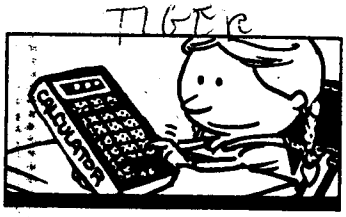

Opinion

Editorials and additional commentary, 20-21A

To get rid of nuclear weapons,

Boris Yeltsin tossed off the other day an idea so radical that it almost passed unnoticed. He said what we all should really do about nuclear weapons is get rid of them altogether.

As a rhetorical flourish the idea has a long and distinguished history. Adlai Stevenson campaigned against nuclear weapons when, running hopelessly against President Dwight Eisenhower in 1956, he decided (against the advice of advisers) to "talk sense to the American people."

In the 1960s the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, for whom rhetorical flourishes were the stuff of life, regularly proposed "general and complete disarmament" — when he wasn't threatening to bury the United States, incinerate the orange groves of Italy, or reduce the Acropolis in Athens to radioactive ash.

In the late 1970s President Jimmy Carter targeted the elimination of nuclear weapons as a major goal. So did both Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan, momentarily, at their Reykjavik summit in 1987 — until Reagan's handlers tugged at his coattails,

Harlan Cleveland

explaining how dangerous it was to talk peace as if he meant it.

Yet espousal of mutual and total disarmament played a practical part in getting arms control negotiations going in the 1960s. The strategy the United States adopted then — we called it jujitsu — probably should be revived in the 1990s.

■

My job in the administration of President John Kennedy was assistant secretary of state for international organization affairs, responsible for U.S. policy in the United Nations. Our gladiator at the United Nations in New York was Adlai Stevenson. Historian Arthur Schlesinger was one of the top assistants to the president.

On Saturday, Aug. 5, 1961, the three of us joined President Kennedy for a ride off Hyannisport in his motor launch Honey Fitz to talk over the upcoming agenda for the General Assembly of the United Nations — Kennedy's first personal exposure to hardball U.N. politics. Schlesinger (in his great biography of JFK's "One Thousand Days") recalls the day as "gray and dreary." My warmer memory is of a smiling Jackie, in the briefest of bikinis, serving us Bloody Marys.

Stevenson, for whom getting rid of nuclear weapons was still top priority, wanted to make sure the young president shared his strong feelings. But Kennedy was no long-range strategist; he was the tactician incarnate. For him, disarmament talk was psychological warfare. Stevenson, in anguish, abandoned the ritual form of address. "Jack," he pleaded,

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we first need new leaders

"you've got to have faith."

It was the wrong approach to Mr. Pragmatic. An embarrassed silence fell over our little policy picnic on Nantucket Sound. Trying to repair the damage, I took a different tack.

"Mr. President," I said, "the problem is this. The Soviets have for years been getting away with murder, coming out for 'general and complete disarmament,' while we've been advocating 'next steps.' Lots of people around the world are coming to think we're less interested in peace than the Soviets are.

"If you now, as a fresh voice in this global debate, come out for 'general and complete disarmament' as our ultimate goal, there won't be anything left to discuss with the Soviets at that level of abstraction. What will be left to discuss will be 'next steps.' "

The president's quick mind had no trouble with this tactical calculation. "OK, that makes sense," he replied, and we went on to other topics.

There was the intervening crisis over the nuclear missiles planted in Cuba by Khrushchev's Kremlin. But before long two certified hard-liners, John J. McCloy and Valerian Zorin, had negotiated at the United Nations a Soviet-U.S. agreement to get rid of all military forces — if everyone else would too, in an enforceable system of world law. The first "next step," a nuclear test ban treaty, was on track within two years of JFK's policy decision aboard the Honey Fitz.

■

Destroying all nuclear weapons is a beautiful goal. It's also a rational goal: Those who possess them know from deep study and long experience that they are militarily unusable.

Translating that simple idea into common-sense policies will be exceedingly difficult. The atom was hard enough to split; it will be impossible to glue back together. Experts can do almost anything with modern inventions except disinvent them. Not even the political leaders with the most reason to vision a nuclear-free future — those of Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States — have done so as yet. Today's and tomorrow's Saddam Husseins certainly haven't got the word that a nuclear warhead is the ultimate suicide machine.

So do we consign the "No More Nukes" goal to the dustbin of "impractical" human aspirations? That's not my answer. Others will continue to think nuclear weapons are usable as long as America acts as if they are. So let's embrace Yeltsin's suggestion, even if he made it in full expectation that we would write it off as a newcomer's naiveté.

A United States of America willing to forswear nuclear weapons as soon as all others do so would be the best of both worlds in disarmament politics — the highest moral ground *and* the strongest bargaining position.

There's a catch, of course. To adopt such a strategy, we would need more daring leadership than we have had in Washington in many a moon. But that problem isn't insoluble either. It's what we have elections for.