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The old Schell game

by [Victor Davis Hanson](#)

On *The Seventh Decade: The New Shape of Nuclear Danger* by Jonathan Schell.

Jonathan Schell

The Seventh Decade: The New Shape of Nuclear Danger.
Metropolitan Books, 272 pages, \$24

During the nuclear freeze movement of the 1980s, Jonathan Schell became well known for his detailed arguments calling for global nuclear disarmament. His latest plea updates the narrative of the earlier *Fate of the Earth* and *The Abolition*, by now warning us that seventy years into the nuclear age the nightmare of “The Bomb” is growing in ways far more dangerous than even during the Cold War American-Soviet stand-off.

The argument is again well-written, often passionate, and takes a new tack in praising the efforts of Ronald Reagan—the book’s unlikely hero-prophet—at the 1986 Reykjavik Summit where he tried to convince Mikhail Gorbachev to help him rid the world of nuclear arms. Schell’s good Reagan came to his senses late in his administration, only after the other Reagan spent a fortune on strategic nuclear weapons, rearmed NATO forces in Europe with tactical nuclear weapons, and may well have helped thereby to implode the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, Schell rightly points out that realists and conservatives have come a lot closer to his way of thinking from their prior insistence on unilateral American nuclear deterrence. Witness the recent *Wall Street Journal* opinion essay calling for global abolition of nuclear weapons by the deans of American foreign policy Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, William Perry, and George Schultz.

Schell’s argument is straightforward and at first glance unimpeachable. The world’s nations often came to the bomb haphazardly. America used it at Hiroshima in sloppy and casual fashion. Only through luck and a half-century of Soviet-American trial-by-error diplomacy did the superpowers narrowly avoid blowing the world apart.

But now the threat is far worse still. There are more nuclear players than ever before—many of them existential enemies of one another, like Pakistan and India who almost went to war once again in 2002. Terrorists have greater chances to acquire unaccounted-for nuclear devices—and ever mounting perceived grievances.

Many of these new players are not subject to rational calculations of the old bottom-line Kremlin. Worse still, the United States has ceased being a restraining force for multilateral sobriety. Under George Bush, America has made things far worse by its unilateral and preemptive policies, its over-reliance on military solutions, and its snubbing of global institutions that alone can fashion the

framework of disarmament.

Schell writes with his usual elegance, and all sane people would wish that his visions of a peaceful nuclear-free world could come true—especially given his minatory recitations of how close the world has come to using nuclear weapons. But there are also enough historical errors, contradictory and inconsistent logic, and partisanship in this book to doubt both Schell's presentation and the very wisdom and practicality of global nuclear disarmament itself.

First, Hiroshima and Nagasaki most definitely did stave off an American invasion of Japan that would have cost hundreds of thousands of lives. Schell omits any real mention of Okinawa, but that bloodbath (50,000 American casualties, 200,000 Japanese and Okinawan dead) loomed large at the newly constructed Pentagon as a precursor of what to expect on Japan itself in late 1945 and 1946. After that island carnage, veterans lamented not that the bomb was used on Japan to preempt another nightmarish invasion, but that it might have been used earlier to prevent Okinawa altogether.

Revisionist historians, of course, cite the Soviet invasion of Manchuria as prompting Japanese surrender, or argue that the bomb was intended as a loud and deadly demonstration to Joseph Stalin of newly found American power and resolution. Perhaps—but again war planners at the time were far more obsessed with not repeating the bloodletting of the 1944–1945 Pacific theater on a far grander scale. For all the dangers of the nuclear age, for seventy years we have not witnessed total industrial war on a continental scale of the type that nearly wiped out Western civilization twice in the twentieth century.

Whatever Schell's nuanced argumentations, it was during the Clinton administration that the nuclear scientist A. Q. Khan ensured Pakistan the bomb and shipped his nefarious methodology abroad. North Korea reached the nuclear threshold in the late 1990s. And *mirabile dictu* it was during the Bush administration that Khan was exposed and North Korea is, for the moment apparently, shutting down its reactor.

Schell warns: "Having outgrown its parochial Cold War breeding ground [the Bomb] is moving to take up residence in every part of the globe." He then immediately cites three examples: India, Pakistan, and North Korea. But India exploded a nuclear device ("peaceful" or not) in 1974. North Korea apparently has not yet detonated a successful bomb and may well be disarming under multilateral pressures and bribes. And Pakistan became nuclear only during the Clinton administration which put a higher premium on the efficacy of international watchdog agencies than has any administration before or since.

The war in Iraq looms large in the narrative as morally reprehensible and a strategic blunder. But such castigation immediately must prompt contortions. If the world is to disarm, what are we to do with fanatics like Saddam Hussein and Muammar al-Qaddafi, who were seeking nuclear technology and have a history of violent war-making, both conventional and terrorist-inspired?

Schell downplays the fact that both of their programs are now gone (Qaddafi purportedly confessed to Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi of his fears of ending up like Saddam). Curiously, Schell also warns how close Saddam was to bomb-making while simultaneously damning the Bush administration for removing him on false pretenses.

So how odd to be told that Saddam did not propose a threat that justified his removal—only to deprecate the efficacy of the 1981 Israeli bombing of the Iraqi reactor at Osirak on the grounds that "after the attack, they [the Iraqis] turned to uranium enrichment, a quicker path to the bomb." And odder still to learn that "having once put together most of the know-how for building the bomb, Iraq could one day call on its scientists to do so again." But then Schell also quotes the often unreliable Seymour Hersh as proof that the United States was considering a preemptive nuclear strike on Iran.

There is no mention of the relationship between constitutional government and nuclear weapons—a glaring omission in regards to Iraq. In fact, the only hope that an oil-rich Iraq will not go nuclear in the future is not the United Nations or appeals to compassionate reason, but the chance of a consensual government that arises in the ashes of the Baathist catastrophe.

Schell doesn't consider why a Britain, France, India, Israel, or the United States having such weapons is far different from a China, Pakistan, or Russia—much less an unhinged Iran or North Korea—in possession of such frightening arsenals. Full-fledged democracies—the truism is largely true—have a history of not attacking each other so frequently, in part due to transparent institutions that monitor their militaries in a way not accorded to the Red Army or the Pakistani intelligence services.

The real danger, it seems to me, is not that France may have over 300 bombs or Israel 170, but that these other illiberal regimes should have any. An omnipresent argument of moral equivalence permeates the book. Schell accepts the complaints of former Third World dictatorships that liberal constitutional states have one set of nuclear rules for themselves while applying quite different ones to poorer others—but never questions that reasoning on either historical or humanitarian grounds. It surely does not help his case to quote approvingly the greatest mass-murder in civilization's history, Mao Zedong, to the effect that “it is absolutely impermissible for two or three countries to brandish their nuclear weapons at will, issue orders and commands, and lord it over the world as self-ordained nuclear overlords.”

There is a disturbing tendency to blame the United States for the present state of nuclear proliferation. (The supposed implosion of unilateral Bush administration policies is, for example, repeatedly referred to as “The Fall.”) But does any serious student of diplomacy actually believe that France went ahead with nuclear acquisition only because the United States rejected a 1954 French proposal to discuss a global atmospheric test ban? Or does the expansion of NATO under George Bush or his advocacy of anti-missile systems really explain the rise of an authoritarian bellicose Mother Russia—rather than the spiraling profits of oil, ex-KGB operative Vladimir Putin's authoritarian tendencies, and nationalist angst over the breakup of the old Soviet Union?

For all of Schell's requiems for Iraq, and its supposed lessons that one can't unilaterally disarm a regime that may or may not have dangerous weapons, the verdict, as we see from the surge, is still out. Ironically, should Iraq stabilize and its constitutional government provide an antithesis to Iran and the Gulf monarchies, then Schell's goal of stopping proliferation will have been advanced, not retarded. Indeed, Schell should ask whether Iraq, Libya, and North Korea were closer on January 20, 2001 or now to obtaining nuclear weapons? Oddly again, Schell seems to recognize this disturbing fact when he offhandedly says of nuclear non-proliferation, “The United States calls for strong measures; Europe is content with weaker ones; Russia and China are happy with even weaker ones or none at all.”

Schell seems uninterested in military history, which in turn leads him to embarrassing rhetorical questions. After stating that it might well have been true in May 1994 that no country was targeted by the strategic forces of the United States, Schell editorializes: “a statement that, if true, seemed to cry out for a follow-up question: in that case, why does the United States still require nuclear weapons in the thousands?” The obvious answer after 2,500 years of civilized war would be twofold: first, the U.S. might not have to point its weapons precisely because everyone knows it has them and thus reacts accordingly; and, two, perceived enemies in 1994 might well be different from those in, say, 2007—or 2030 for that matter.

Finally, who would police Schell's global police? The United Nations did nothing to stop the Balkan, Rwandan, and Darfur genocides but apparently did a great deal to facilitate corruption and starvation with its Oil-for-Food skullduggery. No international court ever convicted mass-murdering

Slobodan Milosevic, much less caught Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic in an era when the genocidal Saddam Hussein has been removed, caught, tried, and executed.

Schell seems to acknowledge the problem of international oversight, but he blithely reassures us that in a world of nations disarmed of nuclear weapons, the “cheater” who unilaterally rearms would find no “genuine” advantage:

At best, the cheater would enjoy a monopoly for a brief period. Indeed, if one spins out these scenarios, it is difficult to imagine how a cheater could gain genuine advantage from its violation.

Actually it is not difficult at all to imagine such an advantage. Try, for example, a Mahmoud Ahmadinejad within “a brief period” of, say, fifteen minutes.

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