In their ringing defense of classical nuclear deterrence ("Less Than Zero," January/February 2011), Josef Joffe and James Davis see nuclear weapons not as a problem but as a solution. We profoundly disagree. Nuclear weapons represent a global threat that is orders of magnitude greater than any other. The danger has increased as these weapons have spread to weak and fragile states, and they could eventually fall into the hands of terrorists.

The Global Zero movement, which we coordinate, calls for the phased and verified elimination of all nuclear weapons worldwide and is spearheaded by more than 300 international leaders, including current and former heads of state, national security officials, and military commanders. It does not discount the real or perceived benefits of nuclear weapons that existed during the Cold War, but it argues that the growing dangers of nuclear proliferation and terrorism have come to greatly outweigh those dissipating benefits. That is why Global Zero calls for eliminating all existing nuclear arsenals and building stronger barriers against the acquisition of nuclear weapons and the materials to build them.

Global Zero does not underestimate the difficulty of reversing proliferation. Our critics, Joffe and Davis included, imply that the movement subscribes to the simplistic "good example" theory of deproliferation, which holds that states will cut their arsenals when inspired by the example of others' doing so. But that characterization of our view is a straw man. We do not suggest that North Korea will abandon its nuclear weapons if it sees reductions by other countries. Rather, we argue that it will take a great-power-led coalition of nuclear and nonnuclear countries, fully committed to the elimination of all nuclear weapons, to marshal the political, economic, and military might to halt proliferation worldwide.

To date, the international community has paid lip service to erecting strong new barriers to nuclear acquisition while mustering only a lukewarm and inconsistent effort to do so. By contrast, a truly unified coalition could overcome that inertia by enforcing the Global Zero program worldwide. It would engineer universal verification and enforcement regimes, yielding hard incentives and punishments, not moral example, to convert the wayward.

Joffe and Davis rely on a misreading of the historical record to make the dubious claim that "hard power combined with a reputation for the will to use it . . . is a more efficient deproliferator than disarmament." Force has a significant role to play as part of a comprehensive strategy, but force alone cannot stop the spread of nuclear weapons. Throughout the nuclear age,
the use or threat of force--nuclear and conventional--has spurred the acquisition of nuclear weapons. For example, even the first test case, the U.S. nuclear bombing of Japan in 1945, accelerated, rather than discouraged, the Soviet Union's lagging nuclear weapons program.

Joffe and Davis also contend that nuclear stockpiles should not be reduced to zero because strategic instability increases as arsenals shrink. "As a state's stocks of nuclear weapons dwindle," they write, "its vulnerability to an enemy's disabling first strike rises," thus inviting sudden preemptive strikes. Only large arsenals provide credible retaliation and stability, they write, so "there is safety--mutual safety--in numbers."

In fact, large arsenals may be highly vulnerable and small arsenals may be highly invulnerable, depending on a host of factors, including the way nuclear forces are deployed, controlled, and stored. Recall, for example, the Reagan administration's "window of vulnerability," a moment, the administration argued, in which the Soviet Union could decimate the U.S. nuclear arsenal with a single first strike. The Reagan-era nuclear arsenal was indeed exposed; the national nuclear command centers and communications networks that existed then would have quickly collapsed under an attack.

U.S. nuclear vulnerability created strong incentives for both sides to go first. Even as U.S. and Soviet arsenals ballooned, topping 70,000 nuclear weapons combined by the mid-1980s, Washington's fears of a disarming Soviet first strike deepened. In response, the administration planned to put as many of its forces as possible on high alert in the event of a crisis and to launch missiles preemptively or at the first sign of a Soviet launch. The Soviets were equally fearful of a U.S. first strike and kept their huge force on ready alert as well. The U.S. and Soviet nuclear postures resulted in several serious false alarms on both sides during the 1970s and 1980s, including at least one that went all the way to the White House in the middle of the night before it was recognized as an error. One night in June of 1980, U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was just about to wake President Jimmy Carter to inform him that thousands of Soviet nuclear weapons were inbound for the United States and to recommend ordering nuclear retaliation, when the alarm was canceled. At the time, the military's early warning commanders suspected a computer glitch was generating erroneous indications of an attack. A malfunctioning computer chip was later found to be the cause.

Strategic stability is determined not by the size of arsenals but rather by the protection from attack afforded them by the resilience of governments' nuclear command-and-control networks. Nuclear planners are able to design small arsenals and supporting networks that can withstand attacks, thereby removing the incentive for haste. As one of us argued in these pages last fall, in "Smaller and Safer" (September/October 2010), which was co-written with a former chief of staff of the Russian Strategic Rocket Forces and others, the United States and Russia could each reduce their total warheads to 500 and take all those weapons off launch-ready alert while still maintaining stable mutual deterrence.

Taking such measures would create far more strategic stability than existed throughout the Cold War. Yet Joffe and Davis assert the opposite, arguing that smaller arsenals would raise the level of "suspicion, fear, and possible preemption." They go so far as to argue that hair-trigger postures "induce caution" and even speculate that World War I would not have occurred if the
great powers' forces had not required cumbersome mobilization. The phased mobilization plans of the major European powers in 1914 likely did contribute to the war's outbreak, but Joffe and Davis' assertion that "high-readiness forces would have kept the 'guns of August' from going off" is a giant speculative leap. If the great-power armies had been poised for immediate combat at the outset of the conflict, historians would more likely be talking about the "guns of July."

At its core, Joffe and Davis' argument rests on their belief that nuclear weapons have kept great-power peace for 65 years, which they base on the fact that "the correlation between nuclear weapons and great-power peace is perfect." But more remarkable is the correlation between 65 years of great-power peace and the steady spread of democracy, deepening economic interdependence, the boom in connective technologies such as the Internet, and the diminishing advantages of territorial conquest. These developments, among others, have so redrawn strategic relationships over the past 65 years that Joffe and Davis' contention that if nuclear weapons disappeared today the world would be thrust back into a pre-1945 state of instability and war is hardly plausible.

Moreover, with their unquestioned acceptance of the causal relationship between nuclear weapons and great-power peace, critics of Global Zero imply that nuclear weapons would have prevented both world wars. In fact, no one can claim to know whether the world wars would have been averted if the great powers had possessed nuclear weapons in the first half of the twentieth century--or if nuclear world war would have occurred instead.

Joffe and Davis themselves cite a reason the world can never revert to its pre-1945 state: the knowledge of how to build nuclear weapons can never be lost. In a Global Zero world, that knowledge would have a deterrent effect, which Joffe and Davis fail to acknowledge. Rather than advantaged, an actor that sought to cheat within a Global Zero regime would find itself in an untenable position. It would face a very determined world with the capability to renuclearize. In practice, of course, long before considering renuclearization, the international community would mass the necessary diplomatic, economic, and conventional military force to stop the proliferator.

Further, Joffe and Davis underestimate existing capabilities for detecting illicit nuclear programs. A would-be cheater would very likely be detected and disarmed long before it could build a nuclear weapon. After all, from the mid-1940s until today, despite their being severe surveillance limitations early on, no country has produced enough nuclear material to build a bomb without first being detected by foreign intelligence. This record includes India and Pakistan, countries that Joffe and Davis incorrectly identify as having evaded close monitoring of their nuclear facilities. (The United States accorded relatively low priority to monitoring them yet still managed to track their production.) The international community has the ability to conduct real-time surveillance and, aided by Global Zero's proposed verification regime, including no-notice intrusive inspections, it would discover nuclear programs in the early stages and prevent breakout attempts from reaching fruition.

The biggest shortcoming of Joffe and Davis' argument is their failure to consider the future other than as an extension of the present. Their argument would not be so dangerous if the world could count on maintaining the status quo. But if it continues on its current course, the world may one
day have not eight nuclear powers, as it does today, but more than 20. Many of these new nuclear powers will have no more intention, or ability, to preserve stability than North Korea does. This is especially true of nonstate actors who may acquire the bomb.

The world is facing a choice not between Global Zero and the status quo, as Joffe and Davis suggest, but between Global Zero and a heavily nuclearized world. Global Zero must be a key element in the response to the threat of proliferation. Surely, it is preferable to Joffe and Davis' "loaded and ready" nuclear forces proliferating worldwide.

BRUCE BLAIR, MATT BROWN, RICHARD BURT

Joffe and Davis Reply

You know your opponents have a weak hand when instead of arguing against facts and logic, they invoke the authority of "300 international leaders"--presidents, premiers, and sages--who agree with them. How could you possibly go against the Great and the Good? Yet names and numbers do not clinch a case. The pope had the College of Cardinals on his side when he made Galileo abjure the blasphemy of a heliocentric universe.

Another telltale sign of a weak argument is to shift ground when stuck--a no-no in any debate. On the one hand, Bruce Blair, Matt Brown, and Richard Burt (hereafter "the Three Bs") advocate the "elimination of all nuclear weapons worldwide." On the other hand, if you don't like Global Zero, they offer an alternative: How about having the United States and Russia reduce "their total warheads to 500," which would still maintain "stable mutual deterrence"?

So zero or nonzero? This is worse than merely shifting ground. In trying to rebut us, the Three Bs have in fact accepted--indeed, blessed--our central principle, namely, that stability rests on mutual deterrence, meaning a world with minimal incentives to preempt. QED. The rest is haggling over how much is enough--but that is for another debate.

Our basic critique of Global Zero is that you cannot get there from here, and you should not want to. The United States and Russia have come down from an insane level of 65,000 warheads to a fraction thereof and will reduce their arsenals even more under the New START treaty. But they will not relinquish weapons that promise existential safety against an existential peril--and provide a very special status to boot. They are even less likely to do so given that there will always be somebody else in the game--today it is Iran and North Korea--who will seek nuclear weapons in order to intimidate and compel, and not just for insurance and deterrence.

Even the march to Global Zero would be destabilizing, since it is a lot easier to take out ten weapons in a first strike than 100 or 1,000. And if, God forbid, we ever reached heaven, that would not make earth a happier place. It would make instead a nervous world where the incentive to break out or cheat would soar.

A weak argument does not get stronger when more weak claims are added to it. Returning to their fallback position of less than zero, the Three Bs assert that "large arsenals may be highly vulnerable and small arsenals may be highly invulnerable." And whom do the Three Bs trundle
out in support? Ronald Reagan and his cue givers in the Committee on the Present Danger in the 1970s. These folks argued that the Soviets were arming to fight and win a nuclear war. It did not matter that the American stockpile was much larger, since, as the Three Bs describe their reasoning, "the Soviet Union could decimate the U.S. nuclear arsenal with a single first strike."

But this claim was just another transparent attempt--like the NSC-68 alarm of 1950 and the post-Sputnik "missile gap"--to discredit political rivals and win elections. It was silly then and has not become more compelling some 30 years later. Consider the irony: here are radical disarmers appropriating the arguments of the coldest of the Cold Warriors for more and more in order to push for less and less--indeed, a zero-nuclear world.

Repeating Reagan does not dispose of the central questions in our debate: How do we get to a world of zero, and how do we keep it that way? If all of us worry about fragile or aggressive states and their nuclear weapons, why disarm the strong and stable ones? How are you going to deter the acquisition or use of nuclear weapons without them? This is where an argument that keeps shifting its terms while invoking the authority of the Great and the Good makes a breathtaking leap of faith. To breach the credibility gap, the Three Bs rely on a refurbished version of collective security.

"An actor that sought to cheat within a Global Zero regime would find itself in an untenable position," they argue, since "it would face a very determined world" that could "mass the necessary diplomatic, economic, and conventional military force to stop the proliferator." Like the "very determined world" that stopped Japan's march into Manchuria and Italy's conquest of Abyssinia in the 1930s? That stopped the 1994 genocide in Rwanda? That rolled back North Korea's and Iran's nuclearization? That voted in unison at the UN Security Council to support a no-fly zone over Libya? That prepared for a humanitarian war against Syria?

This is where the argument slips into the fallacy known as begging the question, or taking its conclusion for granted at the start. If the world is already as it should be and peace and stability reign supreme, then consensus will replace conflict, and the rogues will always lose. Obviously, such a world would render nuclear weapons unnecessary--although, just to be sure, it would have to generate massive conventional might to discipline the wayward.

Can anybody imagine the world we actually inhabit disarming Iran and North Korea? Or Pakistan, a time bomb whose fuse is always smoldering? Can this world guarantee India's security in its rivalry with China? If the world were secure, it would not need collective security; since it is not, it will not enjoy collective security--a chimera in history and theory.

So the Three Bs merely end up restating the problem: in a self-help system, nations calculate interests, risks, and costs before committing to the common good. Hence, there can be no "truly unified coalition," on which the Three Bs rest their case. So let's revive Lenin's axiom that "trust is good, control is better." Today's version reads: "In a world where nuclear weapons cannot be disinvented, reductions are good, but insurance is best."

Now let's argue about how much is enough.
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