

NUCLEAR WEAPONRY

Bombs away?

A journalist probes the morality of nuclear weapons in the 21st century

By Alex Wellerstein

After the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, American scientists and statesmen opined dramatically about the importance of understanding the moral implications of nuclear weapons. Their immense power, their sense of increased collective risk, their potentialities for collateral damage, and their inability to be adequately defended against implied that these were weapons that fell outside the normal moralistic conventions of war.

Dan Zak, a reporter for *The Washington Post*, has written a provocative book that attempts, through a variety of lenses, to restore the big moral questions of the nuclear age. *Almighty* is a collection of stories and characters, organized around the break-in and vandalism at the Y-12 nuclear site in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, in 2012. One of the three antinuclear activists, Megan Rice, was an 82-year-old nun and former missionary, a fact that dominated headlines about the event.

How could a site that was proudly proclaimed the “Fort Knox of uranium” have been infiltrated by a group of elderly Catholic “peaceniks”? Y-12’s vaunted security was, in fact, a house of cards. The security contractor took in billions of dollars but cut corners. At the time of the break-in, 10% of the site’s surveillance cameras were on the fritz, and the thousands of false alarms per day had conditioned the staff to ignore the few actual ones.

Zak’s subject is not really Y-12, even though it serves as the rhetorical fulcrum of his narrative. It is morality and the broad costs and risks associated with nuclear weapons. The book is about the passions that drive people to take strong, potentially self-destructive stands in the name of something they believe in. And this is where things get messy.

For peaceniks, nuclear weapons have the power to destroy millions of lives, and therefore they are an unpardonable abomination. (The Y-12 activists in question are frequently



In 2012, three activists, including Megan Rice, an 82-year old Catholic nun (shown), infiltrated the Y-12 National Security Complex, prompting criticism of the federal government’s efforts to safeguard nuclear materials.

quoted referring to them as the antichrist, which sums up their position well enough.) Many would also note that, although the future nuclear holocaust is, as of yet, hypothetical, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki represent the “original sin” of the nuclear age. Last, they would point to the immense costs (fiscal, environmental, and human) of the development of these armaments.

Those who favor the bomb argue that the atomic bombings of Japan were no sin: They saved lives. Moreover, modern nuclear weapons are “used every day,” the official line goes, because their very existence maintains the peace. As for the costs, those in favor tend to see it as money well spent. They credit nuclear weapons with the dramatic decrease in great-power wars from the mid-20th century onward and the subsequent dramatic drops in both battle and civilian deaths from war.

Do nuclear weapons threaten the world, or do they protect it from such threats? Both may in fact be true. Rational people disagree on the degrees of risk inherent, on the roles of the bombing in World War II, on whether nuclear deterrence actually works, and on whether the costs have been worth the security gained. That risk and security may be inherently intertwined is perhaps the key paradox of the nuclear age.

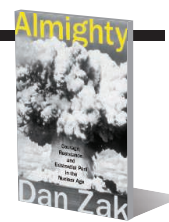
The amount of time that has passed since the invention of nuclear weapons is less than a century and thus a very small unit of human history to try to generalize about. Yet the debate seems to have become even more polarized than it was during the Cold War.

Both the vehemently antinuclear and the vehemently pronuclear positions are, to be frank, unpalatable to this reader. The antinuclear activists profiled by Zak come off as extremists and kooks. Their vision of the world is one of philosophical ideals, far from the realities of international or domestic order. They appear to be relics of a past age, arro-

Almighty
Courage, Resistance, and
Existential Peril
in the Nuclear Age

Dan Zak

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gant in their moral certainties, uncompromising in the way that people who do not have to grapple with the practical consequences of serious decisions can be. Their argument that the world would somehow become rapidly safer, or more moral, were the United States to unilaterally disarm is frankly unconvincing.

Those in favor of nuclear weapons likewise come off in a decidedly unfavorable light. Zak deftly chronicles the disturbing ways in which the military, Congress, and the federal government established and advanced the nuclear program. The story is replete with scandals, spills, pork-barrel politics, meaningless performance reviews coupled to millions of dollars in bonuses, soaring cost overruns, and appalling levels of both corporate and government irresponsibility.

Apparently it required an incredible \$53,000 of taxpayer dollars to clean up the small amount of graffiti, spilled blood, and chipped concrete following the break-in at the Y-12 site. This alone is as devastating an indictment of the government-owned, contractor-operated model as I have ever seen.

Our early 21st-century public conversations on nuclear weapons have been dominated by all-or-nothing approaches. It is hard to come away with much faith in the current system, or much hope that it will be meaningfully reformed without radical changes, but Zak’s book, in a roundabout way, nudges us toward a new conversation about the morality of security that is not dominated only by the extremes.

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The reviewer is at the College of Arts and Letters, Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA. Email: wellerstein@gmail.com

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