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Age of the Nuclear Moron

Julian Cribb

“As democracy is perfected, the office of president represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.”

– H.L. Mencken, [*On Politics: A Carnival of Buncombe*](#), 1956

The day foreseen by US journalist H.L. Mencken when the White House is “adorned by a downright moron” seems, on the face of the accumulating evidence, to have dawned. Regrettably that individual has his finger on a certain button.

Why Americans are not more alarmed about this can only be attributed to the very poor level of scientific literacy in what is, to all intents and purposes, the world’s foremost scientific society. How Americans can be so great at science yet, in aggregate, understand so perishing little about it, is a question for the Ages. Unfortunately, the Ages will probably not have the leisure to debate it.

The missing bit of information is that a nuclear war, even a small one, could eliminate most of civilization, Americans (even those with well-stocked fallout shelters) included.

It is still an obscure historical detail that all-out nuclear Armageddon between the USSR and USA was avoided, in the 1980s, by some rather brave scientistsⁱ sticking out their necks to warn Reagan and Gorbachev that their calculations had revealed that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought”, as Reagan summarised it in his [State of the Union Address \(1984\)](#).

These scientists had worked out that – regardless of fireball, blast and radiation – the amount of dust and smoke thrown into the atmosphere by the unleashing of multiple nuclear warheads would chill the planet by several degrees for several years, causing massive crop-killing frosts which would destroy the food supply for just about everyone worldwide.

Fast forward a few decades and climate modelling has become immensely more precise and sophisticated. In more recent times [Alan Robock and Brian Toon used this modelling](#) to calculate that the amount of dust and ash from even a “limited nuclear war” would wreck food supplies globally for years.ⁱⁱ As there is rarely more than 3 months’ world supply of food in stock at any time, this would be catastrophic. Fifty to one hundred small (i.e. Hiroshima-sized) nukes, emitting 70 Gt of dust would cause 1-2 billion to starve and possibly end civilization, they calculated. Eight countries presently have this power in their nuclear arsenals.

However, in at least one of those eight countries, the arsenal is controlled by an individual who, according to a [psychological conference held at Yale \(April 2017\)](#) had a “dangerous mental illness”ⁱⁱⁱ. But, to be brutally frank, how many of the other countries are run by someone who is completely sane, and doesn’t suffer from a wild, obsessional hatred for some other branch of humanity?

Thus, the real problem emerges. There are, and will be, innumerable idiots with their finger on a button potent enough to destroy all, or most, of the 7.5 billion human inhabitants of Earth. *The conjunction between nuclear firepower and mental incapacity is unavoidable.*

Trump alone, we are told, commands the potential first-strike launch of 900 nuclear weapons – nine to eighteen times enough to eliminate civilization. Then he has another 6,000 nukes in varying states of readiness to support his initial misjudgement. So the Donald can –in theory at least– take out human civilization fifty times over...

The New York Times recently published a [mocking article](#)^{iv} contrasting Trump with the mad Roman Emperor Caligula, unfavourably to Trump. But Caligula, whatever his bloodlust, never wielded the power to eliminate civilization, not even his own. Americans, in their naiveté, have awarded that power to their present Chief.

Since the latest North Korea *imbroglio* there have been numerous media analyses of the powers of the US President to launch nuclear war. (Though none of his power to eliminate civilization. Too incommensurable a thought, maybe.) Those who wish to sleep easy will be comforted by the neat [graphic produced by Bloomberg](#).^v This implies, in theory, that Trump has to go through his senior military officers to order the End of the World as we know it. In practice, the US has developed rather a refined system for weeding out anyone who might defy the command. There will be few, if any, military leaders willing to reply – like the commander at Bastogne – “Nuts”, if instructed to take out their kids and grandkids.

Or are there? Is there a ray of sanity in the US High Command which would hustle the President off to Bethesda in a white jacket with straps, should he become over-excited by what he had just seen on Twitter or Fox News? Put simply, do the US military have as much guts, intelligence and integrity as the scientists who told Gorbachev and Reagan a pre-emptive strike would be curtains for all? For that matter, does any nuclear-armed military have them – in Russia, Israel, France, Britain, China, India, Pakistan, Iran, North Korea....?

Thus, the problem grows. Multiple nuclear arsenals, in the hands of multiple individuals of indifferent or suspect mental capacities, backed by militaries of varying fanaticism who prize blind obedience over human survival. Furthermore, with [nuclear materials being stolen every ten days](#)^{vi}, eventually, atomic weapons will become the playthings of fundamentalists to whom “mutually assured destruction” means absolutely zero.

This is the ultimate algorithm of the atomic age. The combination of unbridled insanity with apocalyptic destructive power.

On July 7 this year, 122 nations in the UN voted for a comprehensive [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#), a promising two-thirds majority. But [71 nations withheld their vote](#) including, of course, all the existing and aspiring nuclear powers.^{vii} The holdouts also include places one might have presumed rational, such as the Netherlands, Australia, Canada, Belgium, Norway, Italy, Spain, Finland, Singapore, etc. These countries, apparently, do not know whether they wish to be obliterated or not, which surely casts a question mark over the sanity of their present rulers.

With so much of humanity signed on for, or indifferent to, its own destruction, what hope is there for the rational part? The answer, for the present, must be: none.

The only possible conclusion must be that, like Americans and Australians, a third of the world's countries simply do not grasp the remorseless scientific logic of human extinction. Their education, imagination or simple common sense, does not encompass it. They have no

concept of what global famine, societal disintegration, mass cannibalism and infanticide might look like. So, they block it all out.

This, alack, does not abolish the threat.

Only wisdom can do that.

Ban all nukes, their materials and technology. Ban them now. Ban them everywhere. Ban them forever.

Julian Cribb is an Australian science writer and author of [*Surviving the 21st Century*](#) (Springer 2017)

The MAHB Blog is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org

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ⁱ The names of the people who probably saved your life, for the record, are Russians Vladimir Sergin and Vladimir Aleksandrov, Americans Richard Turco, Carl Sagan and Stephen Schneider, and Australian Barrie Pittock. They never received a Nobel Peace Prize, but should have done.

ⁱⁱ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alan-robock/an-open-letter-to-preside_26_b_14041438.html

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world-0/donald-trump-dangerous-mental-illness-yale-psychiatrist-conference-us-president-unfit-james-gartner-a7694316.html>

^{iv} https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/18/opinion/trump-caligula-republican-congress.html?mcubz=0&_r=0

^v <https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/graphics/2016-nuclear-weapon-launch/>

^{vi} IAEA Incident and Trafficking Database 2016. <https://www-ns.iaea.org/downloads/security/itdb-fact-sheet.pdf>

^{vii} https://s3.amazonaws.com/unoda-web/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/A.Conf_.229.2017.L.3.Rev_.1.pdf