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After 65 years, retire the bomb!

John Dear | Jul. 27, 2010 On the Road to Peace

The year has turned again, and friends and I are busy completing plans for our annual Hiroshima Day events in Santa Fe and Los Alamos. Our theme this time around: ?Sixty Five Years Is Enough! Retire the Bomb! We Want a Nuclear Free World!?

It has been seven years now since Pax Christi New Mexico began somberly marking the occasion. There have been vigils, lectures, retreats and, on as close to Hiroshima Day as possible, in a communal gesture of repentance, sackcloth and ashes. Many prominent leaders have joined us over the years -- Kathy Kelly, Sr. Helen Prejean, Fr. Roy Bourgeois, Fr. Daniel Berrigan, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton and Nobel Laureates Mariead Maguire and Jody Williams.

This year, on July 30, Bishop Gabino Zavala will join us, president of Pax Christi USA and auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles. Friday night he will address us, and on Saturday, July 31, we will gather in Los Alamos, birthplace of the bomb. From the town?s Ashley Pond, we?ll process in silence through the town, sit in sackcloth and ashes, and spend thirty minutes in contemplative prayer. It will be a time dedicated to summoning our sorrow for the mortal sin of nuclear weapons and war, a time of petitioning the God of peace. Grant us, dear God, a nuclear-free world.

Our gesture, modest though it is, will be infused with Gandhi?s creative nonviolence, plus the biblical allusion to Jonah and the Ninevehites. By the tone we set we hope to dissolve the polarizing sense of ?us? versus ?them.? We will take responsibility for our own complicity; we?ll acknowledge our own stake in the violence that breeds nuclear weapons. Ours is not primarily an accusatory gesture. We come to grieve, repent and pray.

At the same time we have a message to bring. Seven years now and it hasn?t much changed. What it boils down to is this: nuclear weapons are ruinous for the economy, the environment, our health. They?re pernicious for children and creation. The security they lure us with is counterfeit. Nuclear weapons corrupt our souls.

Together with Bishop Zavala we?ll proclaim that designing, building, maintaining them flouts the will of the God of peace. Ordering our culture around them is impractical. Threatening their use is sinful and immoral. The turpitude of using them goes off the map.

The added tragedy is that it could have been averted. In 1945 Americans were duped. The government insisted the bomb was necessary. They said it ended the war, it saved lives. No debate, no public comment. No discerning the rat race that lay ahead. Or the looming squandering of national treasures. The planes were unleashed, the horror was done.

We know now we were lied to. It was the dark obsession to dominate that impelled us to vaporize 200,000 thousand sisters and brothers. According to leading historians, the Japanese were preparing to surrender already. The war was already coming to an end.

If you?ve never read this assessment of the times, you?ve got homework to do. The best place to start is with the

writings of historian Gar Alperovitz, particularly his book, *Atomic Diplomacy*. (Visit his website at www.garalperovitz.com. For a primer, google his name and download some articles.) Alperovitz has well documented how the war would have ended without our dropping atomic bombs.

But Truman was in a belligerent mood. And he looked askance at the Soviets. He wasn?t about to let them get the upper hand; here was his chance to humble them with displays of American might. This serves as no justification, of course, for murdering civilians on an incalculable scale -- a formidable problem for those in power. So the U.S. stoked its propaganda machine. And out came its nonsense: the vast killing saved lives.

Alperovitz was the first to document that Truman postponed the Potsdam meeting until July 17, 1945. The day before, July 16, the infamous test was scheduled -- scientists gathered in New Mexico to detonate a prototype. Would it work as advertized? Would it fizzle out? Truman waited to know; he wanted to size up what kind of bargaining power he would have. (Scientists later confessed they didn?t know what to expect. The atomic fission might be contained. Or it might spread across the atmosphere and set the sky permanently on fire.)

Truman got the results he was hoping for. And by mid-August, atomic fission had consumed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For weeks smoke rose from the rubble. Afterwards the U.S. Strategic Bombing survey concluded: ?Certainly prior to December 31, 1945, and in all probability prior to November 1, 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated.?

A 1946 War Department study concluded that ?the Japanese leaders had decided to surrender ...?

And later, Samuel Walker, a leading historian of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, wrote: ?The consensus among scholars is that the bomb was not needed to avoid an invasion of Japan. ... It is clear that alternatives to the bomb existed and that Truman and his advisers knew it.?

Alperovitz adds that there is ?little contemporaneous evidence that top World War II military leaders believed the atomic bomb was the only way to avoid an invasion.?

Eisenhower, for example, wrote his in memoirs that ?Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives.?

Admiral Leahy later wrote, ?The use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. In being the first to use it, we adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages.?

The implied ?if?s? break the heart. If Russia had declared war on Japan, says Alperovitz, and if we had guaranteed the safety of the Japanese emperor, the war would have ended and no one else would have died.

So why did we drop atomic bombs? The debate continues, a debate in most cases a result of the guilt at having to gaze at our horrific complicity. Easier to stop our ears and, under the guise of jingoistic scholarship, find refuge in denial.

But American rationale for the attacks remains weak, and our cognitive dissonance remains wide. Some by various means have tried to close the gap. Some suggest that huge sums for research had been spent, and Truman considered not deploying the bomb now a huge waste.

Others suggest that Truman feared being seen (that bugbear of all presidents) as ?soft? on the enemy. And yet others suggest that the byzantine federal bureaucracies and their inscrutable decision-making put the attack on a

course that just couldn?t be stopped.

But Alperovitz, to my mind -- and to the mind of many scholars -- cuts to the bone of the matter. The U.S. wanted to strengthen its position in relation to the Soviet Union. And that is why 200,000 Japanese died. What I know of subsequent U.S. history does nothing to refute Alperovitz?s thesis. Truman?s own diaries corroborate it.

Sixty-five years have passed. And we?re mired in a warlike culture of our own making. Under the leadership of the Obama administration, we continue to squander a king?s ransom for weapons of hell. Official minds are transfixed by their own propaganda. Which is to say, the rationalizing drivel America once told its people has defiled all thought. At the highest levels, like the blind leading the blind, they cling to the party line: nuclear weapons make us secure, stable, safe. Which is why we go. At the home of the bomb we proclaim, ?It just ain?t so.?

We don?t proclaim it by our own authority. We go in prayer and repentance. We place our cause in the hands of the God of peace. And the God of peace gives us signs of hope.

You can see and hear Gar Alperovitz for yourself in the excellent forthcoming documentary film, "The Forgotten Bomb," about the history of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the need to abolish nuclear weapons. It was made by Pax Christi New Mexico?s co-coordinator Bud Ryan along with Stuart Overbey. Featuring interviews with George Schultz, Jonathan Schell, Joni Arends and Jim Douglass, this will be a great resource to show in churches and schools. (See: www.forgottenbomb.com)

A group of young evangelicals has started a movement to abolish nuclear weapons. They call themselves the Two Futures Project (see www.twofuturesproject.org), and write:

> We believe that we face two futures and one choice: a world without nuclear weapons or a world ruined by them. We support concrete and practical steps to reduce nuclear dangers immediately, while pursuing the multilateral, global, irreversible, and verifiable elimination of nuclear weapons, as a biblically-grounded mandate and as a contemporary security imperative. Our change strategy is based around the creation of a nonpartisan, conscience-driven, enduring majority of Americans who are committed to a nuclear weapons-free world. By joining together with one voice of Christian conscience, we seek to encourage and enable our national leaders to make the complete elimination of nuclear weapons the organizing principle of American nuclear weapons policy. We join in this work to the glory of God.

Finally, I?m heartened by a loose network of young people traveling the country recruiting folks to come to Los Alamos next week. (See: www.thinkoutsidethebomb.org.) We expect over three hundred young people to camp out on nearby Pueblo land and vigil each day through the sixty fifth anniversaries.

?We can do nothing today about Hiroshima,? Alperovitz writes in the foreword to the 1985 edition of *Atomic Diplomacy*. ?We can ... look to ourselves, to our actions or our inactions, to whether we contribute by deed or by silence to fostering an environment that restrains or allows or promotes the next Hiroshima.?

And that?s why we?ll climb the mesa to Los Alamos. To foster an environment in which it dawns on us all. Nuclear weapons are unthinkable. Thus our message: Sixty five years is enough. Retire the bomb.

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John Dear will introduce Bishop Zavala at this week?s annual Hiroshima day events in Santa Fe and Los Alamos, N.M. See: www.paxchristinewmexico.org. Next week, John will teach a weeklong course, ?Gandhi, King, Day and Merton,? Aug. 2-6, at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, N.M., (see www.ghostranch.org.) His latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*

, as well as Patricia Normile?s *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services? ?Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund,? go to: http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat on Gospel Nonviolence, go to www.johndear.org.

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