

The existential threat of nuclear war: A psychoanalytic comment¹

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Abstract

Utilizing primarily the information and data compiled by both the editorial board of *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* as well as that of former nuclear war planner, Daniel Ellsberg, this paper discusses a number of heretofore classified or little publicly known dimensions of the nuclear war planning of the United States and other nuclear armed nation states, including policies of first use and command and control, the occurrence of false alarms and accidents, and the dynamics of nuclear detonation that would result in nuclear winter and worldwide famine. As such, the focus on these topics is an attempt to ameliorate both our shared ignorance regarding the once again growing threat of nuclear war, and its consequence—nuclear winter, as well as, the tendency of large groups to engage in *collective denial* in relation to thinking about the unthinkable, utilizing a definition from psychoanalysis of the defense mechanism of denial.

KEYWORDS

collective denial, denial, nuclear arms race, nuclear risk, nuclear threat, nuclear war, nuclear weapons, nuclear winter, thinking about the unthinkable, worldwide famine

Let's stipulate that this is all insane

Barack Obama, 2013²

Silence is the real crime

Hanna Segal, 1987

1 | INTRODUCTION

At the time of this writing, March 5, 2022, the 10th day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the warning of one of the United States' high-level nuclear war planners is impossible to ignore:

The hidden reality I aim to expose is that for over fifty years, all-out thermonuclear war—an irreversible, unprecedented, and almost unimaginable calamity for civilization and most life on earth has been, like the disasters of Chernobyl, Katrina, the Gulf oil spill, Fukushima Daiichi, and before these, World War I, *a catastrophe waiting to happen*, on a scale infinitely greater than any of these. And that is still true today (Ellsberg, 2017, p. 20)

Daniel Ellsberg's stark statement is echoed by *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists'* editorial board announcement on January 20, 2022, that for the third year in a row, the Doomsday Clock is set at 100 seconds before midnight, which is the “*closest it has ever been to civilization-ending apocalypse because the world remains stuck in an extremely dangerous moment*” (Mecklin, 2022, p. 3; italics added by this author).

The journal, *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, was founded in 1945, at the end of World War II, by Albert Einstein and University of Chicago scientists, a group of physicists, many of whom had worked in Los Alamos on the Manhattan Project designing and building the first atomic bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945. The logo on the cover of each issue of *The Bulletin* is a clock, the closeness of whose hands to midnight indicates how precarious the world situation is. Started by *The Bulletin's* scientists in 1947, the Doomsday Clock has become a powerful symbol of scientific concerns regarding the possible annihilation of the human and other species, should a nuclear conflagration occur by design—through war, or happen by accident.

Stretching from 1947 to the present, *The Bulletin's* Science and Security Board, in consultation with its Board of Sponsors, which at present includes 11 Nobel Laureates, sets the Doomsday Clock and “has become a universally recognized indicator of the world's vulnerability to catastrophe from nuclear weapons, climate change, and disruptive technologies in other domains” (Mecklin, 2022, p. 2).³ This paper focuses on the nuclear threat because, while we fully recognize the growing civilization threatening perils of worsening climate change, the latter is at the present moment, while albeit certainly having its “deniers,” consciously recognized by most of humanity. Whereas, the threat of world destruction by nuclear bombs and warfare is largely ignored and/or continues to be collectively denied, in the psychoanalytic sense of the word, in this, the second decade of the 21st century.

Furthermore, we now know that should there be a nuclear exchange between the two superpowers, the United States and Russia, the consequent destruction that would result due to the bombing and burning of cities in the Northern Hemisphere, would bring on nuclear winter producing worldwide famine and the consequent extinction of the human species as well as all other species that depend on vegetation within one to 2 years (Ellsberg, 2017, p. 17; Starr, 2017).

2 | SOME RECENT HISTORY

During Donald Trump's tenure as president, in May of 2018, he managed not only to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal (formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action [JCPOA]) negotiated by former President Barack Obama, in 2013, and signed in July of 2015, but also, in October of 2018, announced his intention to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), which lead rapidly to Russia's withdrawal from this same treaty and to its official demise by 2019 (Mecklin, 2019, p. 3).

The INF Treaty, which Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev had signed in December of 1987, had been in force for more than 30 years, and had been an important part of the established nuclear proliferation control structure developed to regulate the use of nuclear weapons.

Moreover, the destruction of these two significant components of nuclear weapons control—the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) and the INF, was the largest part of the Doomsday Clock being moved from being set at 2 minutes before midnight in 2018 and 2019, to only 100 seconds before midnight in 2020. These developments, in January 2020, led *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* to declare:

Civilization ending nuclear war—whether started by design, blunder, or simple mis-communication—is a genuine possibility...The world is sleepwalking its way through a newly unstable nuclear landscape. The arms control boundaries that have helped prevent nuclear catastrophe for the last half century are being steadily dismantled (Mecklin, 2020, p. 3).

3 | THE CONTEXT OF THE NUCLEAR THREAT IN EARLY 2022

Although the change in governmental leadership in the United States that took effect in January 2021, brought hope to many, the facts with regard to international peace and security, not only remain grim around the globe, but with war breaking out on February 24, in Russia's attack on Ukraine, and Vladimir Putin's subsequent nuclear saber rattling (Brumfiel, 2022; Dhanesha, 2022, p. 1), international tensions concerning the use of nuclear weapons in war, have risen to a height unknown since the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists'* Doomsday Clock Statement of January 20, 2022, although including tensions in Ukraine as one of their enumerated "negative international security trends," had Ukraine at the end of its list of major security threats as of as recently as a little over several weeks ago—a testament as to how very rapidly the circumstances on Russia's border with Ukraine have accelerated into full blown war. *The Bulletin's* description of negative international security trends in the aforementioned Doomsday Clock Statement includes the fact that:

- (a) U.S. relations with Russia and China continue to be tense, with all three nations actively pursuing nuclear modernization and expansion efforts including "China's apparent large-scale program to increase its deployment of silo-based long range nuclear missiles" (ibid., p. 2), as well as a "push by Russia, China, and the United States to develop hypersonic missiles" (ibid., p. 2).

With regard to China's silo-based long-range nuclear missiles, the Pentagon has recently estimated that by 2030, China will have 1000 nuclear warheads, three times more than they have at present (Klare, 2021, pp. 1–2).

Additionally, in an earlier, separate report, David Sanger and William Broad, reporting in *The New York Times*, say that China conducted two tests on their hypersonic missile in the summer of 2021, one of which was successful (10/28/21, p. A1). China's testing of this weapon is particularly alarming to the U.S. military because it has the potential to deliver nuclear missiles on a hypersonic vehicle that could "plow a suddenly shifting path, maneuvering in ways that would render all current U.S. missile defenses obsolete" (ibid.). Pentagon officials are not only concerned about not being able to defend against such a weapon, but also fear that such a weapon would spur a revival of yet

another arms race, especially “at the very moment President Biden has been looking for ways to avoid a proposed trillion-dollar modernization of the American nuclear forces and delivery systems” (ibid., p. A9):

- (b) The continuing testing of anti-satellite weapons by many countries which could also contribute to a dangerous new arms race (Mecklin, 2022, p. 2).
- (c) North Korea’s unconstrained nuclear and missile programs (ibid., p. 2), which on January 29, 2022, launched an intermediate-range ballistic missile, its seventh missile test this month, described as “the North’s most powerful launch since November 2017”... and “its boldest ballistic missile test in years” (Sang-Hun, Choe, *The New York Times*, 1/29/2022).
- (d) The as-of-yet unsuccessful attempts to revive the Iran nuclear deal.

4 | SHOCKING REVELATIONS

It is necessary to note at this juncture that the current and recent dire warnings of *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* as symbolized by their setting the Doomsday Clock to the apocalyptic time of 100 seconds before midnight, occur a little more than 4 years *after* the publication of Daniel Ellsberg’s landmark publication of his sometimes stunningly revealing book concerning the U.S. nuclear arsenal and the dangers of nuclear war—*The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*.

Ellsberg has long been known in the U.S. for leaking the *Pentagon Papers* in 1971 to *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Boston Globe* as well as other newspapers. The *Pentagon Papers* disclosed that the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations had all continued the Vietnam War, despite internal U.S. Defense department analyses showing minimal prospects of victory (Burdick, 2019); and the publication of the *Pentagon Papers* indirectly led to the Watergate scandal, the downfall of the Nixon administration, and the subsequent ending of the Vietnam War.

Early on in *The Doomsday Machine*, Ellsberg reveals that for the decade preceding the release of the *Pentagon Papers*, he had been “immersed in highly classified studies of the nuclear-war machine: how it works, who can launch an attack, and how much devastation it can wreak if someone ever pushed the button” (Kaplan, 2017, pp. 1–2). Operating with security clearances several levels above Top Secret, Ellsberg tells us “that from the fall of 1969 to leaving the Rand Corporation in August 1970, I copied everything in the Top Secret safe in my office –of which the seven thousand pages of the *Pentagon Papers* were only a fraction—and a good deal more from my several safes for files classified Secret or Confidential, perhaps fifteen thousand pages in all” (2017, p. 5). And, that soon after beginning to copy the *Pentagon Papers*, he

had decided that it was even more important to release the *other* contents of my safes: those bearing on nuclear matters. I wanted to reveal to the Congress, to my fellow citizens, and to the world, the peril that U.S. nuclear policies over the last quarter century had created (ibid., p. 7).

Ellsberg’s subsequent decision to release the *Pentagon Papers* first, was a pragmatic one based in his opinion that it was more crucial to enlighten the press and the country about the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, in the hope of hastening the end of that war. And, to release the nuclear material at the same time would risk “the press not paying adequate attention to the history about Vietnam, because of the dangers to the world contained in the nuclear documents (2017, p. 7).⁴

What follows is a discussion of some of the most salient and revelatory points that Ellsberg raises in his book, and that rather than be construed as an exhaustive review of *The Doomsday Machine*, what follows is a summary of the most crucial information Ellsberg offers to demonstrate the peril that US nuclear policies have created both for the U.S. itself, as well as for the entire world—policies which have been mimicked in some aspects by other nuclear powers. Because the book itself is a significantly complex document—part memoir, part whistle blowing record of

U.S. nuclear war policy, part military history—particularly airpower theory, part recommendations on how to achieve a sane nuclear policy, a comprehensive consideration of its contents is beyond the scope of this paper.

But, it is important to note here that none of the scholar experts of nuclear war policy have challenged the veracity of the substance of the information that Ellsberg reveals, nor has any one of them questioned the soundness of the conclusions that Ellsberg draws from the data that he presents. Quite to the contrary, from both military and civilian experts the work consistently draws high praise, as for example, from Fred Kaplan, national security analyst for Slate, who says “it is one of the best books ever written on the subject -certainly the most honest and revealing account by an insider who plunged deep into the nuclear rabbit hole’s mad logic and came out the other side” (2017, p. 2); or, from Jonathan Burdick of Air University, Air War College, “Ellsberg’s memoir is an effective reminder that nuclear weapons and their control structures involve significant dangers including the potential to destroy humanity...readers of the *Doomsday Machine* will be better positioned to decide whether the security gained by these weapons has been worth the risk of disaster, or if the risk is intolerable and the weapons should be abolished. To this end, Ellsberg has again proven his capability to kindle an important debate” (2019, pp. 1–3).

Finally, in publishing *The Doomsday Machine*, Daniel Ellsberg has, as he did with the *Pentagon Papers*, made an enormously important contribution to the public knowledge base concerning the U.S. and other nuclear arsenals and the dangers of a nuclear war, for which he received in Sweden, on January 30, 2019, the 2018 Olof Palmes prize for his profound humanism and exceptional moral courage:

1. To begin with, the American readiness for nuclear war remains today as it was in the early 1960s—with thousands of nuclear weapons remaining on hair-trigger alert, aimed primarily at Russian military targets, many of which are in or near cities. The “declared official rationale” for keeping such a system in place has always been the need to deter or respond to an aggressive nuclear first strike by the Russians (*ibid.*, p. 12). Ellsberg states this

widely believed public rationale is a *deliberate deception* (italics mine). Deterring a surprise Soviet nuclear attack—or responding to such an attack—has *never* been the only or even the primary purpose of our nuclear plans and preparations...the nature...of our strategic nuclear forces has always been shaped by the requirements of quite different purposes: to limit the damage to the United States from Soviet or Russian retaliation to a *U.S. first strike* against the USSR—or Russia. This capability is, in particular, intended to strengthen the credibility of US threats to initiate limited nuclear attacks, or escalate them—U.S. threats of “first use” to prevail in regional, initially non-nuclear conflicts involving Soviet or Russian forces or their allies (*ibid.*, p. 12).⁵

This horrifying information that US nuclear weapons policy has always included a U.S. first strike against Russia—that is, that the U.S. would pre-emptively attack the USSR, now Russia, *before* the Russians attack us, is particularly chilling in these days of March 2022, as the tragic war in Ukraine spreads and intensifies, per the announcement on Friday, February 18, 2022, of Russia’s testing of nuclear weapons—including inter-continental ballistic missiles, as part of its military exercises occurring near the Ukrainian border; as well as the AP’s announcement on February 28, of Putin placing Russia’s nuclear forces on high alert (Karmanau et al., 2022). One of the examples of nation states mimicking U.S. nuclear policy mentioned above, is that the Russians, who have their own pre-emptive policy in place in the form of what they call a “de-escalation policy” (Sokov, 2022, p. 2), which they announced in 2000, involving “the idea that, if Russia were faced with a large-scale conventional attack that exceeded its capacity for defense, it might respond with a limited nuclear strike. To date, Russia has never publicly invoked the possibility of de-escalation in relation to a specific conflict. But, Russia’s policy probably limited the West’s options for responding to the 2008 war in Georgia. And it is probably in the back of Western leaders’ minds today, dictating restraint as they formulate their responses to events in Ukraine” (*ibid.*)

Ellsberg continues

...our 'extended deterrence' rests on our preparedness and our frequently reiterated readiness to carry out threats of *first use* (initiation of limited attacks with short-range tactical weapons) and/or, implicitly to carry out a disarming *first strike* on the homeland of Russia, mostly with long range, strategic weapons, in response to large *non-nuclear* attacks by its conventional forces or those of its allies (ibid., p. 13).

Indeed, Ellsberg argues that *we have repeatedly* used our nuclear weapons "dozens of times in 'crises', mostly in secret from the American public (though not from adversaries) by threatening to use them, and, devotes the entirety of chapter 20 in the book to document this history of threats of 'first use'" (ibid.).

2. The U.S.'s unwavering commitment to the "first-use" policy—which again includes the use of tactical nuclear weapons in *non-nuclear* conflicts, against any nation with whom the US might be in conflict, virtually precludes the possibility of the development of effective campaigns for the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons. Nation states, observing "our insistence on maintaining an arsenal of thousands of weapons" many of them on hair trigger alert, "nullifies our advice to most other states in the world that they 'have no need' or justification for producing a single nuclear weapon" (ibid., p. 15); or, as in the case of North Korea, de-nuclearizing their nuclear arsenal. This reality highlights the tragedy of Donald Trump's destruction of the Iran nuclear deal negotiated by President Barack Obama during his term, previously mentioned above.
3. Another startling disclosure in *The Domsday Machine* is that the popular belief that the authority to order a nuclear attack rests exclusively with the president as commander in chief, and/or with the highest levels of the military command structure, is also erroneous. Through his research into command and control procedures of the US nuclear arsenal during the late 1950s, Ellsberg discovered that President Eisenhower "had secretly delegated authority to initiate nuclear attacks to his theater commanders, under various circumstances, including the outage of communications with Washington (a daily occurrence in the Pacific) or a presidential incapacitation (which Eisenhower suffered twice). Furthermore, with Eisenhower's authorization, his theater commanders had in turn delegated this initiative, under comparable conditions, to subordinate commanders (ibid., p. 15).

Ellsberg, moreover, describes that this delegation of command and control over nuclear weapons is also characteristic of Russia's management of its nuclear arsenal, as it is virtually certain that it is that of every nuclear state—including Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea; the relegation down the line of the military hierarchy being the (secret) response to an anticipated "first-strike" involving de-capitation of a country's military command centers (ibid., p. 15). This delegation of command and control over nuclear weapons leads to Ellsberg's musing "How many fingers are on Pakistani nuclear buttons? Probably not even the president of Pakistan knows reliably" (ibid., p. 16). Clearly, the assignment of authority down the military command hierarchy of a nation state's nuclear arsenal brings with it the increase of the possibility of errors in orders for the use of nuclear weapons—including tactical nuclear weapons, a phenomenon that Ellsberg reveals almost occurred during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, when, although both Krushchev and John F. Kennedy were determined to avoid nuclear war, events spiraled very nearly out of control, on the afternoon of October 30, 1962, *after* Khrushchev and Kennedy had stepped back from the brink of war, in an incident when a Soviet submarine, armed with a nuclear tipped torpedo, a fact not known to the U.S. Navy commanders operating in that area of the Caribbean, came under attack from the US Navy ships. In a particularly harrowing account, Ellsberg describes how the Soviet submarine commanders, came within a "handbreath" of triggering a nuclear war, had they used their torpedo. Fortunately for the entire world, the Soviet submarine commanders ultimately retreated from the use of their "special secret weapon"—the nuclear tipped torpedo (ibid., pp. 211–212).

5 | FALSE ALARMS AND NEAR ACCIDENTS

Although incidents of false alarms and near accidents involving the U.S. nuclear arsenal are likely not new disclosures to most readers, Ellsberg states

The strategic nuclear system is more prone to false alarms, accidents, and launches than the public (and even most high officials) has ever been aware. This was my special focus of classified investigation in 1958-61. Later studies have confirmed the persistence of these risks, with particularly serious false alarms in 1979, 1980, 1983, and 1995. *The chance that this system could explode 'by mistake' or unauthorized action in a crisis—as well as by the deliberate execution of nuclear threats—taking much of the world with it, has always been an unconscionable risk imposed by the superpowers upon the population of the world* (2017, p. 16; italics mine).

And, as he emphasizes, the possibility of all out nuclear war between the U.S. and Russia, probably started by a pre-emptive attack by one side or the other, which has been triggered by an electronic false alarm—which have repeatedly occurred on both sides, is a potentially all too real eventuality (ibid., 343).

One such false alarm, originally written about some years ago (Kaplan, 2020, pp. 156–157), but recently reported in *The New York Times* in more detail, occurred in September 1983, a month of peak tension in the Cold War. During the shift of a lieutenant colonel in the Soviet armed forces named Stanislav Petrov, in his role as chief air defense officer on duty, monitoring early warning satellites over the United States, the electronic alarms went off indicating that “the Americans had seemingly launched five Minuteman intercontinental ballistic missiles” (Douthat, 2022, p. 1). With only minutes to spare before the missiles would hit their targets, the lieutenant colonel “had to decide whether to report the attack up the chain of command, potentially triggering a swift retaliatory strike” (ibid.). Relying on both intuition and an assumption that a real first strike would include more than five missiles, he made the decision to report the alert as a malfunction, that is, a false alarm. “Which it was: The satellite had misread sunlight reflecting off clouds as a missile launch” (ibid.). Once more, millions of lives were saved and the potential destruction of life on our planet prevented by the quick thinking of a Russian military officer. Experts on nuclear weapons policy, ranging from Jonathan Burdick, of the Air War College, in agreement with Ellsberg, states “The superpowers’ nuclear capability has not been risk-free as the history of the Cold War includes accidents, false alarms, and weapons mismanagement” (2019, p. 2), and Graham Allison, who says “There have been repeated close calls and near accidents, including as recently as 2007 when an American B-52, mistakenly armed with six nuclear-tipped cruise missiles, flew across the United States” (2017, pp. 1–2).

Because such information is in the public domain—that is, people all over the world have some awareness of the potential for perilous nuclear accidents occurring, an even more recent incident that occurred on January 13, 2018, at 8:10 a.m. when the residents of Hawaii received an alert on their mobile phones understandably terrified the population:

BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL. (Dupuy, 2019, p. 9)

It was later discovered that a government official had mistakenly interpreted “a message sent during a civil defense training exercise for a real alert” (Dupuy, 2019, p. 9). But, it took 38 minutes for a correction to be sent notifying the inhabitants of Hawaii that it had been a false alarm (ibid., p. 10). Only 3 days later, a similar incident occurred in Japan, with an erroneous alert warning of an incoming North Korean missile, urging the population to take shelter. Fortunately, the correction of this false alarm occurred within 5 minutes (ibid., p. 10). Because military commanders and the president of the United States potentially receive such alerts within minutes, and have approximately 10 or so minutes to decide whether to order a launch of a battery of intercontinental ballistic missiles—because waiting any

longer would risk the missiles being destroyed in their silos, it is by no means inconceivable that a false alarm could set off a global nuclear war (*ibid.*, p. 10).

6 | NUCLEAR WINTER

In the spring of 1961, when Daniel Ellsberg was working as national security advisor on matters of nuclear war policy for the John F. Kennedy administration, Bob Kromer, the Deputy Assistant to the president for national security, asked Ellsberg to draft a question to be sent to the Pentagon's Joint Chiefs of Staff in the president's name. The question was "If your plans for general (nuclear) war are carried out as planned, how many people will be killed in the Soviet Union and China?" (2017, p. 2).

The answer was "a total death toll, as calculated by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, from a U.S. first strike aimed at the Soviet Union, its Warsaw Pact satellites, and China, would be roughly six hundred million dead. A hundred Holocausts" (*ibid.*, p. 3).

Describing his thoughts in reaction to the information, he writes "This piece of paper should not exist. It should never have existed. Not in America. Not anywhere, ever. It depicted evil beyond any human project ever. There should be nothing on Earth, nothing real, that it referred to" (*ibid.*, p. 3).

Little did Ellsberg know at the time, however, that this figure, was a gross underestimate of the destruction that would occur, which did not come to light until the early 1980s, via the work of environmental scientists, whose research brought a recognition and an understanding of the effects of fire and smoke from a nuclear exchange between the superpowers resulting in the phenomenon of *nuclear winter*.

Citing the work of Lynn Eden, *Whole World on Fire* (2004), the fact of the matter is that the war planners at the Strategic Air Command as well as the Joint Chiefs of Staff, throughout the nuclear era to *the present day*—have deliberately entirely omitted from their estimates of the destructive effects of US or Russian nuclear attacks, the effects of fire produced by the detonation of nuclear bombs (*ibid.*, p. 141).

The rationalization for this glaring omission is that the effects of fire are "harder to predict" than those from blast or fallout on which their fatality estimates are based exclusively, even though experts had disputed these conclusions for decades (*ibid.*, p. 141). Ellsberg attributes the motivation for this rationalization to inter-army service competition for weaponry—i.e., to acknowledge the danger of fire and smoke would require the Air Force to concede some of its nuclear weaponry to Navy submarines. This psychoanalytic author would add to Ellsberg's military analysis of motivation, by hypothesizing that this rationalization for ignoring the realities of fire and smoke, was/is itself a defense against the ongoing military group denial of the consciously recognized dangers of both.

Even as long ago as the 1960s, "The firestorms caused by thermonuclear weapons were known to be the largest producers of fatalities in a nuclear war (*ibid.*, p. 141). Because the damage radius of firestorms is two to five times as much as the radius of the area destroyed by the blast itself, the more realistic estimate of the number of fatalities caused by the plan of attack on the Sino Soviet bloc, described to Ellsberg in the aforementioned response of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1961, would have *doubled* their predicted number of fatalities to a total of a billion or more—or, one third of the Earth's population of three billion at that time.

By ignoring the factor of fire, military planners also, consequently, ignored the fact of smoke—and, it was not for another 22 years, until 1983, that it was recognized that the indirect consequence of the smoke from the fires in the Northern Hemisphere, would seriously threaten the other two-thirds of the human population (*ibid.*, p. 141). By neglecting fire, and therefore, also, smoke, the Joint Chiefs also omitted the horrifying fact that nuclear bomb detonations do not produce the run of the mill smoke usually emitted in a fire, which remains in the lower atmosphere and is soon rained out. Rather, smoke from nuclear bombs is propelled into the upper atmosphere by ferocious updrafts from multiple firestorms, lofting *millions of tons* (italics mine) of smoke and soot into the stratosphere, where rather than being quickly rained away, these byproducts of nuclear bomb detonations would rapidly encircle the globe, creating a blanket of smoke and soot that would block out most sunlight for 10 or more years. Obstructing

sunlight would lower temperatures to the point that all harvesting of food would be eliminated and consequently, nearly all humans and other vegetation dependent animals would starve to death. “The population of the southern hemisphere—spared nearly all direct effects from nuclear explosions, even from fallout—would be nearly annihilated, as would that of Eurasia (which the Joint Chiefs already foresaw, from the direct effects), Africa, and North America” (ibid., p. 142).

7 | PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE THREAT OF NUCLEAR WAR

The dire and terrifying warnings outlined above regarding the threat of nuclear war occurring by design or by accident, as well as the consequences of such a war for most living species as well as for the planet itself, are even more evocative of an important chapter in the history of psychoanalysis than they were in 2017, when we first wrote of our current concerns regarding the risk of nuclear war as reminiscent of:

...a long ago Resolution Against Nuclear War passed by the International Psychoanalytical Association in 1981 at its 32nd Congress in Helsinki, Finland. The Resolution had been submitted to the IPA for consideration by the American Association for Social Psychiatry, a division of the World Association for Social Psychiatry, and had already been adopted by the American Psychiatric Association (The International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 1982, p. 111). It was highly unusual for the International Psychoanalytic Association to comment on matters of international politics, much less to vote on resolutions concerning them, and, consequently, understandably, in the process of discussion before the vote, a member commented that he was opposed to scientific organizations taking positions regarding political issues. In a brilliantly succinct comment, Dr. Robert Wallerstein of San Francisco, responded by saying he disagreed and ‘he did not feel that the Resolution now presented was a political resolution: he saw it as both a scientific and an humanitarian resolution. If there is ever a nuclear war, there would no longer exist the possibility for psychoanalysis to be practiced again; to safeguard the science from that point of view only, it was essential to give this the highest priority, to join with other scientific organizations in expressing our feelings on this issue. It has an humanitarian objective that has an overriding importance (ibid.)

During the tensions between the U.S. and the USSR manifest in the years of the Cold War, from 1947 until the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, which were particularly intense during the 1980s when the threat of a nuclear war happening was especially high, a substantial literature on the topic of nuclear conflict was published in psychoanalysis (Levine, 1987).⁶

One such volume in this body of work includes *Psychoanalysis and the Nuclear Threat* (Levine et al., 1988), whose lead editor, Howard Levine publishes a more recent paper on the topic in this issue of our journal. Among the papers published in this volume is Hanna Segal’s groundbreaking 1987 paper entitled “*Silence is the Real Crime*” which she had originally presented to the psychoanalytic work group “International Psychoanalysts Against Nuclear Weapons” that she had founded in 1985.

In her paper, Segal argues that the policy of “nuclear deterrence” or the idea that we must be stronger than our enemy so as to deter him from aggression leads to the nuclear arms race—and the production of more and more weapons—which are more and more dangerous—and lead to more and more fear and the consequent danger of a possible pre-emptive strike by the protagonists. Her prescient conceptualization of this vicious cycle is aptly illustrated by Daniel Ellsberg’s description of the United States’ first strike policy discussed above, as well as by Russia’s “de-escalation doctrine” previously mentioned.

Furthermore, the policy of nuclear deterrence—known as Mutually Assured Destruction—or MAD, which was in the ascendancy during the Cold War, Segal, arguing psychoanalytically, says is a *mad process*—an insane process—and

urges us psychoanalysts to first, participate in active efforts to *halt* this mad process; and, second, argues that we, psychoanalysts have a specific contribution to make—precisely because of our understanding of the psychic mechanisms of denial, projection, and magical thinking involved.

Of these defense mechanisms, the focus here is on denial, inasmuch as it is likely the mechanism that most powerfully obstructs our view of the reality of the threat of nuclear war. Salman Akhtar, citing Anna Freud (1946), defines denial as “an unconsciously operative ego defence by which an individual reduces psychic distress by repudiating awareness of a painful, external reality” (2009, p. 73). Psychoanalysts and other scholars have learned a great deal about denial since Anna Freud’s writing at the end of the Second World War, especially the tenacity and power of *collective denial* as it operates in the dynamics of large, and not so large groups. Possibly the most vivid example of this phenomenon is through our learning of how it occurred in the German population’s denial of the Nazi Holocaust of six million Jews, as well as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Roma, gays, and people with disabilities during World War II, even among Germans living in proximity to the crematoriums of the concentration camps.

We have also come to recognize collective denial operating in the profession of psychoanalysis itself, as it often happened 40–50 years ago in the analyses of Holocaust survivors in which the patient’s experience in the concentration camps was not addressed (see Levine, this issue). This egregious error on the part of the profession was recognized in the early 1970s by the psychoanalyst, Judith Kestenberg, when she did a survey among psychoanalysts and found that the majority of them treating second generation individuals were not addressing the Holocaust in the analytic treatments of the progeny of Holocaust survivors (personal communication, Ira Brenner, 2022).

Hanna Segal emphasizes that precisely because of our psychoanalytic knowledge and understanding of intra-psychic defense mechanisms, such as denial, “we should be able to contribute something to overcome apathy and self deception in ourselves and others. When the Nazi phenomenon was staring us in the face, the psychoanalytic community outside Germany was largely silent. This must not be repeated” (1988, p. 49).

Freud’s clear-eyed view of human aggression and our concurrent propensity for destructiveness was expressed as early as 1931, with the publication of *Civilization and its Discontents* and again, in 1933, in his response to Einstein’s question, “Why war?”—both written long before the Second World War and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In 1931, Freud wrote:

The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self destruction. It may be that in this respect precisely the present time deserves a special interest. Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness, and their mood of anxiety (1931, p. 145).

And, in 1933,

war is no longer an opportunity for achieving old ideals of heroism and that owing to the perfection of instruments of destruction a future war might involve the extermination of one or perhaps both of the antagonists (p. 213).

This paper has focused on the risks posed by the “perfection of instruments of destruction” precisely because of the temptation to humanity to remain ignorant of the peril they bring to us, and/or our attempts to continue to manage the apprehension they cause us through the mechanism of collective denial.

Indeed, this paper is a call to all psychoanalysts and mental health professionals all over the world to become fully cognizant of the civilization ending hazards confronting us—so that we can help both our patients deal with the anxieties provoked by these threats, and also, so that as professionals and citizens in partnership with scholars from other

disciplines, as well as scientists, military policy planners, and government officials, we can participate in processes of collectively facing the dangers to humanity caused by the threat of the use of nuclear weapons.

Toward the end of his book, Daniel Ellsberg acknowledges that he:

can't expect enough of others to find my judgment adequately credible to motivate a broad and urgent movement for change without more authoritative confirmation. It is therefore a priority of mine—and, I hope, of readers of this book, to encourage pressure on Congress....and on other legislatures both in nuclear and non-nuclear weapons states to *investigate* the questions and issues I have raised, both in the United States and worldwide.

After all, not one of these legislatures (starting with our own) has ever successfully demanded or been told the truth of nuclear targeting or of the prospective consequences of nuclear war, whether relatively limited and small, or all out (2017, pp. 345–346).

It is therefore incumbent on all of us—not only psychoanalysts and mental health professionals, but also for that matter, citizens all over the world, to not only confront our own, individual internal temptation to deny the current, significantly deepening dangers of nuclear war actually happening, but also to educate ourselves in the facts regarding the dangers of the nuclear threat going forward into the future. By so doing, we move out of a state of perilous ignorance and denial, and move into shouldering responsibility to speak up as citizen witnesses to these facts so as to once again contribute to the prevention of the ultimate catastrophe to all of humanity and to the planet itself.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I have no conflict of interest.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This paper is based on a Discussion Group, “The Application of Psychoanalytic Thinking to Social Problems” at the American Psychoanalytic Association's national meeting in New York City in February 2019, entitled “Thinking About the Unthinkable: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Collective Denial and the Threat of Nuclear Conflagration.” The session was organized and chaired by this author and included presentations by Robert Ellsberg, son of Daniel Ellsberg, who acknowledges that without Robert's work on the *The Doomsday Machine* (2017), the book could not have been completed; and by Howard Levine, M.D., whose paper, “Psychology of the Nuclear Threat ---2019” is published in this issue of our journal. Afsaneh Alisobhani's paper on the Iran nuclear deal, also included in this issue, grew out of the group's conversation of that day.
- ² President Barack Obama, who had received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 for his “extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples” and for “his support –in word and deed –for a vision of a world free of nuclear weapons (Nobelprize.org., 2009, pp. 2–3), made this statement in 2013, during a National Security Council discussion focusing on the question of cutting the number of strategic nuclear weapons, but, still maintaining a “credible nuclear deterrence,” when he grew momentarily impatient with the “otherworldliness of the scenarios and calculations” of the military and civilian analysts in the meeting (Kaplan, 2020, pp. 243–244). Obama was also the first U.S. president to advocate for a “no first-use” nuclear weapons policy, but, was unable to achieve this goal.
- ³ “Disruptive technologies in other domains” refers to disinformation generated on social media, which has created disinformation in the public domain ranging from the fact that large fractions of the Congress of the U.S., as well as members of the public continue to deny the legitimacy of the 2020 election of Joe Biden to the presidency, resulting in such democracy threatening behavior as the January 6, 2021 insurrection on the Capitol of the U.S.; and also, to cyber conflict and cyber attacks. And, to Chinese usage of artificial intelligence and facial recognition systems which “threaten human rights around the world and therefore, civilization as we know and practice it” (2022, p. 8). As well as to tensions over military space activity, which have increased, including, for example, Russian anti-satellite missile testing that created a debris cloud that came dangerously close to the International Space Station (*ibid.*, p. 8)
- ⁴ Although Ellsberg had intended to release the nuclear documents as a follow up to the release of the Pentagon papers, when a manhunt developed for him and his wife, Patricia, he entrusted the nuclear papers to his brother, Harry, who initially buried them in his backyard, but moved them to the town dump, as the FBI's hunt for Ellsberg intensified. Most

unfortunately, and to Ellsberg's lifelong frustration, a tropical storm and subsequent flood hit the site on which Harry had hidden the papers, and they were swept away into a nearby landfill, never to be found (2017, pp. 9–10). Fred Kaplan's comment about this ill-timed incident, is that in retrospect this was a blessing, "as Ellsberg now admits, as he would have been locked up for many years if he'd gone through with his plan" of releasing the Top Secret and beyond nuclear documents. Kaplan goes on to point out that "Ellsberg must have taken notes on those nuclear papers before they vanished, because much of the book summarizes their contents, the impact they've had on his life, and why it should matter to the rest of us, especially now" (2017, p. 2).

- ⁵ In Pentagon jargon, a "first strike" by one of the superpowers—i.e., the US or the USSR/now Russia, is distinguished (by all of the now nine nuclear weapons states—including China, Britain, France, Israel, Pakistan, India, and North Korea) from "first use" in the following way: a "first strike" refers "to a full -scale attempt by a superpower—(the) Soviet Union/Russia or the United States—to disarm as fully as possible the superpower opponent, to prevent or limit its retaliation, by initiating an attack mainly by long-range, relatively high-yield 'strategic' weapons against all the enemy's military forces, especially its strategic forces in its homeland or at sea" (2017, p. 12); whereas, the term, "first use" is reserved for the initiation of a nuclear attack *other than* a first strike utilizing shorter-range, lower-yield "tactical" nuclear weapons against either a nuclear weapons owning nation state or a non-nuclear weapons nation. Only, the super powers, the U.S. and Russia, are capable of carrying out a "first strike," which aims to disarm a nuclear armed opponent (ibid.).
- ⁶ Howard Levine compiled a seven page bibliography on the theme of "Warfare and Nuclear Arms" which he published in the *International Review of Psycho-Analysis* in 1987.

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