

CONCORD MONITOR

My Turn: U.S. should be eliminating, not modernizing, nuclear weapons

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The New Hampshire primary season is full of surprises.

As a voter, I've asked 13 presidential candidates about nuclear weapons. Responses have been disappointing in general, and even candidates with good instincts don't seem to know much. So as a progressive, I was astounded when some of the most informed and enlightened discussion of nuclear weapons this primary season occurred at a recent forum sponsored by the Charles Koch Institute in Manchester.

Depending on how you count, the U.S. and Russia have nearly 15,000 nuclear weapons between them. Stockpiles are much lower than during the Cold War but still far too high. Recent tensions between Russia and the U.S. have again raised the specter of accidental or intentional nuclear war. And refusal of the big powers to negotiate elimination of these weapons has encouraged continued proliferation.

The results of even a limited nuclear exchange could kill hundreds of millions, due not just to immediate casualties but also to famine caused by climate impacts. And physicists have estimated that an exchange of about 2,000 warheads each by the U.S. and Russia "would likely eliminate the majority of the human population" through a combination of direct and indirect effects.

Unfortunately, with rare bipartisan cooperation, the White House, Congress, the Pentagon and the Department of Energy advocate massive new investment in the nuclear weapons triad. (The triad, if you missed Donald Trump's gaffe in the December debate, is the three-legged system the U.S. maintains to deliver nuclear weapons – ICBM missiles, bombers and submarines.) The new plan, benignly labeled nuclear weapons "modernization," would have us spend a trillion dollars over the next 30 years to rebuild all three legs of the triad, as well as introducing destabilizing new warheads.

The panelists at the Koch forum, titled "Keeping America Safe: National Security in the 21st Century," were Andrew Bacevich, a scholar; Stephen Kinzer, a journalist; Christopher Preble of the Cato Institute; and William Ruger of the Koch Institute. The moderator was John Stossel from the Fox Business Network. Cato? Koch? Fox? Quite a cast.

After initial discussion in which panelists criticized U.S. global interventionism, I stuck my hand up and asked about nuclear weapons.

Kinzer, a former New York Times foreign correspondent who now teaches at Brown, responded: “I think that this is a real danger for the world. Not like an ISIS thing. I think we really have in recent years moved a lot closer to a danger of real nuclear conflict. And part of it has to do with the United States. It also has to do with the proliferation of nuclear weapons around the world. And there is still an intense desire in Washington to strengthen this option. We’re not thinking about how we can reduce it.”

Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at Cato, spoke next, referring to a paper he co-authored a couple of years back: “Even if you believe in a nuclear deterrent of some sort, as a principle, that nuclear deterrent does not require very, very large numbers of warheads. Most countries that have chosen to develop nuclear weapons for deterrence have not chosen to develop thousands of warheads. And you don’t need a triad. As a historian looking back on it, it’s not clear to me that we ever needed a triad, actually. It sort of grew up through bureaucratic competition and the race for dollars.”

Bacevich, with the authority befitting a professor emeritus of international relations and history, stated: “The answer to your question is that we should move to a minimalist nuclear posture, which would suffice to deter a nuclear attack against the United States, recognizing that nuclear weapons have no use other than that. And we should realize that with the advances in precision conventional munitions, if we need to destroy something, or we need to kill something, the means are available to do that without resorting to nuclear weapons.”

I’m a nuclear abolitionist myself, so I don’t share the panelists’ endorsement of a deterrent. But I appreciate their view that our nuclear weapons should be greatly reduced. Most important, I’m grateful for an intelligent, informed discussion of nuclear weapons during the primary season.

Perhaps I shouldn’t have been surprised by the Koch Institute forum. Living in New Hampshire has taught me that there are smart, principled people all across the spectrum. The presidents who have cut the most nuclear weapons so far are not Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, but George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush. Retired generals and prominent leaders of both parties have spoken out against our nuclear weapons policies.

My friends and I will trudge to town halls and coffee shops in New Hampshire and Iowa till February to ask candidates about nuclear weapons. We hope other voters will join the chorus. Whether you are left, center or right, there’s a question you can ask.

■ Do you oppose plans to spend a trillion dollars on an entire new generation of nuclear weapons systems that will enrich military contractors and set off a new global arms race?

■ Do you believe it’s so important to invest in modernizing all three legs of the nuclear triad that you would do so at the expense of cybersecurity, conventional forces, diplomatic initiatives and domestic priorities?

■ Do you support taking our ICBM nuclear missiles, which are susceptible to false alarms, equipment failure and cyber threats, off hair-trigger alert?

Voters in New Hampshire and Iowa have just a few weeks left till we turn back into pumpkins. Let's use the time well.