

Remarks for the inaugural Bruce Blair Memorial Lecture

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Thank you to Zia and the Princeton family for inviting me here today. I'm honored to be speaking alongside Frank and look forward to trading stories with you all later this evening.

I joined Global Zero in 2013 as an intern fresh out of graduate school – drawn to the mission and the marriage of policy and campaigns. There was actually a place I could dive deep into nuclear strategy and then help inflate a nuclear missile in downtown DC. That was the beauty of Global Zero. Bruce alongside co-founder Matt Brown understood to make real progress on disarmament you need both an effective inside game and a bold public movement – backed by credible analysis grounded in current realities.

Global Zero's journey started in the fall of 2006. Matt was developing an idea for reinvigorating the disarmament movement. Shopping it around, he was told he should talk to Bruce who was doing very similar thinking. It was a perfect match – Bruce with the policy expertise and credibility, Matt with the understanding of grassroots activism and politics. Not only were they strategically aligned but they personally hit it off, which was great because they were about to spend a lot of time together building the key components to launch Global Zero.

The first component: an international group of world leaders, former senior military and government officials, and national security experts – validators to sign on to the urgent need for, and the *achievability* of a world without nuclear weapons. Matt and Bruce embarked on a two-year journey visiting world capitals, concentrating on nuclear-armed states, to meet with decision makers and those in their circles. They were surprisingly well-received for the most part with people telling them, "I've been waiting for you guys."

With their push, the number of leaders signed on in support of Global Zero reached 300 – I believe a few of you are here tonight and give my thanks for your early support. Some signatories were core advisors, offering guidance on feasible policy steps, serving on commissions, and meeting with student activists. Others lent their name to the cause. This network gave Global Zero power and credibility – with access to decision makers and enough buzz to make global zero a shorthand for a world free of nuclear weapons.

The second key component: A framework for how to get to zero. Working with experts from nearly every nuclear-armed state, Bruce spearheaded the development of a roadmap for elimination that was realistic and made sense. The first of its kind, the Global Zero Action Plan was his answer to those who deemed nuclear abolition an impossibility. It was the missing piece for a number of supporters who didn't need to be convinced of the necessity of zero, but needed to believe there was a feasible path forward.

The final key component: The infrastructure for grassroots movement building. Global Zero was built from the beginning to break from the traditional way of doing things. It centered young people, organizing, and digital tools at a time when mobilizing through email, and later social media and videos, wasn't as central a tactic as it is today.

Unlike their signatory experience, grassroots activism proved harder to get off the ground. As Global Zero launched in 2008 hoping the mission and message would strike a chord with activists, engagement ended up being more like pushing a boulder up a hill. The urgency and feasibility felt by leaders didn't translate to an issue that had mostly been forgotten by the public.

Through partnership with Avaaz, an extensive global online activist network, the documentary *Countdown to Zero*, and staff hitting college campuses, Global Zero built a network of student chapters that brought much-needed energy to the movement. It wasn't easy. Public engagement took a lot of persuasion, a lot of maintenance, and a lot of creative thinking.

That work came from the young staff Bruce and Matt put together, a sign of their commitment to center young people in the movement. They believed in our ability to bring their ambitions to life – here's our vision, let's figure it out together. Bruce, especially, had a lot of trust in people. He knew what we were capable of and he constantly encouraged us to find our own voice and take risks – or as his mantra went: think big, act audaciously, and make shit happen. As former Global Zero Campaign Director Meredith Horowski wrote, “when many doubted my team's recommendation to engage in the 2016 election...Bruce leaned in with his full support and grit. A few months later, our campaign took center stage in front of 96 million Americans during the presidential debates.”

I've spent the past few weeks catching up with former Global Zero colleagues who are now spread out in various fields, including the government, the climate fight, and union organizing. Each spoke first and foremost to Bruce's kindness and his respect for everyone, no matter their position, no matter their age. He knew what he knew, he knew what he didn't, and he respected expertise equally. For all his quiet genius, Bruce didn't treat us as inferior, which unfortunately is a rarity especially for young women and people of color.

Trust and respect were major themes in Bruce's career. What many of Global Zero's signatories and the additional validators recruited over the years had in common was their trust in Bruce. They knew he could bring people together from across the political spectrum to have tough conversations respectfully – moving past the usual political posturing and getting to a place with real implementable ideas to reduce nuclear risk and make progress on elimination.

Bruce had a unique ability to talk to almost anyone and he wasn't afraid to speak unapologetically about elimination. His passion was palpable. He would lay out his vision, drawing people in with stories that

would melt your mind – from his experiences in the missile silos to his work unearthing vulnerabilities in nuclear command and control systems – and he would do it with an incredulous smile as if to say “can you believe how ridiculous this is?” He knew we could do better and he made others not only believe that, but understand that they played an important role in getting us to a safer future.

Now, Bruce was also fearless – going toe-to-toe with anybody, never backing down on what he knew was right. It was a trait we loved. Others didn’t quite feel the same. In 2018, Bruce was invited to speak on nuclear risk at the NPT PrepCom in Geneva. Rumor had it there was pushback to having Bruce in the main plenary, so they moved the talk into a side room. There Bruce spoke about the risks of hair trigger alert and inevitably during Q&A the hand went up from a US official who wanted to dispute the term “hair trigger.” Bruce without hesitation and without breaking eye contact with the official, responded something to the effect of: I was a nuclear missile launch officer. The fact of the matter is we can launch nuclear weapons within minutes of receiving an order. If that isn’t considered ‘hair trigger,’ I don’t know what is.

It was these moments, among countless others, when you remembered what a privilege it was to work with Bruce. He always kept it interesting, always had a new research idea to highlight nuclear risk and expose vulnerabilities from a new angle. The email would come in – “Jess, can you use NukeMap to see how many casualties and fatalities there would be in a Russian nuclear retaliatory strike on the US?” “Sure, Bruce.”

“Jess, can you use Google Earth to pull up the ICBM silos and see if you can track the underground cables connecting them with command centers?” “Will do, Bruce.” I would sometimes Google “Dear US government, I am doing this for non-nefarious research purposes” just to have a record of intent for the NSA worker assigned to keep an eye on us.

But it wasn’t enough to raise awareness of these vulnerabilities. Bruce understood the importance of putting forward credible solutions. For too long nuclear strategy and decision making has been concentrated in small defense circles – never straying too far from the status quo. Decision makers needed comprehensive, credible alternatives to push back against the assumptions in current nuclear strategy. In 2018, Bruce’s [Alternative US Nuclear Posture Review](#) laid out a new vision for US nuclear strategy – one that would shift from a warfighting policy to deterrence-only with a small, survivable second-strike capability and resilient command and control. The report gained traction with then-House Armed Services Committee Chair Adam Smith culminating in a committee hearing. It also gave validity to a No First Use campaign that engaged new activists, partnerships, and congressional voices. While US policy hasn’t changed, Bruce’s work helped show how analysis and inside game could combine with grassroots campaigning to precipitate important conversations that challenge long held views, moving the needle even if a little bit. These conversations are needed now more than ever.

When Global Zero launched in December 2008, the possibility of eliminating nuclear weapons was gathering steam –from the four horsemen to Obama’s Prague speech. I don’t need to tell you all – we’re in a very different time.

It feels like every day we are faced with a new event that increases nuclear risk, further erodes arms control agreements, fans the flames of multiple crises or potential crises involving nuclear-armed states, or pushes us down the path of a multi-pronged new arms race. And in the face of these challenges, long-time funders are leaving the space without new sources to replace them. Global Zero is one of the casualties and was forced to suspend its operations this year. As we turn to the next chapter and look back on all Bruce, Matt, and the team accomplished – from summits to activist trainings to the Iran Deal video – there are also lessons to be shared.

Global Zero was set up to build a powerful movement to change the world. Movement building is long-term work, often unglamorous, requiring dedicated staff time to maintain relationships, consistently communicate, and keep networks – both signatories and grassroots – engaged. Funders traditionally give to Track Two policy initiatives, research, and commissions; sometimes to new ideas to recruit young voices. These are worthwhile projects, but it leaves the essential long-term movement work struggling for resources. Global Zero’s successes in that work didn’t come about because it was fully funded but because leadership insisted on doing it and pulled from every discretionary pot they could to keep it going.

For organizers, it was a constant challenge to develop concrete actions to keep our activists engaged. It’s also labor-intensive to manage volunteer leaders, many who were students with their own workloads. We were always pushing that boulder up the hill just in different contexts. While the nuclear threat is more present in the public consciousness than it has been for decades, our community still struggles to break through, to connect these issues to people’s lives and give them a real sense of agency.

For signatories, the challenges were similar – keeping a vast network in sync on a forward-leaning agenda is difficult in the best of times. Internal pressures rise, the international landscape shifts, and positions evolve. It was a delicate balance managing Global Zero’s bold ambition and flexibility with public campaigns and signatory relationships, and we didn’t always get it right. Shallow rifts on the path forward can widen into unsustainable gaps without effective communication and constant gardening.

These challenges highlight the infrastructure and day-to-day relationship work needed to power a sustained movement. If we deprioritize long-term strategic movement building and if organizations are unable to find new funding sources for this work, we won’t be *growing* a movement, so much as continuously re-establishing one.

Making progress on this issue also requires the community to work together – building alignment, deepening coordination, and working together toward our shared vision. As we navigate this work, we should take a page from Bruce. Be kind. Engage authentically with people at all levels of experience, across all kinds of backgrounds, to encourage and empower each other. Stand in your expertise, and, just as importantly, stand in your ignorance – both as individuals and as organizations. There is no room for egos in our work. Bruce was one of the strongest minds on this issue and he didn't feel the need to talk down to people even when he disagreed.

Speaking of strongest minds, I often think about what it would be like to have Bruce still here with us, of what he'd be doing, what vulnerabilities and solutions he'd be working tirelessly to bring to the fore. As Derek Johnson, Global Zero's Managing Partner, told me Bruce was always looking for opportunity in a crisis. When things got harder, he'd double down, looking for any and every opportunity to gain traction – gathering experts, writing op-eds, brainstorming new modes of engaging people outside the nuclear community, and producing interventions to poke holes in all the things we're told are incontrovertible.

When you need nuclear arms control, risk reduction, and elimination the most, it can seem the most impossible. We have an uphill battle, that heavy boulder still in front of us, but as Bruce would remind us things can change quickly and we need to be ready to seize the moments as they arise. It's up to us to carry on Bruce's legacy, to expose risks, push back against dangerous policies, and show people that in the midst of growing uncertainty, there are pathways forward, and that global zero is not only possible, it's necessary. It's up to us to think big, act audaciously, and make shit happen.