

TALKING ABOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS

IN THE TRUMP ERA

Over the course of 2018, ReThink conducted extensive research into public attitudes about nuclear weapons in the Trump era. This included a national survey, focus groups in Denver and Atlanta, a psychological assessment of how the focus group participants processed the issue, a second national survey with refined questions based on the focus groups, a unique round of “Beltway insider” focus groups composed of Democratic and Republican policymakers, and significant oversamples of Black and Latinx audiences. For more information on methodology contact eva@rethinkmedia.org.

THE SHORT VERSION

Tell people what policy they should support, directly and with confidence, without devolving into policy minutiae.

8 THINGS TO REMEMBER:

1. PEOPLE ALREADY GET IT

People understand the risks that nuclear weapons pose.

They know that the President can start a nuclear war, that a nuclear exchange would be devastating, and that a nuclear war would likely escalate. They understand the threat to their family and their community. They don't know all of the policy issues and they don't want to. Briefly reestablish the problem and move on to the much more important part—articulating clear solutions.

2. BE CONFIDENT

You are communicating from a position of strength. Convey that.

Remind people that the President has the “sole authority” to order a nuclear attack—Americans overwhelmingly think that reality is not OK. This Denver focus group participant summed up what we heard over and over—*“That needs to change.*

No single person should have that level of authority.”

People already believe that the “sole purpose” of nuclear weapons is deterrence. 92% of Democrats hold this view along with 88% of Republicans. They do not want to imagine more usable nuclear weapons.

People respond to confidence. You have to demonstrate the courage of your convictions and confidently describe the policies you support.

3. BE DIRECT AND BE PRESCRIPTIVE

The more complicated you make the policy options the more you are losing your audience. People do not feel equipped to judge between competing proposals or to assess the merit of technical arguments. It only makes them deeply anxious that they might make the wrong decision. Communicating on a technical level might seem like demonstrating expertise, but it is actually telling the broader public that they have no role in the debate. It is encouraging them to check out. So pick your policy proposal and explain why it's the best option, but don't start debating the nuanced or hypothetical merits of various proposals, unless you want to drive away your audience when they agree with you.

4. DON'T TALK POLICY, TALK BENEFITS & CONSEQUENCES

Talking about the nuances of a No First Use policy, for example, is very unlikely to build support. You need to explain why it will be good for the US.

Keep it simple: *“A No First Use policy would lower the risk of a conflict escalating into a nuclear war. The bottom line is that it would increase US security.”*

Talk about consequences too: *“If the President ordered the use of nuclear weapons, the situation would quickly escalate and get out of hand.”*

Support for a No First Use policy jumped 10 points with women and 6 points with men when we tested a message that included consequences. Support jumped 9 points with Democrats and 5 points with Republicans. It jumped 17 points with Gen X audiences and 7 points with Millennials.

5. GIVE PEOPLE POWER AND AFFIRM THEIR FEELINGS

We face a major obstacle when talking about nuclear weapons. Our psychologist identified it as “fate control.” With very good reason, people don’t believe they have any control over the situation. That sense of powerless is depressing and so they are psychologically primed to avoid the topic. This is even more the case when protecting their loved ones—their most hard-wired biological instinct—is out of their hands.

Here are a few things people said in the focus groups.

“Here in this room we really have no control over this.”

“It seems like a waste of my time and energy to worry about it.”

“I feel like no matter what I do, it wouldn’t matter. I’m a little peon.”

“Sometimes I wonder, does my voice even count?”

Papering over these feelings won’t work. It is better to affirm them, address them, and establish a social norm of taking ownership of the problem.

For example, *“most people find this topic frightening, and they’re not sure what they can do, but there is a lot you can do and we’re seeing an increase in people getting involved.”*

6. FEED THE HUNGER FOR NORMALCY

We are in a time of unprecedented partisanship, but they don’t like it. Don’t push their partisan buttons and make them default to their tribal loyalty. Instead, describe a positive potentially bipartisan agenda. The following message did extraordinarily well:

“Since the end of the Cold War, both Republican and Democratic administrations have worked to reduce the number of nuclear weapons in the world. Republican presidents have actually gotten rid of many more nuclear weapons than Democrats. Elected officials from both parties should get back on that track, put political partisanship behind them, and work together to reduce the threat that nuclear weapons pose to all Americans.”

83% of Democratic voters supported this, **along with 64% of Republicans**, and strong majorities in every single demographic group.

7. MAKE THE NUCLEAR WEAPONS BUDGET REAL

The \$1.5 trillion budget for new nuclear weapons is an extraordinarily large amount. So large that it is incomprehensible. Make it real for people by describing the zero-sum trade-offs. 88% of Democratic voters and 59% of Republicans responded to a message about the “security trade-offs.”

We should only spend what we need to maintain a strong enough nuclear arsenal to maintain a credible threat and deter attacks. Nuclear weapons are an old technology and we’d be better off spending the money to address other types of modern threats like cyberattacks and terrorism.

Democratic voters (84%) also favor a message about other trade-offs, but Republicans are skeptical (43%).

That is way too much money to spend on nuclear weapons. It’s about \$5,000 for every man, woman, and child in America. We’d be much better off making our country stronger by investing in infrastructure, education, healthcare, and new technologies.

BONUS — IF YOU GET PUSHED, PUSH BACK

Remember, the data shows that there’s more public support than we often realize. If an interviewer or a debate opponent says a No First Use policy would *“take options off the table,”* don’t duck from the question, lean into it... *“that is exactly right, the goal is to reduce the likelihood of the President starting a nuclear war.”*