

On the scale

The year begins with the “Doomsday Clock” being set a little closer to midnight. Cheers! And Happy New Year to you, too. Between 1947 and 1990, the clock’s minute hand waggled back and forth 13 times, ranging from two minutes to midnight to 12 minutes to midnight. But, in December 1991—to memorialize the death of the East-West nuclear arms race and the apparent birth of democracy in Russia—the hand was moved off its 15-minute scale and set at 17 minutes to—its farthest point ever.

That represented eye-popping optimism, given that one of the aims of the *Bulletin*, in the words of founding editor Eugene Rabinowitch, was to “frighten men into rationality.” Unfortunately, world leaders did not take full advantage of the opportunities; there has been no new world order, to revive a phrase that already seems antiquated. Last month, the *Bulletin*’s Board of Directors once again moved the minute hand toward midnight.

The reasons for that are as many as today’s headlines. The post–Cold War world is still surprisingly brutish and dangerous, and many ambitious U.N. peacekeeping efforts have failed, partly because the major powers have not backed the United Nations. The Middle East remains, as editorial writers are wont to say, a powder keg. The worldwide weapons trade flourishes. A host of nations, including the United States, continue to divert massive amounts of intellectual and financial capital to useless military enterprises. A handful of small-bore dictators around the world covet nuclear weapons and a few have secretly—if so far unsuccessfully—tried to build them.

Democracy in the former Soviet Union has turned out to be a fragile thing, its long-term survival not yet certain. Russia, the keeper of the former Soviet arsenal, is in economic and social distress. Russian nuclear weapons and fissile materials are not always, as the arms control community puts it, in “safe and secure” storage.

Although the possibility of a global nuclear holocaust is remote, as was true four years ago, some 40,000 weapons remain in the world’s arsenals. Given that, the use of nuclear weapons, somewhere in the world, remains an ever-present possibility. When the Cold War ended, nuclear weapons didn’t go to the shredder, like so many worn-out cars. They are still with us, and we must not forget that.

But the clock has never been just an Armageddon metaphor. When the board resets the clock, it also looks toward the future, assesses trends, and takes into account the vision (or lack thereof) of policymakers, foreign and domestic.

And vision has been in particularly short supply of late in Washington when it comes to nuclear arms control. The Bush-Gorbachev-Yeltsin era gave us two strategic arms reduction treaties, START I and II. But then the START process stopped. The Clinton administration has not pursued a START III, partly because the administration has accepted the Pentagon notion that it must “hedge” against a resurgent Russia. Meanwhile, it pushes the eastward expansion of NATO, a move that manages to undercut Russia’s democrats.

On the hill, conservative Republicans take an even harder line; on the right side of the aisle, the Russians are still the Evil Empire and not to be trusted.

Bullheadedness begets wrongheadedness. Hardline American rhetoric, combined with chaos in the Motherland, inspires Russian know-nothings, unreconstructed communists, and displaced fascists to seek political power. And here and there, they win it. Anti-American rhetoric has become the rage in some precincts. And Russian nationalists increasingly suggest that the retention of nuclear weapons is a matter of national honor.

Deep thinkers have long noted the human propensity to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. They are on to something. In any event, the new time for the clock: 14 minutes to midnight.

—Mike Moore



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