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Nuclear Treaties

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. Nuclear energy is generated through nuclear fission. When an atom's nucleus splits, it releases an enormous amount of energy and shoots its own neutrons out, splitting other atoms. If left unchecked, the result is a nuclear explosion. If controlled, the energy can be very useful. In a nuclear power plant, for example, the energy created is used to boil water, which is then used to turn electric turbines and produce electricity. Because it doesn't create any fossil fuel byproducts, nuclear energy is considered a clean power source.

Nuclear energy can also be used to create weapons. In 1939, two years before the US entered World War II, Albert Einstein informed President Franklin D. Roosevelt that a new type of bomb could be built — one with the power of 20,000 tons of TNT, an explosive similar to dynamite. Roosevelt created the Manhattan Project to build an atomic bomb, and after his death in 1945, President Harry Truman took over the secret initiative. Later that year, as the war in Europe ended, Japanese forces refused to surrender. Truman ordered that the new atomic bombs be dropped on Japan. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed more than 120,000 people. Japan surrendered days later.

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2. To date, the US's bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are the only times nuclear weapons have ever been used in conflict. But during the Cold War, the US and USSR began a nuclear arms race, trying to create and stockpile the most powerful weapons possible. By the 1950s, both had enough power to destroy the other — but both also knew that the repercussions of an attack would be severe. This policy of restraint became known as mutually assured destruction. When opposing military forces are equally powerful enough to destroy each other, it's in their best interests not to attack.

Today, only a handful of countries have nuclear weapons. As a result of the Cold War-era arms race, some 90 percent belong to the US and Russia. But almost every nation has signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which was instituted in 1970. This treaty states that countries without nuclear warheads may not develop them, and countries with them must share the benefits of nuclear technology while also pursuing disarmament.

3. The politics of nuclear technology are controversial. North Korea made headlines in recent years after conducting several successful and increasingly powerful nuclear tests. In 2018, the country announced it would be halting its nuclear program as a part of an ongoing effort with South Korea to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula. But as of August 2019, North Korea has resumed testing after negotiations stalled.

Iran is also alleged to have tried to develop a nuclear weapon. In the mid-2000s, many began to suspect that Iran was accumulating the materials necessary to build an atomic bomb — namely, enriched uranium. After years of sanctions that cost Iran billions in oil revenue, international leaders reached an agreement in 2015 that would lift sanctions while carefully monitoring Iran's nuclear facilities. In 2018, President Donald Trump announced that the US would be withdrawing from this deal.

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