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Strand showing brings nuclear arms message to Maine Snowe and Collins asked to lead

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By Shlomit Auciello
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Rockland — Maine's two Republican senators have inspired a viewing of "Countdown to Zero," a new documentary from Lawrence Bender, a 1979 graduate of the University of Maine at Orono and the producer of "An Inconvenient Truth," and writer/director Lucy Walker ("Blindsight" and "Devil's Playground").

On Sunday, July 25 at 3 p.m., the Global Security Institute in partnership with Participant Media, Magnolia Films, Paolina's Way and the Ploughshares Fund will offer a free select screening of "Countdown to Zero" at The Strand Theatre in Rockland.

Global Security Institute President Jonathan Granoff and Ambassador Robert Grey Jr., director of the Washington-based Bipartisan Security Group, will conduct a question and answer session following the film.

In telephone interviews on July 20, Bender and Granoff answered questions about the core issues that inspired the making of the film, and the reasons for bringing it to The Strand Theatre.

"The core of the issue is the legacy that arose from the horrors of World War II, where the United States proliferated [nuclear weapons] to create a deterrent in case the Nazis developed an atomic bomb," Granoff said. "Then the USSR in response to our developing the bomb, developed the bomb. As we squared off with each other during the Cold War, tens of thousands of these were created and the number of countries that possess them proliferated."

"Post Cold War, and now post 9/11, we're in a very different situation," said Bender. "In the Cold War there was mutually assured destruction. If we attacked them they'd attack us, and it assured that we'd both be destroyed. Even though there were some hair-raising situations, self-preservation kept us safe."

"Now things have changed," he said. "There's still a chance of a state attacking, but most people believe it's a fairly low risk. The high risk is terrorism and nuclear proliferation. Most people believe that's an extremely high risk."

Granoff described the creation of the nuclear nonproliferation treaty under President Richard Nixon in 1970, when only China, France, Great Britain, the United States and the USSR had demonstrated the ability to make and use a nuclear weapon.

"The treaty's bargain is that the 182 countries which have renounced developing nuclear weapons - in exchange were promised by the five nuclear weapons states that they would eliminate their arsenals," he said. "The core issue is will the U.S. and Russia lead in fulfilling the bargain they made with the rest of the world to prevent massive proliferation."

While both men agreed that there are root social and political issues that cause nations and others to seek the technology to make weapons of mass destruction, they said their goal is to stop the manufacture of nuclear weapons and to see that all existing weapons are safely locked up or remade into lower grade material that could be used for other purposes.

"Ronald Reagan called for abolition of nuclear weapons," Granoff said. "It's time we heeded the call." He said Republican presidents Nixon, Reagan and George Herbert Walker Bush showed leadership in seeking an end to nuclear weapons, and Maine is in a unique position to complete that work.

They said Sens. Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe could take a leadership role in ensuring that the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, begun by Reagan in 1980 and yet to be ratified, is approved by Congress and signed by the president.

He said calling on the senators to do so was the action "Countdown to Zero" was created to inspire.

"[Those who see the film] can demand of their political representatives a commitment to reducing the value of nuclear weapons by ratifying the START treaty and the comprehensive test ban treaty, supporting deepened cuts between the two countries with 95 percent of the weapons, the U.S. and Russia, robustly strengthening an inspection and verification system for controlled nuclear materials around the world, and demanding the goal of zero," Granoff said.

"In Maine you have two Republican senators who are sane people," he said. "They can make a huge difference. They are intellectually and morally capable of picking up the banner on this issue."

Granoff said citizens should make nuclear nonproliferation a voting issue.

Bender said statesmen such as George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger and Sam Nunn have changed their minds about the efficacy of nuclear weapons as a deterrent to war. He said he has also spoken with military leaders from India and Pakistan who have gone from thinking the weapons are necessary to their countries' security to believing that their national security depends on abolishing the weapons.

He said that while the former Cold War superpowers had to demonstrate their commitment to the goal, that was only an important step on a long road.

"We don't want to be naive about this," Bender said. "We can't think just because we're reducing that it's going to make Iran reduce."

"There needs to be strong pressure on countries like Iran not to acquire nuclear weapons," Bender said. "I think it would be very idealistic to say we're not going to have anything to do with uranium and plutonium. Nuclear energy is a percentage of the world's energy. I don't believe nuclear energy is the answer to the climate crisis. That would mean you'd have nuclear power plants in unstable countries."

Bender said part of what he and other nonproliferation advocates are calling for is bigger and more robust monitoring systems and safeguards on nuclear energy. He said that just as they can be enriched to become more dangerous, nuclear materials could be downgraded in power to become safer to use and store.

In addition to calling on Mainers to ask Snowe and Collins to work for the ratification of the START treaty, Bender and Granoff said they want people to go to the Web site at takepart.com/zero and sign a petition.

"If you're going to college today you were born after the Berlin Wall came down," Bender said. "For young people, it's jaw dropping. They can't believe what they've inherited."

"If we have millions of people signing these petitions and we deliver them to heads of state it will have an effect," he said. "We want this to be a kitchen table conversation. We want people to become aware that this is an umbrella issue. If a nuclear weapon goes off in someone's city the world changes."

"The 21st century is the century when the world will cooperate to protect our common climate, the pH of the oceans and the presently endangered stocks of fish, and cooperate with communications technology to see our common humanity as more important than the richness of our diversity," Granoff said.

"Nuclear weapons are incompatible with the sustained future that people are working to obtain."

"A handful of people make nuclear weapons," he said. "In order to get rid of them we need to follow a paradigm created by the business community, which is based on global integration and cooperation. I bought my gas this morning from a Russian concession. My computer was repaired on a phone call from Bangalore last night, and the money that paid for them was backed by a loan from China."

"If we're going to solve protecting the commons we must have a world based on cooperation, not mutual annihilation," he said.

For more information about "Countdown to Zero," visit the Web site at takepart.com/zero. The Global Security Institute's Web site is at gsinstitute.org.

To learn more about the free July 25 film screening, go to the Web site at rocklandstrand.com.

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