

**2005 Carnegie International Non-Proliferation Conference**  
**Nuclear History Panel – Monday, November 7, 2005**

**Carla Anne Robbins** from the *Wall Street Journal* moderates a panel with historians of the nuclear age:

**Robert Norris**, Natural Resources Defense Council

**Richard Rhodes**, Author of *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*

**Jonathan Schell**, Yale University, Author of *The Fate of the Earth*

**Carla Anne Robbins** opened by asking the three panelists to each describe a defining moment in nuclear history. Robbins said the anecdotes would start their conversation about the possibility of limiting nuclear proliferation today.

**Robert Norris** described an event on December 7, 1962, when President Kennedy toured the underground facilities of the Strategic Air Command in Omaha. Norris explained that although a general on-site spoke of the need for 10,000 missiles, only 1,000 were eventually approved. The importance lies in the restraint shown by both the Administration and the military, especially in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Norris said the high point of military enthusiasm for nuclear weapons in the late 1950s and early 1960s gave way to a decline in missiles requested by the 1970s, largely because of that military restraint. Another factor of the decline was a uniquely American military-civilian divide over enthusiasm for nuclear weapons. Norris pointed out that this moment shows how the arms race could have been much worse than it actually was.

**Richard Rhodes** described a series of potentially cataclysmic events in the early 1980's. In 1981, Yuri Andropov, then head of the KGB, had charged his agency to be on the lookout for any potential signs of a US first-strike. In 1983, Rhodes continued, then-CIA Director William Casey began psychological operations designed to upset and threaten the Soviets to bring them to the arms control table, including flying bombers over the North Pole toward the USSR and directly toward their radars. Meanwhile, the vulnerabilities of the Soviet early response system were evident after the downing of civilian Korean Airlines flight 007.

In this context, Rhodes explained, NATO carried out a simulated nuclear release exercise codenamed Able Archer. Not surprisingly this worried KGB officers and the USSR loaded tactical nuclear weapons onto long-range aircraft in response. The positive outcome of this moment was that tragedy was averted, despite being the closest to nuclear war since the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the aftermath, Rhodes noted, President Reagan asked Secretary Shultz to prepare a statement that addressed banishing these weapons from the face of the earth.

When Robbins asked if there was a moment during Able Archer when a Soviet preemptive strike was possible, Rhodes said we don't know how close we actually came

and the U.S. could not fathom that anyone would think we would commit a “Pearl Harbor” on the Soviet Union. Robbins concluded that deterrence seemed not to be such a rational theory at the time.

**Jonathan Schell** used a paradoxical moment as his example, in that it was considered a wonderful event: the end of the Cold War. In the nuclear realm, Schell explained, the fact that nothing happened was what is so definitive about that moment. He said the miracle of the end of the Cold War called for the deliberate miracle of doing something about nuclear weapons.

Schell said the relationship of nuclear arsenals to political objectives shows how no political justification existed for such large arsenals. He described two traditions that gained traction during the Cold War: one of non-use and one of possession. States no longer needed an emergency to have nuclear weapons – rather, we could just keep them for a “rainy day.” The rest of the world noticed, Schell explained, as India spoke of this paradigm before South Asia went nuclear.

Robbins asked about the U.S. objectives when proposing to get rid of nuclear weapons at the 1986 summit in Iceland. While Rhodes argued that Reagan saw it as a way to build down to zero, Schell proposed that it was a way to eliminate only the destabilizing ballistic missiles. Both agreed that U.S. insistence on the SDI (Star Wars) program killed that initiative.

Norris charged that stockpile history indicates the military is willing to get rid of weapons when confronted with the opportunity to do so. Schell countered that the fundamental framework of deterrence of the Cold War has not gone away, despite the change in political reasons for Russian and American arsenals. Rhodes added that a change occurred in that arsenals were delegitimized, and that a lack of legitimacy has an effect on policy.

Robbins then asked why countries that took the pledge of the NPT (South Africa, Sweden, Brazil and Argentina) gave up their weapons. Rhodes described how Sweden viewed their weapons as dangerous because the USSR could destroy their country with two bombs. Schell explained that Brazil and Argentina gave them up under pressure in the context of the Cold War.

Robbins then asked why India and Pakistan developed nuclear weapons if our arsenals were no threat to their countries, accusing them of using what we do as an excuse. Schell explained that the U.S. is at the center of a network of a global threat: we could possibly threaten China, who might threaten India, who in turn threatens Pakistan.

Citing the example of South Korean officials claiming to be unaware of their scientists enriching uranium, Robbins asked how much nuclear development might come from the scientists or military. Schell argued that a decision must always be made at some point, especially considering the high costs involved.

Robbins asked about the effectiveness of public embarrassment in limiting proliferation. Rhodes explained that every nuclear-capable country considers security concerns, prestige, and domestic political advantage before deciding whether or not to become a nuclear power.

Robbins concluded by asking the three panelists to predict the number of nuclear states in ten years. Schell felt that it's not as scary as we thought because not as many states became nuclear as we had expected – we will be about where we are today, but with fewer weapons. Rhodes claimed there are too many variables to assess the near future, but predicted that monitoring capabilities will increase enough by 2045 that we can begin to imagine a world with no nuclear weapons. Norris ended the panel by agreeing with the positive outlook, but could not predict whether or not a non-nuclear world will come before or after the third use of nuclear weapons.

*Rapporteur Summary by Christopher Corkey*