

Nuclear Weapons and Climate Change

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I've often heard it said that the creation of nuclear weapons was "inevitable". But the historical record doesn't (in my view) bear this out - far from it. The initial development of the atomic bomb was triggered by very specific historical circumstances, namely the fear of the Western Allies in World War II that Nazi Germany might obtain it. Mercifully, if ironically, the Germans never succeeded in developing the atomic bomb, apparently believing that carrying out the task was technically impossible. While it is true that physicists in the 1930s saw the theoretical possibility of developing an atomic bomb, they also saw that there would be virtually insuperable difficulties in actually constructing one. The creation of nuclear weapons was the result of a unique historical situation. Had Nazi Germany not emerged, it seems rather unlikely that any state would have felt it necessary to make the colossal effort needed to produce them. Of course, now that the genie has been let out of the bottle and nuclear weapons are almost commonplace, it is easy to regard their creation as "inevitable" and to forget just how special the historical conditions leading to their emergence actually were.

While nuclear weapons are unfortunately still with us, it seems to me that, from a purely political point of view, it would be comparatively easy, in principle at least, to eliminate them. No state wants them for intrinsic purposes. Indeed, apart from their first use on Japan by the US at the end of World War II, they have (so far, and luckily) functioned solely as a deterrent to attack by other states, and they are widely acknowledged as being virtually useless for any other purpose. It is not inconceivable that political negotiation between states could lead to their elimination: this would only require the agreement of a handful of heads of state and their advisers. Political negotiation has in fact already led to a considerable reduction in the number of nuclear weapons. Their complete elimination is by no means impossible.

Climate change - global warming - is a different kettle of fish altogether. To begin with, if we grant that its emergence is the result of "natural" human activity such as food production, the burning of fossil fuels, etc., then it would indeed appear to be "inevitable". And, given the very "naturalness" of the human activity which causes global warming (to say nothing of skepticism concerning climate change), it would seem to be very difficult in principle to get people to agree to do something about it. Unlike the case of nuclear weapons, which could in principle be eliminated by the

collective decision of a few heads of state, modifying the human activity giving rise to global warming would require radical changes in the lifestyle of virtually every person on the planet. And most people, unsurprisingly, are unwilling to countenance, let alone implement, those changes. Everybody- aside from a few fanatics - would be happy to see the end of nuclear weapons. But even if people became generally convinced that climate change is caused by human activity, it would be only with great, and sadly, natural reluctance that they would abandon their cars and the other trappings of modern civilization. As Orson Welles shrewdly observed, to avoid the Hollywood blacklist, "friend informed on friend, enemy on enemy, not to save their lives, but to save their swimming pools."