

PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Nuclear Disarmament

There are over 25,000 nuclear weapons in the world today. At least 5,000 of them are targeted at cities and on hair trigger alert, ready for launching in 15 minutes. In the name of security, humans have created a system of weapons capable of destroying life on Earth many times over. Despite agreements and treaties committing nuclear weapons states to eliminate or to negotiate in good faith toward the elimination of nuclear weapons, the United States funds research, development, and production of nuclear weapons--and threatens the use of these weapons in policies that provoke proliferation, rather than preventing it.

Nuclear weapons programs--whether actual or imagined, whether aggressive or defensive--are increasingly playing a role in many conflicts. In the U.S., they serve as a key rationale for going to war. Efforts to prevent an expansion of the "nuclear weapons club," the designation of a hostile "axis of evil," the invasion of Iraq, escalating tensions with Iran, recurrent confrontations with North Korea, a nuclear deal with India that violates treaty obligations and threatens other countries--these all reflect an ongoing arms race fueled by cycles of self-fulfilling paranoia. But there is no problem for which the nuclear solution isn't worse than the problem itself.

The irrationality of this state of affairs makes clear the need for a psychological understanding and approach to this urgent problem. It is essential that we become more aware of how we think about weapons of mass destruction. We need to be conscious of our own psychology, the psychology of our enemies, and the dynamics of our interactions, lest we make psychological mistakes with dire consequences. A dependence on nuclear weapons reflects a deeply troubling conviction that the only way to solve problems is by coercion with threats, the use of violent force, domination, and punishment.

Psychology has an important role to play in illuminating alternative nonviolent strategies that have proven more effective in preventing violence, reducing tension, and transforming conflicts. Psychology can also begin to offer answers to several weighty questions that bear on humanity's future: Why do people follow leaders on a path that could lead, by accident or design, to nuclear annihilation? How can destructive propensities for denial, for revenge, for blaming, and for glorifying violence be addressed? Is there something meaningful that people out of power can do to replace violent conflict with peaceful alternatives?

We need a profound transformation to a new way of thought and conduct in international relations. The dualistic, right-wrong, us-them, good-bad, violent military force paradigm is making us profoundly more vulnerable. At the same time, the peace and antiwar movements often fall short in effectively articulating plausible and creative alternative strategies to the false choice between violence or doing nothing. Rich bodies of knowledge about political psychology, violence prevention, and peace and conflict studies are virtually absent in the media and politics. The challenge now is to raise consciousness, build new institutions, and integrate proven methods informed by social science.

Psychologists for Social Responsibility seeks to bring greater psychological knowledge and public awareness to the issues highlighted in this brief overview. For more information, please contact us at info@psysr.org. We encourage new PsySR members to join in these efforts. Media inquiries are also welcome.