VIEWS AND REVIEWS

NO HOLDS BARRED

Margaret McCartney: Nuclear weapons do harm, even if never used

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By Loch Long, a couple of hours' cycle ride from Glasgow, the wind was biting, the sun was shining, and the nuclear weapons were just across the water. I went to my first protest at Faslane when I was a medical student in the late 1980s. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was a visible protest group then, rather than a symbol seen on T shirts sold to fashionable people with no allegiance to the cause.

I was a student member of the Medical Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons—now known as MedAct—which was affiliated to International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW). Truth be told, since then I've often forgotten about my membership, but the standing order is still running.

We learn about Nazis at school and about the cruelty and immorality ordinary men and women are capable of. We learn about the horror of the world wars and the people who sacrificed their own lives to benefit generations to come. We learn about astounding bravery and selflessness and the best of the human spirit. The men and women on parade on anniversaries are fewer and fewer each year.

War seems so far away from us. But it isn't. It never has been. The past year in politics has been a series of extraordinary events. As I write, Donald Trump has been inadequate in his response to the neo-Nazis who led violent protests in Charlottesville, Virginia. A woman in a counter protest has been murdered in an act of terrorism. Nothing has gone away, including nuclear weapons.

Trump is currently in the midst of a Twitter row with North Korea and China. I typed that and then had to read it again in disbelief. Yes, really. Nuclear weapons, which those countries all possess, are a disaster not just because of their indiscriminate, mass killing but because of the long term health and environmental cost to humans and the planet.

Is the flexing of nuclear muscles really the best use of precious resources?

The purpose of IPPNW—founded by physicians from the former Soviet Union and the US—was to present the medical case for preventing nuclear war. Even if the weapons are never used, they do harm. We skimp and save by telling pensioners that there's only enough money to replace one of their knees or to take out one of their cataracts, just as we commit to spending £31bn on renewing Trident.¹

Is the flexing of nuclear muscles really the best use of precious resources? The risk of cyberhackers or accidental launch is ever present: and the mutually assured destruction that we thought was unthinkable is nothing to someone having a tantrum in the White House.

It's tempting to think that this is all so distant that it's not going to happen. If so, I'd suggest cycling down Loch Long. You can watch the patrols around the beautiful loch—nuclear weapons tucked under the hills and sparkling in the water—and wonder why the UK didn't turn up to a UN vote in July to approve banning them.²

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Follow Margaret on Twitter, @mgtmccartney

1 Fullfact. How much does Trident cost? 14 July 2016. <https://fullfact.org/economy/trident-nuclear-cost/>.

2 Sample I. Treaty banning nuclear weapons approved at UN. *Guardian* 2017 July 7. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/07/treaty-banning-nuclear-weapons-approved-un>.

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