With the Cold War a thing of the past, popular expectations had been raised especially high that in the 1990s the nations of the world could make rapid progress toward nuclear disarmament. The probability of a superpower military confrontation and the consequent threat of nuclear war had been reduced nearly to zero. Antinuclear activists and citizen groups began to propound the logical thesis that the role of nuclear weapons, with their acknowledged and unacceptable risks, needed to be rapidly de-emphasized and that the weapons themselves should be placed on the road to ultimate abolition. The people and governments of a vast majority of non-nuclear countries in the world expressed substantial support for rapid nuclear disarmament in a number of formal and informal settings, including the UN General Assembly and UN committees dealing with disarmament and security issues. The logic had merit and a number of subsequent events helped to reinforce international expectations for nuclear disarmament.

Why, then, are the prospects for total nuclear disarmament as far removed from political reality today as they were at the height of the Cold War? For what reasons have the nuclear weapon states mounted such steadfast resistance to every proposal from the comprehensive test ban treaty to the model nuclear weapons convention now being considered by the UN? Most important, are there strategies that the nuclear abolition movement has not yet adopted, and could adopt, during the next two or three years that could persuade the nuclear weapon states to alter course and commit themselves to serious disarmament negotiations?

The Long Road to Nuclear Disarmament

This debate was joined long before the Cold War ended. The centerpiece was the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In the late 1960s the nuclear weapon states initiated the NPT, which entered into force on 5 March 1970. In order to obtain a commitment from the world’s non-nuclear nations that they would not pursue nuclear weapons development, the nuclear weapon states made a commitment, spelled out in Article VI of the NPT, that they would undertake:

“to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective control” [1].

For 25 years, from 1970 to 1995, precious little progress was made toward fulfilling this commitment. Moreover, the number of states that acquired the means to “go nuclear” increased during this period, while concern and discontentment grew steadily.
among the majority of non-nuclear signatories to the NPT. This frustration was evident at each of the five-year review conferences. In 1995, in keeping with the terms of the NPT, a conference was held to review the effectiveness of the treaty and to decide on its further extension. An acrimonious debate ensued over whether the nuclear powers had adequately fulfilled their Article VI commitments and, therefore, whether the NPT should be renewed for only a limited period of time. In the end the nuclear powers succeeded in securing permanent extension of the treaty, but not before a set of so-called “Principles and Objectives” were also endorsed. Among these principles and objectives were a series of nuclear disarmament expectations that included:

- completion of a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty;
- conclusion of negotiations on a convention banning the production of fissile materials; and
- pursuit of systematic and progressive efforts to reduce nuclear weapons, with the goal of eliminating those weapons.

Despite the pressing mandate established by international treaty and the findings of the World Court, there have been no significant initiatives by the nuclear weapon states to fulfill their obligations.

The World Court Speaks: Who Listens?

In December 1994 the UN General Assembly passed a resolution requesting that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) provide an advisory opinion on whether the use or threatened use of nuclear weapons by any state in war or other armed conflict would be a violation of international law. In complying with the request, the Court rendered its decision the following year, finding that not only would the threat or use of nuclear weapons be contrary to the laws of war and humanitarian law, but also that there exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to complete nuclear disarmament [2].

Despite the pressing mandate established by international treaty and the findings of the World Court, there have been no significant initiatives by the nuclear weapon states to fulfill their obligations. While a CTBT has been negotiated and signed by the nuclear weapons states, critics charge that the treaty is a seriously flawed, that it is neither universal nor comprehensive, and that it does not advance disarmament, serving instead the non-proliferation objectives of the nuclear weapon states while their own nuclear status remains unchanged. The CTBT, the critics argue, also leaves the nuclear weapon states free to pursue new, highly sophisticated technologies as alternatives to nuclear test explosions that are unavailable to other states. The fact is that the nuclear policies of the principal nuclear weapon states — the U.S. and Russia—are unaltered by the CTBT or the NPT and both nations still insist that their national defense hinges on the continued possession and deployment of nuclear weapons.

So what are the underlying factors that permit the nuclear weapon states to persist in their entrenched positions?

Conventional wisdom would have it that there is insufficient pressure on the nuclear weapon states to compel them to revise their nuclear “postures” and to push them to the negotiating table. In the absence of insistent public demand, particularly within these countries, the argument goes, the national decision makers can ignore the anti-nuclear campaign waged by a few citizen groups. Others point to inadequate pressure by the international community and, in particular, to an absence of demands by the western states that new initiatives towards nuclear disarmament be set in motion. But is this the case?

The nuclear abolition movement is growing worldwide and, since the conclusion of the NPT review in 1995, is more united than it has been since the height of the Cold War. More than 1,000 organizations, both large and small, are part of the abolition network. As recent opinion polls suggest, public support has significantly shifted in favor of nuclear abolition [3]. Judging from the debate in such forums as the UN General Assembly, the Conference on Disarmament, and the NPT process, there is an unambiguous demand for the nuclear weapon states to take significant steps
toward nuclear disarmament. Even the traditional allies of the nuclear weapon states have echoed these demands. In April 1997 in the NPT Prep-Comm, for example, Sweden, Japan, Ireland, Canada, and New Zealand supported the views of the usually more outspoken Non-Aligned Movement to negotiate and establish a nuclear disarmament committee in the Disarmament Conference. Even among the nuclear weapon states, dissatisfaction with the status quo was strongly voiced by China. Calling for concrete disarmament initiatives such as a no first use treaty, the Chinese government reaffirmed its long held proposal for the complete prohibition and destruction of nuclear weapons.

Thus, if there is a clear mandate for the nuclear powers to negotiate nuclear disarmament, coupled with an insistent demand by the international community, including a majority of non-nuclear states, for progress in nuclear disarmament, the apparent inertia must be explained in some other way.

**Why Have Things Not Changed?**

Some analysts, particularly in the policy making circles that include military and defense officials, hold the view that in the current state of world affairs, nuclear weaponry is needed—by the nuclear powers alone—to maintain international peace and stability and, above all, to safeguard national security. These arguments smack of circular reasoning; they are rationalizations for decisions made on other grounds. Emphatic statements by senior military leaders who once controlled nuclear weapons—such as U.S. Generals Butler and Goodpaster, Lord Carver of the UK, and a growing number of other respected senior retired military leaders—expose the absurdity of these arguments [4].

So the reasons for this intransigence must lie elsewhere. Is it possible that the nuclear weapon states are genuinely committed to nuclear disarmament, but don’t know how to proceed as a practical matter without becoming militarily vulnerable?

Here again the facts speak against such a hypothesis. Within the last three years at least two expert commissions have recommended practical, detailed, and clearly articulated steps toward progressive nuclear disarmament under strict verification and international control. First and foremost was the Canberra Commission [5], whose recommendations have gained wide acceptance by the international community, including most governments in non-nuclear weapon states.

The U.S. National Academy of Sciences issued a report in 1997 [6] that echoed much of what the Canberra Commission had proposed. The Future of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy, written by a group of well-known scientists, arms control experts, and military leaders, established a clear case for the desirability and feasibility of nuclear disarmament. The NAS study called for a fundamental change in U.S. nuclear policies. Evidently there is enough expertise, both within and outside official circles, to negotiate a treaty with adequate safeguards and verification measures.

So in analyzing the nuclear disarmament dilemma, we have to search for clues as to why political will is lacking, especially among U.S. decision makers.

In the final analysis, the status quo is the product of the fixed ideas of a handful of key individuals such as the President, the Vice President, the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Council advisors, and, of course, the top military advisors. A recent Washington Post article provides fascinating insight into the preconceptions behind nuclear policy making [7]. The article is based on an interview with Defense Secretary William Cohen who argues in favor of the present policy based on his continued belief in the doctrine of deterrence. U.S. nuclear “ambiguity,” in Secretary Cohen’s opinion, keeps so-called “rogue states” from producing and using weapons of mass destruction. This desire to have it both ways was re-echoed in November 1997, when President Clinton updated the highly classified Presidential Policy Directive that governs U.S. nuclear strategy. That document, while recognizing the post-Cold War need to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons, nevertheless reasserts their central role as a “deterrent” [8].

The irony is that other countries can use this same argument to support their desire to “go nuclear.” Cold War ideology clearly has not changed at all. James Burke and Robert Ornstein, in their book The Axe Maker’s Gift, provide incisive insight into how important innovations and inventions—from the axe to the atom bomb to the supercomputer—have changed the shape of the world and, more importantly, the ways in which the so-called “axe wielder” thinks [9]. Those who hold overwhelming power develop a mindset that they alone can use such power responsibly and in the best interest of the world. This mindset needs to be challenged and changed if nuclear weapon policies are to change. We have to move
deliberately away from the axe maker psychology, where inventions and technology are used to control others and to shape the world to suit the axe makers’ purposes.

There are important implications for the peace movement and for the antinuclear campaign in this analysis. There is a serious need for the antinuclear movement to undertake a thorough review of its own assumptions and its own messages, including the ways in which those messages are delivered not only to policy makers and to others who are well informed about the issues, but to those who are relatively less informed.

Perhaps current antinuclear strategies are themselves based on Cold War premises and experiences and, for that reason, have not had the desired impact on the thinking of nuclear policy makers. Disarmament advocates and abolitionists need to convince the policy makers that a fundamental change in the way they think about these issues is imperative for our survival. The preface to such a revised strategy may well be a fundamental change in the way disarmament advocates and abolitionists think about these issues themselves.

In demanding steps toward significant nuclear disarmament, one must necessarily distinguish between activities that will ultimately make a difference to the objective of prohibiting nuclear weapons, and relatively less consequential efforts that merely serve as a distraction and provide yet another pretext for the nuclear policy makers to maintain the status quo.

Activities clearly designed to advance the cause of abolition should be organized around a unified demand by peace groups as well as by the international community for specific major steps, including:

- adoption by the nuclear weapon states of a no-first-use treaty;
- the dismantling of warheads;
- an immediate ban on tactical weapons;
- a verifiable stand down of nuclear forces (“de-alerting”) and the separation of warheads from their launchers;
- acceleration of START treaty negotiations; and
- the rapid reduction of existing stockpiles.

Many other ideas have been proposed, some of which have devoted constituencies. Yet when measured against the fundamental strategic value of the steps listed above, their effectiveness as disarmament tools has to be questioned.

Unfortunately, the contemporary movement for nuclear disarmament is at present relatively ineffective. The nuclear weapon states are in a comfortable mode, facing no compelling challenge to their notions of security. The voices of the peace and antinuclear movements are clashing and lack both meaningful public support and strategic insight. The axe-maker mindset will be a permanent fixture unless the world learns how to counter it. We need to look deep within ourselves, within human history, and within the human experience to seek urgent answers.

References