation of a comprehensive test ban treaty. All other nuclear weapon states should join in such a moratorium. It is a measure which would help cap the development of new and destabilizing weapons. Since it is verifiable, it would not require trust. Since it is substantive, it would promote trust.

We also support proposals which would prohibit new nuclear weapons and remove or restrict old ones. We oppose any strategic program on earth or in space, even if described as defensive, whose logical consequence will be the deployment of more nuclear weapons. We oppose all nuclear weapons in all places.

In so affirming, we reject the notion that fewer nuclear weapons imply more conventional weapons. We believe that denuclearization would help rupture the cycle of fear which powers the arms race. We believe that a mutual East-West victory over nuclear arms would help create the trust and reasonableness needed to staunch the hemorrhage of world military spending — a wound that bleeds more than two billion dollars each day.

We see alternatives. Acting together, men and women can relieve misery, assure health, and protect their habitat. Twelve years ago smallpox was eradicated through a great international medical campaign, an effort that required the financial equivalent of three hours of the arms race. New challenges — to curb malaria, to cure AIDS — demand more and broader cooperation from physicians and governments.

Our species will not abolish differences or resolve every conflict. But we are surely capable of cooperating for a shared interest. Physicians are optimists because the cooperativeness required to preclude extinction is the same as that needed to promote life. Humanity will endure and prevail.

