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Interview with Ira Helfand

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Summary:

In this interview, Dr. Ira Helfand discusses his journey into nuclear disarmament activism, initially sparked by concerns about nuclear power's public health risks. He advocates for the abolition of nuclear weapons as an urgent necessity, citing the extreme danger they pose to global security and human survival. Helfand describes the limitations civil society faces, particularly in the U.S., where public and governmental attention on nuclear threats has waned since the Cold War. He emphasizes the need for a reinvigorated grassroots movement and coordinated international action, referencing successful efforts by organizations like ICAN to foster global awareness.This document summary was generated by an artificial intelligence language model and was reviewed by a Wilson Center staff member.

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Michal Onderco: Hi Ira, thank you very much for joining this discussion. I always start this interview by asking the respondents how did they become interested in nuclear weapons? And how did they basically got involved in the field?

Ira Helfand: So, I first became interested in nuclear power, actually, as a public health issue after reading a book when I was a medical student, and stranded on a Navajo Reservation in New Mexico without any reading material, and I happened to find a book at a local bus station about the Enrico Fermi nuclear reactor, which was the first commercial reactor the United States and it had a meltdown on its first day. And based on that I became involved, as an intern, doing my medical training in efforts to stop a nuclear power station here in New England, in Southern New Hampshire. And through that met Helen Caldicott, who is an Australian pediatrician, who is a very charismatic woman, speaking widely about the dangers of nuclear power. And we decided to form an organization called… brought together a group of young doctors to form an organization to deal with nuclear power.

We took the name Physicians for Social Responsibility, which we learned after we started our group, was an organization that had existed in the 1960s, and had become defunct. It was focused on nuclear war, nuclear weapons issues. And as part of taking on the name of the group, we also reached out to some of the founders of the original group, one of whom was Dr. Barnard Lown, and met with him. And he told us…he was very polite about it, he said: ''nuclear power is an important issue, but it's not the real thing. The real problem is nuclear weapons, please go read the articles that we ran in the New England Journal of Medicine in 1962.'' So we went and read the articles, we agreed that he was right. We reframed the focus of Physicians for Social Responsibility on the prevention of nuclear war, continued to have some concerns about nuclear power, but really focused on the danger of nuclear war. And that's basically how I became involved.

Michal Onderco: Was this ever a full-time job for you?

Ira Helfand: No, no, I've always been a practicing…. well, until I retired two years ago, I've always been a practicing physician.

Michal Onderco: How did your day job feed into your work as an activist or in your advocacy?

Ira Helfand: In some ways, they were two parallel careers. I had a full-time day job, which I loved, and did this sort of as a volunteer and evenings, weekends, days off kind of thing. They were very complimentary in important ways. As a physician, doing this work, there was often a sense that we're not making much progress here. And so being able to go back into my office the next day and take care of a very concrete medical problem, sort of spoke to that side of ''you need to get something done.'' And, on the other hand, when you're taking care of one patient after another, and you realize that you're basically taking care of one individual and the whole world is at risk, it was very useful to have this other, more global, area to work in.

Michal Onderco: I always asked all my respondents this question, and but how do you view the role of the nuclear weapons in the world today?

Ira Helfand: I see it primarily through my lens as a physician. I think this is the greatest public health threat that's ever existed. It's an imminent and overwhelming threat to human survival. And it needs to be understood in those terms.

Michal Onderco: Do you think that nuclear weapons helped to stabilize or destabilize world politics?

Ira Helfand: I think they clearly destabilize world politics. We have been repeatedly on the brink of nuclear war. And the Robert McNamara quote, I think, is the defining quote in all of this, he has argued that we did not survive this far because we had wise nuclear doctrine, or wise leaders, or infallible technology. His quote was: "we lucked out," that it was luck that prevented nuclear war. And there are multiple occasions that we know of, and there are probably others that we don't know of, when we came within minutes of a nuclear war that would have destroyed everything. And I don't see how you can possibly think that weapons, which pose that kind of risk, are in any way stabilizing.

Michal Onderco: If you look at the civil society that has worked on nuclear issues, and we have discussed this before we went on the record, there have been different dimensions in which the civil society has directed its actions. Looking at it from the vantage point of 2023, which of them do you find most fruitful? Some people say the efforts in of civil society need to be directed towards abolition and elimination. Others say: abolition elimination are great goals in the end, but they are unachievable at the moment, we need to focus on smaller piecemeal approaches. Which of the camp… or do you fall into some completely other camp?

Ira Helfand: No, I fall clearly into the abolitionists' camp. I don't think we have the time to pursue anything other than the abolition of nuclear weapons. The idea that we need to take a more piecemeal approach has dominated the field completely. And we have marched closer and closer to the end of the world as a result. I don't know when the nuclear war is going to take place. But if we don't get rid of nuclear weapons it's not going to be 100 years from now, it's probably going to be five or 10 years from now. And that sense of urgency, I think, has got to guide everything that we do. The idea that it is not… I don't remember what word you used. Possible at the current moment or…? I think it's a prejudice which many have bought into, it clearly is going to be difficult. But, you know, no one would have thought that the cold… in 1983, when the US was putting weapons in Germany in order to be able to fight with them in a nuclear war, nobody would have dreamed that two years later, Gorbachev and Reagan would say nuclear war cannot be won, and must not be fought. And no one would have dreamed the Cold War was going to end five years after that. So it is possible that we will not succeed. But if we assume that we're not going to succeed, we definitely won't. And we have got to assume that it's possible, and try to make it happen.

Michal Onderco: If you look at the field since the end of the Cold War, and we're going to get to the pre–Cold War activities a little later, and if you look at the field since the end of the Cold War, what do you see as the biggest failure in the field?

Ira Helfand: The failure to keep this issue alive in the public sphere. Globally we've suffered this tremendous amnesia about the danger of nuclear weapons. And the movement was not as successful as it needed to be, I would phrase it that way, in keeping the public aware of the fact that nuclear weapons continue to pose an existential threat. And there's a period in the 90s, in the early 2000s, when you could not get anyone to talk about this issue. And we did some notable things: we introduced the idea of accidental nuclear war, we introduced the idea of nuclear terrorism that would get some people's attention. It wasn't really I don't think until we understood more completely, around 2006, the potential for nuclear famine, that we were able to start to get people's attention again. And I think that has been really critical in getting us to the point we're at now, where there is a greater awareness than at any time since the end of the Cold War, but still a totally inadequate awareness of the danger that we're facing.

Michal Onderco: So you mentioned nuclear terrorism. And one of the things… I spoke recently to another interviewee who said that the whole focus on nuclear terrorism was a distraction. That nuclear terrorism is an issue, but it's nowhere near as big an issue as it was made, and that it was distraction from pursuing nuclear disarmament.

Ira Helfand: There may be some truth to that, I don't think was a distraction. I think it's a real problem that needs to be addressed. It clearly is not the main problem. And in our messaging, that is always what we have said. It served as a way of getting people to talk about nuclear weapons at all. And in that regard, I think, it was quite useful. But the message that we always delivered was: at a time when people were very concerned about terrorism, as long as nuclear weapons exist, there's a danger that terrorists will get them. But the real problem isn't the terrorists getting one weapon, it's the 10s of 1000s that the US and Russia still have.

Michal Onderco: Why do you think that the attention to nuclear weapons slipped after the end of the Cold War?

Ira Helfand: I think it was this incredible sense of relief. We were all thinking in the 1980s… how old are you?

Michal Onderco: 37.

Ira Helfand: Okay, so those of us who are cognizant of things, were all thinking in the night in the 1980's, so we're going to die in a nuclear war. And when the Cold War ended, I mean, it was like this palpable wave of relief across the whole planet. ''Oh, my God. It's not going to happen. We're not going to all blow up.'' And people just didn't want to think about it again. Even those of us who knew that the weapons were still there, I think were lulled into something of a sense that the danger had passed, it clearly had gotten less. I remember in the fall of 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down, going through my files, and throwing out all kinds of stuff, saving a few things, because I wanted my kids, who are your age, to be able to understand why I had been absent many times in their childhood, because there had been this terrible problem. And I think this is going to be of historical interest to them. So even those of us who were very active, this was part of our mindset.

Michal Onderco: So do you think that civil society could have done things differently?

Ira Helfand: I'm not sure. So those of us who were active in the field did try, it was really we were up against a granite wall in terms of politicians, who didn't want to talk about this. The press and the media, which I mean, you would go to them with a story about nuclear weapons, ''but this is not news, we are not interested.'' I will tell you a brief anecdote. If you have time for this.

Michal Onderco: Sure, do you want it on the record or off the record?

Ira Helfand: It's fine on the record. When we published the first report on nuclear famine in 2012, IPPNW, we released it at a Nobel Peace laureate Summit in Chicago, and did a press conference with Jayantha Dhanapala, who was ~~in~~ the head of Pugwash, and with a representative from the Red Cross, the press conference was incredibly poorly attended. Ambassador Dhanapala and I submitted an op-ed to the New York Times. He wrote it, so I can say this, it was a really good op-ed. I mean, I helped a little bit, but it was basically his work. We submitted it to the New York Times, and it was rejected. On the day it was rejected, they ran an op-ed instead on the swimming skills of polar bears, and I totally lost it. And I sent an email to the op-ed editor and said: ''what are you thinking?'' And he wrote back and said,

this is 2012, 'if at time in the future, the danger of nuclear war was greater, we would consider running an op-ed such as yours.'' And that was the attitude that we were encountering. So it was a very difficult environment to work in. Could we've been more successful? I mean, probably. But I'm not sure what we would have done differently.

Michal Onderco: So one of the things that I find interesting is that in the sort of mid-1990s, so around the NPT extension, and also shortly after, there has been the feeling, at least in part of the American civil society, and also in part of American think tanks sphere, that nuclear weapons are ripe to be finished. At that time, for example, Morton Halperin at CFR had the project on abolition of nuclear weapons. He actually talked about making a moral case against nuclear weapons, and then having them abolished, which sounds very familiar. Why do you think that that didn't survive? Or why didn't it get broad attraction?

Ira Helfand: I don't know. I mean, I think it is the great failing of all the people who were in positions of leadership in the 1990s, that was the time they could have done it. US, Russia and China were all getting along well, then. And I think, largely it was inattention, people thought the problem wasn't that big. I'm sure there were also people in the nuclear enterprise who were lobbying fiercely to keep the enterprise alive. And I think there were also people in the military sphere, who felt that these weapons really are useful. It's not just deterring the Soviet Union, that they were designed for, they were designed for the countries that have them to be able to project national power. And there was a real reluctance to give up that perceived strength. But it is the great tragedy of the second half of last century, that we did not take this opportunity, when it would have been relatively easier to get rid of nuclear weapons.

Michal Onderco: Do you think there is anyone, and I don't mean a single person but an organization or group of organizations, that can be blamed for this failure?

Ira Helfand: I think there's probably a lot of blame to go around. But clearly the dominant player in the world at that point was the United States. And this should have been the legacy of the Clinton administration. And it should have been the legacy of the Bush administration, the second Bush administration. Actually, both Bush administrations. H.W. should have been working on this in 91 and 92.

Michal Onderco: Do you think that there have been, in the last 30 years, moments where things could have gone differently and they didn't? When there was like a real chance that things could have been going towards nuclear disarmament?

Ira Helfand: I mean, clearly in the 1990s, I think the United States could have gone to Russia, and to China, Russia was… everyone was at a pretty good page that time. Russia was in a position where they were significantly in need of support from outside, and we could have posed this, and we could move forward. I think Obama, when he gave his Prague speech. He clearly was facing significant Republican opposition, which made things difficult, I think that whole episode could have been handled differently. I think the biggest missed opportunity is right now, when I think we have an extraordinary opportunity to do this.

Michal Onderco: And by ''we'' you mean civil society, or the government's, or…?

Ira Helfand: I mean, the whole global community. And the last two times when we have come close to nuclear war, as we are right now with Ukraine, each of those occasions was followed by rapid progress, to lessen the danger. The crises seemed to sober the leaders involved, they realized what they had done. We're in that kind of a moment now.

Michal Onderco: But do you think that this… well, because, I mean, neither after Cuban Missile Crisis, nor after Able Archer, these sorts of actions happened immediately, it took a year or two. So do you think that we have a chance that in a year or two, we may end up with something better?

Ira Helfand: I do, I think it will take, as it did then, some visionary leadership and some courage on the part of the leaders of the major nuclear powers. We would not have gotten where we got if Kennedy and Khrushchev hadn't had their moment of insight. And, and the same if Gorbachev had not reached out to Reagan, and Reagan had not responded. I think, right now, the ball is kind of in the US court. And I think that President Biden should go to Beijing, and he should sit down with President Xi. And say: ''look, we are competing the way great powers have usually competed. And if we keep doing this, we're all going to die. It's as simple as that. We're not going to deal with the climate crisis, we're not going to get rid of nuclear weapons, we're not going to be ready for the next pandemic. We need to do things fundamentally differently. And your country and my country, the two leading powers in the world today, need to figure out how to do this, as Reagan and Gorbachev did in the 80s. And let us involve Putin as well.'' But I think that's where it starts with US and China and I think, just Biden has the opportunity to have a very grand legacy. And I hope he figures that out.

Michal Onderco: So this is a good moment to pick up on something that I've recently discovered. So people often say that the sort of big arms control movement in second half of the 80s happened because Gorbachev came to power. And Gorbachev sort of had this… well, he became aware of the limits of the Soviet power, but he also had this different vision for the role of the Soviet Union. But when I was reading the archival documents, which I mentioned, one of the things I noticed was that IPPNW was actually already in touch with Gorbachev's predecessor, Konstantin Chernenko.

Ira Helfand: And with Andropov.

Michal Onderco: And Andropov. So I wanted to invite you to tell us to tell me a little bit about… because I think the IPPNW had a very important role in in these discussions. So if you could tell us a little more interaction with the Soviets, both the Soviet academics and the Soviet leadership at that time. And what do you think are the lessons for today from that?

Ira Helfand: Well, we were fortunate in that, despite the intensity of the Cold War, there were some channels of communication. And there was room within the Soviet system for people to question what was going on. In terms of IPPNW work, Bernard Lown was able to reach out to Yevgeny Chazov, who became the head of our Soviet affiliate. And Chazov was extraordinarily well connected. He was Brezhnev's doctor, Andropov's doctor, Chernenko's doctor their personal physician, and I believe also Gorbachev's. And he was their cardiologist. They put a lot of faith in what he had to say, he was keeping them alive. And it was part of the strength that the physicians movement has. But also it was an extraordinary coincidence that Lown had a relationship with this person who is in this position to speak to the Soviet leadership. And we were able to speak directly, not me personally, but Lown and Chazov and a couple of other people were able to meet with Gorbachev, I think on two occasions. Our delegation from IPPNW, with both US and Soviet doctors, did a live broadcast on Soviet television that

reached 100 million people. there was a willingness to consider that the things were very bad and needed to move in a different direction. Part of the lesson for today, unfortunately, is we don't have that network. It is much harder to work in Putin's Russia than it was even in Russia's Soviet Union.

Michal Onderco: It is? Also for your network?

Ira Helfand: Yes, and it's also extremely difficult to work in Xi's China. We do not have a significant affiliate in China, as we did in the Soviet Union. So those are limitations that we, IPPNW as an organization, are dealing with. We do have a group in Russia…

Michal Onderco: But not Putin's doctor?

Ira Helfand: Not Putin's doctor, no. And they are much less able to function publicly. So I think what a lesson is, it's very useful if you are able to have this kind of communication between scientific and medical communities in various countries. And it's a problem that we don't today. But I think the further lesson is that if you are able to get the attention of leaders, the arguments that we have to put forward about the enormity and evidence of the nuclear danger can be very persuasive. People like Reagan, and Gorbachev came to the right conclusion, entered the conversations with very different points of view. They were both believers in nuclear deterrence, and the value of nuclear weapons. And in case of Reagan, believing that nuclear war could be fought and won. And this was all based on nonsense. And when the actual information was brought to them, the data, they were persuadable. And that gives me some great hope for the current situation, if we're able to get through to these people… it is in their interest to get rid of nuclear weapons, they are not going to do well either if the whole world blows up. And if we can just get to them, and figure out how to do that… now, an integral part of getting to both… especially getting to Reagan, and Gorbachev, it was a dual track. We were talking to them privately directly. But also, we were part of a huge movement that made it hard for them to ignore what we were saying.

Michal Onderco: But that doesn't exist today.

Ira Helfand: That's the problem. And that's what we are trying to do, is to build that movement. And it has been one of our great frustrations that the funding world does not seem to think that it is either possible or valuable to have a movement. I mean, at one point a couple of years ago… I wasn't at the meeting, but I was told this by several people, Joe Cirincione, who was head of Ploughshares at this time, said explicitly: ''we're not even interested in that it's not possible to build a movement around nuclear weapons issues. We're just going to lobby Congress.'' I don't know how it was planned that Congress would be lobbied without a movement to do that. I mean, we're all smart, we can all make persuasive arguments. But Congress in particular doesn't listen to that, they listen to their constituents.

Michal Onderco: So when I speak to respondents, especially in Europe, they often say and one of the things that I couldn't have achieved was to re-energize young people for the call for nuclear abolition. And, for example, I spoke to someone who works in the think tank and said: ''I never had so many applications for internships as I have now because everybody sorts of become aware through ICAN and its work.'' Do you think that ICAN is able to generate the sort of interest also outside of Western Europe?

Ira Helfand: Yeah, here in the United States. We have a campaign called Back from the Brink, which we started in 2017. Taking inspiration both from ICAN, and also from the US Freeze Movement of the 1980s. And it has done, I think, extremely well. It is not yet as large as ICAN, but we have 450 plus NGOs as part of our network. We have a resolution introduced in the US Congress, and just this week sent a letter to every member of the Congress that was signed, it was put together quite quickly, by 145 of those NGOs, including major environmental groups and social justice groups that are not part of the traditional peace community. So I think it is definitely possible to do that. In terms of involving young people, we're not as far along, I don't think in the United States, as our sister organizations in Europe are. But there is a growing attention on this issue among young people. I mean, I'm speaking now at high schools and colleges on a regular basis.

Michal Onderco: So one of the things that I find interesting is that… so ICAN have this parliamentary pledge where a number of European MPs regularly sign… I interviewed someone from Italy who said that in the previous Italian Parliament, there were 80 MPs who signed. I think in the US, there is like four or five who signed it. Why do you think that these formal elements are less present in the US? Is it because of the lack of pressure from the constituencies or…?

Ira Helfand: Well, something of that, but I think also the ICAN pledge is not something which is going to get traction in the United States right now. because it calls on the United States to sign or ratify the treaty. Which is unilateral disarmament, which is the third rail of nuclear politics in the United States. And the Back from the Brink campaign, recognizing that. Our goal was to promote the treaty, but we also understood that the US was not going to sign and ratify at this point. What the US would need to do to sign and ratify, would be enter negotiations with the other eight nuclear states to fill in all the details that were not part of the TPNW: the verification mechanisms, the enforcement mechanisms, the time table. And so that's what we are called for. Back from the Brink… the specific language of our resolution calls the United States to embrace the treaty, words we chose very carefully not to sign and ratify, and to immediately now enter into the negotiations that are the steps it needs to take to be able to sign the treaty at some point in the, I think, near future.

Michal Onderco: So imagine that the White House has a change of heart tomorrow. And they say: ''we're going to embrace this treaty.'' Do you think they, in the environment that exists today, Would be able to bring in China and Russia on board to start these discussions?

Ira Helfand: I do. I don't know that, and it might not happen. But I think it's what needs to be tried. And I think, as I said, I think the first step would be United States to reach out to China. And then the two of them together to reach out to Russia. And there's every reason to believe that the leadership in all three countries can understand that it is urgently in their own self-interest to get rid of these weapons. That's the only way this is going to happen. And we know what's going to happen if they don't get rid of the weapons. No one's ever tried this approach before. There's no downside whatsoever, in say, the United States trying this approach. So that's what we're advocating for.

Michal Onderco: Imagine this interview is read by someone in 15 years. What do they need to know about both PSR and IPPNW to understand your organization?

Ira Helfand: To be really blunt, in 15 years, someone reading this will either know that we were right, and that nuclear weapons could be abolished without a war, or they won't be reading this, because I don't think we're going to go for 15 years if we don't get rid of nuclear weapons. I mean, people made

that prediction in 1980. They probably were right, even though they were wrong. I mean, the fact that we survived the 80s was just astonishing good luck. The situation today is in many ways worse than it was in the 80s because the climate crisis has progressed so much further. I mean, look at what the world is going to be like from climate change 15 years from now. And the odds that India and Pakistan haven't gotten to war. I mean, the Indus River Valley will be drying up by then. Do we really think that everyone's going to sit there and watch this happen? So, I mean, that is my most truthful answer. In terms of should we be lucky enough not to have a nuclear war. I mean, I'm hoping they'll look back and say that we were able to rekindle this movement. And to build something like here in the United States, like the Freeze of the 1980s, that is actually able to move policy. And I'm cautiously optimistic about that. I mean, I don't underestimate at all the enormity of the challenge that we're facing. But I do take some inspiration, some hope, from what happened in the 1980s, we were able to do it then. We are not asking to do something that's unheard of, we are asking to do, again, what we've already done once.

Michal Onderco: spent with the topic of the organization, when I spoke to Peter Buijs, who is leading the IPPNW affiliate in the Netherlands. He told me that among the young medical professionals, it's really difficult to find people to care about this issue. And so they find it very difficult to find the younger members. Is this a problem that you recognize in the United States as well?

Ira Helfand: In the 1980s, there were young doctors who were hearing every day in the press, and in statements by our leaders, about the danger of nuclear war. That climate doesn't exist today. And so it is harder. One of the experiences that I had is when I give one of my talks, people come up to me afterwards, and they say, they were not aware of this information before, they find this extremely disturbing, and they want to do something about it. But I think what happens to a lot of them is weeks go by, they don't anything else about nuclear war. And I think what they I have… I have not had people come back to me and say this, but I'm assuming what must be going on in their minds Is they are thinking:'' well, that guy was kind of interesting. But he must have been wrong. Because if really the situation were that dangerous, I'd be hearing about it all the time'' So part of what we need to do is, and there is no good other term for this, we need to create a critical mass of attention to this. So that when people hear about it from a doctor in PSR, they also hear about it two days later in the news, and they read about it in the papers. And we are not yet at that point. And when people sort of point that out to me, but I also point out was we were not at that point in 1978 either. But we were at that point just two years later. Because we all did the work. And we eventually achieved critical mass. And I think we are moving in that direction. Clearly now. Thanks to Mr. Putin, there's much more attention to nuclear weapons than there has been. We have the network here in the states that we ~~billing~~ built through Back from the Brink has grown dramatically in the last year. And I think that we have the potential to expand this in the next couple of years, in the same way that the Freeze expanded very rapidly here in the United States.

Michal Onderco: Is there anything about the Freeze Movement that the future movement should avoid?

Ira Helfand: The Freeze was pretty successful in terms of what it was doing. It did not have the ambition to eliminate nuclear weapons, which did not seem technically even possible at that time. It had the ambition of stopping the Cold War arms race and it succeeded. I mean, I'm sure that there are some organizational details about it, that maybe we… this is beyond the scope of my work. Although I

am actually planning to talk with Randy Keeler later today, who was the director for the Freeze. But I think the Freeze is a good model.

Michal Onderco: Before we went on the record, we talked about difficulty to find funding in this field in the United States. If you look at the PSR and IPPNW in the last 30 years, can you tell me something more about how your funding developed and your relationship with the major funders in the field?

Ira Helfand: Well, basically our relationship with major funders just atrophied. They were not interested in funding is this work. IPPNW gets almost no money from foundations. It comes from individual donors, from the people who have supported us over the years. PSR also does work on climate, and it's gotten climate funding. We were getting major funding from the Alton John's foundation for nuclear work in the early 2000s, Alton Jones went out of business. I don't think we had any major foundation funders after that. We got some money from a couple of foundations for a period of time, but for a number of years, PSR has not been getting any money from foundations for nuclear work. That changed about two or three years ago. We started getting some money from Ploughshares, a relatively small amount. It was mainly targeted, not for advocacy for the abolition of nuclear weapons, it was targeted for other projects related to nuclear war.

Michal Onderco: It's probably not for the lack of trying, but you haven't had a lot of these funding. Do you think that the foundations are fundamentally misguided in where they're allocating their funding?

Ira Helfand: I think they have been, I think they're starting to change. I mean, I am under the impression that Ploughshares is trying to convene this grassroots alignment conversation, which is encouraging. Your funder, Carnegie, received an application from Back from the Brink, and seems interested. We had a meeting with them just yesterday, actually. Where they asked for the meeting in response to our letter of inquiry, wanting to clarify some items. I'm not sure we'll get funding, but we've never even had that kind of interest from them before. So I think that there is perhaps some understanding. For the last eight or 10 years, funders in this field has studiously avoided funding grassroots organizing around the abolition of nuclear weapons. And I think that there is now a growing understanding of that has been the missing piece. Why the money they have given to groups to lobby for no first use, hasn't resulted in a thing, because there's been no pressure from the outside to create this. And I think also part of what they are starting to understand, which we're trying to help them understand is that there isn't going to be a large movement for say, no first use. If you talk to people about the danger of nuclear war, and then propose no first use as a solution, this does not seem like a really realistic solution to the problem. Getting rid of nuclear weapons, that kind of a global, definitive answer has, I think, a much greater chance to resonate with people.

Michal Onderco: So one of the things that I always find interesting is when I talk to grassroots organizers, and I ask them: imagine you will get a small pot of money, let's say $100,000, what would be the first thing that you would invest that money in?

Ira Helfand: Well, we have the campaign now, Back from the Brink, so what does Back from the Brink wants to do next? This was completely volunteer effort, we could get no money at all. I mean, some individual donors like myself, with limited means put money into this. But basically, this was all volunteer. In the last year, we decided that we needed to have some professional organizers, who built up this grassroots network of people who are doing their best, but don't have expertise in organizing, and are coordinated, and we need some field organizers to help them. So we took the money that we

were able to raise, we hired a field organizer, and he's doing great work. And our proposal to Carnegie is for a little bit more than 100,000 for 250,000 to hire three field organizers. And if we get money beyond that a communications person. We think that the real secret to building political power is to have had a real grassroots network, not a bunch of names on an email list, although that can be useful as well, but to have organizations, groups of people who in communities who are able to reach out to their congressional leaders as constituents and put pressure on them.

Michal Onderco: So, also, I mentioned before we went on the record that in the archives, I have come across a number of donations that you have received from the Rockefeller family, even though you were not aware of it that it was from them, because they were anonymous. For example, ICAN today receives a number of donations, not hugely significant but some, from different private individuals who often wish to remain anonymous. As PSR has this type of philanthropy sort of declined over time for you? That's my first question. The second question, have you ever seen that as morally problematic, or in any way problematic?

Ira Helfand: Yes, we have seen a major decline in philanthropy over the 90s, 2000s, and up to the last couple of years. Back from the Brink, the campaign has seen a major increase in philanthropy in the last year, we've received significant donations from a number of individuals. Not on the scale that that the Rockefellers were giving back in the 80s, although we hope that that will happen. And I spent a lot of my time trying to find individuals to support us. In the last couple of years, it's been from a belief that foundations were hopeless, that they just were so locked into this idea that they weren't going to fund grassroots, that it wasn't even worth spending time approaching them. We are now rethinking that, as we see greater receptivity in some of the foundations at least, but along with that, we are trying to develop a network of major individual funders. And see that is really probably the area where we are most likely to score success.

Michal Onderco: So, are there any rules that you apply for whom you approach or whom you don't approach? I once asked a question to Beatrice Fihn if she would take money….

Ira Helfand: To who?

Michal Onderco: To Beatrice Fihn, whether she would take money from Elon Musk. And she said probably yes.

Ira Helfand: She does? Indirectly, ICAN receives some money that I think comes from Elon Musk indirectly.

Michal Onderco: What do you mean indirectly? How does it work indirectly?

Ira Helfand: It's through a foundation which he supports. It's problematic, there are different views. My own personal view is: the world is going to end if we don't get this work done. We have happily taken money from the Rockefeller family, they are very nice people. Their money comes from the worst sources in the world, the Rockefeller foundation was built on the exploitation in coal mines and oil fields of people all around the world. Those are the sins of the fathers, not of the current generation. But large sums of money are not usually acquired through the best of means. And if people who have large sums of money, want to help save the world, I think we should use that money for something good rather than for the other purposes might be put to. As long as we do not provide support to them, providing cover for the activities that they're engaged in, or give them inappropriate

control over what we're doing. But, I mean, all the foundations… the Carnegie money, where does that come from? The Ford money, where does that come from? Rockefeller money… this is all laundered money made by robber barons, I'm sorry to your grantors from the Carnegie Foundation. I'm sure they're fully aware of where their money comes from.

Michal Onderco: I want to move on to a different part of the interview. If you look at the civil society landscape, both in the US, but also globally. How would you position your organization? How does it relate to others in the field?

Ira Helfand: My research meaning IPPNW?

Michal Onderco: Yes.

Ira Helfand: Well, I mean, we've always sort of had sort of a niche that we thought we feel uniquely, which was to be the medical voice. We think that the medical part of the message is absolutely critical. And that's been our job, primarily, we are a relatively small organization. We're doctors, we don't have the necessary organizational skills. But what we do bring to this is a message which is very powerful. And success of ICAN, I think, is further proof of that. The great accomplishment of ICAN was in changing the conversation away from the sort of nuclear theory type conversation, to a conversation based on what happens when the weapons are used. And IPPNW is the founding partner of ICAN, it played a very central role in providing that message to the whole ICAN movement. Alex Kmentt said at a public meeting a couple of years ago that I wasn't there but it was reported to me by many people. The turning moment in the effort to get the TPNW was when IPPNW made its presentation in 2013 in Norway, about the nuclear famine data. So that's that is our particular role. What we've done in the United States, globally, IPPNW said: ''okay, that's cool, but we need a broader civil society movement beyond just the doctors.' Let us start ICAN.'' And IPPNW started ICAN. Here in the United States PSR worked with the Union of Concerned Scientists has started Back from the brink. And that's one of the ways in which we're modeling on the ICAN experience. And this is a much broader, and civil society movement in which we are doing everything that we can, but the main thing that we're doing is providing the message.

Michal Onderco: [OFF RECORD]

Can you tell me something about this division of labor and whether it's more formal or more informal?

Ira Helfand: It's informal. But again, it speaks to the particular skills that people bring. There are people in the ICAN world who know a great deal about how the UN treaty process works. That was their job of getting the TPNW approved my job and job of other people in IPPNW. was to talk about the end of the world, what's going to happen if you don't succeed? And Rebecca, in particular, she would on occasion arrange for me to come to Europe to speak to critical audiences to explain to them the medical consequences, because people don't know this. It's remarkable. I mean, even people who've been in the field for years, when you talk to them about what's actually going to happen, this is still eye opening to them. And so that was sort of the particular job that I had to do, and the others in IPPNW. [NAME UNCLEAR]. And many other people. It was to present the medical consequences of nuclear war, and help people understand what is at stake here. It's interesting because when people talk about nuclear weapons, they say that it will be the end of the world. But they use that almost as a phrase to deflect thinking about what's really going to happen. And the hibakusha a very play similar role, when they describe… have you ever heard … speak?

Michal Onderco: Yeah, I've heard a few of them.

Ira Helfand: Okay, when you hear them describe what happened to them, it's a totally different level of understanding of what's at stake. I talk sometimes about the difference between knowing and believing. A lot of people know what would happen if it's a nuclear war, but they kind of don't… And they know that it can that it's going to happen if we don't do something different, but they can't quite believe it. I mean, they look around, and they can't imagine all this just blowing up. It's hard enough to imagine your own death, even when you get to my age, but to imagine everything being destroyed, it's really hard. And so part of our job is helping people get that, to really understand, because the knowledge of what is at stake here needs to be in that part of your brain that determines your activity every day. You need to wake up in the morning, saying: ''I've got to pick up the kids after school, and I have to get to work on time, and I have to do the laundry, but I also have to do something to prevent nuclear war.'' And that's where we all were in the 1980s. And we need to get there again. That's kind of hard to do.

Michal Onderco: Because the public is not interested or…?

Ira Helfand: Well, because it's inherently hard to make people focus on horrible things. And because at the moment, it's 1978 not 1980, people aren't talking about nuclear war all the time. And who wants to think about this? You have to kind of, the initial reaction is to just push this aside. That's how we deal with unpleasant things. We don't think about them. And so, I mean, in the 1980s, there were songs about nuclear war, there were movies about nuclear war, there were books about nuclear war. You could not escape from it. And in a sense that we need to recreate that kind of immersing experience, so that people understand that as much as they don't want to think about this. The alternative experience is going to be even worse.

Michal Onderco: So we talked about the fact that ICAN have differentiated impact in Western Europe and in the United States. From your point of view, as someone who has been doing a lot of grassroots advocacy in the US, what's the added value of ICAN?

Ira Helfand: I mean, the added value of ICAN, I think, is that it has demonstrated what civil society can achieve. And this is the great success story of the last 30 years in the sphere. We have shown that a civil society movement can change the behavior of governments, can bring about… the TPNW, It has limitations , the non-involvement at the nuclear weapons states, but it's a huge step in the right direction. And fully appreciating the work done by the governments of Ireland, and Austria, and Mexico ,and South Africa, this would not have happened without civil society. And so this is a huge thing to be able to show to people, we really can make a difference on this issue, at this time.

Michal Onderco: So there are some people who are extremely skeptical, and they often say: ''well, the TPNW is around, it's a force, there is 60 countries who are a state party, or something like this. But at the end of the day, nuclear weapons are still around, Mr. Putin is still making nuclear threats. The TPNW doesn't matter.'' What is your response to those people?

Ira Helfand: I would say the TPNW hasn't achieved its goal yet. But that's very different than saying it doesn't matter.

Michal Onderco: So explain me how?

Ira Helfand: Well, because the TPNW was adopted, what? Six years ago now, it was six years in July. During that time, it has helped to foster… what has to happen next is we need to build a movement in the countries that have nuclear arms, nuclear weapons. And that means basically, in a handful, we're not going to get a movement in Korea, we're not going to get a public movement in China, or in Putin's Russia, and probably not in Pakistan. It's really scary for anti-nuclear activists in Pakistan. But in India, Israel, Britain, France, in the US, it's possible to build a popular movement. The TPNW's value is in helping to build that movement. And I think it's, speaking from experience here in the United States, I think it is working. We have not gotten to the point we need to be at. But we've made enormous progress in the last five years. And I think we're poised to make much further progress. So to say that you haven't succeeded yet, is not at all the same as saying you can't succeed and you're not making progress. I understand the skepticism. And I understand perhaps the pessimism, we need to be much further along than we are right now. But that argument it is put forward simply to say: ''so we should stop trying.'' So what's your alternatives? We just wait until we blow up?

Michal Onderco: How do you perceive other actors in the field? So as I mentioned, in in our project, we also look at the role of academia. So how do you view the role of academia in the nuclear field in the last 30 years?

Ira Helfand: I must choose my words carefully. I think there clearly is a role. And especially in that interface that you've described between academia and advocacy. And there's a role… it's important to look at these questions. Seriously, I mean, I'm a doctor, I believe in data-driven medicine, we need to have the information. But I think at this point, the piece that's missing is not more academic discussion about this. What's missing is effective advocacy. We have the data that we need to make the case that nuclear weapons will destroy the world if they were used. And that's the direction that we're heading in, and that there is an alternative. And the thing that is missing is advocacy, at the grassroots level and at the national level along that. To the extent that academics can cite their credentials into a familiar with these arguments because they've helped to create them, it's great, but only if they're actually doing the advocacy. And in terms of… the Future of Life Institute right now, has launched a $3 million initiative to do additional research on the climate impact nuclear weapons. There is important research that still can be done. And I know some people who are doing this research and I am tangentially part of some of their work. But really, that $3 million would have been so much better spent on disseminating the data we've already generated. Because the information that already exists, is so powerful, and it is so little shared with policymakers and with the general public. That I think is the real task at this moment in time.

Michal Onderco: A few of my interviewees mentioned that the biggest problem in the nuclear field is not the lack of impact, it's the lack of funding The field is enormously underfunded, would you share that view?

Ira Helfand: Well, certainly the advocacy part of the field isn't reflected. And it gets no funding at all, at this point to speak of. I mean, very small amounts of money going into… aside from the money that ICAN is able to raise. And it's really interesting, because much of that money comes from private individuals, the money that comes from foundations, there are a few that have been with us from the beginning in Europe, Ploughshares came along kind of late when it looks pretty clear that ICAN was going to do something really impressive. But essentially, because Ploughshares has not funded similar activity here in the United States where they're based.

Michal Onderco: So which European foundations are with them? I'm trying to think…

Ira Helfand: Heinrich Boell, they've been funding ICAN for long. And there's another one I'm sorry, I don't remember the name. But…

Michal Onderco: I mean, they they're also being funded by Soka Gokkai.

Ira Helfand: Yes. Soka Gokkai has funded this work. I don't think of them as a foundation, I guess you probably could, but there's something that exception they exist to find anti-nuclear advocacy work, In many ways. That's, that's a key part of their *raison d'etre*. But the other foundations just really haven't been, there's been a lot of money going into the academic side of things. I mean, when I met with the head of MacArthur in 2012, he told me, we're spending 12 and a half million dollars a year on the nuclear sphere. Not a penny to people who are trying to actually create a movement to change policy. It was all going to think tanks, and academic institutions.

Michal Onderco: So we talked about academics, and you had to choose your words carefully. We haven't said a single word about think tanks. How do you view the role of think tanks? Because in the 90s, they were even in so-called establishment think tanks like CFR, there would be people who would be working on things like nuclear abolition. And I don't see that today, but maybe I'm not looking at the right…

Ira Helfand: There is a little bit of stuff like that. I mean, Chatham House in the UK, they are think tank, and they really figured out how to use the intellectual resources of the think tank in in a very effective way. And advocacy. Zia and the group at Princeton, similarly. There may be others that I might be missing, just through my ignorance or not knowing about them, but they kind of stand out by how few there are. And in general, I tend to think of the think tanks pretty much the way I think of academic centers, you know, they're doing important work. But we need to put more of an emphasis on translating what they find into educating people with their findings. And that means figuring out how to get things out in venues other than scholarly journals, which the general public and policymakers don't need.

Michal Onderco: So you mentioned about five minutes ago, ICAN as an example of success. Why do you think ICAN was successful as compared to other initiatives? If you look at ICAN's steering group, there is a lot of people who have been around for a long time, why is this constellation effects more successful than others?

Ira Helfand: I think it was the coming together of a number of threads all at the same time. There was some growing understanding that things were not going well in the international sphere. US-Russia tensions were already starting to reappear, US-Chinese tensions. The work on limited nuclear war drew a lot of attention to the India-Pakistan potential for causing conflict. So, there was that happening in the world. I think a lot of it was due to the figuring out how to make the medical message central in the conversation. There was a convergence of some very energetic and quite talented people in the civil society sphere, and a group of people in the diplomatic world, Alex Kmentt, Tonie [Jaquez] in Mexico. I don't know all the names because I was not directly involved, but real commitment on the part of a number of governments as well. And it kind of all came together.

Beyond that, I don't know what it was going to be when we you know, the ISG leadership of ICAN, I think was extremely good. Rebecca, and Akira Kawasaki, Tilmann Ruff is extraordinarily effective. And

Bea has, certainly, been an extremely, extremely good executive director, Susi Snyder has been, it's just a bunch of people who really were good. And it just all came together.

[Ira Helfand wished to add the following here: "At an early moment in its efforts to spread globally (it had started in Australia), ICAN received significant funding from the Norwegian government which recognized the importance of grass roots advocacy in changing government policy at least in some countries. The grant, which was about a million Swiss Francs per year for several years, enabled ICAN to create an office in Geneva and to hire the impressive young staff which was so critical to its success through the several conferences on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons and the negotiations for the TPNW. Without this funding ICAN would not have succeeded."]

Michal Onderco: I want to move on to the last part of the interview. I want to ask you two questions. The first one is, where do you think the nuclear world nuclear field is going to go? In the next 15 to 50 years? And some people find it easier to answer this question, if I pose it to them? Do you think there will be nuclear weapons around in 50 years?

Ira Helfand: No, I don't. I think they either will have been eliminated, or they will have been exploded, okay, we this is the current moment is profoundly unstable. And the idea that this is going to continue indefinitely, which underlies those who advocate the continued possession of nuclear weapons is just I think untenable, given what we know about the last 15 years, and where we are right now. So what I think is going to happen, but I hope is going to happen is that we are going to build a successful movement here in the United States, we're going to get the United States government to commit to a new policy on nuclear weapons, based on the premise that they do not make us more secure, that they are the greatest threat to our security, and that the US will reach out to other countries around the world. And that effort will be successful. And sometime in the next seven or eight years. There'll be a treaty amongst all nine nuclear powers, eliminating nuclear weapons. I think that's possible. And I think it's also ~~un~~necessary. I think if you don't get that I think the game ~~was~~ is over. I don't I don't see this, this situation continuing with nuclear weapons is totally still here.

Michal Onderco: I when I when CPW was negotiated, I offered one of the academics who were really closely related to a bet for a bottle of good French wine, whether any nuclear weapons state would sign the treaty in 10 years. And he said, it's not a goal for any of the states to sign the treaty. And so it would be unrealistic to have them sign the treaty. Would you sign up to this view that basically the goal of DPW is to sort of create this social movement based on moral argument. And whether it will have direct impact on the states in terms of signing the treaty or whether it will spur them into other actions doesn't matter.

Ira Helfand: Our timeframe now is 10 years from now. I think they all will have signed the treaty or have signed a parallel document which embodies the principles of the Treaty. I don't think any of them are going to sign the treaty individually. With the possible exception of the UK under certain circumstances, I could imagine the UK signing this treaty in Scotland withdraws, and they lose the base. And they're confronted with Are we really going to spend all this money to build a new base?

Michal Onderco: If we're going to have lettuce in the supermarket?

Ira Helfand: And we don't need the nuclear weapons anyway, because we're currently under the US umbrella. I can imagine UK doing it, but probably not. And I don't think any of the others would sign

unilaterally. But I do think that that they can all come to an agreement amongst themselves and then all signed together.

Michal Onderco: Do you think that any of the just you know, that's [FAILED RECORDING]

Ira Helfand: [FAILED RECORDING] I think it's, it's fine if people want to sign it, but I don't anticipate significant numbers of people will. I think we will get significant numbers of people signed on to the Congressional resolution around back from the break.

Michal Onderco: Do you think that it's more likely to any of the NATO allies in Europe will sign and ratify the treaty?

Ira Helfand: Yes. I think that's a distinct possibility. There's no reason why they shouldn't. There's no it is not contradictory to their NATO obligations. There are several countries NATO already have explicit agreements that they will not post nuclear weapons

Michal Onderco: In peacetime. Yes.

Ira Helfand: And I think there's no reason why they cannot sign the treaty.

Michal Onderco: You mentioned there is a world without nuclear weapons. How does the security in such a world look like?

Ira Helfand: You know, that's the great project for the century, right? And I'm a doctor, not a states person. What I would say is this, the process of reaching this agreement, I think, can be a very important modeling experience for dealing with security for dealing with the climate crisis. You know, of the two great existential threats, the nuclear weapons problem is by far the easier to deal with, we're not talking about changing the way 8 billion people live, we're not talking about building the entire global economy. We're talking about dismantling 13,000 machines this big, we've already dismantled 50,000 of them, we know exactly how to do it, it's not that big a deal. It doesn't disrupt the global economy to do it. But it's going to require a lot of cooperation amongst the countries that have these weapons. And it's going to require them to relate to each other in a different way. And in the process of creating that agreement, I think they will essentially be modeling how they're going to have to behave going forward. And if that if that process is clearly undertaken in the context of, of, we also have you paying attention to the climate crisis, a lot of us can follow. We're saying, essentially, that there needs to be a new way, a new basis of international relations, the competitive model, which has dominated since the beginning of city states, just really doesn't work anymore. What needs to be, there needs to be collaboration. We're not saying this, because we're idealists, and this is the way the world should be and Kumbaya. We're saying this as a matter of hard practical reality, we're either going to figure out how to cooperate to deal with these problems, or the world ~~is going to~~ as we know, it is going to be destroyed. And so that's something that perhaps can get the attention of people.

Michal Onderco: I always end these interviews with a question. Is there something I should have asked about? And I didn't

Ira Helfand: want to know, it's been a fairly far-ranging conversation? I can't think of anything. I mean, I'm delighted that foundations, at least Carnegie is investigating this question. I do hope that it is part of a serious consideration on their part of where their funding priority should be the decision to withdraw as MacArthur did. Which was such a strange decision to take at this moment in time. Although I guess it reflects the fact that I feel they're not getting anything from the money they've

been giving. But there's a different answer to that observation, which is to give it to things that are more effective. Maybe that's what maybe that's what's made the other foundations rethink what their priorities should be. But, you know, I mean, when I look at, for example, what I can do with a very modest budget, what Back from the brink has done with an incredibly tiny budget. If we were funded significantly, we could save the world.

Michal Onderco: I think this is a good moment to stop. Thank you very much.

Ira Helfand: My pleasure. Thank you, Michal.