Strengthening Non-Proliferation: Game-Changing Ideas

*Introduction to a Presentation by Ward Wilson*

By

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Ecclesiastes 1:9 says, “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.” There is some wisdom in that. It is certainly true that while history does not always repeat itself, at least it occasionally rhymes.

But I think we take this bit of wisdom a little bit too much to heart in the nuclear weapons field. It sometimes seems as if that the same statements are being repeated again and again when it comes to nuclear weapons. All who follow such statements regularly in the First Committee, the Disarmament Commission, and the Conference on Disarmament—as well as in national policy statements—know exactly what I mean. And it is unfortunately also true that even the ideas themselves don’t seem to evolve very much. The problem is not just repetition, but an apparent lack of learning and adaptation.

When it comes to nuclear weapons, perhaps a better source than even the Bible might be Abraham Lincoln, a man who presided over a time of far-reaching changes in the United States. Here is what he said in an annual message to Congress during the American Civil War, “The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise—with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthral ourselves, and then we shall save our country.”

I believe—and have said before—that we require new thinking about nuclear weapons. I agree with President Lincoln that as the case of nuclear weapons is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We seem to have fallen into the thrall of ideas that hold us frozen in place. Only if we break free of those bonds can we take the actions that are needed.

One of the reasons I like Ward Wilson’s ideas is that they generally are unexpected and new. I don’t always agree with what he says, but certainly gets his audiences thinking. It is in exploring new ideas that I believe we will eventually find the path out of the nuclear dead-end where we currently find ourselves.

In his talk, Ward will examine how to strengthen nuclear non-proliferation. It is a subject that has been talked almost to death. But I think you will be surprised by Ward’s approach. His thinking about political icons is fresh—he has found a way to combine judiciously his iconoclasm on nuclear weapons with a healthy respect for the lessons of history. To tell you the truth, I’d never considered that dreadnoughts and chariots were relevant to the nuclear weapons discussion. But Ward makes an interesting case that we should see them in a new light.

Most of us don’t like letting go of our old beliefs. I know I don’t. Once I’ve figured out the way the world is, I don’t want to have to go back and rethink a problem. But in order to deal with the Gordian Knot of nuclear weapons, we will have to all be a little uncomfortable. We will all have to give up some cherished ideas. Only when we see the world from a new perspective will we be able to begin to make real progress on this issue.

Perhaps one of the most viral ideas we have inherited has been the notion that nuclear non-proliferation can and should be pursued as an end in itself. Ward, however, is leading us to a different conclusion about this subject. He is exploring whether some of the deepest roots of proliferation—some of its most compelling motivations and causes—relate to the very existence
of nuclear weapons themselves, and to the ideas we have constructed to rationalize their possession and threats of use.

This is a profound insight indeed, for it suggests that the path to non-proliferation may well be through the great gate of disarmament. This is already the essence of the “grand bargain” at the heart of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime—disarmament must never be seen as just a distant goal. It is instead a process accompanying progress on other fronts, including the elimination and non-proliferation of all WMD, the reduction in conventional arms, and the implementation of the fundamental norms of the Charter and international humanitarian law concerning the use of force, and the obligation to resolve disputes peacefully.

So I would now like to extend Ward a warm welcome to the United Nations. Tell us of your “game-changing ideas”. Help us all to find our way to a world free at last from nuclear threats. An eager global audience awaits.