

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

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*What's Next*  
**New Weapons Against Nuclear Threats**  
By Adrienne Day

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## WHAT'S NEXT

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## SECURITY

## New Weapons Against Nuclear Threats

BY ADRIENNE DAY

**I**n the early '80s, two films likely had a greater impact on the national conversation surrounding nuclear weapons than any policy wonk or talking head. President Ronald Reagan saw *WarGames*, about a hacker who nearly triggers World War III, shortly after its 1983 release and issued a security directive that amounted to the first national policy on reducing the vulnerability of computers to hack-

ers. That same year, *The Day After*, a made-for-TV film about a nuclear war with the Soviet Union that takes out much of the American Midwest, convinced millions of terrified Americans that a nuclear strike could indeed happen on our soil, and is now credited with helping to curb the arms race.

N Square, a multimillion-dollar foundation-supported initiative dedicated to ending the threat of nuclear weapons,

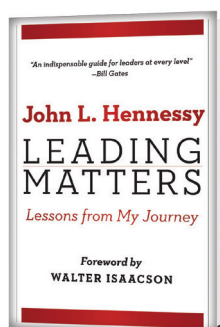
is betting on popular culture's power, among other tactics, to influence policy. By supporting different players in a sprawling network that touches on everything from industrial design to Hollywood screenplays, N Square hopes to influence the cultural conversation and rekindle public awareness about the danger nuclear weapons pose to humanity. With the Iran nuclear deal now in jeopardy, in addition to renewed tensions with North Korea, concerns about managing the arms threat are heightened—especially as some of the world's more than 15,000 nuclear weapons approach 70 years old.

"There is a sense that the threat [of nuclear war] went away after the Cold War, but the threat of nukes is greater and more immediate than climate change," says Eric Schlosser, an investigative journalist whose 2013 book *Command and Control* examined terrifying near misses involving America's nuclear arsenal. "The only way to change that is by raising awareness with citizen activism," he says. N Square helped fund *the bomb*, a 61-minute experimental film that Schlosser codirected.

According to a 2016 Chapman University poll asking American adults about their greatest existential fears, nuclear weapons didn't even



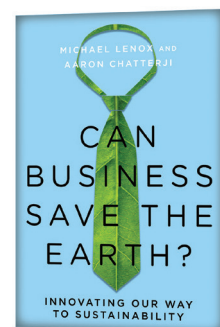
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↓ A series of community meetings led to inexpensive improvements that helped revitalize Akron, Ohio's, Summit Lake. Akron is one of five cities involved in the Reimagining the Civic Commons initiative.

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register in the top 15, says Kate Folb, who directs Hollywood, Health & Society, a program of the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center that provides entertainment industry professionals with information for storylines on health, safety, and national security. "It was just completely off people's radar," Folb says.

N Square approached Folb about providing funding and contacts to include the issue of nuclear security in her program's portfolio of activities. The program has since developed storylines about nuclear weapons in popular shows such as the political drama *Madam Secretary*.

"This is an issue we all have a stake in and all can have agency over," says Erika Gregory, N Square's managing director. The collaboration was founded in 2014 by program officers from five foundations invested in peace and security issues—MacArthur, William and Flora Hewlett, Carnegie, Skoll, and the Ploughshares Fund—which were concerned by the lack of new ideas, energy, and resources being devoted to the disarmament field. Public fears regarding the threat of nuclear annihilation, which faded with the Cold War, are now largely enshrined in dated cultural artifacts. Until recently, the threat of an accidental or deliberate nuclear strike seemed obsolete in the face of more tangible crises like school shootings.

Today, the organization is building a network of experts and donors from a variety of fields, all committed to nuclear-threat reduction. Gregory helped launch the N Square Innovators Network in 2017, bringing

together a group including engineers, brand strategists, designers, media wonks, futurists, and nuclear-threat experts, for retreats, meet-ups, and other gatherings. N Square puts up everyone together in houses, and activities have included everything from nighttime beach walks to discuss arms control to games such as figuring out how to escape a room called the "Putin Bunker" as a way to think about the role of kinesthetic experience in building public awareness. Two more cohorts will follow this fall and next spring.

Gregory wants to make sure that those working on disarmament have the resources and allies they need, she says.

So why work with Hollywood instead of the Pentagon? Gregory cites *The Medici Effect*, in which author Frans Johansson argues that innovation happens when different disciplines and ideas intersect. Having people from very different backgrounds working together is critical, she says. Each person brings his or her own unique expertise to bear on a common problem. "People working on policy agendas don't necessarily have any idea what is going on with new technology."

Complacency comes at a cost, says Morgan Matthews, N Square's program manager and design strategist. "We don't have frameworks for managing [a nuclear event], yet it has the highest consequence of anything humans can do to our planet and ourselves," she says. Such threats, as well as newer technologies like synthetic biology and autonomous weaponry, "will continue to come at us." ■



## CITIES

# Revitalizing Community Connection

BY COREY BINNS

A 100-acre glacial lake known in the 1900s as Akron's million-dollar playground sits just a two-mile jog south of the city's downtown. Thousands of Ohioans once spent summer days riding the park's roller coaster and swimming in the lake. But after the area's booming rubber industry contaminated Summit Lake, the nearby neighborhood fell into decades of decay and isolation.

In 2016, a series of meetings with community members led to inexpensive improvements around the lake. Today, families from all over the city sit next to each other on new benches under shade umbrellas, grill hot dogs, and paddle canoes. For Akron Mayor Dan Horrigan, the process revealed the critical role that public spaces play as a platform for equity: "It's allowed us to reevaluate how we view city

parks and view our citizens as cocreators of public land."

Akron is one of five US cities involved in a three-year, \$40 million initiative launched in 2016 that has developed a measurement system for parks, trails, and community centers to model how cities can restore their civic commons. The goal is to create, or re-create, public spaces that matter. "Libraries and parks and recreation centers have historically served the purpose of amplifying citizenship," says Carol Coletta, a fellow at The Kresge Foundation, one of the four funders of Reimagining the Civic Commons in addition to the JPB, Knight, and Rockefeller foundations. "We're trying to reclaim their legacy as institutions."

Communities, especially disinvested ones, need a boost, says Coletta. We no longer know our neighbors, and our belief in institutions has dwindled. She and her colleagues set out to pinpoint hiking trails and civic spaces they might repurpose to rebuild capital and trust in disenfranchised neighborhoods.

The team claims it has built the first comprehensive set of metrics that connect the impact