

Has nuclear nightmare really ended?

DANIEL McCABE

It wasn't all that long ago that the spectre of nuclear war scared the living daylights out of millions throughout the world.

During the early 1980s, demonstrations against nuclear weapons attracted thousands of protesters in the U.S. and Europe. Newspapers and magazines regularly published chilling accounts of the massive destruction even a limited nuclear war would wreak. Films and TV shows like *Testament* and *The Day After* presented apocalyptic dramatizations of a post-nuclear world.

Thanks to the end of the Cold War, nuclear weapons have lost their grip on the headlines. But they're still very much out there.

"It's not a dead issue, but it is lying low," says political science professor T.V. Paul. "I think the concerns about these weapons are always just beneath the surface—look at the intense reaction when France and China tested their nuclear weapons recently. The protests were amazingly international and quite effective. After the boycott on French wine, we saw the French government back down a bit."

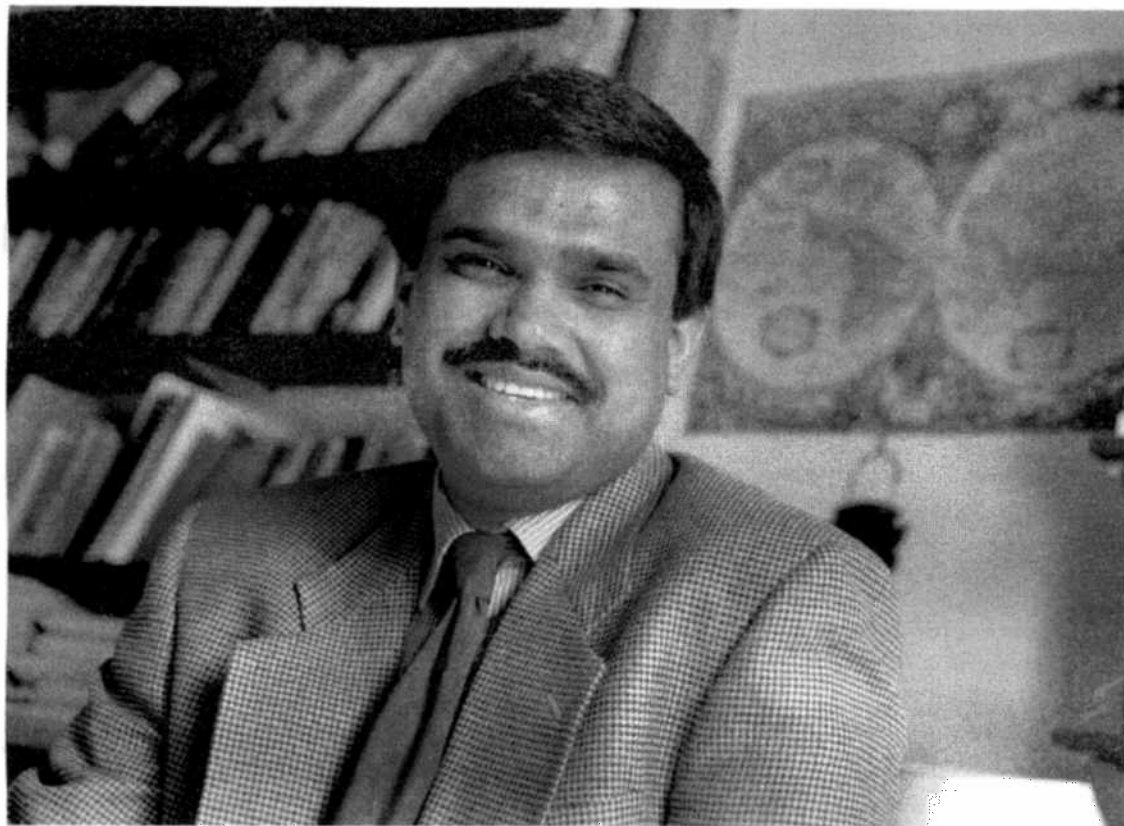
Paul spends much of his time thinking about a topic the rest of us would just as soon forget. The co-editor of a major new book on nuclear weapons—*The Ultimate Weapon Revisited: Nuclear Arms and the Emerging World Order*, Paul has quickly carved out a reputation for himself as a leading scholar on nuclear arms and international security since earning his PhD from UCLA in 1991.

His research has been supported by the McArthur Foundation and the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and his last book, *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers*, earned favourable reviews from such top journals as *Foreign Affairs*, *International Affairs* and *American Political Science Review*.

Paul is the co-director of the Université de Montréal/McGill Research Group in International Security (REGIS). Supported by the Department of National Defence, REGIS regularly attracts high-profile experts in the field to give presentations to graduate students from both universities. Together with sociology professor John Hall, Paul is also organizing a conference on "International Order in the 21st Century" to be held May 16-18 at McGill. The conference will feature presentations from scholars from Harvard, Princeton, UCLA, Columbia and the University of Pennsylvania.

Paul's new book is a response to the 1946 classic, *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order*. That work included essays from some of the top security experts of the day and influenced generations of scholars.

Fifty-one years later, the world is a much-changed place, and Paul



Political science professor T.V. Paul

and his collaborators have their own thoughts on the place of nuclear weapons today.

Paul argues that, from the perspective of political and military leaders, nuclear weapons have lost much of their cachet. Being a nuclear power was a definite badge of technological superiority when the club was limited to five members—the U.S., Russia, China, Britain and France.

But now, Israel, India, North Korea and several other countries have either acquired nuclear arms or have the know-how to assemble them. "When the capacity spread to economically less developed countries, the halo surrounding these weapons also faded," says Paul.

Paul adds that, contrary to the suppositions of many political scientists at the dawn of the nuclear era, nuclear powers haven't had that all that much success in using their weapons to intimidate non-nuclear adversaries into submission.

In fact, countries without nuclear arms have started wars with nations that did have the weapons. Egypt and Syria attacked Israel in 1973 and Argentina invaded Britain's Falkland Islands in 1982, even though they courted nuclear retaliation by doing so.

In both cases, Paul reasons, the attackers sought limited military gains and felt the stakes weren't high enough for their foes to resort to nuclear measures. Even when faced with a real possibility of defeat, nuclear powers have resisted using these weapons in wars against non-nuclear adversaries, notes Paul. The U.S. wouldn't use them against Vietnam and Russia didn't resort to them in Afghanistan.

"Nuclear arms are a unique category of weapons," says Paul. "They are incredibly destructive—that's certainly true—but conventional weapons can be quite destructive in their own way too. What sets nuclear weapons apart is that they evoke an intense emotional reaction that you don't see with other weapons."

Memories of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki are still haunting, says Paul, and they contribute to a powerful "nuclear taboo" that has prevented any country to date from using nuclear weapons again. "Nobody wants to be the first to use these things," says Paul.

Paul. "Compare the way the U.S. fought in Vietnam to the way it conducted itself in the Gulf War. Vietnam was just bombarded—the casualties were very high and there was an incredible reaction to that in the U.S. I think Russia learned the same lesson in Chechnya. The Russian leadership paid a high price for how they fought that war—both at home and internationally."

Paul won't go so far as to say that nuclear weapons are a non-factor in the world today. For instance, North Korea, now largely abandoned by its former allies in China and Russia, uses its nuclear capability "as its only real bargaining chip" in its dealings with South Korea.

But for every North Korea, there are other nations that are deciding not to acquire nuclear weapons or to give up the nuclear weapons they already have. Paul says that Argentina considered the possibility of going nuclear, but decided such a move might escalate tensions in the region as neighbouring countries would want to "keep up with the Joneses" and get their own nuclear weaponry.

In recent years, South Africa and three of the successor states of the Soviet Union—Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan—have willingly given up the nuclear weapons they once possessed. "Part of the equation is that nuclear weapons are very, very expensive to maintain," says Paul.

There are even influential voices among America's military and political leadership calling for an end to nuclear weapons altogether, but Paul says their reasoning isn't necessarily altruistic.

"If everyone gave up their nuclear weapons, the U.S. would stand out as the dominant military power by far. No country comes close to matching the U.S. in terms of conventional weaponry. America's technological superiority would easily make it the supreme power."

A few weeks ago, U.S. president Bill Clinton and Russian president Boris Yeltsin met to discuss the possibility of new talks aimed at cutting back the numbers of nuclear weapons maintained by the two countries. They also spoke about NATO's controversial expansion into Eastern Europe. Former East Bloc countries such as Poland and the Czech Republic are set to join the U.S.-led military alliance.

Most press reports say the talks went well, but Paul sees storm clouds looming.

"I watched the coverage and Yeltsin didn't look too happy," observes Paul. "Right now Russia needs the West's help, so [Yeltsin] is being accommodating. But Russia is very insecure. Once the NATO expansion actually takes place, it will hit them hard. They'll be right next door to a military alliance and a potential adversary. When that happens, I can't see the Russian parliament supporting any kind of arms deal. Russia's nuclear weapons are her last card to play as a superpower."

Paul says the NATO expansion is proceeding too far, too fast and that the U.S. is being clumsy in its handling of its former Cold War enemy.

"The Americans are acting as if they've won the Cold War—which is true—but they aren't paying attention to history. If a defeated power isn't integrated properly into the new global system, it can come back again—as Germany did after World War I. I would argue that the peaceful integration of Japan and Germany after World War II ranks as one of the U.S.'s greatest accomplishments."

Paul says the U.S. has to be more sensitive to Russia.

"Russia hasn't benefited as quickly as it thought it would from the end of the Cold War and the adoption of capitalism. This is a dangerous juncture in its development. It's a time when demagogues can come to power.

"I think the U.S. ought to slow down the NATO process. Perhaps NATO could change its mandate—it could promote stability among countries within the alliance instead of being designed as a defensive military force right on Russia's doorstep. Maybe NATO could involve Russia more actively in discussions about Europe's defence mechanisms."

After all, says Paul, the nuclear weapons that once fueled countless nightmares are still among us. "All we need is one major crisis involving countries with nuclear weapons and we'll see all those old concerns resurface in a hurry."

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As a result, nuclear weapons have lost much of their ability to deter non-nuclear countries—you can't scare countries with a weapon they don't think you'll ever use. In his new book, Paul says that, judging from the results of the Gulf War, a new class of weapons have taken over as the arms of choice—the precision-guided munitions and satellite technologies that the U.S. deployed so effectively.

"We live in an era of instant global communication and populations won't tolerate high civilian casualties anymore," says