

CORRESPONDENCE

Branding and the Disarmament Movement

Nathan Pyles, in "Building Political Will: Branding the Nuclear-Free-World Movement" (15.3, November 2008, pp. 441–58), contributes some welcome, focused thinking to the strategic discourse on achieving a nuclear-weapon-free world. He is right: those of us who are working to rid the world of nuclear weapons need to address our PR challenges head-on. As if further proof were needed, the Obama campaign underlined for us all, once again, the importance of branding.

The solution to the nuclear weapons threat is more a question of political will than of analysis. Therefore, the opinions of everyday U.S. citizens will, in fact, carry the day on this issue. And advocates of a nuclear-weapon-free world must reach U.S. citizens of all age groups, political persuasions, and levels of technical prowess. We will need to draw them in, engage them in the discussion, and help them see how they really are the experts. Because this is essentially a commonsense debate.

As younger generations take over the reins of decision making, the memory of Hiroshima will continue to fade into abstraction. Judging by the 1994–95 *Enola Gay*/Smithsonian controversy, this may be a net good thing. But our communications at the Campaign for a Nuclear Weapons Free World must take into account the fact that nuclear weapons are becoming more and more of an abstract concept in this world. Therefore the urgency of the threat is also abstract. On the other hand, we cannot afford to wait for another nuclear detona-

tion in some hapless city—and the consequent CNN footage—to bring the urgency of the threat to the fore.

Pyles's point is spot-on: our ambitious social undertaking will require straightforward, effective branding and messaging in order for it to succeed. But his branding example, "The Reykjavik Vision," misses the mark.

Naming the initiative after the Reykjavik summit is problematic. Although the 1986 meeting was an inspirational watershed event, it is not a story that we can expect to resonate with younger people. For instance, my son—now a junior in college—was not yet born when Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev had their fateful meeting.

Also, while keeping our eyes (and messaging) on the prize of a nuclear-weapon-free world, we should exercise caution in setting a "date certain" for complete abolition of nuclear weapons. Therefore, Pyles's example of October 21, 2021 for a target date is risky.

President John F. Kennedy's "Man on the Moon" speech was brilliant and a perfect example of effective messaging. That the United States met the challenge by the deadline, long after JFK himself was gone, makes it even more impressive. But the challenges of the space program, though daunting, were in the realm of "national technical means," and Kennedy had the power to drive the national agenda. He could be reasonably confident that his "end of the decade" target date, though bold, was achievable.

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Ushering in a nuclear-weapon-free world, on the other hand, will require work in multiple realms, some technical, but mostly political and diplomatic. It is an undertaking that requires political will, cooperation, and some trust among sovereign nations. We've got nine nuclear weapon states (and many more aspirants) to contend with, and there are competing agendas within each of these states. Absent a change of momentum (which the Campaign is currently striving to bring about), setting a target date such as 2021 may be premature and/or overly optimistic. (I'm reminded of something Senator Sam Nunn said in a June 2007 speech to the Council on Foreign Relations: "It is true that today in our troubled world we can't see the top of the mountain.")

Pyles points out that Martin Luther King Jr. forged ahead despite advice from his own supporters to wait for "a more convenient season." And it is true that we owe it to future generations to forge ahead now. But we should set a target date when we have good reason to believe it can be met.

While framing the issue in terms of the stated goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world, the Campaign is advocating progress on the specific, multilateral, and irreversible steps that will get us there as fast as possible. The step-by-step approach toward a nuclear-weapon-free world can provide the needed change in momentum, and with skill, can be crafted into a good elevator statement.

But these are merely quibbles with Pyles's Reykjavik Vision branding example. We will do well to heed his underlying point: "An effective message is critical for successful management and goal achievement." To capture the public imagination and get our decision makers moving, we

need to tame our wonkish habits. We must tailor, package, and communicate our message so that it appeals to the everyday citizens who hold the key to success.

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Nathan Pyles's article, "Building Political Will: Branding the Nuclear-Free-World Movement," was full of some very trenchant thinking. And that was the problem with it.

On first inspection, it isn't so far-fetched for the rules of traditional business branding to be applied to politics; in fact, it's fairly common, as recently evidenced by our presidential campaign. Voters were told to ponder vague, distant ideals that were worded to feel very tangible and immediate, such as "lower taxes" and "change." It could be argued that this "branding" drove much of the behavior captured as votes on November 4, 2008.

But it had very little to do with thinking, per se. Rather, the branding worked because of three primary factors:

1. There was a target market (i.e., voters).
2. The issues were configured to be very personal and/or local (i.e., "your involvement matters").
3. There was an objective trigger for taking action (i.e., election day).

What people actually "thought" was rather incidental to the outcome, if not sometimes quite hard to reconcile with how they voted. This is why so much of commercial branding fails, and why the marketing industry is in a state of utter crisis these days: the connection between

what people are supposed to think, and what they should do with it, is imprecise at best, and at worst, simply chaos. Consumers are distracted, disengaged, and distrustful of any statements, declarations, or “vision.” Branding actually “brands” nothing but passing awareness, if that.

So when Pyles cites President John F. Kennedy’s “Man on the Moon” as effective branding, he’s really referencing the three attributes I mentioned earlier: a target audience, provided with immediately meaningful and reachable tasks, and incentivized to take repeat action on those points. While many of the NASA engineers responsible for delivering Neil Armstrong to Tranquility Base may have shared the goal, I’d bet a good number of them were driven by fantasies about *Star Trek*. Perhaps most were compelled to action by the sheer fact of their obligations of employment.

I’d also bet that most people think that a world safe from the threat of nuclear Armageddon would be a good thing. So is health, happiness, and the ready availability of internet access. These goals get no more real or attainable with different words or checklists. We can think good thoughts about them until we’re blue in the face (or glowing?).

The lessons of politics and history tell us that successful movements aren’t branded as the marketing experts might suggest; rather, the behavioral factors of audience, relevance, and immediate (and repeatable) action are what drive change. So, less top-down global movement, and more bottom-up local endeavor. Not so much thinking about a safer world, and more acting to make homes, neighbor-

hoods, towns, cities, states, and countries safe. Tell people what to do, not what to think.

The global terror movement is probably a better model to emulate. It provides a broad goal, no less abstract than a nuclear-free planet, which inspires individuals and small groups to take actions which they may or may not ever “see” add up to a macro change. This “brand is behavior” approach tends to be less goal-directed and more ongoing, translating an objective into something that is acted upon and otherwise lived every day. Again, less thinking, and more doing.

A nuclear-free world could be a lifestyle that people live, and not a static destination toward which they endlessly—and thus unsuccessfully—strive. Pyles asks important questions about effecting change, but he accepts a traditional approach to branding that is proving inadequate for the very commercial concerns that rely on it.

Jonathan Salem Baskin, Author

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Nathan Pyles responds

I appreciate the thoughtful comments of both Martin Fleck and Jonathan Salem Baskin to my essay, “Building Political Will: Branding the Nuclear-Free-World Movement.”

As Fleck points out in his letter, implementing a new alternative nuclear weapons policy is now “more a question of political will than analysis.” Therefore, it’s time for the policy debate to expand

beyond the walls of conference centers and beyond journal bindings and to begin addressing the broader audience—the constituents who can directly influence their representatives' policy votes. Improved messaging will assist in clearing nuclear policy makers' often self-imposed hurdle of "nuclear complexity." All involved benefit if proposed new nuclear weapons policies are identified by more unique and distinctive titles (brands), with straightforward and succinct position statements.

I am not alone in the opinion that there needs to be more focused messaging on nuclear policy. Since early 2008, there has been much progress in this area. The Campaign for a Nuclear Weapons Free World, where Fleck is coordinator, has built a coalition of more than eighty-one different advocacy organizations. The voices of eighty-one groups working together will have an exponentially greater national impact than the discordant discourse of these groups acting individually. The more focused both the Campaign's message and its specific initiatives become, the greater the influence all involved will have.

By the time of this letter's publication, a new, well-branded, global nuclear-free initiative will also have been launched. This new group will bring a higher level of communication skills and tools to the nuclear weapons policy issue than ever seen before. All these new efforts are welcomed, and required, if we are to bring about a new nuclear weapons policy sooner rather than later.

I agree with Baskin that there is much to be said for advocacy initiatives that start at the ground level. Among nuclear weapons advocacy groups, there have been many local success stories—especially from groups working on issues of environmental safety in neighboring nuclear weap-

ons production facilities. Tri-Valley CAREs and Nuclear Watch New Mexico are examples of local advocacy groups whose policy influence has extended to the national level.

However, when it comes to influencing the most significant global and national nuclear policy legislation, nuclear policy advocacy groups have been less successful to date. The proof is in the lack of results in areas where there is widespread agreement, yet little to no progress—such as U.S. Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Looking forward, the new, more disciplined advocacy efforts described above might work cooperatively on near-term initiatives where their platforms overlap. The low-hanging fruit is at the intersection of consensus—see, for example, the table, "Major Advocacy Groups and Their Positions," in my article in the November 2008 *Nonproliferation Review*, p. 445. By developing methods to combine efforts at the tactical level, especially when legislative action is required, each organization could maintain its unique identity and larger purpose—yet amplify its impact on specific initiatives through cooperation, shared resources, and the power behind larger numbers.

With the new Obama administration and a new Senate taking office in January 2009, advocacy organizations could choose to work together on a focused initiative for ratification of the long-languishing CTBT. The ratification of this treaty clearly meets the criteria of having widespread support among advocacy groups, global and national leaders, as well as with the general public.¹

This cooperative effort would also be an opportunity to pull the nuclear weapons

policy issue out of the partisan box in which it is has wrongly been placed. Nuclear policy advocacy from the political center must find the motives and the language with the broadest appeal. Fortunately, Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Sam Nunn, and William Perry have led the way in reframing this issue. They have helped redefine a carefully constructed nuclear-weapons-free-world policy as the most rational option for improved global security.²

The formerly dominant morality-based arguments need to take a backseat to the practical. Our elected representatives and our military leaders correctly understand that it is their duty to take measures that improve, not diminish, both national and individual security. This is a primary function of national governments around the globe. Passage and entry into force of the CTBT is critical to the security goal of eliminating proliferation of proven nuclear capabilities.

With a series of successive initiatives—messed for and driven by greater citizen participation—momentum could be built toward adoption of a nuclear-weapons-free-world policy. A world without nuclear weapons is the

safest policy for our circumstances, the safest for our time—a time when our greatest danger is continued nuclear proliferation and its attendant heightened risks of nuclear war, nuclear terrorism, and nuclear accident.

Nathan Pyles

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NOTES

1. "Both Americans and Russians overwhelmingly support the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Eighty percent of Americans and 70 percent of Russians said their country 'should participate in the treaty that would prohibit nuclear test explosions worldwide.' Only 18 percent of Americans and 10 percent of Russians opposed the treaty." See Steven Kull, John Steinbruner, Nancy Gallagher, Clay Ramsey, and Evan Lewis, "American and Russians on Nuclear Weapons and the Future of Disarmament: A Joint Study of WorldPublicOpinion.org and the Advanced Methods of Cooperative Security Program, Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland," Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, November 9, 2007, p. 9.
2. George P. Shultz, William J. Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, and Sam Nunn, "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007, p. A15.

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