

Psychological Obstacles to Nuclear Zero, or even to Nuclear Reductions
For the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation Retreat
October 24-25, 2016
By Judith Lipton and David Barash

The game for all participants: In the past, David and I used to go hiking with our children and we played the Cream of Mushroom Soup Game with them. The game goes like this: consider Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup. Now describe it from a chemical paradigm: what are the chemical constituents? A physical paradigm: what happens if the soup is moving close to the speed of light? A biological paradigm: how does this soup contribute to nutrition, if at all? An evolutionary paradigm: does this soup contribute to inclusive fitness? A Marxist paradigm: is this a manifestation of the food of the proletariat? A postmodern paradigm: is there soup at all, or is it a social construct? Etc. The game is to make fun of "hardening of the categories."

The list below is the most serious effort I have ever made to play the Soup Game in answer to David Krieger's question. The reason for the list is to cast aside any single explanation for our failures – thus far - to create nuclear sanity, let alone nuclear abolition. I invite all participants to take this Word doc and add to it, comment on it, or whatever, and get it back to me. My goal is to create a "big tent" where every thinking person, from artist to zoologist, feels empowered and has a role.

I am totally sick of the catfights and undermining that happen among intellectuals. The monoscopic fratricide or even cannibalism that takes place when one academic or intellectual takes a radically different point of view than another has been reprehensible. The Left has been fractured by these squabbles, and it is now time to stop. Put away our personal points of view, and get on with joining with others who may speak or think differently, but for whom preventing nuclear war is transcendent. Thus the Cream of Mushroom Soup Game is an effort to make paradigms playful and flexible, so there is room for everybody under a very big tent to join together. We can dispute intellectual arguments over coffee in the morning or drinks after dinner, but for now, let's forget our own fundamentalism and move on as friends and allies.

- a) Nuclear Fundamentalism – the myth that absolute nuclear zero is more important than emergency measures that are incomplete, but essential and more immediately achievable.
- b) Confusing "unilateral disarmament" with treaties that include cuts in numbers of weapons along with international technical means of verification and nuclear forensics.
- c) Nuclear deterrence theory: we need nuclear weapons to deter our enemies.
- d) Religions that propagate an idea of afterlife, heaven or hell or reincarnation; this secular world doesn't really matter.
 - a. Messianic visions of the End Times.
 - b. God is going to take care of everything.
 - c. Religions that teach an ultimate clash of the Faithful vs. Everybody Else, as necessary for the coming of a Messiah. The Rapture. All those Islamic Virgins.

- d. The Abrahamic myth of man's dominion over the earth. "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. As early as the 2nd century both Tertullian and Saint Irenaeus of Lyons were insisting that when God shaped Adam he was foreshadowing the image of the incarnate Christ, the Second Adam. Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends."¹
- e) Mysticism, magical thinking.
 - a. Psychological neoteny. The renowned anthropologist from Duke, Weston La Barre, postulated that psychological neoteny creates the need for religion. Humans find it difficult to grow up, to take seriously that there are no parents or Super figures, so they revert to childlike thinking and superstitions to take the place of their insecurity.
- f) The genie is out of the bottle. Nuclear weapons are easy to make, there are plenty of fissile materials, there is no way to abolish them.
- g) "Our friend the Atom, Walt Disney, 1956. The notion that atomic energy and weapons are "our friends," and things to celebrate rather than abolish.
- h) The Evil Human Nature Argument, from many traditions. If human beings are intrinsically bad (born of Eve, spawn of the Devil, tainted with original sin, genetically selfish sinners or libertarians) then in order to survive, one must be equally evil, or at least, potentially violent. (From B. Brecht, *How to Survive* from *The Three Penny Opera*, "Just once do something bad and you'll survive!")
- i) The Hare and the Tortoise argument, or Overcoming the Neanderthal Mentality.² The DNA of human nature has not changed much in the last 100,000 years. It is ill equipped to deal with the speed of cultural evolution, and it is likely to cling to old habits that worked ok in the past. Example: musk ox behavior. For millennia, musk oxen formed a protective circle around the young to protect them from wolves. It worked fine. But the invention of the gun changed everything except their way of thinking, to paraphrase Einstein, so now they make perfect targets to be mown down by machine guns.
- j) The sensation of security (the musk oxen in their circle presumably feel secure) versus the objective nature of safety (musk ox faced with armed hunters are not safe.) The "nuclear umbrella" is a perfect example of a metaphor that implies that we are secure or sheltered by weapons of mass destruction.
- k) "Whatever happens we have got the Maxim Gun, and they have not": Hilaire Belloc, 19th century apologist for British imperialism. Fancier weapons make "us" stronger against "them."
- l) Testosterone poisoning, masculine aspects of aggressive human nature – H. Caldicott. They're "toys for the boys."
- m) Will to power, F. Nietzsche, admittedly a perversion of Nietzsche, but widespread.

¹ White, Lynn, The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis, *Science*, volume 155, #3767, 3/10/196, pg 1203-1204.

² Barash, D.P., and Lipton, J.E., *The Caveman and the Bomb*, McGraw Hill, NY, 1985.

- n) Death instinct, S. Freud. This theory is not accepted by biologists, nor modern psychiatrists, but it represents a widespread popular belief – sometimes attributed to others, and then used as a justification for nuclear weapons.
- o) Its all about the money
 - a. Pure profit, for corporations
 - b. Military spending per se, and those employees who benefit from it
 - c. Military research that spins off into commercial applications (such as the DARPA founded internet)
 - d. The military/industrial/academic/media complex
 - e. Who, whom? V. Lenin, mostly about money on understanding greedy motivations.
- p) Nationalism – People think of nuclear weapons as useful for supporting, defending, or enhancing their nation.
 - a. Nations serve as proxy extended families, based on the myth that people of one nation are in fact more related to one another than to people of other nations.
 - b. This creates “In group amity/out group enmity”
 - c. Pseudo kin selection. Nations create a myth of “fictive kinship,” and capitalize on biological tendencies towards kin selection to amplify nationalistic fervor.
- q) Denial
 - a. Of one’s own personal death (Becker)
 - b. Of personal responsibility. “Preventing nuclear war is not my problem.”
 - c. Of the possibility of planetary extinction
- r) Inferiority, insecurity. Doubts about one’s own competence or effectiveness.
 - a. “Its not nuclear physics.” Some is, some not, but basic principles are not beyond the ken of an average human being.
 - b. Some people think that nuclear issues, especially nuclear physics and rocket science, are so complex and deep that normal people are precluded from having a right to having an opinion. “Let the experts handle it.”
- s) Technical sweetness (R.J. Oppenheimer), originally a matter for weaponeers, but now of interest to computer scientists, rocket engineers, nuclear physicists, mathematicians, chemists, atmospheric scientists, etc.
- t) Failure of imagination – inability to perceive and act upon the danger because of inability to imagine the consequences of failure.
 - a. It is virtually impossible to imagine a nuclear explosion, the heat of the sun and the stars, right here on earth. “Hot” is 100 degrees, boiling water, maybe molten steel or lava – but not millions of degrees.
 - b. Numbers are numbing.
 - c. It is literally impossible to imagine billions of people dead in a few hours, not to mention the plants and animals in those locations.
 - d. While science fiction writers have imagined the end of the world for many years, it is still difficult to imagine that this beautiful world as we see it at this moment may be totally incinerated in just a few more minutes. No Mad Max. No On the Beach.
 - e. Nuclear detonations have not occurred in the atmosphere in decades. People have seen old movies, mostly in black and white, but there are no recent events that parallel even a small nuclear explosion. 9/11 is not even close!

- u) Revulsion. Because nuclear annihilation is so painful to contemplate, it is not considered to be an appropriate topic of polite conversation. Nuclear War as a topic sucks the air out of a room. Nobody wants to talk about it, much less think about it. David and I can barely talk about it with our children, let alone ordinary friends. With whom do you talk?
- v) "Happy endings, everybody" (B. Brecht)
 - a. Bob Marley: "Every little thing is going to be all right."
 - b. A version of Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss, channeling Leibnitz, "Everything is for the best in this best of all possible worlds."
 - c. "The cock-eyed optimist" – "They say the human race is falling on its face, and hasn't got too far to go. But every whip-poor-will is selling me a bill, that's telling me it just ain't so." Nellie Forbush, from South Pacific, is attractive; pessimists aren't.
 - d. Video Games, dystopian literature, movies, and games that conclude with happy endings or by hitting the reset button – i.e., a pervasive habituation to horror, leading to a sense that it won't happen or if it does it wouldn't be so bad.
- w) The Debbie Downer Syndrome: "Hell hath no fury like a Buddhist who's mellow has been harshed!"³ Not only a problem for Buddhists. A big problem for the culture of Mindfulness and the Happiness Movement.
- x) Vindictiveness and Hyperbole: "Bomb them back to the Stone Age." Reflects basic misunderstanding of the Stone Age and of nuclear war's global impact.
- y) Spite – a uniquely human psychological maneuver. Other animals generally act in their own self-interest, whether short term (proximal) or long term (ultimate, evolutionary.) Only human beings engage in behaviors in which the payoff to them is WORSE than to their opponent, but they do it anyway. The Samson Option said to be contemplated by Israel, or the Dead Hand options by Russia are cases in point.
- z) Distracting conversations about human nature. Confusion between memes and genes, ultimate vs. proximate causality, sociobiology versus postmodernism. These confusions are distractions that reduce the likelihood of workable solutions in real time.
- aa) Population. As of 8.31.16, there were 7,447,193, 500 people in the world. Of those, 4.326 billion people lived in the 9 Nuclear Weapon States. Their median age was 29.9 years old. In other words, more than half of the residents of the NWS have no memory of atmospheric tests, the Cuban Missile Crisis, or even the close calls of the 1980s. Only about 2.33 billion people lived outside of the "nuclear umbrella." Most people on the planet are invested in nuclear weapons, one way or the other, BUT THEY DON'T KNOW IT.
- bb) Desensitization. 50,000 nuclear weapons? 17,000 nuclear weapons? Sounds like a lot. Big numbers again. Forget about it.

³ (From the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, posted by Katie Loncke on 10.29.13) "No one wants to be the Debbie Downer criticizing weak "diversity" practices within a sangha; calling out fatphobic jokes about losing weight during a meditation retreat; or gravely predicting a police attack on an Occupy encampment. (One Zen teacher told me that during an Occupy support meeting in his sangha, when he asked what they should do in the event of a police raid, a student exploded at him: "Why do you have to be so negative?!") Hell hath no fury like a Buddhist who's mellow has been harshed!"

- cc) “Quotidian concerns” – people are otherwise occupied, dealing with everyday issues. Making a living, raising children, commuting, and watching TV and social media.
- dd) Illiteracy in general. Literacy is usually defined by the World Bank or UNESCO as the ability to read and write one’s own name as well as a simple sentence. In 2011, 84.1% of adults in the world were defined as literate by those criteria. Is that enough to understand the risk of nuclear war?
- ee) Low or even low normal intelligence. Even taking into account of the flaws and cultural bias in evaluating intelligence, let’s say for the sake of argument, and differences over the validity of IQ measurement, that the average IQ is 100. This means half the people on earth have an IQ *less* than 100. How much IQ, whether mathematical, verbal, emotional, or other is necessary to comprehend an existential threat? How much intelligence does it take to overcome the caveman mentality and adopt new modes of altruism, cooperation, and social cohesion?
- ff) Mental disorders. How do people with mental disorders make decisions about international policies? How many international leaders suffer from mental disorders?
- The World Health Organization rates depression as the #2 most disabling disease on the planet, second only to HIV. Mood disorders, schizophreniform disorders, anxiety disorders, and personality disorders affect about 25% of the people in the US at some point in their lives.
 - Worldwide, in 2016, about 44 million people suffer from dementia. This is expected to rise.
 - From WHO: “As many as 450 million people suffer from a mental or behavioral disorders. Nearly 1 million people commit suicide every year. Four of the six leading causes of years lived with disability are due to neuropsychiatric disorders (depression, alcohol-use disorders, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder).”
 - While mental health professionals are notoriously unable to predict violence, it is clear that certain forms of mental illness are associated with violence to self and others.
 - In the US, approximately 10% of the population appear to suffer from personality disorders, including paranoid, narcissistic, and borderline.
 - Leaders from Caligula to Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Hitler, and Stalin have suffered from severe personality disorders at best, sadism and paranoia as well. What is to keep a mentally ill person from becoming a nuclear weapons state leader?
- gg) Compartmentalization. As I write this list, I am listening to Sergeant Pepper and thinking about lunch. My brain only stops to think about nuclear war when I force it, at least writing this list.
- hh) Pre-Traumatic Stress Disorder. On a normal day, I think about nuclear war at least once every 5 minutes or more. I suffer from intrusive thoughts of fires and being vaporized. I see firestorms sweeping across Seattle every time I cross the Evergreen Point Bridge. As I ride my horse through the meadow, I picture all of the trees catching on fire and being blown up. This does not make me “happy.” It is a relief to go grocery shopping, or play Bach or Scarlatti, or groom a dog or horse. How do you all contain the fear and sorrow? What can we tell people about coping with the facts of death? The only time my mind is really at peace is when I am engaging in serious physical exercise (galloping my horse), or working to prevent nuclear war.

- ii) Compassion Fatigue. Syria, Iraq, Yemen. Refugees. Police Brutality. People are overwhelmed by bad news and fear. There is so much bad news and fear that it is difficult to decide where or if to pay attention.
- jj) Catastrophes de jour. World War I. The Spanish Flu. The Great Depression. World War II. The Cold War. The Population Explosion. Global Heating. The Next Superbugs. Peak Oil. Autism. Income Inequality. "The Clash of Civilizations." Genetically modified foods. The next Big Earthquake. Income inequality. The 2016 election. How do we prioritize?
- kk) "Rich people's problems" like how to manage a household with 2 income earners, children, pets, and "help" including nannies, housekeepers, and gardeners. How are we to be Tiger Mothers? These adults may be smart and educated, but they are exhausted and preoccupied with maintaining their lifestyles. These "problems" include slow Internet connections; getting preschoolers into the "right schools," and sous vide cooking.
- ll) "Two sports and a hobby." A local sage told his daughter that to get into Harvard, she needed to demonstrate mastery of 2 sports and a hobby. Although the numbers and piety are silly, we are indeed enjoined to take care of ourselves first. We need to diversify our interest and passions. "In the event of loss of cabin pressure, please put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others." How do we fit that in with the desperate need to prevent nuclear war right now?
- mm) Immediate problems faced by people of color, refugees, the mentally ill, and anybody who does not make the cut into at least the lower tier of the middle class. This is true in Europe, Africa, South America and Asia as much or more than in the US. People are subject to militarized police, racial profiling, and all sorts of sabotage, not to mention poor schools, lack of personal safety, lack of access to healthcare, etc. Where are their voices? How are they to have voices?
- nn) "Manifest destiny" and US Exceptionalism. The US is a country at permanent war, founded on colonialism, which never gave up the habit of expansionism. Teddy Roosevelt: "Speak softly and carry a big stick." Nuclear weapons are a very big stick. And the US is the third most populous nation in the world now, after China and India. The US has really become an Empire. Somehow this surprises me!
- oo) Russian history and psychology. Russian experiences with war and invasion, from Napoleon to Hitler. Now NATO. How does this affect Russian decision-making?
- pp) Need for *quid pro quo*: The widespread feeling that for the US to reduce its nukes, Russia must reduce at least as much, which ignores the facts of immense overkill, while also making US reductions hostage to Russian actions. (A nice exception here was George H. W. Bush's unilateral removal of US tactical nukes in 1992 and his invitation to Gorbachev to follow suit, which he did ... and was enabled to do so by Bush's initiation.)
- qq) Fear of North Korea, a rogue state with a potentially crazy leader.
- rr) Fear of a nuclear Iran, other nuclear states, and nuclear terrorists with dirty bombs.
- ss) Culture wars, such as the Red and Blue disconnect in the US today. Often, but not necessarily due to financial, religious or educational disparities.
- tt) The planet Earth has only a finite amount of resources, including fresh water and petroleum. People predict increasing conflict over access to safety and resources.⁴

⁴ Cixin Liu, *Remembrance of Earth's Past*, a trilogy including *The Three Body Problem*, *The Dark Forest*, and *Death's End*, Tor Books, 2016.

- uu) The “People’s Report Card” that measures Basic Needs, WellBeing and Opportunity gives the world a C+ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/campaign/peoples-report-card/>. Based on data from 160 countries. This returns to the basic question, how can people or nations that are just barely getting by on basic needs supposed to take a lofty vision on nuclear weapon abolition?
- vv) Suppression of love drugs. LSD was synthesized in 1938 in Switzerland by Albert Hoffman. I have a very personal connection to this story. My father, Morris Lipton, was involved with chemical warfare during WWII, and went on to conduct the LSD experiments on veterans at the Chicago VA Hospital. He also took a lot himself. My first summer job was at Yale, working for Dr. Daniel Freedman, studying the mechanisms of LSD (1964). We killed a lot of rats and bunnies, and didn’t touch the LSD. Only later (1966) did I realize what I’d missed! It is possible that the positive psychedelic and revolutionary aspects of LSD, DMT, MDMA. Etc. were deliberately suppressed by the CIA because they undercut that basics of narcissism, nationalistic fervor, boundaries, and hatred. <http://projectavalon.net/forum/showthread.php?t=16241>
- ww) What about all of the sentient beings that have no vote and will be extinguished in nuclear war? NPR presented this chart, in 2011. Here is a link to the numbers of animals in the world <http://reducing-suffering.org/how-many-wild-animals-are-there/> There are supposed to be 950,000 species of insects. There are supposedly 390,900 plants species known to science. Who gave humans the right to extinguish them all?
- xx)



- yy) The invasion of the aliens, the extraterrestrial extremophiles. There is one multi celled creature that may survive nuclear war. The Tardigrade. Maybe the Tardigrade is an extraterrestrial come to colonize earth, for whom heat, cold, solar radiation, and even nuclear radiation don’t matter. . <http://tardigrades.bio.unc.edu/>

They are also called Water Bears, and here is a nice rap video about Tardigrades, inspiring to all of us who fear extinction: Called Water Bears Don’t Care
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9Mw44u0UBw>