

Editor's note: this transcript is a result of the original text Tim Wright wrote which he read from during his presentation extended with observations he made during the course of his exposition. I am grateful to Tim Wright for sharing his text with me. The original webcast recording can be found inside: <http://totalwebcasting.com/view/?id=hcf>. Left-mouse click the local file recording here at – <[DPNE-TimWright030115.mp3](#)> – to download the mp3 file to your machine. This presentation of Tim Wright was recorded on 1 March 2015 at [The Dynamics of Possible Nuclear Extinction Symposium](#), presented by [The Helen Caldicott Fondation](#), at [The New York Academy of Medicine](#).



The [Helen Caldicott Foundation](#) Presents

Tim Wright:

A New Movement to Ban Nuclear Weapons

[Symposium: The Dynamics of Possible Nuclear Extinction](#)

The New York Academy of Medicine, 28 February - 1 March 2015

Introduction by Ray Acheson

Our next speaker is Tim Wright. Tim works for the [International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons](#) or ICAN. He is usually based in Australia but he's here in New York to do advocacy and other work ahead of the [NPT Review Conference this May](#). He's one of ICAN's most effective campaigners. He strikes fear into the hearts of diplomats from many countries. ICAN is a growing, dynamic campaign that currently has [424 partner organizations in 95 countries](#). It's global. It's not just North America and Western Europe. It is all over the world and it's growing every day. It's revitalized international work on nuclear weapons by calling for a treaty to ban nuclear weapons and Tim's going to talk about that now.

Thanks Ray. Do I look fearsome? Like most of you here today I come from a country that has experienced and continues to endure the devastating consequences of nuclear weapons. The cancer deaths, birth defects, cultures destroyed, food sources poisoned, Indigenous communities forever displaced from their sacred lands.

I learned of all this in the late 1990s when I read Helen Caldicott's autobiography, [A Desperate Passion](#). I learned of the misery that the British and Australian governments had knowingly and with little care or concern unleashed on our people, particularly our Indigenous People whom they saw as expendable, powerless, less than human.

The [atmospheric nuclear tests in Australia](#), and the hundreds of plutonium experiments that accompanied them, [dispersed radiation across much of our vast continent](#). No one has ever apologized for this and the suffering continues. This is my motivation for speaking out against nuclear weapons.

[Sue Coleman-Haseldine](#), a nuclear test survivor of the [Kokatha Mula Aboriginal nation](#), a woman of extraordinary strength and courage, left Australia for the first time last year to speak at the [Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons](#). To an audience of over a thousand people, including diplomats representing 156 nations, [she said](#):

If you love your own children and care for the children of the world, you will find the courage to stand up and say ‘enough’—always keeping in mind that the future forever belongs to the next generation.

This, too, is Helen’s message and I thank her for bringing us together this weekend. For awakening *me* to the possibility of nuclear extinction, and for everything that she has done, over so many years, to end the “nuclear madness.” [Applause] I only wish that I were nearly as energetic and youthful as she is.

In 2007, with Helen’s help, we launched the [International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons](#)—ICAN—in an effort to reignite the languishing global antinuclear movement, to get better organized, and to finish the work of decades past. It was an ambitious undertaking, no doubt, but we felt confident then, and feel confident now, that it is a battle that we will ultimately win. Indeed, in many ways, we are *already* winning.

That might seem a naïve claim in light of all we have heard this weekend about the perilous state of the planet and the many barriers to nuclear disarmament, not least of all the bolstering of existing arsenals. But there are glimmers of hope and I do believe that we *will* abolish nuclear weapons before they abolish us. Helen asked me to end on an upbeat note so that I will do.

Over the past few years, we have seen the start of a fundamental shift in the way that governments talk about nuclear weapons—not the governments of nuclear-armed nations or their nuclear-weapon-loving allies, who remain firmly stuck in cold war thinking, but the rest: the other hundred or more members of the family of nations, constituting the overwhelming majority.

Possessing the bomb, it is worth remembering, is not normal. Almost every nation in the world has made a legal undertaking never to acquire nuclear weapons. But for many years, these nations have taken a back seat in disarmament debates, waiting patiently, idly, hoping that the promise of Prague, and every other promise, would be realized. But no longer. The so-called humanitarian initiative on nuclear weapons has emerged because of mounting frustration at the failure of nuclear-armed nations to fulfill their decades-old disarmament commitments under [the NPT](#). It has emerged out of recognition that simply bemoaning their inaction, no matter how loudly, is not an effective strategy for achieving abolition. Indeed, *why would we* expect the nuclear-armed states to lead us to a nuclear-weapon-free world? Why would they willingly, happily give up weapons that they hold so dear, that they perceive as the ultimate guarantor of their security, that they believe give them prestige and status in international affairs?

Meeting as we are at the [Academy of Medicine](#), it is perhaps appropriate to draw an analogy with the banning of smoking in public places, and I do apologize to the smokers here because it's not a very nice comparison. We would never expect the smoking community to initiate and lead efforts to impose such a ban. In fact, we would expect them stridently to resist it. The non-smoking community (the majority)—who wish to live and work in a healthy environment—must be the driving force. That should be obvious. Similarly, it is the non-nuclear-weapon states on whom we must depend to drive a process to ban nuclear weapons, to stigmatize them, to make them socially and politically unacceptable, to make it harder for nations to get away with possessing and upgrading them, and to help the nuclear-weapon states overcome this awful, debilitating addiction.

This flips the traditional arms-control approach on its head. The humanitarian initiative is about empowering and mobilizing the rest of the world to say “enough.” It is about shifting the debate from “acceptable,” “safe” numbers of nuclear warheads to their fundamental inhumanity and incompatibility with basic standards of civilized behaviour. It is about taking away from the nuclear-armed states the power to dictate the terms of the debate and to set the agenda—and refusing to perpetuate their exceptionalism.

I want to show you now some footage from the first two conferences as part of this initiative which have involved governments, ICAN, the International Red Cross movement, and various UN agencies. They took place in [Norway in March 2013](#) and [Mexico in February 2014](#) with 128 and 146 nations participating respectively. This is clip from our message to the [third conference held in Vienna last year](#).



Move slider to 03:54 to see where the excerpt started that was presented at the Symposium.

As [Ray mentioned in this morning's session](#), the Austrian government concluded the Vienna conference with an extraordinary and very exciting pledge to work with all relevant stakeholders, including civil society, to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons. [See [Pledge presented at the Dec 2014 Vienna Conference by Austrian Deputy Foreign Minister Michael Linhart](#)] ICAN is now calling for negotiations on a treaty banning nuclear weapons to begin this year.

This is not a radical proposal: indiscriminate, inhumane weapons do get banned. Indeed, nuclear weapons are the only “weapons of mass destruction” not yet subject to a comprehensive, global prohibition. We must rectify this legal anomaly. [See [Weapons Already Banned: Biological Weapons, Chemical Weapons, Land Mines, & Cluster Munitions](#)]

In the 1990s, a small group of humanitarian-minded nations, with the active encouragement of civil society, decided to initiate a diplomatic process to outlaw anti-personnel mines. They began by assembling the irrefutable evidence of the catastrophic impact that these pernicious devices have on people. That, they knew, would provide a solid foundation for successful negotiations. And this is what we now see in the nuclear sphere—the groundwork carefully being laid.

Of course, many of the major users and producers of landmines stubbornly refused to participate in negotiations for the [Mine Ban Treaty](#). They claimed that such weapons were fundamental to their security. U.S. allies such as Australia worked actively to undermine the process, proposing gaping loopholes and voicing scepticism at every opportunity about the utility, the worth of an endeavour that did not include “the big players.” But the treaty has been successful beyond expectations. Few nations today use or stockpile landmines, whereas their use in the past had been widespread and common. Since the treaty entered into force in 1999, the number of landmine-related deaths and injuries has dropped by over 60 per cent and that is meaningful.

We are under no illusion that a treaty banning nuclear weapons will be a panacea. It will not magically transport us to a nuclear-weapon-free world. But it *will* fundamentally change the game. It is the alternative to waiting in vain for U.S. and Russian leadership. It is a way to translate into law the tenet [propounded by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon](#) that “there are no right hands for wrong weapons.”

From Tim's text: It would stigmatize nuclear weapons in the same way that chemical and biological weapons have been stigmatized through conventions. [Angela Kane](#), who serves as the Secretary-General's high representative for disarmament affairs, asked rhetorically in an address in New Zealand in April of 2014: “How many States today boast that they are ‘biological-weapon states’ or ‘chemical-weapon states’? Who is arguing now that bubonic plague or polio are legitimate to use as weapons under any circumstance, whether in an attack or in retaliation? Who speaks of a bio-weapon umbrella?” [See [The New Zealand Lectures on Disarmament](#), UNODA Occasional Papers, [No. 26](#), June 2014, p. 19. See also: [A Beacon of Hope – A Middle Powers Initiative Briefing Paper](#),” Middle Powers Initiative, Building Bridges between governments to support the elimination of nuclear weapons, September 2014, [www.middlepowers.org](#)]

Through its normative force, a nuclear weapon ban treaty would profoundly affect the behaviour even of states that refuse to join. The public, the media, parliamentarians and mayors would have a powerful new tool with which to challenge the possession of nuclear weapons by their governments. The ban would compel allies of nuclear-armed states to end the practice of hosting nuclear weapons on their soil, and to reject the pretence of protection from a “nuclear umbrella.” It would oblige all states to divest from companies that manufacture nuclear arms.

The [Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) falsely divides the world into nuclear-weapon states and

non-nuclear-weapon states. In reality, there is a significant group in the middle: 30 or so nations that claim the protection of U.S. nuclear weapons. They reinforce the idea of nuclear weapons as legitimate, useful, and necessary instruments. The humanitarian initiative has shone a spotlight on these [enabler states](#), known less affectionately as “[weasel states](#),” and they are scampering. They are not used to this level of scrutiny. They have always claimed to be committed to disarmament. But are clearly part of the problem—and that we can change.

Many of these governments, it turns out, are vulnerable to public pressure. Take, for example, Japan, which, despite having experienced the horrors of nuclear war, maintains a policy of reliance on U.S. nuclear weapons. In 2013 because of this policy, the Japanese government rejected an invitation by South Africa to sign on to [a joint statement](#) declaring that nuclear weapons should never be used again, “under any circumstances.” ICAN protested against that decision. We organized a small, spontaneous demonstration outside the Japanese mission to the U.N. in Geneva. It made prime-time news in Japan, prompting the foreign minister to convene a press conference to defend the decision, which in turn generated more furore. The mayor of Nagasaki, in his annual peace declaration, [condemned Japan’s stance](#), as a betrayal of the expectations of the international community. And so Japan shifted its position.

This is a small example of how we are winning. The joint statement itself was not an especially significant one. It was merely a political declaration, not a legally binding instrument. But the public’s ability to influence the Japanese government’s position so dramatically, against its wishes and those of the United States, was of enormous significance. And we will see more of this in Japan and elsewhere as the process to achieve a treaty banning nuclear weapons progresses.

Listening to the debates here five years ago about whether the U.S. should ratify the New START agreement with Russia, I was stuck by the comment of one senator that pursuing nuclear arms reductions is not America’s decision alone, for America’s allies, too, depend on U.S. nuclear weapons, and have a say, and that they want the arsenal to remain strong and large. The NATO allies and others were essentially being invoked as an excuse for maintaining the status quo. But what if that excuse no longer existed? What if these nations were on our side, as states parties to a future treaty banning nuclear weapons? That, I expect, would have profound flow-on benefits for your work here in the United States to advance disarmament.

The U.S. government, interestingly, [felt compelled to attend](#) the Vienna Conference in December, having boycotted the earlier conferences in Norway and Mexico, which it labelled a “distraction” from America’s many other efforts to achieve nuclear disarmament. Why the apparent change of heart? Does this mean that the U.S. is now supportive of the initiative? Not at all. That was obvious in Vienna. But it is beside the point—because the initiative does not depend on their endorsement. Its success will depend on the collective resolve of nuclear-free nations and effective public mobilization.

In a tone-deaf statement delivered immediately after the searing testimonies of survivors of America’s nuclear atrocities in Japan and the Marshall Islands and its own backyard, the U.S. ambassador declared that your country does not support, and will oppose, moves to ban nuclear

weapons. He came across as callous, almost comically out of touch, a pariah in the room—not the mythical “responsible” nuclear power. That concept the humanitarian initiative has torn apart.

The U.S. attended Vienna for two reasons: it wanted to be seen as doing the right thing in the minds of its own citizens and before the international community, but also it wanted to stop the ban treaty proposal from gaining any further traction. The problem is that the momentum of this initiative is already considerable. The train has left the station and is gaining speed. Some states, of course, will get off along the way and others will jump on board. The journey will be a rocky one. But we are confident that, before long, the train will reach its destination.

I encourage you all to join in the [International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons](#)—to work with us to put in place a global, legal prohibition on the worst weapons ever created. This August marks 70 years since the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. An appropriate milestone, one could not deny, for the start of negotiations on a ban.

Thank you.