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Interview with Ray Acheson

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Summary:

Ray Acheson reflects on their career in nuclear disarmament, emphasizing the destabilizing role of nuclear weapons and their harmful physical, political, and environmental impacts. They critique the failure of governments, academics, and think tanks to fully embrace nuclear abolition, highlighting instead a focus on incremental reforms that sustain the nuclear establishment. Acheson outlines the unique contributions of Reaching Critical Will, including feminist advocacy, transparency in UN disarmament processes, and impactful treaty work, such as with the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). They express cautious optimism about a nuclear-free future, advocating for dismantling militarized security systems while recognizing ongoing challenges like the war in Ukraine. The transcript was lightly edited to ease understanding without any changes in the meaning. Clarifications inserted post-interview have been marked with squared brackets [].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: So, Ray, thank you very much for agreeing to be a part of this interview. And perhaps a good question to start is, how did you become interested in nuclear weapons? And how did you get to the position where you are at the moment?

Ray Acheson: I first started working on nuclear weapon issues when I was doing an internship with a woman named Randall Forsberg. She had an NGO in Cambridge, Massachusetts called the Institute for Defense and Disarmament Studies. But she had been a leader in the Nuclear Freeze movement in the 80s, and wrote the call for the Nuclear Freeze, and was involved in the big march and rally in 1982 in Central Park, sitting down also with government leaders to discuss the Nuclear Freeze. So, she was really instrumental at that time. When I was doing an internship with her, I was still doing my undergraduate studies back in Toronto. For Randy's organization, I was working mostly on the arms trade and conventional weapons manufacturing, and tracking trends. But it was in the margins of that internship, sort of her just talking to the interns about her experience in the Nuclear Freeze movement and about nuclear issues, I came out of that experience wanting to work on that. And so, when I graduated from university, I found another internship in New York with Reaching Critical Will. And I've never left. So, I started as an intern in 2005, and then became sort of the head of the program by 2007. And have grown the program from its origins. It was founded by Felicity Ruby in 1999. And for those first many years, it worked primarily on nuclear weapons. But now we also work on the arms trade, small arms, autonomous weapons systems, explosive weapons, and a broad range of disarmament issues.

Michal Onderco: Do you find your career to be typical in this field? Or do you find it atypical?

Ray Acheson: I don't know. I don't know that there's really a typical answer that people give to this question, I think some of my experience is being at the right place at the right time. Internships being available, meeting people who were willing to take someone young and inexperienced on and give them space to grow. I think that WILPF, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, which is the organization where Reaching Critical Will is housed, it's a very unusual organization, and it treated its interns with a lot of respect and trust, and gave us space to engage right away with the United Nations, and doing really substantive work. And so, I think, that is probably a bit unusual. And I think my passion for disarmament, in general, really for me came out of interest from much younger years of high school and before of being involved in anti-prison work, and then antiwar work. And through that to disarmament work. So that might be unusual, compared to a lot of my peers. But I think a lot of us in this field do sort of just piece together our engagement, right? I mean, some are lucky enough to find these positions and be able to stick with them. Others might come to it through more traditional think tanks or university fellowships, or things like that. But I think it's pretty varied how people get stuck into this work.

Michal Onderco: I have a few questions that I asked all interviewees about the role of nuclear weapons. And I want to ask you those questions as well. If you look at the world today, how do you view the role of nuclear weapons in the world as we have it today? So, in 2023. And some respondents find it easier to answer this question if you pose it to them as "do you find nuclear weapons as stabilizing or destabilizing", so you can choose the way in how you want to answer that question.

Ray Acheson: Nuclear weapons are extremely destabilizing in the world and always have been. Not just today, but throughout history. And we can see this most immediately within the last year. In the mainstream attention anyway. I think this has been very visible with the Russian government's

repeated threats to use nuclear weapons, and using nuclear weapons to provide cover for its illegal invasion and war on Ukraine, threatening anybody that gets involved with nuclear war. So we can see it in the immediate term how nuclear weapons are destabilizing. But this is not a shift, right? Nuclear weapons have always been used by the nine countries that possess them to hold the rest of the world hostage, to suit their interests. So whether that's been the United States, whether it's been Russia, whether it's been India and Pakistan more regionally, whether it's been Israel in the Middle East. We can see many, many examples of this. And going back through all of the Cold War, of course, as well, which I think, is a bit of a misnomer to call it a Cold War, because there were certainly a lot of conflicts going on and a lot of people dying around the world and the nuclear weapons possessing governments, pulling the strings on a lot of those conflicts. And so I think that all of that has to be taken into consideration when we're talking about the role of nuclear weapons. And that role is really to have weapons of genocide that enforce a world order that privileges a very small number of governments—not entire countries, but elites and governments, and the military-industrial complexes within those possessing countries, and within some of their allies.

Michal Onderco: So, I normally follow up this question with a question of what is the practical impact of nuclear weapons on world politics. Because sometimes I speak to people and they tell me nuclear weapons don't matter, because they haven't been used in history, in a war, in how many years. And you already said, well, nuclear weapons, allow states to pursue certain policies. Do you think there are other ways how nuclear weapons impact the world, even if they are not used in a war?

Ray Acheson: Absolutely. So if we look at the physical impacts that the more than 2000 nuclear weapon tests have had on the world, that's quite extreme. And there are those who refuse to even call them tests, because a test is sort of an abstract thing, right? You kind of think: “oh, it's not really happening.” But actually, they exploded nuclear weapons all over the world. And most of these tests have happened predominantly on Indigenous land in the United States, in Australia, in Algeria, in Kazakhstan, in China, and they've happened in the Pacific as well. So there's this colonial, imperialist aspect to these quote-unquote tests, these explosions of nuclear weapons, which have had a disproportionate impact on Indigenous communities and land, that have also had just a tremendous physical impact on everybody living in the vicinity. So people today are impacted by the radiation of US nuclear testing people in North America; across North America, everyone has radiation in their bodies from these explosions. And the uranium mining to create nuclear weapons, the reprocessing processes that lead to plutonium, and the failure to find any kind of reasonable, long-term storage solution for nuclear waste. All of these are impacts that are ongoing. That are, regardless of whether a nuclear weapon has been used in an act of war, in that kind of very narrow, traditional sense, they're used all the time. And their production, and existence have these very physical impacts, in addition to the political impacts that I've discussed, as well.

Michal Onderco: When you look at the field, and you have been someone who has been looking at working on this and also writing academic work on this, what do you see as the biggest failure in the field since the end of the Cold War?

Ray Acheson: I think the failure to pressure the US government to disarm—as well as other nuclear-armed governments, but I'm thinking within the context that I do a lot of my work to end nuclear weapons from the end of the Cold War. With all the caveats about the Cold War that I mentioned earlier, of course, but that timeframe. Because that was the moment where the nuclear weapon

establishment within the United States really had to reinvent itself and justify its existence by doubling down on concepts like nuclear deterrence theory, full spectrum dominance, national security state, and all of those concepts. The entrenchment of violence for security really ramped up with the end of the Cold War at that moment, when it could have gone in a very different direction. And I think one of the biggest failures from many academics, as well as nuclear policy folks, mostly in the corridors of power, was turning away from the grassroots movements, which across the Pacific, and Europe, and the United States, and the joint grassroots movements that had built up, like the joint efforts from the Kazakh nuclear test site and the Nevada nuclear test site. And with all of these amazing transnational convergences, there was a turning away from them by the policy elite and sort of a turning of funding towards the think tanks, and the academics, and this notion of what it was to be an expert on these issues, that really diluted so much of the grassroots movement that had been built up to the 1960s and 1980s against these weapons. And so that I see as part of the main problem that we face today, that we're still experiencing the ramifications of, as we tried to rebuild, reenergize the anti-nuclear movement globally. But I think in general, the biggest failure has been not to critique the nuclear establishment as a whole, and to pursue instead minimalist or reformist policies within the gambit of arms control, which is turned into a farce over the last two or three decades. Where the last treaty that was negotiated within the establishment was the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which is still not into force, and that was adopted in 1996. So, it took from then until the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons for anything substantial to happen at the international level in terms of nuclear weapons. And that is because of this pursuit of minor adjustments to nuclear weapon stockpiles and international governance over nuclear weapons. And this idea at the core of it is really that nuclear weapons do serve some stabilizing purpose, right? So we can reduce the numbers, we can make them more secure and safe. We can agree not to build new nuclear weapons, or we can ban the production of fissile materials, whatever the particular things are. This agenda, the step-by-step, building block, progressive approach, whatever you want to call it, the terminology has changed many times. And it's the same agenda that they've had now for more than two decades [without implementing any of these measures or commitments]. And it hasn't actually critiqued the fundamental problem of nuclear weapons existing at all. It hasn't demanded nuclear abolition. And so, a lot of resources, attention, and energy has gone into these projects, which can never actually get to the core of the problem because they refuse to address it.

Michal Onderco: So, if I understand correctly, you would sort of say that the blame is to be ascribed to the academics, and the think tankers, and the civil society. Because they never demanded abolition, but it sort of satisfied itself with these piecemeal approaches.

Ray Acheson: Certain segments, not as a whole, I think. I definitely think there's still lots of I mean, the International Campaign to Abolish nuclear weapons ICAN, and all of our 600 partner organizations, we do call for abolition. So, this isn't a blanket critique. It's a critique…

Michal Onderco: But ICAN is also a fairly new organization, right? So, if we had this interview, well, 10 years ago, ICAN was already around but if we had this interview 15 years ago, there wasn't anything like that.

Ray Acheson: And there were still there still grassroots organizations, globally, that were calling for nuclear abolition, absolutely. But most of the funding and attention has gone to the think tanks that are mostly based in corridors of power, D.C., London, Moscow, Paris. And mostly very establishment

figures that sort of rotate between government and think tanks and academia. And there's this insular circle of folks, which have sort of dictated the terms of what is possible, what's feasible, what's realistic. And it's all based on propping up the nuclear weapon industry, not on fundamentally getting to the core argument that nuclear weapons should not exist. It's been about tinkering around the edges of mass destruction, as opposed to eliminating the problem.

Michal Onderco: I like the sentence "tinkering around the edges of mass destruction." What do you think that in the last 30 years, we had some milestones when things could have really gone differently, and they didn't?

Ray Acheson: In the last 30 years, milestones that could have gone differently? That's a really big question. I'm having trouble kind of filtering what an answer could be. So for example, I think that, and I don't know if this is at all getting to the question that you're trying to ask, but I think that a big turning point was the launch of the, quote-unquote, "global war on terror." I feel that disarmament and anti-war activism were really strong at that moment, but the launch of that 20 plus years endless war fiasco really undermined a lot of the disarmament work that had been going on, prior to that shift in global politics. So is that the kind of answer that you're looking for?

Michal Onderco: Yeah, that was a very good answer.

Ray Acheson: Okay. Yeah. So, I think that that's one of them. I think there have been other moments when we could have probably had more of a global response. But I'm just… sorry, I'm just thinking through this. And I think in my last answer too, I was focused on like, what's the failure? Because I assumed your question was, what's the failure and sort of the civil society side of things, but I'm also thinking about other government failures in this regard.

And I think, the same way that there was an actual refusal from some US allies to go along with the war in Iraq, there has not been that same refusal of US allies when it comes to nuclear weapons. And I think that that is a major thing. That's not necessarily limited to the last three years, but I think is much more pronounced in the last 30 years. Kjølv Egeland's work investigating the history of NATO as a nuclear alliance, for example, is very useful here, because his research has found that many NATO governments actually did oppose nuclear weapons, did not want NATO to become a "nuclear alliance," didn't want to host nuclear weapons, didn't want to include nuclear weapons in the doctrine, and were really bullied into what's known as sort of the burden sharing, which is US language I believe, around nuclear weapons within the alliance. And that was not their choice. And so, I feel like, over time, the resistance to nuclear weapons by many US allies in Europe and Canada, disintegrated. And they did not refuse the same way that some refused when it came to the Iraq War. So I would say, that's sort of an overlapping answer from your last question. And also, this question as well as a development in the last 30 years.

Michal Onderco: Yeah. I want to move on to a different segment of the interview. Imagine this interview is read by, let's say, an undergraduate or graduate student in 10 years. What do they need to know about Reaching Critical Will? And what makes Reaching Critical Will different from other organizations in the field?

Ray Acheson: So, when Reaching Critical Will was founded in 1999, the idea at the heart of it was really to increase transparency of disarmament and in particular nuclear disarmament processes at the United Nations. So, there had been some civil society engagement with the Non-Proliferation Treaty

meetings, and a little bit with the General Assembly, but it was a very ad hoc engagement. And difficult to access, and figure out, and understand what was happening or what the importance was.

So, the idea of Reaching Critical Will was both to help people access the UN and be able to attend these meetings if they wanted to, but also to report on what was happening in a way that would be accessible to grassroots activists, or students, and academics, and researchers. And also, to other government officials that were engaging in these processes, but maybe were new to the issue, or didn't have the capacity to engage in all the meetings. So, it had a lot to do with transparency, and it was something that hadn't been done in a systematic way, in relation to disarmament. And so, over the years, we've expanded our coverage to a lot of different forums and issue areas related to weapons. And we've ebbed and flowed like others in terms of, we're putting a lot of energy and attention here now, and then less on that now and moving on to cover this. Through the process ourselves of doing the monitoring and the reporting in the analysis, it also is inevitable that we're doing advocacy through this as well too. Because we're not an unbiased neutral party, that is just providing information like a wire service or something, right? We're an activist organization. That is a feminist story. WILPF is a feminist organization, and antiwar organization, we've been around since 1915. So, we have a legacy behind us. And so being part of that organization, Reaching Critical Will does do advocacy, that is very pro disarmament, anti-nuclear, and against the arms trade, etc, etc. So all of our work that is analysis, is also advocacy.

And then we've engaged directly in treaty-making processes as well. So, we were part of the work to develop the Arms Trade Treaty. Reaching Critical Will, and the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) worked together to ensure gender-based violence made it into that treaty, among other things. We were a leading part of the development of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons as well. So we have all these different components to our work at the United Nations that I think is quite unique, both from the organizational perspective we bring, but then also this monitoring-reporting that we're doing.

Being an archive for primary documentation is also another aspect of our work. And so, a lot of government officials use our website, because the UN website is not as comprehensive, it's much more complicated to find things on it. So outgoing diplomats will tell their incoming colleagues: “here's your repository for all information. If you want to know what our position was three years ago, you can go find it on the Reaching Critical Will website because we don't even have it in the office anymore.” I've heard stories like that. So, we've also done that work.

And then we do a lot of speaking and workshops with students and other activist groups, and we're part of many coalitions, we're part of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. We're part of Stop Killer Robots, which is working on autonomous weapons, and we're part of the International Network on Explosive Weapons. So we work very well in coalitions with other activist groups. We partner with academics as well, especially if they're inputting to treaty processes, or other analyses.

Michal Onderco: I will have a few questions on everything that you said so far, but perhaps… so, you said that you were part of ICAN, what would you say is Reaching Critical Will edge over, or added value over other people or other organizations that you are involved with. In ICAN, there in the steering group, or he people who are in the central… I'm not sure if it's a central office or central bureau …

Ray Acheson: Well, there's so there's like a staff team, the Secretariat. If that's what you mean?

Michal Onderco: Yeah.

Ray Acheson: Yeah. So, there's the staff team. And then there's an International Steering Group, which is kind of like a board but it's more about strategy than anything else. And so WILPF is a member of that steering group. And then there are partner organizations beyond that, which I forget how many we are now, like 600 something.

Michal Onderco: But my question was, so within the steering group, what is the special thing that WILPF brings with it? Is it the expertise and the knowledge and the facts and repository? Or is it the feminist angle? Or is it all the above? What is it that WILPF really brings out?

Ray Acheson: Yeah, I think it's all of the above. I think that the feminist analysis and approach is a really important added contribution to the work of ICAN. We produce a lot of material on gendered impacts, gendered norms, gender diversity, and participation. We always have a feminist and an intersectional approach to our work. So, for us it's not just about adding women to processes and everything will magically be better. It's actually about looking at overlapping oppressions and harms based on gender, sexuality, race, class, etc. And bringing those perspectives into the conversation. Looking at, as well, gendered norms around, concepts like militarized masculinities, and normativity that, along gendered lines, promote certain ideas or approaches over others, and how that impacts nuclear policy. And so that is something I think that's our added value, for sure.

And then, I think, also the institutional knowledge of working within the UN, but in multiple spaces, is also an added value. So a lot of the groups that are part of ICAN, they just work on nuclear weapons. Whereas RCW works on many disarmament issues. So we know what works and doesn't work in other forums, and other issues, and can bring in examples and lessons. And then WILPF, as a whole, works across a whole range of issues that are even bigger than just disarmament. And so that gives us, I think, a much broader perspective than some of the other groups that solely work on nuclear weapons.

Michal Onderco: I was hoping to get to one question a little later. But since you raised it a little bit, I want to get to it now. So one of the things that I find really interesting about ICAN is that it has these 600 partners, as you mentioned, all over the world. And for some of them, as you just mentioned, nuclear is really the thing that they focus on. And they often have a team, and maybe one, maybe three, maybe five people who really work on nuclear things. And they really have a lot of expertise in that field. There are other partner organizations that work on a lot of other things. And for them, the nuclear portfolio is very, very narrow. So, they may have one person who works on it maybe half a day a week, and sometimes not even that. What kinds of dynamics does this disparity between the attention that different partners can devote to the topic create within the whole organization?

Ray Acheson: Well ICAN, like any coalition, is really a space where people can contribute what they can contribute and be involved as much as they want to, or have the capacity to be involved. Or otherwise, you know, if you don't have much capacity, and this isn't one of your primary issues, but you support the goal, then you're lending your voice to and enhancing the credibility of a coalition as a transnational, popular call for nuclear abolition, for support for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. So I think coalitions tend to work well, in that way, when there is space for very different levels of engagement and those that have the capacity and want to be engaged more, they can lead on hosting conferences, they can organize direct actions, they can be more prominent in the

sort of the pushing for universalization of the treaty, or whatever project it is they want to work on. But that's the other thing—so many partners, even the active ones, do all these different things. Some are working really hard to get their government to sign. Some are working really hard on the divestment angle and trying to get banks to divest from nuclear weapons, or they're working at the city council level on the ICAN City Appeal. So, there's so many things to do and ways to engage in levels to engage at, that I think, works really well at ICAN and is a selling point of most coalitions that I've been part of. There's always been sort of this varying engagement from different partners.

Michal Onderco: If you look at the nuclear field, I mean, you can cite partners within ICAN, but outside of people within your immediate vicinity, who are the five organizations that you find the most useful to work with or inspirational for you?

Ray Acheson: In the nuclear weapon field?

Michal Onderco: Yes.

Ray Acheson: That's a good question. I don't really know how to do that without just naming… they can't be part of ICAN?

Michal Onderco: You can also say people within ICAN, that's fine as well.

Ray Acheson: I might actually need to think about this. And then can I like to send it to you in writing?

Michal Onderco: Sure, of course, yes.

Ray Acheson: I feel like my mind is not able to produce the list.

Michal Onderco: Okay, so let me ask a slightly different question. Let's say you're putting together a campaign, or you're putting together a project, how do you go about finding organizations that you're going to work with, or finding partners for that? Because, I think, that's a process that sort of, we often see on the tail end, so we see what's the result. But very often, the thinking process that goes into it is more complicated. So, can you elaborate a little more on that?

Ray Acheson: Yeah, I think it really varies based on what the project is. So if we're going to do something, for example, on the new AUKUS military alliance, then I'm going to be contacting partners that I know within ICAN Australia, and their larger nuclear-free movement within Australia to connect them up to folks working in the US and the UK on this issue. But I'm probably going to do that mostly within my WILPF network, within the ICAN network, and then getting other recommendations from those people of who else we need to be engaging.

If it's not geographical, and it's more thematic, then I guess I'm going to be reaching out to people that I know that have worked on this issue to ask if they want to be involved, and also ask them for other recommendations of people.

Because WILPF is an intersectional feminist organization, we're always trying to have diversity in our projects and campaigns that we do work on, in terms of participation, but also in terms of the leadership, and the conceptualization. So, we try very early on to find a diverse set of collaborators, whether that's geographic diversity, age diversity, gender diversity, etc.

Michal Onderco: Okay, perfect. I was actually going to ask how you define diversity, but you just answered my question. So, you already were quite critical at the beginning about the role of academics

and some of the think tankers in the field. Do you engage with academics and think tankers working in think tanks in your own work?

Ray Acheson: Yeah, absolutely. And again, that wasn't a blanket critique of all of them, but particular ones, particularly those that benefit from the nuclear establishment. And so, I think, two academics that I do work with Kjølv [Egeland] and Benoît [Pelopidas], who you may have been in touch with already, they just produced this excellent report about sort of the—I would call it corruption—but like, the funding that goes to certain academic or think tank institutions from the nuclear weapon industry, right? And so, there's sort of a bias in terms of the work. So, I just want to caveat again, my earlier remarks about that.

But yeah, I do engage with academics, so Benoît, Kjølv, also Nick Ritchie from York University, Matthew Bolton and Emily Welty from Pace University, the whole team at the Princeton Program for Science and Global Security, which I'm actually personally affiliated with as an individual as well. And Bonnie Docherty's team at Harvard University, at the Harvard Law School Human Rights Clinic. So yeah, and many others too, and some in Australia, and in the Pacific as well. And a few folks in Latin America, and the African region. So, there's different academics that do engage in nuclear abolition.

And I think there are academics who write about things from a distance, right? And then there are academics who show up to these meetings, and talk to the government officials, talk to the activists, and sort of are engaged with the processes in a more hands-on way. And so, I think that can have some effect as well in terms of, first of all, my ability to know who they are, and, but also their own understandings of these issues and how processes really work.

I find that a lot of what students are taught, including myself when I was a student, about how international relations work, is not how international relations really work. It's all: "governments are monoliths and policies are top-down, and…" blah, blah, blah. And it's like, it's actually all about individual people and their interests and their willingness to push for things, or not push for things, and their vested interests or their personal views on things. And so, I think the academics who are more engaged have a better understanding of those elements of process, and are thus able to produce more useful work. In the sense of useful for both government policy as well as activist analysis or understanding.

Michal Onderco: So, I want to come to one thing that you talked about the academics and think tankers who receive funding from government and from nuclear weapons industry, and you used the word corruption. And I don't want to dwell on the word corruption too much.

So, I earlier spoke with another think tanker, and the think tanker said that there is a certain attraction for people to sort of work on really small technical issues. Like verification for test ban treaty and these really, really technical issues. And that attraction sort of makes then people then lose the sight of big theoretical questions like abolition of nuclear weapons. Do you recognize that? And do you think that this is, do you see that as a, as a sort of an intentional thing? Or is it the unintentional but harmful byproducts of the whole process?

Ray Acheson: I think it's largely intentional, but I can also, I could believe there are circumstances in which well-intentioned people kind of get sucked into the minutiae of working on something narrow and specific. But I do think that it's institutionally intentional, to silo people, to have them focus on in on an interesting problem. When you were first posing this question, I was thinking immediately of

what I've heard from those who have done historical research like Hugh Gusterson, and Richard Rhodes, and Rebecca Solnit, and others who really looked into the creation of nuclear weapons and sort of the anthropology, or ethnography of that process. And so many of the scientists that were working on the Manhattan Project or the physicists that even came up with the idea of splitting the atom, for so many of them, it was just this cool physics problem to work on. And once the United States first exploded the Trinity tests, but then especially when it dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it was only then that they realized what they'd done. And so, to me, I'm sort of like: "well, how did they not realize what they were working on." But then you can also understand institutionally that the problems are constructed or the tasks are constructed in such a way to preclude people from thinking beyond what they're working on. So, I can believe that similar things may be happening in terms of think tank type environments, where your job is to like get this line item in the budget to be reduced by 10% or something. And that's all you focus on, and you lose sight of the bigger picture. Sure, but I also think that there's some lack of accountability there, personally.

Michal Onderco: So, I want to move on to the next part. But before we go there, I want to ask if you are looking at your organization, and if you're looking for, especially for staff and for funders, what are the criteria that you apply for finding new staff members for your team and what are the criteria that you apply when it comes to looking for suitable funders?

Ray Acheson: So, for staff, it depends on what level of the position we need to fill. And we're a very small staff team. Right now, there are three people that work for Reaching Critical Will. In the past, I think in our heyday, we had four. So, we're quite small, WILPF is a little bigger, with about 30 people in the whole organization working on different things. So, I'd be looking for people that have some experience with disarmament issues, and/or the United Nations. And that can apply a feminist perspective and intersectional feminist perspective to their work. And that are able to engage critically, and analytically with government positions and policies. And people also that can write, because we do a lot of writing, and we do a lot of writing on very tight deadlines. Sometimes daily reporting during conferences. So those, I guess, are some of the key things that that we're looking for, as well as, of course, the diversity criteria as well. And then what was the second part of that question?

Michal Onderco: About the funders.

Ray Acheson: Yes, yeah. So we, at Reaching Critical Will, I think one of our main criteria at the moment is we don't, we don't take any funds from nuclear-armed states. We do receive money from some government donors that have, like disarmament and arms control divisions, and they mostly like to fund our work around the reporting and analysis and sort of the UN conference work that we do, and being an archive and repository for documentation, and maintaining our website, and that kind of work. We sometimes put into foundations for specific projects that we want to work on. And we also get some donations from people that just make really small monthly donations, or one-time donations to our work, that rely on our work for academic purposes, or just for information purposes, as well.

Michal Onderco: So just to connect this to the discussion that we had. How would you explain to the skeptical reader the biggest difference between accepting, let's say, a donation from a European NATO country, and someone who sort of takes, like a think tank, or that takes funding from a European NATO country to work on test ban verification?

Ray Acheson: Right. Well, it's also I think, one of the problems that that Benoît and Kjølv's study found is that it's also the corporations that they're taking money from, right? So companies that are producing nuclear weapons then funding work for arms control, it's a little different, I think, than government type funding.

But I also think, two, it's dependent on, if we're talking about a government funding, then it has to do with what they're funding. And if they're funding a project for a particular outcome, or if they're funding kind of the core work of a program. So in our case, we do receive money from certain governments, but it's for the work that we do in general, and there's no political influence over the content. And so, we're extremely critical, even of some of the governments that we do receive funding from, in terms of nuclear weapons policies or other disarmament policies, in certain cases. And so, I think that's different than sort of executing a particular project with a particular political goal for a government. I see there being a distinction there.

Michal Onderco: I want to move on to the final, well, final, but it's a pretty big part of the project, of the questionnaire. So how would you define impact? And can you give me an example of a situation where you would say that Reaching Critical Will had impact?

Ray Acheson: Yes. So, I think there are a few ways to answer this impact can be difficult to measure in a lot of ways. And impact can seem very small at first and have a much bigger effect later. So, the whole butterfly effect situation, I've definitely seen this, in terms of like, an individual diplomat, learning about feminist theory as we apply it to disarmament, and then 10 years later in their career, making extremely strong feminist statements in higher level positions, and having that impact resolutions or treaty making in those processes. So that's sort of like a long-term example of impact. I think a shorter-term example of impact I can give is… is it okay to give a non-nuclear example or just a nuclear one?

Michal Onderco: Whichever you want.

Ray Acheson: Okay. I mean, I think I'll give both if that's all right. So, one example with the Arms Trade Treaty is that when the United Nations first took this issue up, we had most governments say to us that they didn't understand what the arms trade had to do with gender-based violence. And it took about six years of work through the various preparatory process meetings and two rounds of negotiations of the treaty. But through that six-year process, by the end, we had more than 100 governments signing on to statements saying that gender-based violence had to be a legally binding provision in the treaty. So that is directly because of Reaching Critical Will and the IANSA Women's Network, and a few other civil society actors. So, we can see the change.

Very concretely, I think the TPNW is another great example of impact as a whole. That treaty wouldn't exist if it wasn't for ICAN's lobbying, and Reaching Critical Will was part of that process as well from start to finish. And so, I think that's a great example of the impact and the change in discourse that we've also seen. And these are kind of impacts within impacts, right? Because starting that process of changing the discourse to the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons away from nuclear deterrence theory helped us achieve the TPNW. But then also having achieved the TPNW is helping us advance this discourse further, in this moment of heightened tension with Russia's threats, etc, etc, etc. So, again, impact is both measurable and immeasurable, and impacts feed off each other. And so, there's unseen and seen elements to it.

Michal Onderco: So I think this week, or last week, you published this piece on gender elements in the TPNW.[1] And one of the things that you mentioned there is the dissatisfaction with the fact that the final statement from the meeting of state parties, for example, talks about gender only in terms of women. So, it talks only about the binary gender categories, for example. And some could say "well, this is an example of where lobbying or your attempts to influence the process was not particularly successful".

So, my question is, is success, something where the goalpost gets pushed further every single time? Or is it the moment where you can say: "I have now been successful." And whatever comes later? And my second question is, how do we know whether something is successful or not?

Ray Acheson: So, on your gender example, I don't think it has been unsuccessful yet. I think things are changing, right? In terms of how the world at large is approaching issues of gender, gender identity, and gender norms. And so, we're at a changing moment. One of the things that I wrote about in this paper was the ways that at the August meeting of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, there were actually some governments that were calling for reflection of all genders and more inclusive language, and that is a direct result of lobbying that Reaching Critical Will did, of advocacy that we did. And so, putting that reflection in this paper about how the TPNW declaration didn't do it, is another sort of clarion call that they need to do it moving forward. I don't know if that's what you mean by shifting goalposts, but it's always important for us to be pushing for further things, right? And pointing out what's needed is a big part of that, and where they were limited last time, as in, this is something they have to get right next time.

Michal Onderco: So would you… this might be a really big question. So, you may want to decline to answer it. But would you, for example, say that TPNW so far has been a success?

Ray Acheson: Yes, absolutely. Yes.

Michal Onderco: And what's the metric for that?

Ray Acheson: Okay, so its existence is a success. I think it's interesting when I read about the TPNW, from people that were not involved in creating it, and it's just sort of like this obvious thing that, of course, nuclear weapons were banned. And then some say, it's not really successful, because the nuclear-armed states haven't joined it yet.

And to me, that's just so astonishing, because it overlooks the fact that there was so much pressure against banning nuclear weapons even being discussed. And then there was pressure against the humanitarian impact initiative, there was pressure against the Open-Ended Working Group in Geneva in 2016, there was pressure against the General Assembly resolution that established the negotiations, there was pressure against the negotiations themselves. At every element of this process, for years we were told this would never happen, and that we would never achieve the next step, and then we would in fact achieve the next step. So, I think in itself, the TPNW existing, being negotiated, being adopted in 2017, and entering into force in 2021—all of these are incredible successes.

I think that the other thing that's important to recognize is the ways that international law shifts normativity over time. Already we have cities from nuclear-armed states joining the ICAN Cities

[1] Editorial note: see the paper here: https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/news/latest-news/16763-new-publication-the-treaty-on-the-prohibition-of-nuclear-weapons-and-gender-feminism-and-intersectionality.

Appeal, raising this issue within city councils—and some of the biggest cities in the world, within the countries that possess nuclear weapons. Also, we have the parliamentary efforts that have gone on [in nuclear-armed or nuclear-allied states] within parties in power, but also from opposition parties challenging the government, and having debates in parliament that we've not had before. The divestment [from nuclear weapon producing companies] that we've already seen, and that we know is coming down the pipeline, I think is extraordinary, and we didn't have before this treaty. So yeah, it's definitely a success, and it will keep having success.

And anyone who says that it doesn't, I think they're setting themselves up to look pretty bad in a historical rearview mirror. So anyone… as you said, What do I say to students listening to this in 10 years, I think it'd be interesting to look at who said that the TPNW was useless, and look at where we are in 10 years. And things change really quickly, but also very slowly. And so I think that, as a species, we're quite impatient. We want immediate results, right? We want to know cause and effect right away. But all of these changes, any change that we've had throughout history has been built on a slow, steady, normative shift. And then, it can happen in an instant, or look like it happened in an instant, when it does change. But it's really built on the backbone of sustained activism and advocacy. And so tracing that I think this interview process is really going to be worthwhile in the future for those looking back on this issue and how it changed over time.

Michal Onderco: So even if, in 10 years, when that student reads that interview, there will be still nine countries possessing nuclear weapons…

Ray Acheson: Maybe, who knows?

Michal Onderco: I'll come back to that point, but even if that is the case, okay. You would still say that the TPNW was successful?

Ray Acheson: Yeah, it already changed the landscape. And I mean, who knows what the world will look like in 10 years? I think that's less and less predictable every day with all the different converging crises we face. But yeah, I think that the TPNW is already a success, in terms of the challenges that it's mounted to the nuclear orthodoxy. People say things now that would have been unimaginable even five years ago. They were written off as being naive and unrealistic and idealistic [for talking about a ban on nuclear weapons]. And many more people are talking about nuclear abolition now then since you know, the heyday of like the 80s, or the big moments for the anti-nuclear movement in the past.

Michal Onderco: I've heard one of my interviewees say that was cited as an impact of TPNW the fact that Jens Stoltenberg said that the nuclear threats are unacceptable, or something like that so…

Ray Acheson: Yeah, we claim everything. ICAN is really good at being like: “that was us.”

Michal Onderco: So, my final two questions. And the first one is, how do you where do you see the nuclear field, the nuclear world Go in the next five to 50 years?

Ray Acheson: Five to 50?

Michal Onderco: Yes. And some people find this question easier to answer, if I pose it as: “do you think there will be still nuclear weapons around in 50 years?”

Ray Acheson: Oh, in 50 years? I really hope not. And I'm, I'm actually optimistic that there won't be.

Michal Onderco: Why? You're the first person who says no.

Ray Acheson: Okay. I'm not saying that I'm definitely predicting it. I'm saying that it's absolutely possible. And the reason I think that is because the climate crisis is getting worse and worse. At some point, the problems posed by nuclear weapons that are mapped onto the climate crisis, whether that's the material issues, in terms of the physical components of nuclear weapons, which are also extremely toxic and dangerous for exacerbating climate change. But also, the financial issues of nuclear weapons. Like right now, there's 82.4 billion, I think was ICAN's estimate for nuclear weapons spending in 2021. And that is completely unaffordable in the sort of landscape that we're entering into, which is true of, of military spending in general as well. I think that the current inclination of the world's elite is to securitize against the impacts of climate crisis, particularly against migration. And so we're seeing a lot of horrific investments in violation of human rights at borders. And that is something that we need to also work on undoing. But I wonder where did nuclear weapons fit in this imagination of the securitized elite in this future dystopian landscape that they're actively building right now? And I kind of wonder if, in 50 years, nuclear weapons will still be part of their imaginary.

But I don't know. And I'm, you know, I'm not… I just think that anything is possible. And so, I think, for anyone to declare nuclear weapons will definitely be gone in 50 years is ridiculous. But I also think it's ridiculous for anyone to declare that nuclear weapons will absolutely be here in 50 years.

Michal Onderco: So, imagine there is a world without nuclear weapons. What does security in such a world look like?

Ray Acheson: So, preferably, or like a prediction?

Michal Onderco: You can offer both.

Ray Acheson: Yeah, so I mean, I prefer a world where we've done away with geopolitics, basically, that we're in a much more cooperative transnational world, maybe without nation states altogether, as that configuration has not provided for our security and has only fostered the security of elites in many countries. So I think there's that sort of vision of security that doesn't look anything like it does now. It's a demilitarized sense of solidarity, and global cooperation, and dealing with the actual crises that we have before us.

Michal Onderco: And what do you think is the likely outcome?

Ray Acheson: I'm not going to say that it's unlikely, but it's probably not super likely, at least in the short term. But I do think regardless of these other sorts of have elements of weaponized and militarized security that we face in our world, it's still possible to eliminate nuclear weapons within this landscape. Because nuclear weapons, the shift that needs to happen is real... and I think this shift is underway right now, which is why the nuclear-armed states are so frightened of the TPNW, and the humanitarian discourse, because they help make it clear that these weapons destabilize international security. I think the Russian government has done a lot to demonstrate that over the past year, but as I said earlier, that's always been true.

But I think the more that that shift in thinking happens, realizing that nuclear weapons don't create security, they create insecurity in the world, then they can be removed from the quote-unquote, "security equations." I'm sure lots of people that you've interviewed, especially government officials, diplomats, if you're interviewing those folks, they see nuclear weapons as a discrete issue that can be eliminated, I tend to see it as part of a bigger package of militarization. But I also think it can be looked

at the other way, as well as something that we can just eliminate right now. Like, let's just take care of that problem. I'm totally down for that.

Michal Onderco: So some of the activists that I've interviewed, for example, said, “Well, we can take away nuclear weapons from the world and we can provide for deterrence by, I don't know, global prompt strike, and cyber-attacks and sanctions and all sorts of things”.

Ray Acheson: I'm not going to say that.

Michal Onderco: But I see that you disagree with that.

Ray Acheson: Yeah, I think that I understand why certain people make that argument, because they don't want to be seen as challenging the broader construct of the military-industrial complex or weaponized security. But I do challenge those things. WILPF does challenge those things. Since 1915, we've recognized that the biggest impediment to peace is the private profits accruing from the production of tools for war. And so that is at the heart of my advocacy and my approach to these issues. So no, I don't, I don't celebrate or promote other weapons systems to replace nuclear weapons at all. And I don't see that as being part of a realistic answer.

Michal Onderco: Yeah. This is a question outside of my script. But do you think that the war in Ukraine makes your case easier or more difficult to make?

Ray Acheson: I think both. I mean we've experienced I think both of those things, where some people have sort of opened their eyes to like, watching the CEO of… was it Raytheon or Lockheed Martin? I don't know, one of them basically, like, being overjoyed with the uptick in stocks or whatever. Yeah, that was happening. I forget, that was earlier on this was last year, like in probably March or something like that, um, and just watching the billions of dollars that have gone into weapons sales and transfers. But I also think that there's been a pushback against antiwar activists, with people saying: “Well, we have to support Ukraine in defending itself at this moment.” So, I think it's worked both ways. But I think the underlying antiwar critique holds, with all the nuance that it's always had, right? Of like, what's the difference between self-determination and offensive warfare? Or what are ways that we can critique the war industry, globally, as well as domestically in our own national contacts? And call for peace, more broadly. So, it's been a challenging time, I would say, because people don't have time for nuance, right? People again, just want like, give me your 30-second take that I can quote on the news. And it's like, well, no, let me tell you the story [of how we even got to this point]. But I also think that it gets to a broader problem of this lack of nuance too, right? Because, as an anti-war activist, or an anti-nuclear activist, it’s always demanded of you that you react to the situation right in front of you, while our critique says, we've been opposed to this entire system. Having this system is what led us to this moment. And now you're demanding that we like give you a 30-second sound clip about for or against this war, and it's like, that's not the point. We said this war was going to be inevitable based on how we've directed our money and our culture towards relentless militarism, etc. And so, this is the inevitable outcome of that. And that's the whole story. Right? Okay, that gets left out.

Michal Onderco: I always end these interviews with a question. Is there something I should have asked about and I didn't? Or is there something that you think is important to add to this interview?

Ray Acheson: No, I don't really think so. Well, that's I think I've rambled enough.

Michal Onderco: In that case, thank you very much.