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# REWRITING THE NARRATIVE ON NUCLEAR WEAPONS

A research-based guide to  
building a safer future

PLOUGHSHARES

NTI 

- ▶ Every step we take to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons brings us closer to creating the safe and sustainable future we all deserve.

# **REWRITING THE NARRATIVE ON NUCLEAR WEAPONS**

**A research-based guide to  
building a safer future**

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# WELCOME TO OUR COMMON FUTURE: A LETTER FROM EMMA BELCHER AND JOAN ROHLFING

“Nukes keep us safe.”

That’s the prevailing narrative on nuclear weapons in the United States and the message advanced by a system promoting a staggering level of spending and weapons arms racing. Public polling, policy trends, and statements by elected officials make clear that this deterrence-based narrative dominates within both U.S. political parties.

This dominant narrative has allowed dangerous national security policies to go unchecked and choked rational policies that would protect us against the inherent dangers of nuclear weapons.

Today, in the face of a drastically altered and increasingly dangerous global and domestic environment, it is imperative to challenge this dominant narrative on nuclear weapons. To support this effort, Ploughshares and the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) partnered on a community-informed research project to better understand how to shift the narrative to bolster our collective efforts at a time when nuclear weapons threats are on the rise and attention to this issue has dwindled.

In fall 2023, we engaged Metropolitan Group (MetGroup) to collaborate on the development of a clear, comprehensive, effective, and persuasive narrative strategy related to nuclear threats, security, and disarmament. We started by reviewing the extensive thinking and research already conducted

by the nuclear risk reduction and disarmament community (“the field”). We assessed existing research, testing, and message guidance, and engaged members of the field, who participated in an on-site stakeholder mapping session with representatives from nine organizations. We also conducted listening sessions with 40 people from 16 organizations, and a series of interviews with key stakeholders, from field staff to current and former officials to advocates from other movements. We also formed a narrative advisory panel of experts from the field who shared their insights, expertise, and experiences in communications, grassroots organizing, and legislative advocacy.

After tapping these important resources, we decided how to complete a picture. We conducted new, in-depth quantitative and qualitative research, including focus groups, sponsorship of ReThink Media’s 2024 audit of nuclear news media coverage, and a review by Gen Z Lab at the global communications firm, Edelman.

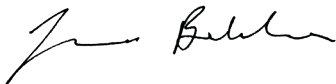
We thank all the participants who helped develop this narrative, especially Ravi Garla and Cecili Wake, who led the effort with colleagues from NTI, as well as our MetGroup partners and staff at Ploughshares and NTI.

This new narrative—and its implementation—is designed to move advocates of nuclear risk reduction and disarmament out of a defensive stance and communicate in a way that taps values shared by a supermajority of Americans.

Working together, we can persuade people that nuclear weapons put us all at great risk, that the solutions we seek will make us safer, and that everyone can play a role in building a safer world.

We can change the status quo. People want to support us. A common, winning narrative can reshape our shared future.

Join us.



Dr. Emma Belcher  
President  
Ploughshares



Joan Rohlfing  
President and Chief Operating Officer  
Nuclear Threat Initiative



# INTRODUCTION

## Humans are hardwired to respond to storytelling.

The science is well documented. People persistently look for morals and universal truths to help navigate the world. Narratives are patterns of stories that contain beliefs about the way the world works. Said another way, narratives are the vehicles that society uses to articulate shared understanding of universal truths and values. Think of tried-and-true stories like “the boy who cried wolf” or more modern social narratives like the one represented by the phrase “pull yourself up by the bootstraps.” In both cases, you are probably immediately familiar with not only relevant stories but also the morals of those stories and the values they illustrate.

Narratives influence decision-making. Likewise, shifting embedded narratives can shift beliefs and behaviors. (For more, see [How We Got Here: What Is Narrative?](#))

This guide introduces an evidence-based narrative framework that can be applied to advocacy, awareness-building, engagement, and activation efforts to reduce nuclear threats and advance the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons. The top-line narrative—**Every step we take to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons brings us closer to creating the safe and sustainable future we all deserve**—is grounded in research that proves its effectiveness with a supermajority<sup>1</sup> of the American public, encompassing those who already support nuclear risk reduction (“base”) and those whose views can be shifted on the subject (“persuadable”). This message and its supporting framework were most effective in increasing interest, prioritization, and likelihood of activation among a supermajority. In the face of deep skepticism about the possibility of totally eliminating nuclear weapons—even from base constituencies most likely to show support—this narrative was accepted by audiences as believable, worthwhile, and achievable.

<sup>1</sup> A full description of these audience segments is covered in [Our Audiences: Building a Supermajority](#) and [Appendix C](#).

An expanded narrative developed through the research process includes messages and proof points that also tested well across “base” and “persuadable” constituent segments. Key elements of the expanded narrative explain the urgency and importance of addressing nuclear risks, identify the potential impact of a nuclear confrontation, and provide evidence (new to most people) that progress is possible and has been accomplished before.

The full narrative framework in this guide includes:

- ▶ **Top-line narrative**, which is “Every step we take to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons brings us closer to creating the safe and sustainable future we all deserve.”
- ▶ **Core narrative statement**, which incorporates the core values that resonate with a supermajority of the U.S. public.
- ▶ **Expanded narrative**, which expands on the core statement to include messages and proof points that resonated with persuadable audiences.
- ▶ **Storytelling imperatives** with best practices for changing the narrative on nukes.

This guide is designed to support the work of anyone pursuing changes in policy to reduce nuclear threats and eventually eliminate nuclear weapons globally. The research findings and narrative recommendations in this guide create an opportunity to explore new ways of engaging the public on nuclear weapons and open windows for meaningful policy change.

# CORE VALUES

People make decisions about what to believe and what to do based on the connection between what they are hearing (including facts and data) and their deeply held values and perceptions about how the world works.

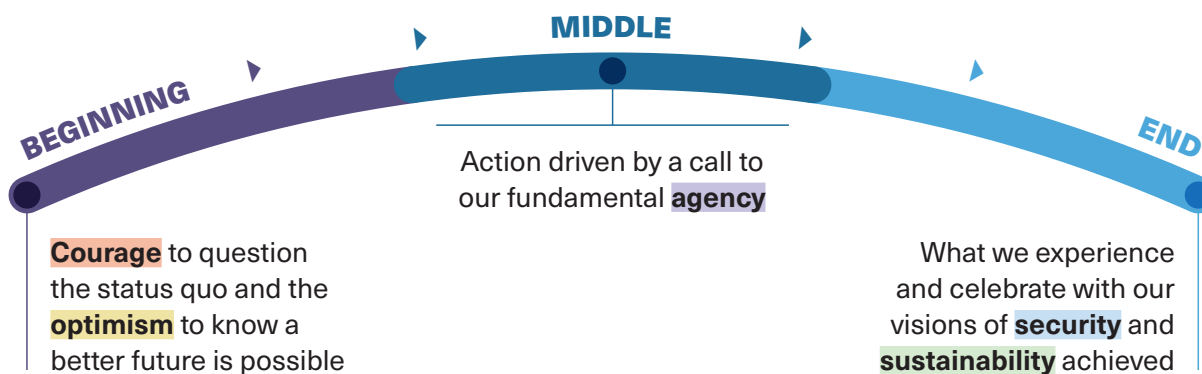
The new nuclear narrative is based on values held by a supermajority of the American public identified through qualitative and quantitative research, workshops, and focus group discussions. (See [Appendix A](#) and [Appendix B](#) to explore the underpinning research.)

Five core values underpin the new narrative framework:

- ▶ **Courage:** We question the status quo, take on worthy challenges, blaze new paths, and remain steadfast in our conviction to shape the future we deserve.
- ▶ **Optimism:** We dream big, nurture goodness in small ways, and know that a better future is possible.
- ▶ **Agency:** We seek a sense of control in an increasingly chaotic world, we recognize that we each have a role in creating the future we want, and we understand that we can achieve more together than alone.
- ▶ **Sustainability:** We work to ensure the health and well-being of humanity and our planet, including the most vulnerable, by never wasting or destroying our resources and striving to learn from the past so that we can bequeath more to those who come next.
- ▶ **Security:** We demand to live free from catastrophic threats to ourselves, our loved ones, and all of humanity as we embrace our collective interdependence, to address threats that don't respect divisions between people and countries.

**FIGURE 1. Values as a Story Arc**

One tool to remember the five core values is in the order of a story.



▶ “We come up against the ideas that the world is scary, dangerous, and that nukes are a way to keep us safe. The argument is really around what brings safety. That is the value that will ultimately resonate with folks.”

— John Pope, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*

# THE NARRATIVE

The new nuclear narrative and its supporting messages and proof points were written to evoke the five core values. Below is a core narrative statement, followed by the expanded narrative, which includes supporting messages and proof points.

This narrative can be used as is, but communications will be most effective by tailoring it to the messenger, audience, medium, and social context. What feels authentic for an activist on TikTok will be different for an arms control expert on CNN.

## Core Narrative Statement

The core narrative statement is color-coded to represent each of the five core values:

**Courage** **Optimism** **Agency** **Sustainability** **Security**

Every step we take to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons brings us closer to creating the safe and sustainable future we all deserve.

Everyone deserves to be free to live the lives they choose in a stable, safe, and sustainable world. To make this future possible, we must recognize our common humanity and challenge the dangerous idea that the world is safer by threatening mass destruction.

It doesn't have to be this way.

At another pivotal moment in history—the height of the U.S.-Soviet arms race—people spoke up and their demands helped lead to the elimination of more than 80 percent of nuclear weapons globally. Together, people and governments can finish the job.

There is no time to lose. Historic international agreements that have successfully limited nuclear weapons will soon expire, just as a new nuclear arms race is underway. Eliminating the nuclear threat will bring us closer to securing a shared future where nations address common challenges facing humanity—like climate change, pandemics, and artificial intelligence.

We must urge our leaders to protect us now by working with other nations to reduce the number of nuclear weapons while moving toward their eventual elimination. Even if we never get all the way to that goal, every step in that direction will make us all safer.

## Expanded Narrative

This longer version of the new narrative expands on the core statement with additional values-driven messages and proof points that resonated in testing (Table 1).

**TABLE 1. Expanded Narrative**

<b>MORAL</b>	Every step we take to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons brings us closer to creating the safe and sustainable future we all deserve.
<b>VISION</b>	Everyone deserves to live in a stable, safe, and sustainable world. Together we can create a world where governments invest in human needs over weapons of mass destruction, people come before corporations, and hope is a stronger force than fear. In this world, generations to come will be free to live the lives they choose.
<b>CHALLENGE</b>	<p>To make this future possible, we must recognize our common humanity and challenge the dangerous idea that threatening mass destruction somehow makes the world safer. This idea was always dangerous, but in today’s world, it’s even more so. Nuclear weapons have become faster, more powerful, and more widespread. Just one of today’s powerful nuclear weapons could kill or injure millions and cause widespread destruction and lasting environmental damage.</p> <p>We’ve had dozens of close calls with nuclear weapons—times when systems failed, people made mistakes, or leaders felt pressure to retaliate. We’ve been lucky, but our luck won’t last forever. The only way to guarantee nuclear weapons are never used is to work together to get rid of them.</p>
<b>SOLUTION</b>	<p>It doesn’t have to be this way. At another pivotal moment in history—the peak of the U.S.-Soviet arms race—people spoke up and their demands helped lead to the elimination of more than 80 percent of nuclear weapons globally. There were 70,000 nuclear weapons in 1986. Today, there are about 12,000. Together, people and governments can finish the job.</p> <p>Global leaders who don’t agree on much else still agree that nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. And yet, historic international agreements that have successfully protected us for decades by limiting nuclear weapons will soon expire just as a new nuclear arms race is underway.</p> <p>The United States plans to spend almost \$2 trillion in the coming years on nuclear weapons. We are compounding the national debt by spending on outdated and dangerous weapons that put all of us at risk.</p>

<p><b>BENEFITS</b></p>	<p>Instead of spending almost \$2 trillion on nuclear weapons we hope never to use, our tax dollars would be better spent supporting our troops and veterans, rebuilding our roads and bridges, reducing health care costs, or funding education.</p> <p>Eliminating nuclear threats will bring us closer to securing a shared future where nations work together to address challenges facing all of us—like climate change, pandemics, and artificial intelligence.</p>
<p><b>CALL TO ACTION</b></p>	<p>We must urge our leaders to protect us now by working with other countries to reduce the number of nuclear weapons and the threats they pose while moving toward their eventual elimination. Even if we never get all the way to that goal, every step in that direction will make us all safer.</p> <p>You can help to build that future by learning more about the issue, making your voice heard, adding it to your voting priorities, and holding your elected leaders accountable.</p>

## MESSAGING PATHWAY TO DISARMAMENT

Building public support for the elimination of nuclear weapons is the goal of the new nuclear narrative. However, the new focus group testing and previous field research<sup>2</sup> underscore that opening communications with the goal of disarmament triggers skepticism with a majority of people who may also pigeonhole the speaker as naive. Instead, you can create a pathway to the nuclear disarmament message that is better able to bring your audience along.

Acknowledge your audience’s skepticism but also state the benefits to the path toward the ultimate disarmament goal, as in the core narrative’s phrasing, “even if we never get all the way to that goal, every step in that direction will make us all safer.” This approach kept focus group participants open to hearing more.

In longer messages, the most effective approach is to first establish how nuclear weapons cause risks. From there, discuss concrete risk reduction steps and include examples of past success. The logic of eliminating all nuclear weapons can emerge from there—often by the audience themselves.

<sup>2</sup> See [Appendix E: Metropolitan Group Focus Group Report](#) for more details. Other major research projects using sophisticated methodologies also came to this finding, including research by FrameWorks and Topos Partnership (see respectively, Marissa Fond, Andrew Volmert, Nathaniel Kendall-Taylor, and Pamela S. Morgan, *An Unthinkable Problem from a Bygone Era: How to Make Nuclear Risk and Disarmament a Salient Social Issue* (FrameWorks Institute, August 2016), <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org>, and Axel Aubrun, Meg Bostrom, Joe Grady (Topos Partnership), *From Asset to Liability: Developing a Message Strategy on Media* (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2009)). There is a longer list of simpler quantitative surveys on related public beliefs, including the NTI commissioned Harmony Labs research in 2021 that found that nearly 80 percent of people preferred a world without nuclear weapons but only half could imagine it ever happening (see Riki Conrey, Harmony Labs, *Rewriting the Nuclear Story: U.S. Cultural Audit Research Findings* (Nuclear Threat Initiative, May 3, 2022), <https://www.nti.org/events/rewriting-the-nuclear-story-u-s-cultural-audit-research-findings>).

- ▶ “The reference to the 80% reduction of nuclear arsenals during the Cold War was flagged by multiple people in each focus group as one of the most attention-getting elements of the narrative summaries, as well as a fact that gave them more hope that nuclear reduction was possible.”

— Metropolitan Group summary analysis of focus groups (See [Appendix E](#))



# OUR AUDIENCES: BUILDING A SUPERMAJORITY

Multiple research projects have identified key demographics and political affiliations for persuadable audiences. They tend to be voters who lean Democratic or Independent, are younger, and mostly consist of women and people of color. But to then reduce the target audience to a single label such as “young, progressive women of color” would be a mistake. Similarly, describing each persuadable audience segment can quickly turn into a dizzying list of combinations of race, age, gender, geography, and political orientation.

Furthermore, demographics and political affiliations have limited utility in understanding how and why people hold their policy beliefs. When undertaking narrative strategy, segmenting audiences by values, cultural affinities, and media consumption habits is more useful.

This narrative framework builds on audience segmentation profiles developed by Harmony Labs, which is derived from the Theory of Basic Human Values developed by social psychologist Shalom Schwartz.<sup>3</sup> Harmony Labs divides the American public into four values-based segments. Not only are these segments well-researched and proven through successful narrative work by various issue movements, Harmony Labs also conducted nuclear-specific research on behalf of NTI,<sup>4</sup> allowing this project to pinpoint with greater clarity the distinct audiences most persuadable on nuclear weapons, grouped by their values, interests, and behaviors. Three of the four audience segments represent the persuadable audience on nuclear disarmament and constitute a supermajority of the American public. These audience segments offer opportunity for substantial growth for the field because they were moved to favor action and beliefs on disarmament when exposed to sample media.

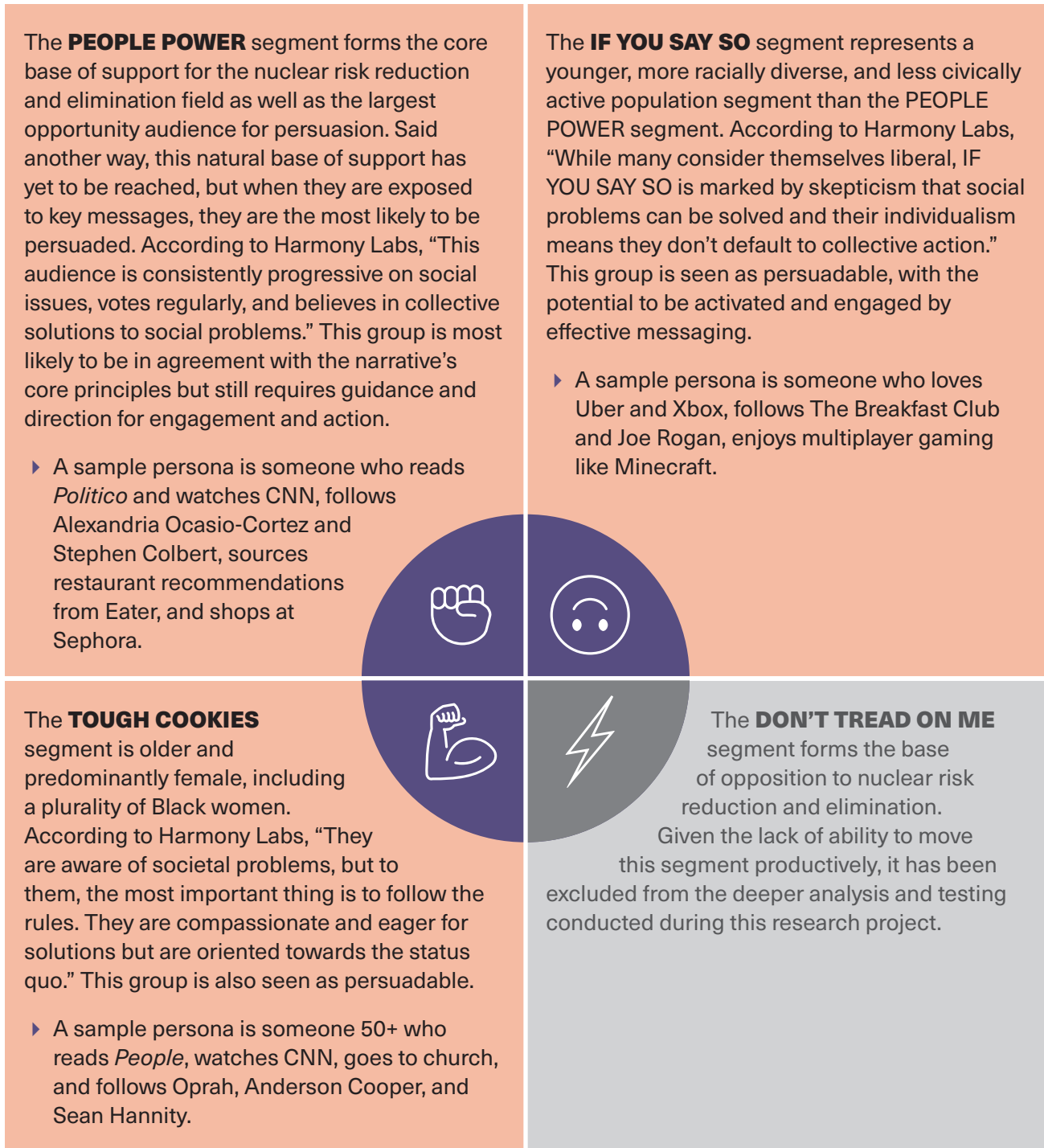
The new nuclear narrative is designed to reach the three persuadable segments described below: People Power, If You Say So, and Tough Cookies (Figure 2). Focus groups were organized around each audience segment, and the narrative framework includes elements that worked well across all persuadable segments.

When applying the new narrative text, tailor your message to your specific audience without losing attributes that work for a supermajority of Americans. If exposed to convincing messaging, these audiences might be persuaded to prioritize the issue and could become key messengers, reaching decision-makers and their own peers.

<sup>3</sup> See Harmony Labs Narrative Observatory, <https://narrativeobservatory.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> See Riki Conrey, Harmony Labs, Rewriting the Nuclear Story, and Gretchen Barton, Kirk Cheyfitz, and Riki Conrey, *Nuclear Narrative and Audience Research: A World Free of Nuclear Weapons* (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2021), <https://www.nti.org/nti-nuclear-narrative-and-audience-research/>.

**FIGURE 2. Three Persuadable Segments**



A more detailed analysis of these audience segments can be found in [Appendix B](#).

Although the core and expanded narratives emphasize messaging elements that appealed to all three persuadable segments, the research also identified messages that ranked highly for only one or two segments. To see proof points by audience segment, see [Appendix D](#). To read about how the focus group findings applied to various audience segments, see [Appendix E](#).

▶ “The entertainment complex could be one of our greatest allies against the military-industrial complex.”

— Former senior White House official

# HOW WE GOT HERE: WHAT IS NARRATIVE?

A narrative is a collection of stories and beliefs about the way the world works, which shapes how a person experiences, perceives, or makes sense of a particular issue. Narratives can be harmful, beneficial, or both. Every story has a moral or universal truth, and a new narrative strategy is about changing the moral that society has accepted.<sup>5</sup>

Humans are uniquely wired to understand the world through story, myth, and narrative.<sup>6</sup> Human decisions—even those that seem rational—are made in the unconscious where stories of how the world works reside and where true drivers of emotions can be submerged. Research consistently demonstrates that facts and data are not persuasive, but stories are.

Narrative shapes mindsets, defines “normal,” affects how we filter experiences and the meanings we assign, determines how we define problems and solutions, and establishes what we tolerate or seek to change in systems, policies, and practices.

<sup>5</sup> Additional resources on using narrative for social change can be found in [Appendix F](#).

<sup>6</sup> Carl Alviani, “The Science Behind Storytelling,” *Medium*, October 11, 2018, <https://medium.com/the-protagonist/the-science-behind-storytelling-51169758b22c>.

## What Makes Storytelling Effective?

Storytelling that effectively harnesses how humans process information is built on a broad framework that can be simplified into five storytelling imperatives.

FIGURE 3. Five Storytelling Imperatives



- 1 POSITION THE AUDIENCE AS THE HERO OF THE STORY:** People must see themselves in stories in order to feel a sense of relevance or agency. When motivating action by an audience, they must be the subject, not the object, of a story. Highlighting the role that everyday people have played in the past, or can play today, to bring about change can be one way to accomplish this goal.
- 2 BUILD TRUST AND RELEVANCE:** Connect to what your audience already cares about and who they trust.



## Building Powerful Narratives

Narrative strategy is the practice of creating and sharing pieces of content to forge, spread, and reinforce a shared “moral of the story.” The new nuclear narrative counters harmful messages, specifically, those that suggest “nuclear weapons keep us safe” as well as those that imply an “us versus them” mindset. It displaces these inaccurate and paralyzing tropes by inspiring more people to understand how they can take action, based on widely held values, to create a future free from the threat of nuclear weapons.

Each communication in a strongly executed narrative strategy is part of a larger whole. Whether a news story, social media post, website, speech, private conversation, or pop culture moment, each transmission taps into and reinforces a broader narrative.

Narratives do not exist in isolation. They emerge from a multidimensional system: channels, messengers, words, and images that project relevance and credibility to a member of your persuadable audience. Whether you’re riding the waves of awareness and interest in the wake of Robert Oppenheimer’s story filling screens large and small, or reminding legislative staffers of the power we all hold to choose sanity, safety, and “cost-efficiency” at a dynamic geopolitical moment, it is important to reflect on whom you are trying to reach and what you want them to do, as you consider the messages and stories they are simultaneously encountering.

Understanding the dominant narratives your audience already accepts and how to shift or activate them are critical to enacting and sustaining policy change. For example, passing economic reforms that address systemic inequalities is harder if the dominant narrative is about “pulling yourself up by the bootstraps.” Shifting problematic narratives starts by being conscious of how choices on policy, organizing, research, and communications all tell stories.

Storytelling should be used across advocacy work, policy analysis, fundraising efforts, grassroots organizing, communications, and beyond.

▶ “Every story needs a zip code and a heartbeat.”

— Kaitlin Yarnall, National Geographic Chief Storytelling Officer, as relayed by Outrider’s Robert K. Elder



# HOW WE GOT HERE: BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

In fall 2023, NTI and Ploughshares engaged MetGroup to collaborate on developing a clear, comprehensive, effective, and persuasive narrative framework related to nuclear threats, security, and disarmament. The project team:

- ▶ Conducted a landscape analysis of narrative and messaging research commissioned by the existing nuclear risk reduction and disarmament field.
- ▶ Conducted supplemental testing to refine core values important to a supermajority that want to address nuclear risks (see [Appendix B](#)).
- ▶ Assessed messaging guidance developed by field members and their partners over recent years.
- ▶ Commissioned ReThink Media to conduct an audit of news media coverage of nuclear issues between 2020 and 2023.

Other activities engaged field members:

- ▶ An on-site stakeholder mapping session with representatives from nine organizations.
- ▶ Listening sessions with 40 representatives from 16 organizations.
- ▶ Interviews with key stakeholders, including staff in the field, current and former presidential administration officials and Congressional staff, and staff from other movements.

The team also created a narrative advisory panel that was engaged multiple times over half a year to share their insights, expertise, and experience in areas such as communications, grassroots organizing, and legislative advocacy.

NTI and MetGroup then developed and tested new narrative content and supporting messaging with six focus groups who represented persuadable audience segments.<sup>7</sup> This focus group input refined the narrative by incorporating the highest-performing message components.

<sup>7</sup> See [Appendix E](#) for the full focus group report and [Appendix C](#) for Audience Analysis.

The resulting new nuclear narrative is designed to activate the field's base constituencies into personally identifying with nuclear risk reduction and taking action to support its goals, while also opening the door to deeper engagement with persuadable audience segments.

### THE FIELD'S SELF-EVALUATION ON NARRATIVE

Participants in listening sessions were asked to evaluate the field's narrative strategy. Confidence in the field's message, messengers, and know-how, and resources to execute were all below the 60 percent mark.

FIGURE 5. Measures of Confidence in Messaging



▶ “The younger generation is a blank slate on nukes. We need to educate them by going where they are and speaking their language.”

— Molly McGinty, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War

## Research Findings and Storytelling Imperatives

Deeply understanding the beliefs of the public and what drives them was an essential starting point for defining a new narrative strategy.

A top-level summary of U.S. public opinion:

- ▶ The risk posed by the nuclear threat is not a top-of-mind concern for most people.<sup>8</sup>
- ▶ By a 5:1 ratio, people see nuclear weapons as an asset, not liability, to our security.<sup>9</sup>
- ▶ An overwhelming majority of people would prefer a world without nuclear weapons (84 percent<sup>10</sup>) but just half can imagine it ever happening.
- ▶ Fewer than one-third saw a role for themselves in achieving this vision.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The threat of nuclear weapons or related topics does not appear in the long list of issues in Gallup's long-running “Most Important Problem” survey (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/1675/most-important-problem.aspx>). Nor do nuclear weapons appear as a stand-alone top issue in Pew's 2024 survey of registered voters (<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/09/09/issues-and-the-2024-election>), although foreign policy does. “Reducing the spread of weapons of mass destruction” ranked third among America's top long-range foreign policy goals in a Pew survey published April 23, 2024 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/04/23/what-are-americans-top-foreign-policy-priorities/>).

<sup>9</sup> Note that the 5:1 ratio excludes 43 percent of respondents who stated that the nuclear arsenal made no difference or that they don't know enough to make an assessment. Dina Smeltz, Craig Kafura, and Sharon K. Weiner, *Majority in U.S. Want to Learn More About Nuclear Policy* (The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, July 19, 2023), <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/majority-us-want-learn-more-about-nuclear-policy>.

<sup>10</sup> Bill McInturf and Elizabeth Harrington (Public Opinion Strategies), Public Opinion Survey Research (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Barton et al., *Nuclear Narrative and Audience Research*.

In the following figure, more expansive findings from diverse audience research projects are organized across the five key storytelling imperatives and offer a fuller picture of how to counter the prevailing narrative on nuclear weapons.

**FIGURE 6. Research Findings That Underpin Nuclear Storytelling Imperatives**

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS	STORYTELLING IMPERATIVE	HOW TO DO IT
Public doesn't believe they can influence nuclear weapons policy	<b>1</b> Position the audience as the hero of the story	Share stories where people made an impact and provide a clear call to action
Voters don't consider nuclear threats a top issue	<b>2</b> Build trust and relevance	Connect to issues people care about, like excessive spending, and use trusted messengers
News audit shows advocates aren't connecting on values	<b>3</b> Connect with audiences through shared values	Use core values of agency, courage, optimism, sustainability, and security
Using fear of other states or actors can lead to desire to reinforce nuclear arsenal	<b>4</b> Express urgency with hope	Expose the risks of nukes themselves—close calls, sole authority, and nuclear winter
Goal of elimination triggers skepticism	<b>5</b> Articulate a clear vision with realism	State the benefits of the steps to elimination; share examples of past progress

## 1 Position the Audience as the Hero of the Story

**People do not think they have a role to play in nuclear risk reduction and disarmament and are consistently left out of the success stories we tell.** As ReThink found, very little of the field's media outreach references the role everyday people have played and instead reinforce the belief that policymakers and experts alone are the heroes of the story. This reinforces that most Americans don't feel a sense of agency on the issue and therefore, don't engage.<sup>12</sup>

**People want specific guidance on actions to help reduce the nuclear risk.** Given the overwhelming and global nature of the nuclear issue, people are understandably uncertain about actions they could take that would be meaningful, effective, and worth their time and energy. MetGroup focus group participants reacted positively to calls to action such as voting, protesting, and holding elected officials accountable and also expressed interest in more detailed guidance.

- ▶ Every public speaking or communication should help people see their role, ideally with a call to action.

## 2 Build Trust and Relevance

**Most people are not thinking about nuclear weapons.** Although concern about nuclear risks is rising with the conflict in Ukraine and growing brinkmanship with China,<sup>13</sup> when compared to other issues, nuclear risks are not among people's top concerns or voting priorities. This ultimately reflects the success of the dominant narrative that nuclear weapons keep us safe and a lack of awareness of rising risks and feasible solutions. For as long as this relevance gap exists, it's essential that advocates connect problems and solutions to what people already care about.

- ▶ One entry point is the cost of nuclear weapons. Although people consider economic issues—such as jobs, inflation, and housing—a higher priority, focus group participants across all three audience segments expressed shock and increased interest after understanding the almost \$2 trillion cost.

**Framing the problem in terms of “The dangerous idea that threatening mass destruction somehow makes the world safer” is more effective than referring to “The dangerous misconception that nuclear weapons keep us safe.”** The “dangerous idea” language frames the issue in terms of logic and common sense (i.e., how can threatening mass destruction be safe?). The “dangerous misconception that nuclear weapons keep us safe” implies a degree of naivete, or worse unwitting complicity, on the part of the public, closing the door to further discussion.

**Enlist trusted messengers.** On the topic of nuclear weapons, survey research indicates that most people say they are likely to trust nuclear weapons experts, U.S. military leaders, and cybersecurity experts more than academic experts, religious leaders, or even current or former top government officials.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> In research conducted by Harmony Labs for NTI, only a third of people thought they had a role to play (Barton et al., [Nuclear Narrative and Audience Research](#)). In David Binder Research commissioned by ReThink in 2018, 45 percent of people agreed with the idea that even working together, people like them wouldn't be able to change current U.S. policy like who has the authority to launch nuclear weapons.

<sup>13</sup> Greg Hadley, “American Public's Concern About Nuclear War Growing, Survey Finds,” *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, December 2, 2022, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/american-publics-concern-about-nuclear-war-growing-survey-finds/>.

<sup>14</sup> Hart Research commissioned by NTI polling voters in 13 states, from November 2019.

▶ “We need former senior military leaders to say [about modernization and new weapon systems], ‘we don’t need all of this.’”

— Former White House official

### 3 Connect with Audiences Through Shared Values

The research identified five core values—agency, courage, optimism, sustainability, and security—that are crucial for an effective narrative that resonates with audiences. However, the field is not applying these shared values to communications. ReThink Media’s 2015 and 2023 audits both found significant underperformance in the field’s ability to reference deeply held shared values in its media outreach. As ReThink describes it, what’s important is “naming or evoking the shared values that underlie your position. Making explicit why what you are speaking about matters.”

- ▶ Organizations can apply the five values identified in this guide to draw audiences in all communications: op-eds, advocacy emails, press releases, Congressional leave-behinds, or tweets.

**With “nukes keep us safe” as a prevailing narrative, those working to counter it must address the core value of “security.”** Multiple public opinion surveys show that Americans believe nuclear weapons are a security asset, rather than a liability. Most recently in July 2023, the Chicago Public Affairs Council found a 5:1 ratio of Americans saying that “the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal makes the country safer than less safe.” An earlier study, conducted by Topos in 2009, concluded that “the most effective way of building support for new nuclear weapons policy is to directly take on the conceptual trap ‘Nuclear weapons = Security,’ with a claim that reverses the usual understanding.” Nuclear weapons create risk rather than reduce it.<sup>15</sup>

- ▶ Because security is such a closely held value across key audience segments, it is critical to tackle this head on, pointing out the ways in which nuclear weapons undermine our security, rather than ensure it. Proof points in the extended narrative ([Appendix D](#)) include examples of close calls.

<sup>15</sup> Aubrun et al., *From Asset to Liability*.

## NEWS MEDIA AUDIT SHOWS NEED FOR IMPROVED NARRATIVE PRACTICES

Effective messaging evokes shared values, talks about past successes and the future, and provides a sense of agency. A media audit by ReThink demonstrates that most news quotes and opinion pieces from nuclear risk reduction and disarmament advocates lack these elements.

TABLE 2. Percentage of Core Values in News and Opinion Pieces

	News Quotes	Opinion Pieces
Past Successes	3%	19%
Shared Values	1%	33%
Connection to the Future	1%	7%
Individual/Collective Agency	0.4%	14%

Source: ReThink Media 2020–2023 news media audit

Journalists pick the quotes that get published, but op-eds are almost entirely in the control of the writer and reflect the field’s proactive messaging strategy. The study notes, “If advocates don’t provide a path forward and a sense that solutions are possible, the audience is likely to feel overwhelmed and want to disengage from the issue.”

ReThink’s audit examined 27,000 news and opinion articles published between September 2020 and August 2023. [Key findings are available online](#), and the full report is available upon request to ReThink.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Adrienne Lynette, *Arms Control Advocates Have Increased Voiceshare, Media Audit Finds* (ReThink Media, February 12, 2024), <https://rethinkmedia.org/blog/arms-control-advocates-have-increased-voiceshare-media-audit-finds/>.

## 4 Express Urgency with Hope

**Use “all of us” instead of “us versus them.”** Research shows that deepening fear about who has nuclear weapons—expressed as “us versus them” (e.g., Russia, China, Iran)—reinforces the utility of nuclear weapons and arguments for arms build-ups. On the other hand, conversations describing problems with the weapons and systems themselves left people more favorable toward policies of risk reduction, diplomacy, and elimination. This approach demonstrates that “all of us” are at risk from nuclear weapons. Examples demonstrating how nuclear weapons put all of us at risk include close calls, risky decision-making structures, and nuclear winter.<sup>17</sup> Importantly, whereas reactive news cycles revolve around the challenging “us versus them,” proactive campaigns by advocates can reframe the problem as affecting “all of us.”

<sup>17</sup> Fond et al., [An Unthinkable Problem from a Bygone Era](#). This existing research finding was underlined by the quantitative research conducted for this guide that found “to better safeguard a future for all of us” as the strongest rationale for action (see [Appendix B](#)).

**Provide concrete proof points, not details.** Across the research, people expressed a desire for more information to understand how nuclear risk reduction could be accomplished. However, avoid providing overwhelming content or too many “wonky” details. A strong narrative invites curiosity, which can overcome skepticism. Most audience members come to the conversation with little-to-no knowledge about nuclear weapons and plenty of doubt. Focus groups even found some people completely unfamiliar with the term “Cold War.” Some proof points are needed to answer questions and drive interest—but jargon, “wonkiness,” and too many details can scare people away or inadvertently open new lines of doubt.

- ▶ Speak and write in plain language, providing key proof points essential for initial understanding. Links to more detailed explanations can and should be provided, where possible.
- ▶ The reference to the 80 percent reduction of nuclear arsenals in the 1980s was cited across focus groups as one of the strongest proof points, and they noted that it gave them more hope that nuclear reduction was possible.

### **5** Articulate a Clear Vision with Realism

**A supermajority of people prefer a world without nuclear weapons, but few can imagine it.** As noted above, people prefer a world without nuclear weapons, but few can imagine it. Focus group participants doubted that leaders would be able to cooperate on this issue or that the global community would be able to come to agreement with countries such as Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Most also said they believed there would be no way to verify that all nuclear weapons had been dismantled or destroyed.

**There is overwhelming skepticism about the total elimination of nuclear weapons.** Across previous research and our recent focus groups, there is overwhelming skepticism that total elimination of the nuclear arsenal is possible. Opening a narrative with a call for total disarmament activates incredulity. Starting with steps to reduce threats, like reductions, keeps the door open and enables a conversation about past successes at reducing the number of nuclear weapons globally.

**Despite skepticism, all three constituent segments see efforts at reducing nuclear threats (“every step in that direction makes us safer” in the new narrative) as a worthwhile and more realistic goal.** MetGroup’s focus group participants in all three segments agreed with this statement: “Even if we never get all the way to that goal, every step in that direction will only make us safer.” Participants said that they felt like this was a more feasible goal, which appealed to them.



# IMPLEMENTING THE NARRATIVE

## Checklist for More Effective Communication

### 1 POSITION THE AUDIENCE AS THE HERO OF THE STORY

- **Progress is possible, together:** Can your audience see themselves and “regular people” as actors in the story? Have you provided examples of success?
- **Agency:** Have you provided specific (and realistic) actions for your audience? For example, contacting elected representatives or sharing content.

### 2 BUILD TRUST AND RELEVANCE

- **Plain language:** Avoid acronyms, jargon, or complex terms and details that come across as “wonky” and confusing. Speak simply.
- **Connect nukes to relevant topics:** Talk about how nuclear weapons connect to current issues, such as the \$2 trillion cost of nuclear weapons during a period of high inflation and economic hardship.
- **Trusted messengers:** Can you cite a nuclear scientist, a veteran, someone from the armed forces, or a civilian national security expert?

### 3 CONNECT WITH AUDIENCES THROUGH SHARED VALUES

- **Values that resonate:** Consult the narrative for language that projects courage, optimism, agency, security, and sustainability.

### 4 EXPRESS URGENCY WITH HOPE

- **Expose the fallacy that nuclear weapons keep us safe:** Cite tested examples that resonate, including close calls.
- **No “bad guy with a nuke” frame:** Have you made nuclear weapons the threat (by describing inherent flaws in the system), instead of focusing on bad behavior by other countries?
- **Step-by-step progress:** Have you tempered urgency (and frightening consequences) with solutions and hope for the future? Describe steps that lead toward the larger goal. For example, “Supporting [relevant initiative] ensures security today and forges a path toward eventual elimination of nuclear weapons.”

### 5 ARTICULATE A CLEAR VISION WITH REALISM

- **Bold and realistic:** When addressing nuclear disarmament, talk about “reduction as a step toward eventual elimination” and explain the steps to manifest it. Back it up with evidence of wins, including drastic reductions already achieved.
- **A vision for a nuke-free future:** Can you talk about the possibilities that exist in a world no longer held hostage by the global nuclear weapons arsenal?

# NEXT STEPS FOR THE NUCLEAR RISK REDUCTION AND DISARMAMENT FIELD

Members of the field consistently reference the need to build political and people power.

It won't be possible until far more people understand the relevance of nuclear weapons in the context of their own values and the grave dangers nukes pose—and believe that they can play a role in reducing nuclear risks.

Ploughshares and NTI partnered on developing the new research-based, community-informed narrative strategy to help shift understanding, shape behavior, and energize new audiences around nuclear risk reduction and eventual disarmament. We are eager to implement the findings ourselves and invite the field to use and adapt it in its own work.

## **Steps every organization can take today to reframe the narrative:**

- ▶ Use the checklist to review content, from social media posts to op-eds to testimony.
- ▶ Incorporate the narrative guide as a resource for onboarding staff engaging on nuclear weapons, not just those working in communications.
- ▶ Identify a narrative liaison to review your organization's communications materials against the narrative framework and collaborate with others doing the same.
- ▶ Provide feedback to NTI and Ploughshares as you apply the narrative recommendations. We look forward to hearing what works, what doesn't, and how we can improve upon these findings for the benefit of the field.

**Steps and questions members of the field can consider to build alignment, create more effective partnerships, and support adoption and improvement of the narrative:**

- ▶ Within a diverse field with differing strategies, constituencies, and priorities, how might we continue to support efforts to shift public beliefs through a shared narrative strategy and framework? Are there opportunities to accelerate progress across organizations by coordinating on audiences and messengers? Consider new partnerships beyond the field where there are complementary strengths in terms of trust and reach and ask if there are messengers you need access to or messengers you can offer for unique collaborations.
- ▶ Reactive earned media is almost exclusively grounded in a “bad guys with nukes” paradigm, reinforcing nuclear deterrence and arms racing. As the field continues to rely primarily on earned or unpaid media to transmit messages, how can we support more spokespeople in their efforts to effectively pivot to a new frame? Consider hosting practice sessions for anyone who speaks or writes for your organization and harvest and share clips of the best examples of upending the status quo paradigm.
- ▶ What can we learn from successful efforts on passage of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), supporting the 2015 Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) and leveraging the film *Oppenheimer*? Consider how proactive campaigns can better advance a new narrative and ask what stories do your current policy, organizing, and campaign priorities tell the public and which opportunities do the work of establishing relevance with nukes framed as creating risk from the start.
- ▶ How might we create a space to share ongoing learnings, measure collective progress, and iterate on the implementation of a shared narrative? Consider identifying community members to gather and share questions and challenges from the field that come up along the way.

# APPENDICES

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## Appendix A: How the Core Values Emerged from Research

The core values were identified through research on common or shared values between the public and advocates. And then refined through language used in focus groups.

- ▶ **Audience research** projects included analyzing 90-minute one-on-one qualitative interviews with a cross-section of Americans<sup>18</sup> and quantitative consumer research among the 77 percent who believed nuclear weapons could be reduced or eliminated.<sup>19</sup>
- ▶ **Advocate research** included values delivered by advocates in an analysis of news media quotes and op-eds<sup>20</sup> and a workshop of 18 advocates from nine organizations exploring vision, archetypes, and values.<sup>21</sup>

Table A-1 below summarizes and highlights how the shared, core values emerged.

**TABLE A-1. Genesis of Shared Core Values**

Consumer Research		(Shared) Core Values	Advocate Research	
Barton et al. 2021	Grow Progress 2024		Barton et al. 2021	Rethink 2024
Future	Future	<b>Optimism</b>	Idealism	Optimism
Freedom		<b>Courage</b>	Creativity	Courage & Tenacity
Control & Agency	Independence	<b>Agency</b>	Empowerment, Community	
Sustainability, “Wisdom Through Generations”	Environmentalism & Compassion	<b>Sustainability</b>	Sustainability & Diversity	Fairness
Community, Connection	Interdependence	<b>Security</b>	Survival & Security	Safety, Security, Cooperation

<sup>18</sup> Barton et al., [Nuclear Narrative and Audience Research](#).

<sup>19</sup> See [Appendix B](#).

<sup>20</sup> Lynette, [Arms Control Advocates Have Increased Voiceshare](#).

<sup>21</sup> Barton et al., [Nuclear Narrative and Audience Research](#).

## Appendix B: Grow Progress Message Testing and Audience Understanding Survey

In January 2024, MetGroup conducted two tests through the Grow Progress market research platform: an **Audience Understanding** survey to identify the core values and emotions that shape audiences' public opinions on nuclear weapons and nuclear risk reduction; and **Rapid Message Testing** in which 1,200 people were surveyed on five test messages (and one placebo message).

For the **Audience Understanding** survey, 1,500 respondents were first asked the following core question: *"How much do you agree with the following statement: 'I believe people and nations can work together to reduce or even get rid of nuclear weapons.'"*

Following this, respondents were asked three additional questions to explore their emotional response to the issue and how likely they'd take various actions. This survey, along with Grow Progress's algorithm and proprietary data, provided us with insights into the core values, emotions, and demographics of those who believe strongly either way and those who are still undecided (and therefore persuadable) on this issue.

Some of the most relevant findings from the Audience Understanding survey included:

1. Most (77 percent) of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed with the core statement (*"I believe people and nations can work together to reduce or even get rid of nuclear weapons"*).
2. The core values that were scored most highly by the above 77 percent of respondents were:
  - ▶ **Equality:** *"I think it is important that every person in the world be treated equally. I believe everyone should have equal opportunities in life."*
  - ▶ **Compassion:** *"We should protect the weak and vulnerable in the world."*
  - ▶ **Independence:** *"It is important to me to be independent. I like to rely on myself."*
  - ▶ **Environmentalism:** *"I strongly believe that people should care for nature. Looking after the environment is important to me."*
3. When asked *"Which of the following is the most compelling reason to take steps to reduce or even get rid of nuclear weapons?"*, the top answers were *"to better safeguard the future for all of us"* and *"to prevent the environmental disaster that would result from a nuclear explosion."*

The **Rapid Message Testing** survey presented 1,500 respondents with a series of demographic questions, followed by one of five test messages (and one placebo message as a control). After receiving the test message, respondents were then asked three post-exposure questions to gauge their willingness to take deeper actions: (a) read an article, (b) share information on social media, or (c) vote for a candidate based on this issue.

The five test messages presented to respondents are summarized as follows:

1. We've Come So Far, We Can Finish the Job
2. Solving Global Threats by Working Together
3. Taking Control of Our Future
4. Nukes Anywhere Threaten the Planet Everywhere
5. Promoting Real Safety and Security

Some of our most relevant findings from the Rapid Message Testing survey include:




1. The overall winning message among respondents was *"We've Come So Far, We Can Finish the Job,"* which led to respondents being 6+ percent more likely to be aligned with our core position and take follow-up actions accordingly.
  - ▶ This message was especially effective with younger people (18–34), women, and moderates.
2. "Solving Global Threats by Working Together" performed well with those with children under 18, but showed a risk of backlash with those without children under 18, as well as Republicans and conservatives.
3. "Taking Control of Our Future" performed well with urbanites and liberals, but showed a risk of backlash with suburbanites, moderates, and conservatives.
4. "Nukes Anywhere Threaten the Planet Everywhere" performed well with suburbanites, liberals, and those over 55, but showed risk of backlash with those ages 35–54.
5. "Promoting Real Safety and Security" performed well only with urbanites, but showed possible risk of backlash with suburbanites, ruralites, conservatives, and those aged 18–34.

## Appendix C: Snapshot of Audience Segments

Common cultural and media opportunities across the three persuadable groups can be found in [Harmony's 2022 research report for NTI](#).<sup>22</sup> Specific data on the most persuadable subgroups within these segments on nuclear weapons can be found in [infographic](#)<sup>23</sup> or [written form](#)<sup>24</sup> online.

Extended descriptions of the general audience segments from Harmony Labs are in Table A-2.

**TABLE A-2. General Audience Segment Descriptions**




	Audience Segment		
	 PEOPLE POWER	 IF YOU SAY SO	 TOUGH COOKIES
<b>Sample Mantra</b> <i>(What they believe)</i>	We have to liberate ourselves from the status quo. It's time to live up to our ideals, especially for the marginalized and oppressed. All kinds of people coming together in community can fix the system.	It's complicated. Politicians lie, cheat, and steal—corporations too. The system can't be trusted. We have to look out for ourselves, here and now. Why not have fun doing it? I wish we could solve society's problems, but a lot of people suck, and there's no way the system is going to change.	Life's a grind and never fair, but you've got to keep going. We play by the rules, just like our parents. We learned to treat others right, and that family comes first. With a little faith and some hard work, there's no reason this country's problems can't be solved.
<b>Demographics</b>	Skews millennial and predominantly female. More than half are white, with 18 percent Black and 16 percent Latinx.	Younger, racially diverse, and well-educated with over 75 percent having at least some college education.	Older, predominantly female, and, although majority white, has a substantial proportion of Black women.




<sup>22</sup> Conrey, *Rewriting the Nuclear Story*.

<sup>23</sup> Harmony Labs Infographics, <https://www.nti.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/NTI-Infographics.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Harmony Labs, Cultural Brief, <https://www.nti.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Cultural-Brief.pdf>.



		Audience Segment		
		 PEOPLE POWER	 IF YOU SAY SO	 TOUGH COOKIES
<b>Psychographics and Values</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Deeply values community with an “us” mentality that is driven by creativity and hope.</li> <li>▶ Consistently progressive on social issues.</li> <li>▶ Regularly votes.</li> <li>▶ Believes in collective solutions to social problems.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Liberal but skeptical that social problems can be solved.</li> <li>▶ Individualistic and do not default to collective action.</li> <li>▶ Less civically active than those in the “People Power” segment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Aware of societal problems, but care most about following the rules.</li> <li>▶ Compassionate and eager for solutions, but oriented toward the status quo.</li> </ul>
<b>Sample Messengers</b>	<b>Voices</b>	Bernie Sanders, AOC, Sarah Cooper, Phil Lewis, Stephen Colbert	Mr. Beast, Elon Musk, SSSinper Wolf, CoryxKenshin, <i>Key &amp; Peele</i>	Oprah Winfrey, Tamron Hall, Bob & Brad, Anderson Cooper, Sean Hannity
	<b>News Sites</b>	<i>Washington Post, Slate, Politico, NYT, BBC</i>	<i>Venture Beat, Breakfast Club, IGN, Vice, CNBC</i>	CBS News, <i>People, Essence, CNN, AOL</i>
	<b>Brands</b>	Sephora, Eater, The Knot, Booking.com, Patch	Uber, Cider, Xbox, Louis Vuitton, Khan Academy	Pet MD, Spruce Craft, American Greetings, Microsoft, Dove
	<b>Media</b>	TEDx, <i>Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon</i> , NBA, Stardew Valley, Time	<i>Rick and Morty</i> , Future, Megan Thee Stallion, First We Feast, Crunchyroll	<i>The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, 90-day Fiancé, Nicki Swift, Snopes, Dancing with the Stars</i>

	Audience Segment		
	 <b>PEOPLE POWER</b>	 <b>IF YOU SAY SO</b>	 <b>TOUGH COOKIES</b>
<b>Message Themes</b>	Most likely to be in agreement with the field’s core principles, but still requires guidance and direction when it comes to engagement and action.	Persuadable, with the potential to be activated and engaged by more effective messaging focused on shared values, evidence, and trust building.	Persuadable, like the “If You Say So” segment, but more committed to the status quo and, thus, a heavier lift. Messaging should focus on safety and security, expert guidance, rather than redefining or undermining the status quo.
<b>More Details</b>	<a href="#">Explore more details about the People Power segment on the Harmony Labs website.</a>	<a href="#">Explore more details about the If You Say So segment on the Harmony Labs website.</a>	<a href="#">Explore more details about the Tough Cookies segment on the Harmony Labs website.</a>




## Appendix D: Value-Coded Narrative by Audience Segment




Testing demonstrated that the new narrative overall and many elements of the supporting message framework were effective across all three base and persuadable constituencies. It also identified specific messaging elements that were more effective with specific segments. In Table A-3 below, messaging that works for all three segments runs all the way across whereas messaging specific to a constituency is shown in the column for that constituency.




You'll note that the colors associated with each of these five values is used for text that is intended to evoke or reflect these values.

**VALUES LEGEND** Courage Optimism Agency Sustainability Security

**TABLE A-3. Value-Coded Narrative by Audience Segment**

	 <b>PEOPLE POWER</b>	 <b>IF YOU SAY SO</b>	 <b>TOUGH COOKIES</b>
<b>MORAL</b>	Every step we take to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons brings us closer to creating the safe and sustainable future we all deserve.		
<b>VISION</b>	Everyone deserves to live in a stable, safe, and sustainable world. Together we can create a world where governments invest in human needs over weapons of mass destruction, people come before corporations, and hope is a stronger force than fear. In this world, generations to come will be free to live the lives they choose.		
<b>CHALLENGE</b>	<p>To make this future possible, we must recognize our common humanity and challenge the dangerous idea that threatening mass destruction somehow makes the world safer. This idea was always dangerous, but in today's world, it's even more so. Nuclear weapons have become faster, more powerful, and more widespread. Just one of today's powerful nuclear weapons could kill or injure millions and cause widespread destruction and lasting environmental damage.</p> <p>We've had dozens of close calls with nuclear weapons—times when systems failed, people made mistakes, or leaders felt pressure to retaliate. We've been lucky, but our luck won't last forever. The only way to guarantee nuclear weapons are never used is to work together to get rid of them.</p>		

	 <b>PEOPLE POWER</b>	 <b>IF YOU SAY SO</b>	 <b>TOUGH COOKIES</b>
<b>CHALLENGE</b>	<b>Additional messaging for specific constituent segments:</b>		
	<p>New research has shown that even a limited regional nuclear conflict could dim the sun and devastate crops for years, resulting in a famine that could kill billions of people—regardless of where the mushroom clouds appeared on the planet.</p> <p>For decades, people in nuclear frontline communities—often lower-income, rural, people of color, or indigenous communities—have been directly harmed by exposure to radiation and toxins due to the development, storage, or testing of nuclear weapons. Even without a nuclear explosion, these weapons represent a clear and present danger to building a more just, prosperous, and equitable world.</p>		
	<p>No leader—no matter who they are—should have the power to launch a nuclear weapon without consulting anyone else. In a healthy democracy, the lives of <b>millions of people should never be held in any one person’s hands.</b></p>		<p>No leader—no matter who they are—should have the power to launch a nuclear weapon without consulting anyone else. In a healthy democracy, the lives of <b>millions of people should never be held in any one person’s hands.</b></p>
<b>SOLUTION</b>	<p><b>It doesn’t have to be this way.</b> At another pivotal moment in history—the peak of the U.S.-Soviet arms race—<b>people spoke up</b> and <b>their demands</b> helped <b>lead to the elimination of more than 80 percent of nuclear weapons globally.</b> There were 70,000 nuclear weapons in 1986. Today, there are about 12,000. <b>Together, people and governments can finish the job.</b></p> <p>Global leaders who don’t agree on much else still agree that nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. And yet, historic <b>international agreements that have successfully protected us</b> for decades by limiting nuclear weapons will soon expire just as a new nuclear arms race is underway.</p> <p>The United States plans to spend almost \$2 trillion in the coming years on nuclear weapons. We are compounding the national debt by spending on outdated and dangerous weapons that put all of us at risk.</p>		

	 <b>PEOPLE POWER</b>	 <b>IF YOU SAY SO</b>	 <b>TOUGH COOKIES</b>
<b>SOLUTION</b>	<b>Additional messaging for the People Power constituent segment:</b>		
	Defense contractors and big corporations spend millions lobbying elected officials for lucrative contracts to build new nuclear weapons. They're driving a new nuclear arms race that is turning our tax dollars into their profits.		
<b>BENEFITS</b>	<p>Instead of spending almost \$2 trillion on nuclear weapons we hope never to use, our tax dollars would be better spent supporting our troops and veterans, rebuilding our roads and bridges, reducing health care costs, or funding education.</p> <p>Eliminating the nuclear threats will bring us closer to securing a shared future where nations work together to address challenges facing all of us—like climate change, pandemics, and artificial intelligence.</p>		
<b>CALL TO ACTION</b>	<p>We must urge our leaders to protect us now by working with other countries to reduce the number of nuclear weapons and the threats they pose while moving toward their eventual elimination. Even if we never get all the way to that goal, every step in that direction will make us safer.</p> <p>You can help to build that future by learning more about the issue, making your voice heard, adding it to your voting priorities, and holding your elected leaders accountable.</p>		
	<b>Additional messaging for specific constituent segments:</b>		
	As a global leader, the United States can lead by example by strengthening our alliances, fostering cooperation with other nuclear-armed states, and advancing strong new, verifiable limits on nuclear weapons.		As a global leader, the United States can lead by example by strengthening our alliances, fostering cooperation with other nuclear-armed states, and advancing strong new, verifiable limits on nuclear weapons.

## Appendix E: Metropolitan Group Focus Group Report

### Introduction

Metropolitan Group (MetGroup), on behalf of the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI) and Ploughshares, conducted six online focus group discussions (FGDs) in May–June 2024 to test narratives and messaging around nuclear risk reduction.

The FGDs were organized and recruited using the constituent segmentation<sup>25</sup> designed by Harmony Labs, broken down as follows:

Date	Group	Segmentation			
		Age	Gender	Race	Political
May 29	<b>People Power #1</b> (n=10)	33–54	6 women, 3 men, 1 non-binary	5 white, 5 Black	Strong Democrats
May 30	<b>If You Say So #1</b> (n=8)	21–29	6 women, 2 men	2 Asian, 1 Black, 5 white	Independents and Moderates
June 3	<b>Tough Cookies #1</b> (n=8)	30–40	5 women, 3 men	3 Black, 2 Hispanic/Latino, 2 white, 1 other	Independents and Moderates
June 4	<b>People Power #2</b> (n=10)	27–44	7 women, 3 men	3 Black, 4 Hispanic/Latino, 1 Asian, 2 white	Independents and Moderates
June 4	<b>If You Say So #2</b> (n=10)	22–30	7 women, 3 men	5 Black, 2 Asian, 3 white	Independents and Moderates
June 5	<b>Tough Cookies #2</b> (n=10)	45–59	7 women, 3 men	5 Black, 1 Hispanic/Latino, 4 white	Independents and Moderates

In each of these 90-minute FGDs, participants were asked to react to two narrative summary statements (rotated to eliminate order bias), nine problem statements, seven solution statements, one vision statement, and one call to action statement (see in the Focus Group Guide and Focus Group Slide Deck, available upon request). The bulk of the time was spent discussing their reactions to the content being shared. In addition, they were polled on their preferences between the narrative summary statements and asked to select the four most effective problem statements and three solution statements via polls as well. It is important to note that focus groups are a form of qualitative data collection, rather than

<sup>25</sup> The focus group makeup was in the range of our intended mix.

quantitative. Polling within a focus group can be helpful (as it was in this case) to identify concepts and ideas that are rising to the top across the groups rather than to predict response at a population level.

The focus group input suggests the revised narrative and messaging can increase levels of interest, priority, and urgency. Although it was not realistic to expect the narrative and messaging in a single session could raise nuclear reduction to a top priority, it does get people more interested in learning more and opens space for the issue to become a higher priority and act on a sense of personal agency.

With refinement along the lines described below, we believe the narrative and message framework can also accomplish the key objective of activating the *People Power* base of support while generating increased interest and potential for action by persuadables, and minimizing the risk of backlash among the constituents in the *People Power*, *If You Say So*, and *Tough Cookie* segments.

Despite high levels of skepticism, it is clear from the focus group testing that people in these three segments can be inspired to want to learn more, including the specific and tangible actions they can take. It is also clear that levels of awareness and understanding of the issue (including both the immediate, urgent need to take action and the successful steps taken in the past to limit the spread of nuclear weapons) are low. A public education campaign to increase awareness and understanding along these lines is a critical step toward generating the motivation to take action.

Please note that although the narrative summaries were originally labeled as “People Power Case for Nuclear Disarmament” and “Tough Cookies/Persuadables Case for Nuclear Disarmament,” we will refer to them below as the “Base” and “Persuadables” narrative summaries to avoid confusion with the references to constituent segments.

## Findings

- 1. The risk posed by the nuclear threat was not a top-of-mind concern among most of the focus group participants.** This is a verification of a core challenge NTI, Ploughshares, and MetGroup identified early in the process as part of the research scan. Although economic issues such as jobs, inflation, and housing are considered higher-priority issues, many participants expressed increased interest in the issue of nuclear disarmament after exposure to the narrative and messaging by the end of the FGDs.

  - ▶ Audiences were asked at the start of the discussion to list their most pressing concerns and priorities: participants from all three groups overwhelmingly answered with economic concerns: jobs, housing, inflation, and health care. Only four people out of 51 mentioned international relations or global security as a key issue, in most cases in reference to Gaza/Israel or Russia/Ukraine.
  - ▶ At the end of each FGD, participants were asked if the messaging had an impact on their perception or behaviors related to the issue. Many participants across all three groups said that they were likely to do more reading about the issue and speak to friends and family about what they had learned. Some participants said they would want to vote for a politician who they agreed with on this issue; however, only a few indicated that the messaging had impacted their voting behaviors or priorities (as opposed to reading or learning more about the issue). This is a strategic sequencing indicator that increased interest and curiosity can be peaked relatively quickly to open space for deepening understanding/knowledge, which is a likely precursor to more direct activation.

2. **As has been noted in prior research, every constituent segment evidenced overwhelming skepticism that total elimination of the nuclear arsenal is possible.** Participants doubt that U.S. leaders would be able to cooperate on this issue or that the global community would be able to come to agreement with states such as Iran, North Korea, and Russia. Most participants also believed that there would be no way of truly verifying that all nuclear weapons had been dismantled or destroyed.
3. **Despite the overwhelming skepticism about total elimination, all three constituent segments see the effort at reduction (every step in that direction makes us safer) as a worthwhile and more realistic goal.** Participants in all three segments said that they liked this sentence in the *Persuadables Narrative Summary*: “Even if we never get all the way to that goal, every step in that direction will only make us safer.” Participants said that they felt like this was a more feasible goal, which appealed to them.
4. **Framing the problem in terms of “The dangerous idea that threatening mass destruction somehow makes the world safer” is more effective than referring to “The dangerous misconception that nuclear weapons keep us safe.”** The “dangerous idea” language frames the issue in terms of logic and common sense (i.e., how can threatening mass destruction make the world safer?) whereas the “dangerous misconception” frame implies some degree of naivete (or worse, unwitting complicity) on the part of the public. In addition, although some participants challenged the assumption that people actually believe this “misconception” others countered that some people do believe it to be true, making the reference to “misconception” inaccurate. In either case, the phrasing focuses on the accuracy of the frame rather than on the meaning behind it, thereby reducing its power.
5. **Audiences expressed a desire for more concrete facts to understand how nuclear reduction could be accomplished.** As was the case here, one of the hallmarks of a strong narrative is that it invites questions about how the vision it expresses can be achieved. Addressing these questions and spreading awareness of how success has been achieved in the past may go a long way toward addressing the immediate skepticism most audiences exhibit when first considering this issue.
  - ▶ Participants wanted to know which organizations would be responsible for verifying or enforcing the elimination of nuclear weapons, who would need to agree to the treaties, and what role bodies such as the United Nations would have in the process.
  - ▶ The reference to the 80 percent reduction of nuclear arsenals during the Cold War was flagged by multiple people in each focus group as one of the most attention-getting elements of the narrative summaries, as well as a fact that gave them more hope that nuclear reduction was possible. The solution statement referencing this figure also polled well among *People Power* (9 participants out of 17), *If You Say So* (9/17), and *Tough Cookies* (8/17) audiences alike. It also raised the question of “according to whom.” The power of this proof point will be enhanced by credentialing it as part of the message.
  - ▶ Participants in all three groups expressed a desire to know more about the reduction process: how it was accomplished, which states and world leaders were involved, and how it was verified. They also wanted to know what had stalled the elimination of the final 20 percent.



**6. Five of the nine problem statements were well received by participants and should be considered for inclusion in the message framework for some or all audiences.**

- ▶ Two problem statements were selected by all three audience segments as among the most effective statements:
  - » (Problem Statement 4) “The U.S. plans to spend almost \$2 trillion in the coming years on nuclear weapons. We are compounding the national debt by spending on outdated and dangerous weapons that put us at risk.”
  - » (Problem Statement 8) “We’ve had dozens of close calls with nuclear weapons—times when systems failed, people made mistakes, or leaders felt pressure to retaliate. We’ve been lucky, but our luck won’t last forever. The only way to guarantee nuclear weapons are never used is to get rid of them.”
- ▶ Three other problem statements were preferred by two of the three constituent segments:
  - » (Problem Statement 6) “No leader—no matter who they are—should have the power to launch a nuclear weapon without consulting anyone else. In a healthy democracy, the lives of millions of people should never be held in any one person’s hands.” *People Power* and *Tough Cookies*, moderate preference from *If You Say So* segment
  - » (Problem Statement 7) “For decades, people in nuclear frontline communities—often lower-income, rural, people of color, or indigenous communities—have been directly harmed by exposure to radiation and toxins due to the development, storage, or testing of nuclear weapons. Even without a nuclear explosion, these weapons represent a clear and present danger to building a more just, prosperous, and equitable world.” *People Power* and *If You Say So*
  - » (Problem Statement 9) “New research has shown that even a limited regional nuclear conflict could dim the sun and devastate crops for years, resulting in a famine that could kill billions of people—regardless of where the mushroom clouds appeared on the planet.” *People Power* and *If You Say So*

**7. Four of the seven solution statements were well received by participants and should be considered for inclusion in the core message framework for some or all audiences.**

- ▶ Three solution statements were well received by all three audience segments:
  - » (Solution Statement 2) “Instead of spending almost \$2 trillion on nuclear weapons we hope never to use, our tax dollars would be better spent supporting our troops and veterans, rebuilding our roads and bridges, reducing health care costs, or funding education.” *People Power* (15/17), *If You Say So* (14/17), and *Tough Cookies* (9/17)
  - » (Solution Statement 7) “Eliminating the nuclear threat will secure our shared future and allow our leaders to focus on tackling other challenges we face, from the climate crisis and food insecurity to global pandemics and injustice.” *People Power* (10/17), *If You Say So* (12/17) and *Tough Cookies* (10/17)
  - » (Solution Statement 4) “In 1986, there were 70,000 nuclear weapons. Today, there are about 12,000. We’ve already eliminated more than 80% of the global nuclear stockpile. Together, people and governments can finish the job.” *People Power* (9/17), *If You Say So* (9/17) and *Tough Cookies* (8/17) (Note: Several participants expressed skepticism about the fact that 80 percent of nuclear weapons had been eliminated during the Cold War; citing a reputable independent source for this figure would help it maintain or increase its effectiveness).

- ▶ One solution statement was well received by *People Power* (10/17) and *Tough Cookies* (8/17) audiences, but poorly received by the *If You Say So* participants (2/17). This statement should be considered for use only with non-IYSS audiences.
  - » (Solution Statement 3) “As a global leader, the United States can lead by example by strengthening our alliances, fostering cooperation with other nuclear-armed states, and advancing strong new, verifiable limits on nuclear weapons.”

**8. Participants were interested in more specific guidance on actions they might be empowered to take to advance the objective of reducing the nuclear risk.** Given the overwhelming and global nature of the nuclear issue, participants were understandably unsure of what actions they could take that would be meaningful, effective, or worth their time and energy. They reacted positively to the calls to action (CTAs) they received and expressed interest in more detailed guidance on steps they could take. As has been discussed, in specific campaign and activation efforts, more specific CTAs should be included and the reactions in the FGDs indicate this will be welcome and will strengthen impact.

- ▶ Participants in all three constituent segments appreciated the CTA statement, saying that they felt empowered by the guidance on action they could take. Some participants also specifically highlighted the CTA in the *Persuadables Narrative Summary* as one of the elements they liked best (“We must urge our leaders to protect us now by working with other nations to reduce the number of nuclear weapons while moving toward their eventual elimination”).

**9. There is an opportunity to use some problem statements to both create a sense of urgency to address the issue now and to connect with specific CTAs.** Many of the proof points that tested well among participants could elevate the nuclear issue as an urgent priority while also suggesting more specific CTAs. For example, messaging that references expiring international treaties, diverting funding to other priority areas, and limiting or checking sole authority would likely be effective at capturing and engaging public interest.

- ▶ The problem statement referencing sole authority polled well, particularly with the *People Power* (15/17) and *Tough Cookies* (10/17) audience segments. Making this a voting or policy priority would be an effective CTA for audiences.
- ▶ The fact that international nuclear treaties are reaching their expiration garnered a lot of attention, with participants in both the *People Power* and *If You Say So* groups mentioning that it increased their sense of the urgency of the issue. Very few participants were aware of this fact, signaling a significant opportunity to leverage the urgency and time frame to elevate the issue and increase understanding/knowledge, and motivate the existing base to engage with elected leaders on this issue.
- ▶ When asked to identify which problem and solution statements they found most effective, participants in all six FGDs selected the statements referencing the fact that the United States spends \$2 trillion maintaining our nuclear arsenal. The problem statement referencing the \$2 trillion figure was the most effective statement across all three audience segments when polled: *People Power* and *Tough Cookies* (9/17 participants each) and *If You Say So* (15/17). And the solutions statement referencing alternative uses for that same \$2 trillion also performed strongly: *People Power* (15/17), *If You Say So* (14/17), and *Tough Cookies* (9/17). In addition to including this in the core message framework, this should be considered as an engagement and activation leverage point during election processes and federal budget advocacy efforts.

## Recommendations

1. Given the strong similarity of reactions across all three audience segments, we recommend deploying a single narrative summary with a foundational message framework that can be used across all three constituent segments (as opposed to distinct messaging stacks for each audience segment). Instead we recommend the single foundational message framework with specific variations for the audience segments to reflect supporting evidence and proof points that work more effectively with each constituent segment (see recommendation 4 below).
2. We recommend using the *People Power Narrative Summary* (available upon request) as the basis for the message framework, as the tone and framing tested better with most audience segments. We recommend retaining the framing of the problem as being the “Dangerous idea that somehow threatening mass destruction somehow makes the world safer.”
3. We also recommend incorporating key elements of the *Persuadables Narrative Summary* into the final message framework, based upon audience feedback about which elements from each statement worked best for them. Specifically, we recommend incorporating language referencing the expiration of international treaties; appeals to finding common ground across political divides; and replacing the elimination frame in the *People Power Narrative Summary* with the reduction language emphasizing that “Even if we never get all the way to that goal, every step in that direction will only make us safer.”
4. The proof points from the problem and solution statements that were well received by all audiences should be incorporated into the narrative and core message framework (for instance, references to the \$2 trillion required to maintain the nuclear arsenal, discussion of close calls from our recent history, and emphasizing the need for checks and balances on the president’s sole authority to launch a nuclear strike). Other proof points should be included on a case-by-case basis based on the constituent segment to which messaging is directed, as shown below.

Proof points to be incorporated into the core messaging for all constituent segments:

- ▶ “We’ve had dozens of close calls with nuclear weapons—times when systems failed, people made mistakes, or leaders felt pressure to retaliate. We’ve been lucky, but our luck won’t last forever. The only way to guarantee nuclear weapons are never used is to get rid of them.”
- ▶ “In 1986, there were 70,000 nuclear weapons. Today, there are about 12,000. We’ve already eliminated more than 80% of the global nuclear stockpile. Together, people and governments can finish the job.”
- ▶ “The United States plans to spend almost \$2 trillion in the coming years on nuclear weapons. We are compounding the national debt by spending on outdated and dangerous weapons that put us at risk.”
- ▶ “Instead of spending almost \$2 trillion on nuclear weapons we hope never to use, our tax dollars would be better spent supporting our troops and veterans, rebuilding our roads and bridges, reducing health care costs, or funding education.”
- ▶ “Eliminating the nuclear threat will secure our shared future and allow our leaders to focus on tackling other challenges we face, from the climate crisis and food insecurity to global pandemics and injustice.”

Proof points to be used for specific constituent segments:

- ▶ “No leader—no matter who they are—should have the power to launch a nuclear weapon without consulting anyone else. In a healthy democracy, the lives of millions of people should never be held in any one person’s hands.” *People Power* and *Tough Cookies*
- ▶ “For decades, people in nuclear frontline communities—often lower-income, rural, people of color, or indigenous communities—have been directly harmed by exposure to radiation and toxins due to the development, storage, or testing of nuclear weapons. Even without a nuclear explosion, these weapons represent a clear and present danger to building a more just, prosperous, and equitable world.” *People Power* and *If You Say So*
- ▶ “New research has shown that even a limited regional nuclear conflict could dim the sun and devastate crops for years, resulting in a famine that could kill billions of people—regardless of where the mushroom clouds appeared on the planet.” *People Power* and *If You Say So*
- ▶ “As a global leader, the United States can lead by example by strengthening our alliances, fostering cooperation with other nuclear-armed states, and advancing strong new, verifiable limits on nuclear weapons.” *People Power* and *Tough Cookies*

5. Further development of the narrative and messaging framework should emphasize *why* this is an urgent issue today. Language about the expiring international treaties, funding, sole authority, and other near-term policy goals will help increase the sense of urgency with which audiences receive this information and consider this issue.
6. The core message framework should also be more explicit about how audiences can address the nuclear threat, otherwise, they will simply dismiss the issue as too big, too broad, and beyond their pay scale. Including CTAs referencing specific actions people can take in a general sense is likely to result in increased engagement. More specific CTAs should be incorporated into messaging created for specific constituent segments or for specific outreach efforts and campaigns (e.g., to prompt the public to put pressure on their U.S. Senator to take action on a new nuclear weapons agreement). Additionally, reduction language (as opposed to elimination language) helps audiences see the possibility of near-term success with demonstrable dividends, as opposed to a pipe dream that they don’t believe will ever come to fruition.

## Appendix F: Narrative and Storytelling Resources

### Nuclear Narrative Research

Axel Aubrun, Meg Bostrom, and Joe Grady (Topos Partnership), *From Asset to Liability: Developing a Message Strategy on Media* (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2009).

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### Narrative & Storytelling Guides

The Commons Social Change Library, Narratives, [https://commonslibrary.org/tag/story\\_narrative/](https://commonslibrary.org/tag/story_narrative/).

Free Range Studios, Values & Archetypes Deck, <https://freerange.com/resources/free-range-archetype-deck>.

The Narrative Directory, <https://narrativedirectory.org/>.

The Opportunity Agenda, Shifting the Narrative, <https://opportunityagenda.org/messaging-reports/shifting-the-narrative/>.

Anat Shenker-Osorio, Narrative Workshop, <https://shiftthebay.org/resources/shift-the-narrative-anat-shenker-full-workshop/>.

Social Change Initiative, Narrative Change Lessons & Tools, <https://www.socialchangeinitiative.com/narrative-change>.

Story Strategy Group, Resources, <https://www.storystrategy.co/resources>.

## Using Narrative for Social Change

“A More Perfect Story: A Journal of Theory, Strategy, and Practice from the Frontlines of Social Impact Storytelling and Narrative Change Work,” *Medium*, <https://medium.com/a-more-perfect-story>.

Jonah Sachs, “Winning the Story Wars,” TedxRainier, Seattle, Washington, January 13, 2013, 12 min., 23 sec., [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvaPF\\_y-fiU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xvaPF_y-fiU).

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## Science of Storytelling

Carl Alviani, “The Science Behind Storytelling,” *Medium*, October 11, 2018, <https://medium.com/the-protagonist/the-science-behind-storytelling-51169758b22c>.

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### **About NTI**

NTI is a non-profit, nonpartisan global security organization focused on reducing nuclear, biological, and emerging technology threats imperiling humanity. The Critical Mass project works to increase public awareness and engagement to shift political incentives away from support for nuclear weapons and a new arms race and toward support for nuclear risk reduction and the ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons.

### **About Ploughshares**

Ploughshares is a relentless force committed to eliminating the threat of nuclear weapons. As the largest U.S. organization singularly focused on reducing this danger, we amplify the impact of the most effective advocates and organizations in the world through critical funding and trusted field building support. Nuclear war affects everyone. We raise much-needed awareness to the perils of nuclear weapons development, testing, and use. We are a hub where thought leaders, innovators, campaigners, and citizens convene and take action to move us closer to a world free from nuclear threats.

▶ “Working together, we can persuade people that nuclear weapons put us all at great risk, that the solutions we seek will make us safer, and that everyone can play a role in building a safer world.”

— Dr. Emma Belcher, President, Ploughshares  
Joan Rohlfing, President and Chief Operating Officer, Nuclear Threat Initiative

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