GUEST COLUMN

Jan. 22, 2021 will one day be looked back as a turning point in history. On that day, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons enters into force. To mark the day, the balls at the Loretto Motherhouse in Nerinx will ring in celebration. They will join faith communities and houses of worship across the country.

In other places, banners reading “Nuclear Weapons Are Illegal” will be hung at nuclear weapons production sites and military bases; protests will take place at colleges and universities that participate in weapons programs; citizens will call on corporations and financial institutions to divest themselves of support for nuclear weapons production.

The Treaty, approved in 2017 by 122 countries at the United Nations, is not a magic wand. It won’t make nuclear weapons go away. But it will place them in the same legal category as chemical weapons, biological weapons, land mines, and poison gas, all of which have been outlawed by the international community.

Today, nine nations possess more than 13,000 nuclear weapons—an all out nuclear exchange between the U.S. and Russia would kill hundreds of millions of people and destroy every major city in both countries in one afternoon. But it doesn’t take that to ruin us—even a “small” exchange between India and Pakistan would trigger “nuclear winter”—a cloud of debris circling the planet that would make growing crops impossible for at least a decade and contaminate virtually every water source we rely on. Remote rural areas would not be spared.

That’s the existential threat of nuclear weapons—they threaten our very survival.

Those nine nuclear nations say the Treaty doesn’t apply to them because they haven’t signed it. They are right—it has no legal force in the United States. But it does have moral force. And it becomes the work of all of us who want our children and grandchildren to grow and thrive without the fear of nuclear destruction to make the promise of the Treaty real.

Stalwart conservatives (Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, Adlai Stevenson) have called for the abolishment of nuclear weapons, declaring that they make no sense, produce no economic benefits, secure hundreds of generals and diplomatic leaders around the world have joined in their call. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is an important step in turning those calls into action.

In the last 50 years, every U.S. President has declared nuclear weapons the single greatest security threat we face. Republican presidents—Reagan and Bush—have done more to reduce nuclear stockpiles than Democrats. But all of them realize the current situation is irrational and unsustainable. Today, according to a panel of experts at the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, the danger is greater than ever before.

The risk of an accidental launch, a computer hack, a chain of command failure, a mistaken reading on a radar computer hack, a chain of command failure, a mistaken reading on a radar—in staying on the right side of peace, we can all do something, instead, to getting on the right side of history.

Agreement is a beacon—it is not a magic wand. It won’t make health care, address the opioid epidemic, extend the end of life as we know it on our terms. It will require us to be part of the international community.

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We must do something to make the future safe for our children.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

Week 2 of the 2021 Legislative Session

Jimmy Higdon