

Historian asking for end to nukes – but read on

Way to go! Richard Rhodes.

Tri-City Herald
March 8, 2006

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Richard Rhodes is an unabashed advocate of technology, especially nuclear energy, and he pulls no punches.

Critics of food irradiation are as medieval in their thinking as those who fought pasteurization at the turn of the century, and opponents of expanding nuclear power as an answer to global warming and economic disparity are not "simply misinformed and elitist" but "immoral," he said.

Nuclear weapons made world war so costly that their invention, he said, brought a drop in manmade death from tens of millions during World War II to 1 or 2 million a year since 1945 — fewer today than deaths from tobacco use and "clear evidence that the epidemic had been brought under control."

"Who can doubt that the United States and the Soviet Union would have come to fullscale armed conflict — a horrific third world war — had nuclear deterrence not restrained them?" Rhodes said Tuesday at Sandia National Laboratories-California.

But standing before nuclear bomb scientists celebrating the founding 50 years ago of Sandia as a weapons lab, the author who poignantly brought their life's work out of the shadows and into dramatic light in "The Making of the Atomic Bomb and Dark Sun" gently proposed an end to all nuclear arsenals worldwide.

The Cold War is over, he said, and it is time for the world's major nuclear powers to make good on their promise in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to reduce and eliminate their nuclear arms as soon as possible. At the least, the United States needs a debate over what its weapons are for and who they are meant to deter, he said.

"The U.S. has not taken a profound look at its nuclear arsenal. That one may be too hot to touch," he told Sandia's weaponeers. "The question is what we really need and why."

Suicide terrorist bombings and Sept. 11-style attacks are horrific but incomparable with the threat of annihilation posed by the former Soviet Union and its nuclear forces, Rhodes said.

"We are not in a position to be threatened by anyone who is deterrable," he said. "I can see the arms aren't going to be terribly useful with the terrorist groups."

The spread of nuclear weapons to India, Pakistan, North Korea and perhaps in a few years Iran are worrisome developments but perhaps not as dire, he suggested, as seeing weapons developments in the estimated 30-40 nations that have the capability, as President Kennedy predicted in the early 1960s.

"The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty is probably

Advertisement

the most successful national–security treaty in the history of the nuclear arms race, and we should do what we can to support it," said Rhodes, now an associate at Stanford's Center for International Security and Arms Control.

"It may be time for an American Gorbachev to step up to the plate," he said, referring to the former Soviet president who proposed an end to the U.S.–Soviet arms race. That also might be unlikely, "but everyone has their dream."

Sandians gave him ringing applause that, according to Sandia–California chief Mim John, ran longer than anyone invited to speak at the lab in years.

Under the Moscow Treaty, President Bush promised steep cuts in active, deployed nuclear warheads, to no more than 2,100 fielded strategic weapons from roughly 7,000 today. He has ordered dismantling of nearly half the fielded arsenal by 2012, to levels last seen in the 1950s.

But the treaty leaves untouched thousands of nuclear weapons that the United States stores in reserve, in case of new threats or unpredicted failure of a weapon design. In order to cut that reserve, the Bush administration is proposing to design new, more age–resistant thermonuclear weapons to replace the entire arsenal and to build at least one factory capable of turning out newly designed weapons on demand.

At Sandia, where scientists are working with colleagues at two other designs labs on designing the first of the new "reliable replacement warheads," Rhodes said the idea of building new, longer–lasting warheads was an "imprudent" step away from the United States' promise to reduce and eliminate its arsenal.

"If the world eliminated all nuclear weapons, the U.S. still would be militarily stronger than it ever has been," he said in an interview.

Nuclear nations still would have the materials and the knowledge to reconstitute their arsenals in a matter of weeks or months, Rhodes said, and that would serve as a check on any other nation stockpiling weapons.

"It's just deterrence delayed," he said.