Banning the Bomb: Four Decades Too Late?

For forty-one years we have lived in “the shadow of the bomb,” and as nuclear arsenals multiply, the shadow lengthens. That nuclear holocaust would be an unspeakable catastrophe requires no argument. As the bumper sticker reminds us, “One nuclear bomb can ruin your whole day.” But the present state of nuclear deterrence, in which the superpowers aim tens of thousands of warheads at each other, is viewed by many as a nightmare in its own right, and a moral abomination.

In The Abolition, Jonathan Schell argues that by consenting to live under the doctrine of deterrence, “we bear responsibility not only for the lives of the people whom ‘we’ may kill but also for the lives of those whom ‘they’ would kill; namely, our families, our friends, and our other fellow-citizens... Our acceptance of nuclear weapons is in that sense a default of parenthood, of love, of friendship, of citizenship...” Quoting Khrushchev’s remark following the Cuban missile crisis, that the smell of burning flesh was in the air, Schell observes, “in truth, that smell is never far from our nostrils now.”

Of course vast numbers of people carry on with their daily business for the most part oblivious to the realities of nuclear deterrence, giving little thought to the weapons targeted against them, less to the weapons their government targets against others. If this is so, then, according to Australian philosopher C.A.J. Coady, so much the worse, morally, for them. He likens those who avert their noses from the threat of nuclear incineration to those good German burghers who failed...