

Capitalism normalizes death: From COVID-19 to the threat of nuclear war

Andre Damon
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In 1963, Barry Goldwater, the future Republican Party nominee for President of the United States, published a book titled *Why Not Victory?* In it, he argued that the United States was insufficiently aggressive in confronting the Soviet Union because the American population was too fearful of nuclear war.

“A craven fear of death is entering the American consciousness,” Goldwater wrote, “We want to stay alive, of course; but more than that we want to be free.”

In the following year’s presidential campaign, Democratic candidate Lyndon B. Johnson countered Goldwater’s slogan, “In your heart, you know he’s right,” with the rhyme, “In your heart, you know he might”—implying that Goldwater might end human civilization by using nuclear weapons.

The Johnson campaign ran the famous “daisy” political ad, showing a young girl picking petals from a flower and counting aloud, before cutting to a missile launch countdown and a nuclear explosion.

Commenting on Goldwater’s campaign, the American political theorist Richard Hofstadter wrote, “What had become clear by 1964, and what could not be undone in the campaign, was the public impression that Goldwater’s imagination had never confronted the implications of thermonuclear war.” Goldwater, Hofstadter wrote, “seemed strangely casual about the prospect of total destruction.”

More than half a century after the 1964 presidential race, the United States and Russia are engaged in a deadly proxy war over Ukraine, threatening to spill over into full-scale conflict. As the war spins out of control, significant sections of the US political establishment are again, to use Hofstadter’s phrase, “strangely casual about the prospect of total destruction.”

It is not merely Goldwater’s political progeny on the far right, but the entire political establishment that is flirting with the prospect of a nuclear apocalypse. With no input from the population or serious public discussion, the US government is taking a series of actions that threaten the most devastating consequences.

The present threat of nuclear war between the United States and Russia is, however, only the violent eruption to the surface of systematic preparations for nuclear war that have been years in the making.

With no public debate and with no opposition within the political establishment, three successive presidents have made sweeping, far-reaching preparations for using nuclear weapons in combat to

target Russia and China.

In 2016, President Barack Obama initiated the most dramatic expansion and modernization of America’s nuclear forces since the end of the Cold War, at a projected cost of \$1.2 trillion.

Obama’s nuclear arms race sparked what commentators at the time called the “second nuclear age.” In contrast to the Cold War’s doctrine of “mutually assured destruction,” this “second nuclear age” would, in the words of a 2016 report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, involve combatants “thinking through how they might actually employ a nuclear weapon, both early in a conflict and in a discriminate manner.”

To this end, Obama’s nuclear modernization program involved the construction of low-yield nuclear weapons that, in the hopes of US military theorists, could actually be used in combat without triggering a full-scale thermonuclear exchange.

In addition to making nuclear weapons smaller, lighter, less destructive and more portable, the corollary of making “usable” nuclear weapons was the scrapping of restrictions on shorter-range weapons.

In 2018, the Trump administration intensified the arms race initiated under Obama by unilaterally withdrawing from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, freeing the United States to ring Russia and China with short-range nuclear weapons capable of hitting major cities in a matter of minutes. This was accompanied by the systematic expansion of the US nuclear modernization program, the cost of which subsequently ballooned to nearly \$2 trillion.

The Biden administration has doubled down on the nuclear preparations of its predecessors, and Biden’s proposed 2023 budget calls for creating new versions of every single weapons system in the US nuclear “triad.” While Biden eschews the “fire and fury” rhetoric of his predecessor, his administration has been even more aggressive in provoking conflicts with Russia and China than either Obama or Trump.

In 2021, the White House signed the US-Ukraine Strategic Partnership, announced on September 1, 2021, which declared that the US would “never recognize Russia’s attempted annexation of Crimea.” The agreement was signed just months after Ukraine made the retaking of the Donbas official state doctrine, all but announcing a planned Ukrainian war against Russia.

At the same time, the administration has systematically worked to undermine the One China policy, with Biden pledging in a town hall meeting to defend Taiwan from China. Last year, the Nikkei

published reports that the United States was working on plans to station nuclear weapons on the “first island chain,” including Japan and Taiwan.

But with the outbreak of war between Russia and Ukraine, the far-reaching plans for “great power conflict” prepared behind the backs of the population are now being put into effect, confronting humanity with the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Echoing the 1963 declaration by Barry Goldwater, Philip Breedlove, NATO’s former supreme allied commander in Europe, told Voice of America this week: “We have been so worried about nuclear weapons and World War III that we have allowed ourselves to be fully deterred. And [Putin] frankly, is completely undeterred.”

The inevitable conclusion is that the population must accept the threat of nuclear war and overcome its “craven fear of death.”

The utter casualness and total recklessness with which the US political establishment is treating the prospect of a war that threatens to escalate into a full-scale nuclear exchange is of a piece with the ruling class’s indifference to mass death in the pandemic.

One million Americans have died of COVID-19 since January 2020. In a typical month, 37,000 Americans lost their lives, the equivalent of twelve 9/11 attacks.

A significant attribute of media commentary on the pandemic in the United States was the claim that the struggle to preserve life, the first right enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, is synonymous with “fear.”

New York Times writer David Leonhardt has made this insinuation his specialty. In column after column prematurely declaring the pandemic over and claiming that COVID-19 is less harmful than the seasonal flu, Leonhardt has referred to “irrational Covid fears,” demanding to know, “Why do so many vaccinated people remain fearful?”

Commenting on the relationship between the pandemic and war, *Bloomberg* observed last year: “Yes, the U.S. has botched its response to COVID-19. At the same time, its experience shows that America as a nation can in fact tolerate casualties, too many in fact. It had long been standard Chinese doctrine that Americans are ‘soft’ and unwilling to take on much risk. If you were a Chinese war game planner, might you now reconsider that assumption?”

In other words, COVID-19 has cheapened life in America. One million people are dead, and the US media and political establishment simply ignore the death toll. Mass death is simply expected to become part of the background noise.

This paradigm shift is not being discussed, it is simply imposed upon the population through propaganda. Nowhere does anyone in the media ask: What would a nuclear war between the United States and Russia look like?

Earlier this year, James Stavridis, NATO’s former supreme allied commander in Europe, published a novel about a fictional future nuclear war. Describing an American nuclear attack on Shanghai, Stavridis wrote: “These many months later the city remained a charred, radioactive wasteland. The death toll had exceeded thirty million. After each of the nuclear attacks international markets plummeted. Crops failed. Infectious diseases spread. Radiation poisoning promised to contaminate generations. The devastation exceeded... capacity for comprehension.”

The American survivors of a Chinese nuclear attack on San Diego are left to live in “wretched camps,” where “cyclical outbreaks of typhus, measles, and even smallpox often sprouted from the unbilged latrines and rows of plastic tenting.”

Since the publication of his book, Stavridis has become a regular on the Sunday talk shows, where he expostulates on the crimes and cruelties of America’s enemies, whom he has dubbed the “butchers of Bucha.”

No one interrupts him to ask about the relevance of the description of nuclear war contained in his book to the growing threat of a Third World War. Rather, the news is full of war propaganda, designed to work upon the emotions of the population and incite it to support actions that threaten a war between the two largest nuclear powers.

The total devaluation of human life, the indifference to mass death in the pandemic and the recklessness with which American capitalism is rushing into conflict with Russia reflect the views and social character of the American ruling class. This parasitic oligarchy feasts upon the impoverishment and exploitation of the working population.

Living on financial speculation made possible by a credit bubble inflated by the Federal Reserve, fearing and hating the working population of America and the world, the American ruling class is as desperate and reckless as it is ruthless.

The central question is what will develop more quickly: the war drive of the capitalist oligarchy or the growing global rebellion of the working class.

Throughout the world, the surging prices of food and energy have produced outpourings of working class opposition, such as the mass demonstrations against the Rajapakse government in Sri Lanka. As workers enter into struggle, they must take up the demands of fighting to end the COVID-19 pandemic and opposing the war threats of the capitalist oligarchy.



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