

A conversation with Joe Cirincione on October 15, 2014

Participants

- Joe Cirincione – President, Ploughshares Fund
- Nick Beckstead – Research Fellow, Future of Humanity Institute, University of Oxford

Note: This set of notes gives an overview of the major points made by Mr. Cirincione.

Summary

Nick spoke with Joe Cirincione in order to learn more about the work of the Ploughshares Fund as part of an Open Philanthropy Project investigation of nuclear weapons policy.

Ploughshares' focus

Ploughshares is an operating foundation with a Washington policy focus and an annual budget of around \$8 million, about \$5.5 million of which is spent on grants. Its advocacy focuses on nuclear arms control treaties (including defending existing ones), influencing U.S. nuclear posture, and promoting nuclear champions in the U.S. House and Senate. Ploughshares Fund provides grants for groups to produce expert reports, articles, op-eds, town hall meetings, briefings for Congress and other advocacy tools. Ploughshares Fund provided grants worth over \$3 million to support the negotiation and ratification of the New START treaty in 2010. The foundation focuses on U.S. nuclear policy because, in Mr. Cirincione's view, groups and experts have greater leverage to impact that policy than those of other nations.

Currently, Ploughshares Fund is focused on U.S. policy toward Iran and rightsizing the U.S. nuclear budget. Decisions over the next few years about whether to update the nuclear arsenal have long-term consequences because new weapons and supporting technology can have lifetimes of up to 50 years.

What could a new philanthropist do?

Influencing public opinion

A small portion of American citizens currently see our large nuclear arsenal as an important national security asset. But maintaining such a large arsenal has limited utility in meeting today's national security challenges. Moreover, nuclear issues are getting far less public attention than they did in the past. Public opinion matters because it affects how much political capital politicians are willing to expend on nuclear issues and what options are politically feasible.

One option would be to work with filmmakers to influence public opinion about nuclear weapons. The Skoll Global Threats Fund, for example, has supported films that raise awareness about other global risks such as pandemics (through *Contagion*) and the documentary *Countdown to Zero*. Funders could also work with filmmakers so that when nuclear weapons are used as a plot element in films, the themes would highlight risks from nuclear weapons (such as in *Godzilla* or *The Dark Knight Rises*), rather than portraying nuclear weapons as a solution to the problem (as in *The Avengers*, *Pacific Rim* or *Independence Day*).

Another possibility would be to support awareness online. Much of the information about nuclear weapons policy is presented in a way that is hard for the public to understand, and an organization could improve this by making a website that presented the core set of issues more accessibly. This in turn could be coupled with social media campaigns that could also raise awareness of nuclear issues.

Possible policy changes

A philanthropist could support the following policy changes in the US:

- **Reduce deployed strategic nuclear weapons in the US by 1/3.** President Obama said in June 2013 that U.S. military leaders believe they can meet all current military missions with 1/3 fewer weapons.
- **Ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.** This change has advocates in the Obama administration.
- **Delay funding of the new generation of nuclear weapons.**
- **Support a deal with Iran that prevents that nation from getting nuclear weapons.**

A philanthropist might also consider supporting efforts to revive the US/Russia dialogue on nuclear weapons, though this would be a challenge in the current climate.

These policy changes could be pursued in part through approaches discussed above. In addition, a philanthropist could assist with efforts to write the next president's nuclear policy. Ploughshares is supporting research at Brookings that may be relevant, and additional funds could be used for this purpose.

People to talk to

Steven Pifer, Senior Fellow and Director of Arms Control and Non-proliferation, Brookings Institution

Deborah Rosenblum, Nuclear Threat Initiative

Jon Wolfsthal, Monterey Institute for International Studies

Reading

Cirincione, Joseph. 2008. "The Continuing Threat of Nuclear War," in *Global Catastrophic Risks*, edited by Nick Bostrom and Milan Ćirković. Oxford University Press.

Cirincione, Joseph. 2013. *Nuclear Nightmares: Securing the World Before it is Too Late*. Columbia University Press.

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