

# The Challenge of Nuclear Weapons



THE  
**CHOICES**  
**PROGRAM**  
BROWN UNIVERSITY

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## Acknowledgments

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*The Challenge of Nuclear Weapons* was developed by the Choices Program with the assistance of faculty at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs and scholars at Brown University. We also wish to thank the following people for their invaluable input to the written and video portions of this and previous editions of this curriculum:

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Institute Professor and Director, Center for Non-Proliferation Studies  
Monterey Institute of International Studies

**SCOTT SAGAN**

Caroline S.G. Munro Professor of Political Science  
Stanford University

**NINA TANNENWALD**

Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science  
Brown University

**ANDREW C. WINNER**

Professor of Strategic Studies  
U.S. Naval War College

We wish to thank the following teachers for their contributions:

**KELLY KEOGH**, Normal Community High School, Normal, Illinois

**JOSH OTLIN**, Hudson High School, Hudson, Massachusetts

**YVONNE THOMPSON**, Covenant Christian High School, Indianapolis, Indiana

We wish to thank the Ploughshares Fund for its generous support. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the Choices Program.

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# Contents

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<b>Introduction: Why are Nuclear Weapons Important?</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Part I: The Problem of Nuclear Weapons</b> .....	<b>2</b>
World War II.....	3
The Cold War and the Nuclear Arms Race.....	4
Deterrence.....	5
The Cuban Missile Crisis.....	8
Arms Control.....	10
The End of the Cold War.....	11
<b>Part II: Three Challenges—Cold War Arsenals, Proliferation, and Terrorism</b> ....	<b>13</b>
Cold War Arsenals.....	15
Preventing Nuclear Proliferation.....	16
Three Proliferation Cases.....	19
Terrorism.....	22
<b>Options for U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy</b> .....	<b>25</b>
Options in Brief.....	25
Option 1: Eliminate Nuclear Weapons Now.....	26
Option 2: Rely on Arms Control.....	28
Option 3: Keep Nuclear Weapons as an Essential Part of U.S. Security.....	30
<b>Supplementary Resources</b> .....	<b>32</b>
<b>Videos</b> .....	<b><i>online</i></b>

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## Introduction: Why are Nuclear Weapons Important?

No nuclear weapon has been used in a war since World War II when the United States exploded two over the Japanese cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. Just after World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union began a forty year confrontation, known as the Cold War. Both sides threatened each other with tens of thousands of nuclear weapons, but never used them. Many historians believe that humanity was lucky to avoid a nuclear war that would have killed hundreds of millions of people.

The Cold War ended more than twenty-five years ago when the Soviet Union dissolved and became Russia and fourteen other countries. But many of the nuclear weapons of the Cold War still exist.

The potential consequences of the use of nuclear weapons are difficult for most of us to imagine. Because of their destructive power, they remain among the most serious security issues for the United States. Experts believe that the United States faces three challenges: countries that already have nuclear weapons; the potential spread of nuclear weapons to other countries (known as “proliferation” of nuclear weapons); and the possibility that a terrorist might obtain a nuclear device.

While most agree that nuclear weapons are a great threat to the security of the United States, there is disagreement about what to do about these weapons. Some believe that they are simply too dangerous and that countries should agree to give them up.

***“This prize is a tribute to the tireless efforts of many millions of campaigners and concerned citizens***

***worldwide who, ever since the dawn of the atomic age, have loudly protested nuclear weapons, insisting that they can serve no legitimate purpose and must be forever banished from the face of our earth.”***

—Statement by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons after being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, October 6, 2017

Some also worry that it is simply a matter of time before a nuclear weapon is used against the United States. Others believe that they are essential for U.S. security.

***“The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes.”***

—U.S. President Donald J. Trump, in a Twitter post, December 26, 2016

The arguments that surround nuclear weapons are often heated. Understanding these arguments involves thinking about complex questions.

To understand debates about the role of nuclear weapons in the world today, it is helpful to review the history of nuclear weapons as well as some of the important ideas and beliefs behind U.S. nuclear policy. You will read about these ideas and beliefs in the following pages and then consider some of the arguments about nuclear weapons. Ultimately, you will be asked to formulate your own ideas about what the future of U.S. nuclear weapons policy should be.

# The Challenge of Nuclear Weapons

## Teacher Resource Book

TEACHER RESOURCE BOOK

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# Contents

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Note to Teachers . . . . .	2
<b>Part I: The Problem of Nuclear Weapons</b>	
Study Guides and Graphic Organizer . . . . .	3
Portrayals of the Soviet Threat . . . . .	7
Songs About Nuclear Weapons . . . . .	<i>Online</i>
<b>Part II: Three Challenges—Cold War Arsenals, Proliferation, and Terrorism</b>	
Study Guides and Graphic Organizer . . . . .	16
Mapping the Nuclear World . . . . .	20
Fifteen Minutes . . . . .	23
<b>The Options Role Play</b>	
Organization and Preparation . . . . .	28
Options: Graphic Organizer . . . . .	32
Debate and Discussion . . . . .	33
<b>Synthesis</b>	
Joining the Debate on U.S. Policy . . . . .	35
Film Analysis . . . . .	39
Key Terms . . . . .	41
Supplemental Materials and Videos . . . . .	<i>Online</i>

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## Portrayals of the Soviet Threat

### Objectives:

**Students will:** Examine how people in the United States saw the threat of the Soviet Union and nuclear weapons in the early years of the Cold War.

Understand the political climate in the United States during the Cold War.

Explore multiple contemporary sources to analyze an historical issue.

### Required Reading:

Before beginning the lesson, students should have read the Introduction and Part I of the reading and completed “Study Guide—Introduction and Part I” (TRB 3-4) or “Advanced Study Guide—Part I” (TRB-5).

### Handouts:

“Civil Defense Posters” (TRB 8-9)

“Fictional Journalism” (TRB 10-11)

“Comic Book: Godless Communism” (TRB 12-14)

“Soviet Intentions and Capabilities” (TRB-15)

(A slideshow of these images is available at <[www.choices.edu/nuclearweapons](http://www.choices.edu/nuclearweapons)>.)

### In the Classroom:

**1. Focus Question**—Write the question “How did people in the United States view nuclear weapons and the Soviet Union during the early years of the Cold War?” on the board. During the Cold War, fear of the Soviets and a nuclear attack were part of everyday life in the United States. Ask students to recall information from their reading about the Cold War.

**2. Examining the Cold War**—Divide the class into groups of two or three students and give one handout to each group. Tell students that each group will examine the Soviet threat from different perspectives. Ask students to read the instructions on the handout and answer the questions provided. Be prepared to

help students with the challenging vocabulary in “Soviet Intentions and Capabilities.”

**3. Group Responses**—After small groups have completed the questions, have everyone come together in a large group. Call on small groups to share their responses to the questions. Are there recurring themes and ideas that appear across the sources?

Using the information they have, how would students characterize U.S. perceptions of the threat from the Soviet Union during the first part of the Cold War? Add some of the perceptions to the board. Ask students how these perceptions may have affected international politics during the Cold War.

Ask students if these four sources give them enough information to gauge the mood in the United States during the early years of the Cold War. Why or why not?

How can we know if the Soviet threat was real? Were people in the United States right to be scared? How do historians and students begin to consider these questions? What sources might students turn to to assess the threat that the Soviet Union posed to the United States? How do students perceive each of these handouts from the perspective of today?

### Extra Challenge:

Watch or read President John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address. Kennedy does not directly mention the Soviet Union or nuclear weapons, yet both were very much on his mind as he gave the speech. Can students find evidence to support this? What values does he support and oppose in the speech? What further clues does the speech give you about the political climate of the United States at the height of the Cold War?

### Homework:

Students should read Part II of the reading and complete “Study Guide—Part II” (TRB 16-17) or the “Advanced Study Guide—Part II” (TRB-18).

## Civil Defense Posters

*Instructions:* Examine the following Civil Defense posters and answer the questions after each. The purpose of the Civil Defense program was to protect U.S. citizens during and after a military attack. As you examine all of the posters, be sure to note common ideas and themes. Use a separate piece of paper if you need more space for your answers. Be prepared to report back to the class.

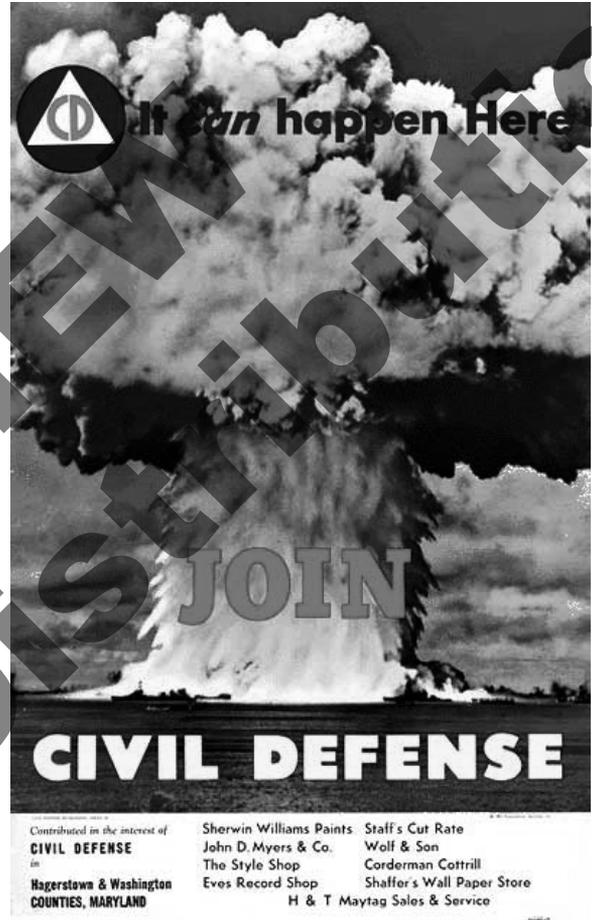
1.



The National Archives, 694366.

1. Describe the image on this poster.
2. What does the large text of the poster emphasize?
3. What mood does the poster create? How?

2.

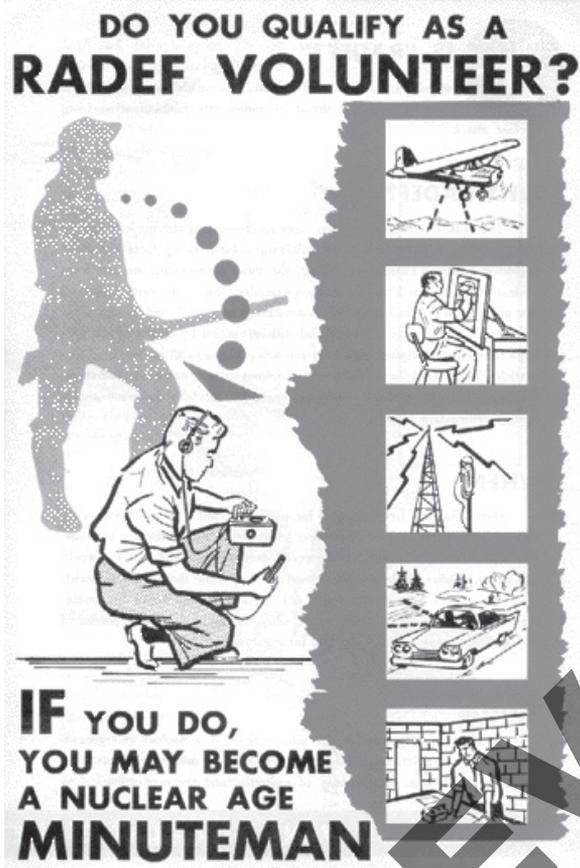


The CONELRAD Collection.

1. Describe the image on this poster.
2. What does the text of the poster emphasize?
3. What mood does the poster create? How?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

3.



1. Describe the image on this poster.

2. What does the text of the poster emphasize?

3. What mood does the poster create? How?

4.



1. Describe the image on this poster.

2. What does the text of the poster emphasize?

3. What mood does the poster create? How?

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## Fictional Journalism

*Instructions:* The *Syracuse Herald-American* published the following fictional article under the byline of Sergei Uritsky on November 12, 1950. Read the article and answer the questions that follow.

“THOSE OF YOU who are still alive and read about this will remember that at 11 P.M. a giant four-engine bomber flying at an extremely high level was heard but not seen. You will also have heard of the failure of your military interceptor planes to knock down the bomber that rushed in at 400 miles an hour over the Polar route until after we had unloaded.

“THERE IS nothing for me to lose at this moment by revealing that the atom bomb which destroyed most of Syracuse and vicinity was of a very special type and its delivery crew were well picked from among our young, more fanatical, suicide group of flyers who had been secretly prepared for the mission over a period of many months.

“No doubt, as you read this, you will recall that your State Department reported a year or so ago that seismographs throughout the world recorded a tremendous explosion in a distant part of the world.

“That was the first time that the world had any knowledge that your country and mine had begun a free-for-all race for atomic supremacy. That explosion was our first controlled atomic bomb experiment, but not the first firing of our experimental atom bomb.

“WE LEARNED from that test that our scientists had progressed further with their experiments than we had dared hoped. As a matter of fact, some of them expressed fear that we were tampering with forces so dangerous and tremendous that the world might be blown apart.

“In a little air field not far from Sverdlovsk in my country, we took off at 1 P.M. on a relatively clear day and headed north by west towards the United States. As I recall, we were all quite cheerful and enthusiastic, naturally, over this, our first large scale bid for world domination.

“I HAD been chosen for this difficult as-

signment because of my 23 years experience in my country’s air force and because of my military record in World War II against the Germans. I had been in the United States many times of course, so that I knew your heavy industrial areas like the back of my hand. It was never suspected that I was a member of a Communist party and even some of my closest friends felt that I was a native citizen of the United States for I had always acted as an outspoken critic of Communism in the Communist party.

“MY SUBORDINATES had been selected with care. Aboard the plane were several of our atomic engineers as observers.

“We found little difficulty in approaching northern Canada and the area adjacent to the northeastern United States and on the night of \_\_\_\_\_ we cruised blithely along with our deadly cargo. As we approached the target, an unreal hush settled over the intercom system. We had been in the air approximately 11 hours and it seemed most strange to be at last in striking distance of our goal. Much depended upon the next few minutes.

“The staccato bark of the bombardier to the pilot broke the spell. In a matter of seconds ‘bomb away’ sounded over the intercom.

“I LOOKED at my watch—it was exactly 11:01. Your people in Syracuse had just settled down for their sleep with the exception of your night plant workers. Mass murder occurred 5 seconds later.

“There was a tremendous detonation. What had been a thriving industrial city, now was a horror stricken, unreal world. The usual results followed the atom bomb burst, with the ball of fire expanding rapidly from its mushroom base to a weaving, surging, flaming mass arising steadily to a great height in the sky.

“THOSE WHO lived outside the blast area know the rest. You know how completely we



## Comic Book: Godless Communism

*Instructions:* The Catholic Guild published *Treasure Chest* from 1946-1971. *Treasure Chest* was a comic book designed to inspire citizenship, morality, and patriotism. It was distributed in Catholic schools throughout the United States. Below is an excerpt from a 1961 issue depicting what life in the United States might be like if the United States fell under communist control. Read the excerpt and answer these questions on a separate piece of paper. Be prepared to report your answers to the class.

1. What values are emphasized? List at least five.
2. How are the communists portrayed? Give two examples of images and/or key phrases.
3. What do you think the primary purpose of this comic was given its audience? Do you think it achieved this purpose? Explain.



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Name: \_\_\_\_\_



