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Los Alamos revisited

John Dear S.J. | Jul. 31, 2007 On the Road to Peace

"We stand at the brink of a second nuclear age. Not since the first atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki has the world faced such perilous choices. North Korea's recent test of a nuclear weapon, Iran's nuclear ambitions, a renewed U.S. emphasis on the military utility of nuclear weapons, the failure to adequately secure nuclear materials, and the continued presence of some 26,000 nuclear weapons in the United States and Russia are symptomatic of a larger failure to solve the problems posed by the most destructive technology on earth."

So writes the Board of Directors of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, in consultation with a board of sponsors that includes 18 Nobel Laureates.

You might be familiar with the Bulletin's "doomsday clock," a graphic representation of our planetary nuclear peril. (See **www.thebulletin.org [1]**.) The clock's hour hand is poised on 12 and the minute hand is set just minutes away from the stroke of midnight. In 1984, the height of Cold War tension, the clock was set at just three minutes to midnight. By 1991 with the Cold War dissipated, the scientists reset the clock to 17 minutes to midnight. In January, they nudged the minute hand from seven minutes to midnight to five, a sign of their increasing pessimism.

The Bulletin board statement continues: "As in past deliberations, we have examined other human-made threats to civilization. We have concluded that the dangers posed by climate change are nearly as dire as those posed by nuclear weapons. The effects may be less dramatic in the short term than the destruction that could be wrought by nuclear explosions, but over the next three to four decades climate change could cause drastic harm to the habitats upon which human societies depend for survival."

My Chicago friends at the North Suburban Peace Initiative (**www.nspipeace.org [2]**) write

> *The biggest challenge of our time is to halt the rapidly growing spread of nuclear weapons. India and Pakistan are increasing their nuclear bomb-making capacity Iran is pursuing plans to develop nuclear weapons and the missile capability to deploy these weapons. At the heart of the problem is the nuclear strategy of the Bush Administration which rejects international treaties as a solution to proliferation and relies on U.S. military might and technology to protect the US. Rather than negotiate treaties to eliminate weapons, this Administration has forged a strategy to eliminate regimes that might use them against us.*
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> *"But the strategy has backfired. The invasion of Iraq has turned out to be a disaster. Iran and North Korea have accelerated their nuclear programs. The Bush administration has requested funding*

from Congress to develop a new generation of nuclear weapons. Congress has agreed to provide initial funding for the development of these new nuclear weapons. Total cost is projected to be in the multi-billion dollar range. These new nuclear weapons must also be tested before they are deployed. Any such testing would end the U.S. nuclear testing moratorium and would almost certainly prompt testing by Russia and China."

Such statements chill our souls here in New Mexico, birthplace of the bomb, center of the world's demonic nuclear weaponry. Here reside more nuclear weapons than in any place on the planet. And we continue to build them, and we continue to suffer the effects of radioactive waste.

Over 18 million cubic feet of waste lie buried in unlined pits, shafts and trenches at Los Alamos.

This month, an independent research group examined dust in dozens of homes, restaurants, hotels, and offices, and found radioactive particles everywhere. Hexavalent chromium (the deadly chemical featured in the movie "Erin Brockovich") has been repeatedly detected in the Rio Grande and other canyon systems and regional drinking water. The state urges people not to eat fish from the Rio Grande. I avoid the drinking water from the well on the mesa where I live, some 30 miles from Los Alamos, N.M.; it's sure to be contaminated.

Nonetheless, New Mexico politicians push the U.S. Congress to keep the funding pipeline to Los Alamos open. Their eyes twinkle at the prospect of all those millions. And the Congress complies. In the last few months, Los Alamos completed its new design for a starter mechanism, called a nuclear pit. With it comes another generation of nuclear weapons: the old are retired and the new are trotted out in just as big of numbers.

Despite the risks and evils, our national hurry toward world annihilation intensifies. We are rushing toward death.

My friend Jim Wallis of *Sojourners* recently wrote: "I don't believe any country should possess nuclear weapons. The foundation of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty was an agreement by the nuclear powers to reduce and eventually eliminate their nuclear stockpiles in return for other countries agreeing not to acquire them. None of the nuclear powers has upheld their side of the deal. If the U.S. and other nuclear weapons states are serious about preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, they must take the necessary steps toward eliminating their own nuclear arsenals. Hypocrisy doesn't make good foreign policy."

What can we do? Everything we can! Pray, fast, study, speak out, take at stand, cross the line, organize, act as the nonviolent Jesus would.

This year, my friends and I will journey once again up the mountain to Los Alamos to take our stand for disarmament. We will commemorate the 62nd anniversary of the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Friday Aug. 3, I'll celebrate a special Mass for peace in Santa Fe. Later that evening, we will hold our annual lecture, this year featuring my friend Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois of the School of the Americas Watch, just back from Latin America and Iran.

Saturday Aug. 4, after a nonviolence training session, we'll gather for prayer at Ashley Pond in the center of Los Alamos, process through the town, pour bags of ashes on the sidewalks, put on sackcloth, and sit in strict silence for 30 minutes. The time will be devoted to repenting of the mortal sin of war-making and nuclear weapons. And we'll beg the God of peace for the gift of nuclear disarmament, for a new world without war, poverty of nuclear weapons, for a new world of nonviolence.

Effectiveness? Making a difference? Results? We are way beyond that. Our role is to try to fulfill the biblical mandate of repentance. Our role is to convert to Gospel nonviolence. For our inspiration, we embrace the story of Jonah and the people of Nineveh, who themselves sat themselves in sackcloth and ashes -- a gesture Jesus urged on Chorazin and Bethsaida.

By this symbolic gesture we will denounce the immorality of nuclear weapons, and our own complicity. We'll pray and speak out that Los Alamos be converted into a nonviolent center for turning all such weapons to scrap and for researching how to heal the environment.

Toward this end we bear a few dreams. We hope the weapons-makers of Los Alamos will quit their jobs. We envision all nuclear weapons being dismantled. We urge Los Alamos's scientists to devote their talents to reversing global warming. And we proclaim to all to heed the Gospel call to nonviolence.

Everyone is hereby cordially invited to join us in this act of prayer, repentance and nonviolence on Aug. 4. May we all repent and one day welcome God's reign of nonviolence, justice, love.

John Dear's new book, "Transfiguration," (Doubleday) is available from online and from your neighborhood bookstore. The DVD about Dear, "The Narrow Path," is available from **www.sandamianofoundation.org [3]**. For information about the annual "Sackcloth and Ashes" nonviolent action at Los Alamos, N.M., Aug. 3-4, see: **www.paxchristinewmexico.org [4]**. Dear is to stand trial for his antiwar protest Sept. 6th. For information, see: **www.johndear.org [5]**.

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