

20. In the first place, the secret is possessed by our friends

and allies, Great Britain and Canada, whose scientific genius made a tremendous contribution to our original development and possession of

Atoms for Peace Plus Fifty

by Susan Eisenhower

One of Dwight Eisenhower's most significant political legacies stemmed from his management of the nuclear question. Five decades after Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace" speech before the United Nations, the nuclear dilemma persists but the world is a different, and I would submit, a better place today than it might have been had that vision not been articulated, or its proposals not advanced.

It is hard to replicate the international atmosphere that existed in 1953 at the time of the speech. The nuclear terror that was unleashed by the atomic carnage in Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of WWII were only heightened four years later when the Soviets tested an atomic weapon on August of 1949. Great Britain, without help from the United States, followed suit on October 3, 1952.

With the Korean War still raging, only a month later, in November 1952, the world entered the age of the hydrogen bomb. This nuclear weapon tested by the United States had a fearful capacity to destroy. On its detonation it vaporized the test island, Elugelab, and blew open an underwater crater 1,500 yards in diameter. The test demonstrated that if other nations got such weapons a nuclear holocaust could occur.

Then less than a year later, on August 19, 1953, the Soviet Union announced that they had successfully broken the United States' monopoly on the hydrogen weapon. The country had been all but destroyed during WWII, making it obvious that a nation's wealth was not a prerequisite for gaining nuclear knowledge and capability. It was clear that if the world took its current path soon many others would be able to develop and acquire nuclear weapons.

What could be done to address the contradictions inherent in the atom? On the one hand the very weapon that could produce unthinkable destruction also, on the other hand, served as a deterrent and was central to our national security calculations. Furthermore, advancements in the nuclear field held out the promise that the atom could provide ideally limitless nuclear power for energy and humanitarian purposes.

The "Atoms for Peace" speech had a number of objectives, but its overarching goal was to propose a set of ideas, a nuclear strategy, which would call on the Soviets to cooperate internationally for the betterment of mankind. This would reengage the Soviets in discussions on nuclear matters at a time when arms control talks had stalled, but it would also offer hope, and a practical set of ideas, to the developing world. Could a post-imperial world, increasingly restless with the double standards meted out by developed nations stand by for long, if the nuclear club seized but restricted access to the benefits that nuclear power promised? The proposal to establish an internationally protected pool of fissionable material would be a start at bringing them the benefits of this promising new science in exchange for their rejection of nuclear weapons.



Eisenhower archives

Dwight D. Eisenhower portrait by J. Anthony Wills



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Finally, Eisenhower wanted to give the American people “certain knowledge” that their hard earned tax dollars had not been spent for destructive purposes alone—that there could be economic and social benefits from this pioneering research.

The President took a keen and active role in the crafting of the concept of “Atoms for Peace” and in the writing of the text itself. After being shown countless drafts of the speech, Eisenhower recalled to a friend, “Every version left listeners with only a new sense of terror, so, I began to search around for a new kind of idea that could bring the world to look at the atomic problem in a broad and intelligent way and still escape the impasse to action created by Russian intransigence in the matter of mutual or neutral inspection of resources. I wanted, additionally,” he wrote, “to give our people and the world some faint idea of the distance already traveled by this new science—but to do it in a way that would not create new alarm.” The atom was non-political, Eisenhower would later say, neither moral nor immoral. Only man’s choice would determine the purpose for which it would be used.

“Eisenhower,” wrote one analyst, “sought to reconcile the ambiguities and contradictions of nuclear politics offering some hope for the future.”

“Atoms for Peace” spawned many developments, including the establishment of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and eventually the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. While “Atoms for Peace,” as well as the institutions it created, has come under fire in recent years, it is hard to imagine what the world would have been like without it. Had some proposal not been set in place at that pivotal period of history one can imagine the chaos that might have been created by the absence of leadership.

As an attempt to manage proliferation, “Atoms for Peace” also had some modest success, though it did not prove to be a panacea. Given the 1953 calculation that some and possibly all countries would be able to acquire nuclear weapons, the actual number of nuclear weapons nations, in that context, has, until now, been manageable. Most dramatically, other than developmental tests, no nuclear weapon has been used since World War II, and the nations of the world have essentially stopped even the testing of nuclear weapons.

Largely through the International Atomic Energy Agency, which was a direct result of the President’s speech, nations around the world have participated in research and development programs—including the use of nuclear energy in important civilian applications. Nuclear electric power accounts for nearly one-fifth of the world’s electricity—reducing global tensions by replacing oil in many applications, and providing much of the world’s electricity that is generated without the release of greenhouse gases or other destructive emissions. Many other nuclear and radiation-



David, Mamie, Barbara, Mary, John, Anne, Dwight and Susan at the White House, December 25, 1957.

related technologies, especially radiopharmaceuticals and medical advances involving radiation, have resulted in large part from research spawned by “Atoms for Peace.” Millions of lives have been saved in the process.

While the “nuclear dilemma” remains a challenge almost as complex as it was fifty years ago, the world now has institutions, like the IAEA, on which it can draw. Reform, augmentation and broadened mandates are urgently required.

But perhaps the outcome that the President wanted most has indeed come to pass. Today the United States and Russia are engaged in intimate cooperation on securing nuclear materials and reducing their nuclear arsenals. Unprecedented access and transparency has occurred since mutual verification was undertaken as part of the INF Treaty in 1987, and while joint work on Cooperative Threat Reduction programs still needs improvement much has been accomplished.

Eisenhower’s “Atoms for Peace” was a vision not a blueprint. But it lent presidential legitimacy not only to the international pursuit of atomic energy, but gave the US standing in the eyes of the developing world. The world on the threshold of nuclear annihilation had a choice it could make. In his December 8th address Eisenhower underscored his deepest hope: “The United States pledges before you—and therefore before the world—its determination to help solve the fearful atomic dilemma—to devote its entire heart and mind to find the way by which the miraculous inventiveness of man shall not be dedicated to his death but consecrated to his life.”

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