The hopes expressed by U.S. president Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890–1969; served 1953–61) in April 1953 in his “Chance for Peace” speech were all but dashed on August 12, 1953. On that day, the Soviets answered the successful U.S. hydrogen bomb test on November 1, 1952, with their own detonation of a thermonuclear, or hydrogen, bomb. Although much smaller than the U.S. bomb, it meant that the Soviets were in the arms race for the deadliest weapons man had yet devised. Even more frightful, the Soviet H-bomb, unlike the enormous U.S. H-bomb, was small enough to be carried by a bomber aircraft.

On December 8, 1953, eight months after his “Chance for Peace” speech, Eisenhower went before the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York City to deliver his “Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy” speech, more popularly known as the “Atoms for Peace” speech. Eisenhower, in clear, frightening language, described how both the United States and Soviet Union could annihilate each other with nuclear weapons. He proposed instead to turn the awesome atomic power into an instrument for peaceful power—to

“Experts would be mobilized to apply atomic energy to the needs of agriculture, medicine, and other peaceful activities. A special purpose would be to provide abundant electrical energy in the power-starved areas of the world. Thus the contributing powers would be dedicating some of their strength to serve the needs rather than the fears of mankind.”

Dwight D. Eisenhower

Excerpt from “Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy” Speech before the General Assembly of the United Nations, New York City, December 8, 1953

Originally published in Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, Volume 1953
“provide abundant electrical energy in the power-starved areas of the world.” He called for international cooperation under the United Nations’ control in setting up a nuclear material stockpile that “would be allocated to serve the peaceful pursuits of mankind.”

Things to remember while reading “Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy” speech:

- At the time of the speech, the nuclear technology already existed to build plants to produce nuclear power.

- Eisenhower’s speech was forward-thinking and in contrast to the thinking of many U.S. military “hawks,” or those eager to use the new technology to attack the Soviets.

- Nuclear bomb development programs were proceeding ahead at a rapid pace in both the United States and the Soviet Union.
Excerpt from
“Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy” speech

I feel impelled to speak today in a language that in a sense is new—one which I, who have spent so much of my life in the military profession, would have preferred never to use.

That new language is the language of atomic warfare.

The atomic age has moved forward at such a pace that every citizen of the world should have some comprehension ... of the extent of this development of the utmost significance to every one of us. Clearly, if the peoples of the world are to conduct an intelligent search for peace, they must be armed with the significant facts of today’s existence.

My recital of atomic danger and power is necessarily stated in United States terms, for these are the only incontrovertible facts that I know. I need hardly point out to this Assembly, however, that this subject is global, not merely national in character.

On July 15, 1945, the United States set off the world’s first atomic explosion. Since that date in 1945, the United States of America has conducted 42 test explosions.

Atomic bombs today are more than 25 times as powerful as the weapons with which the atomic age dawned, while hydrogen weapons are in the ranges of millions of tons of TNT equivalent [that is, hydrogen weapons are equal to millions of tons of the conventional explosive, dynamite].

Today, the United States’ stockpile of atomic weapons, which, of course, increases daily, exceeds by many times the explosive equivalent of the total of all bombs and all shells that came from every plane and every gun in every theater of war in all of the years of World War II.

A single air group, whether afloat or land-based, can now deliver to any reachable target a destructive cargo exceeding in power all the bombs that fell on Britain in all of World War II....

But the dread secret, and the fearful engines of atomic might, are not ours alone.

In the first place, the secret is possessed by our friends and allies, Great Britain and Canada, whose scientific genius made a

Impelled: Forced.
Incontrovertible: Indisputable.
tremendous contribution to our original discoveries, and the designs
of atomic bombs.

The secret is also known by the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union has informed us that, over recent years, it has
devoted extensive resources to atomic weapons. During this period,
the Soviet Union has exploded a series of atomic devices, including
at least one involving thermo-nuclear reactions [a hydrogen bomb].

If at one time the United States possessed what might have
been called a monopoly of atomic power, that monopoly ceased to
exist several years ago. Therefore, although our earlier start has per-
mitted us to accumulate what is today a great quantitative advan-
tage [the United States had more nuclear weapons stockpiled than
the Soviet Union did], the atomic realities of today comprehend
two facts of even greater significance.

First, the knowledge now possessed by several nations will even-
tually be shared by others—possibly all others.

Second, even a vast superiority in numbers of weapons, and a
consequent capability of devastating retaliation, is no preventive,
of itself, against the fearful material damage and toll of human lives
that would be inflicted by surprise aggression.

The free world, at least dimly aware of these facts, has natural-
ly embarked on a large program of warning and defense systems.
That program will be accelerated and expanded.

But let no one think that the expenditure of vast sums for
weapons and systems of defense can guarantee absolute safety for
the cities and citizens of any nation. The awful arithmetic of the
atomic bomb does not permit of any such easy solution. Even
against the most powerful defense, an aggressor in possession of
the effective minimum number of atomic bombs for a surprise at-
tack could probably place a sufficient number of his bombs on the
chosen targets to cause hideous damage.

Should such an atomic attack be launched against the United
States, our reactions would be swift and resolute. But for me to say
that the defense capabilities of the United States are such that
they could inflict terrible losses upon an aggressor—for me to say
that the retaliation capabilities of the United States are so great
that such an aggressor’s land would be laid waste—all this, while
fact, is not the true expression of the purpose and the hope of the
United States.

Comprehend: Embrace.
Retaliation: Ability to strike back.
To pause there would be to confirm the hopeless finality of a belief that two atomic colossi are doomed … to eye each other indefinitely across a trembling world. To stop there would be to accept helplessly the probability of civilization destroyed—the annihilation of the irreplaceable heritage of mankind handed down to us generation from generation—and the condemnation of mankind to begin all over again the age-old struggle upward from savagery toward decency, and right, and justice.

Surely no sane member of the human race could discover victory in such desolation. Could anyone wish his name to be coupled by history with such human degradation and destruction….

My country wants to be constructive, not destructive. It wants agreements, not wars, among nations. It wants itself to live in freedom, and in the confidence that the people of every other nation enjoy equally the right of choosing their own way of life.

So my country’s purpose is to help us move out of the dark chamber of horrors into the light, to find a way by which the minds


Two atomic colossi: Two giants of atomic power: the United States and the Soviet Union.

Annihilation: Complete destruction.

Degradation: A lowering of the moral character.
of men, the hopes of men, the souls of men everywhere, can move forward toward peace and happiness and well being.…

The United States, heeding the suggestion of the General Assembly of the United Nations, is instantly prepared to meet privately with such other countries [Great Britain, Canada, and France] as may be “principally involved,” to seek “an acceptable solution” to the atomic armaments race which overshadows not only the peace, but the very life, of the world.

We shall carry into these private or diplomatic talks a new conception.

The United States would seek more than the mere reduction or elimination of atomic materials for military purposes.

It is not enough to take this weapon out of the hands of the soldiers. It must be put into the hands of those who will know how to strip its military casing and adapt it to the arts of peace.

The United States knows that if the fearful trend of atomic military buildup can be reversed, this greatest of destructive forces can be developed into a great boon, for the benefit of all mankind.

The United States knows that peaceful power from atomic energy is no dream of the future. That capability, already proved, is here—now—today. Who can doubt, if the entire body of the world’s scientists and engineers had adequate amounts of fissionable material with which to test and develop their ideas, that this capability would rapidly be transformed into universal, efficient, and economic usage.

To hasten the day when fear of the atom will begin to disappear from the minds of people, and the governments of the East and West, there are certain steps that can be taken now.

I therefore make the following proposals:

The Governments principally involved … begin now and continue to make joint contributions from their stockpiles of normal uranium and fissionable materials to an International Atomic Energy Agency. We would expect that such an agency would be set up under the aegis of the United Nations.…

The Atomic Energy Agency could be made responsible for the impounding, storage, and protection of the contributed fissionable and other materials. The ingenuity of our scientists will provide special safe...
conditions under which such a bank of fissionable material can be made essentially immune to surprise seizure.

The more important responsibility of this Atomic Energy Agency would be to devise methods whereby this fissionable material would be allocated to serve the peaceful pursuits of mankind. Experts would be mobilized to apply atomic energy to the needs of agriculture, medicine, and other peaceful activities. A special purpose would be to provide abundant electrical energy in the power-starved areas of the world. Thus the contributing powers would be dedicating some of their strength to serve the needs rather than the fears of mankind.

The United States would be more than willing—it would be proud to take up with others “principally involved” the development of plans whereby such peaceful use of atomic energy would be expedited.

What happened next …

On January 12, 1954, before Soviet premier Georgy Malenkov (1902–1988) had responded to the “Atoms for Peace” speech, U.S. secretary of state John Foster Dulles (1888–1959) announced a new U.S. military strategy toward fighting communist expansion. He proclaimed that in response to any communist military aggression no matter if only small in scale, the United States would retaliate with a massive nuclear weapon response. Nuclear war seemed a drastic response to a localized hostile action. This strategy was designed to avoid war by threatening the ultimate nuclear war.

Nevertheless, Dulles contended that focusing on nuclear capability would prove much cheaper than maintaining the massive conventional air and ground forces called for in the National Security Council Report 68 (see Chapter 3). Eisenhower, for whom a sounder U.S. economy was a high priority, was interested that he could spend less on military defense by scaling down the large U.S. conventional forces and weapons while developing a much more powerful military. Eisenhower chose this path. As a result, he was able to cut the 1955 defense budget by 25 percent from the 1954 budget. Ground forces were re-
duced by 33 percent, and the air force would play a larger role. In keeping with the new policy, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces were supplied with small nuclear arms and the number of ground NATO divisions were cut by 75 percent.

By early 1955, Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971) had won an ongoing power struggle since Stalin’s death in 1953 with Malenkov and taken full reign of the Soviet government. He considered the new U.S. strategy as very aggressive and threatening to Soviet interests. He too was interested in strengthening the Soviet industrial and agricultural economy and spending less on large conventional armies and arms. Like Eisenhower and Dulles, he decided to concentrate on a buildup of nuclear weapons. When conflicts arose, both the Soviets and the Americans could threaten each other with nuclear war, pushing each other to the brink. The strength of both actually deterred either from starting a war. This strategy became known as brinkmanship.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, delivering the 1955 commencement address at Penn State University, promoted the use of atomic power for peaceful purposes. Reproduced by permission of AP/Wide World Photos.
Did you know …
• Even with the peaceful words of “Atoms for Peace,” mutual fear was still too great. The United States and the Soviet Union continued successfully to test hydrogen bombs. On March 1, 1954, the United States’ “Bravo” tested at fifteen hundred times the power of the Hiroshima bomb. The Soviets perfected smaller H-bombs that were dropped from aircraft. Both nations stockpiled nuclear weapons.

• The B-52 bomber, the United States’ first intercontinental jet bomber capable of delivering nuclear bombs to Soviet targets, became the backbone of U.S. air power.

• Although “Atoms for Peace” had called for arms limitations, serious talks on the matter did not occur until 1963, when the United States and the Soviets pushed each other to the brink over the island of Cuba, in a situation that came to be called the Cuban Missile Crisis (see Chapter 8).

Consider the following …
• Is brinkmanship a valid strategy with which to avoid war? What might some pitfalls of brinkmanship be?

• Could there be a winner in a massive nuclear war?

• Find out what other countries in the mid-1950s possessed, or were developing, nuclear capabilities.

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