

The Rotblat Legacy

**Interlocking Strategies for a
Nuclear Weapons-Free World**

By Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C.

**Address to Pugwash Colloquium
in honour of Sir Joseph Rotblat**

London, December 10, 2005

“Morality is at the core of the nuclear issue: are we going to base our world on a culture of peace or on a culture of violence? Nuclear weapons are fundamentally immoral: their action is indiscriminate, affecting civilians as well as military, innocents and aggressors alike, killing people alive now and generations as yet unborn. And the consequence of their use might be to bring the human race to an end. All this makes nuclear weapons unacceptable instruments for maintaining peace in the world.”

-- Sir Joseph Rotblat
Letter to 2005 NPT Review Conference

These words are the quintessential Rotblat. They combine the intermingling of the scientist and the ethicist that characterized Rotblat’s personality. They speak outward to society in a pointed warning. And they were uttered just a few months before his death, reflecting his ceaseless drive to rid the world of nuclear weapons. Though physically frail, his voice could only be stilled by death itself.

Einstein is often quoted for his remark that the atomic bomb changed everything except how we think. Rotblat showed how human thinking can indeed change: how we can, in short, lift up our eyes to a vision of a nuclear weapons-free world.

As we in the Pugwash movement continue our work, it is the Rotblat vision that should guide us. I state sincerely to my Pugwash colleagues that

just as Jo Rotblat was my mentor in life, so his words continue to inspire and guide me.

* * *

Nuclear weapons and human security cannot co-exist on the planet. Nuclear weapons are anti-human. Humanitarian law has always recognized that limitation and proportionality must be respected in warfare. But the very idea of a nuclear weapon – even a tactical nuclear weapon -- is to kill massively; the killing and the poisonous radiation cannot be contained. The social and economic consequences of nuclear war in a world intimately inter-connected in life-support systems would be catastrophic. The severe physical damage from blast, fire and radiation in any type of nuclear exchange would be followed by the collapse of food production and distribution and even water supplies. The prospect of widespread starvation would confront huge masses of people. Rampant disease would follow the break-down in health care facilities. These immense brutalities would violate the universal norm of life – to go on living in a manner befitting a human being with the inherent right to life.

No civilization, no culture has ever denied this common foundation upon which all peoples stand. Leaving aside the massive suffering, which by itself ought to stir the consciences of the nuclear proponents, the entire

question of human rights would be up-ended. The right to a social and international order, as set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, would be completely lost. The structures underpinning humanitarian law would be gone. Order would be inverted into disorder.

The humanitarian question is of growing concern to scientists and technologists who see the fruit of their work turned into instruments of death. A code of conduct for scientists, strengthening their hand in resisting more advances in the technology of killing, can come about by this emphasis on the assault to life that nuclear weapons pose. This was, in fact, the stance taken by Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein when they signed the Russell-Einstein Manifesto in 1955, along with nine other scientists, including Joseph Rotblat. Their scientific critique of nuclear weapons ended with the stirring words: “We appeal as human beings to human beings: Remember your humanity and forget the rest.”

It is empowering to note that the age of weapons of mass destruction arrived just at the time when the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and its follow-up instruments were being codified. Just when we have learned that every human, no matter the culture, religion, ideology or geography, has the right to life, we have perfected our ability to kill massively. The U.N.’s formulation of a Culture of Peace is leading us

inevitably to the recognition that every human being has the right to peace, in fact, as is said in the early declarations on this subject, to the “sacred” right to peace. The gradual increase in humanity’s understanding of itself will lead to a societal condemnation of nuclear weapons when it is fully understood that such instruments of evil are a violation of life itself.

* * *

The impact on humanity must be the basis of Pugwash’s stance on nuclear weapons as we go forward in the post-Rotblat age of Pugwash. Both a short-term and a long-range strategy are required.

Every effort must be made to obtain a Nuclear Weapons Convention to ban the production, as well as the use, of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons must be formally declared illegal; any use anywhere for any reason must be codified as a crime against humanity. The present deadlock in the operation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty combined with the increasing danger of the use of nuclear weapons demand a focused effort to start building the architecture to support a nuclear weapons-free world. Time is urgent.

All this might be considered the short-term strategy. It cannot wait for the peaceful resolution of conflict around the world, as if regional tranquility must be achieved before the nuclear weapons states will give up

their arsenals. Neither can we wait for humanity to overcome its proclivity for greed, as if a more compassionate human nature must be developed before society can lay down its instruments of mass destruction.

It is true that nuclear weapons are about far more than nuclear weapons. They are about power. They are about economic exploitation. They are about racism. They are about fear. Nuclear proponents have deceived the public for a long time that nuclear weapons are about deterrence, that they are necessary to ensure our own security and that their use, while to be regretted, is justified in the protection of our way of life. Just as truth is the first casualty of war, the rationale constantly advanced for the possession of nuclear wars is deceitful and an insidious manipulation of public thinking.

A thorough analysis of the true reason for the continued existence of nuclear weapons leads into the terrain of the human psyche. The same is true of war. Is a war necessary to resolve a problem of aggression in any given circumstance, such as Vietnam, Afghanistan or Iraq? Or is war the outcome of the determination of a political or military actor to defend vested interests? The military-industrial complex, a powerful influence in political decision-making, benefits commercially from war and profiteers from the maintenance of the nuclear weapons systems. They do not want to let go,

and seize on instabilities to make their case, always appealing to the fear, grief and anxiety of the human condition.

The human condition is clouded by aggression at the best of times. That may be expressing reality too mildly. We have fought wars throughout human history (though there have been intermittent periods of peace). The inter-action of human beings always engenders conflict. And so the pessimists say that, human nature being what it is, we will always need to protect ourselves. We cannot expect angels to walk the streets of the world.

This view of humanity – dark, apprehensive, acquisitive – is a significant obstacle to a nuclear weapons-free world. Nuclear weapons have become part of the condition of continued existence in a decidedly imperfect world. Yes, they are dangerous, people tell pollsters. Yes, the world would be better without them, the polls record. But behind a benevolent response lies lassitude borne of an interior conviction that the human condition is such that nuclear weapons will continue to exist. That is just the way it is.

The necessary architecture for a nuclear weapons-free world – the strengthening of international law and verification systems – is summarily rejected because pessimists assume we cannot change human thinking. Human thinking does, of course, change. Legalized slavery, colonialism, apartheid were all done away with when societal thinking matured and

decided to instigate the proper political and legal machinery. But such transformations take a long time.

How long will it take for the public mind to awake, if not erupt, and decide that nuclear weapons are too dangerous a threat to the very development of the human condition that, through science, technology and the appreciation of human rights instruments, is making the world a better place? In other words, when will there be a public clamouring to excise the threat of nuclear weapons from the continuation of life on the planet?

Once such a clamour (call it a concerted campaign) starts up, and the public determines that it will be freed of the nuclear apocalypse, putting the pieces of the architecture for a nuclear weapons-free world into place will be much easier. The awakening of the public mind to the full benefits of life on earth without nuclear weapons is, perhaps, a long-term strategy. Human beings do not change overnight.

The short-term strategy, immediate action, needs a long-term strategy to be effective. The long-term strategy needs the short-term strategy to give it focus and impetus. Both strategies need each other. They are interlocked. Immediate steps and a full vision are mutually complementary.

We have a vision – the legacy of Joseph Rotblat -- to implement a two-pronged course of action. Governments, for the most part reeling with

daily crises, cannot do much because the effects of the human condition have driven them too far apart. Civil society, even that element most attuned to nuclear dangers, cannot do it alone because it does not have its hands on the levers of power. But players and groups within each can create a critical mass to move government machinery and public thinking forward at the same time. This fusion of effort occurred in the development of the Anti-Personnel Land Mines Treaty and the International Criminal Court, and it can occur in a growing movement to banish nuclear weapons from Earth.

It is not as if such an effort has to start from scratch. There is, in fact, considerable historical momentum behind the evolution of human rights thinking and the gradual rejection of any moral or legal base for nuclear weapons. The strong legal basis of the Non-Proliferation Treaty as a result of the deliberations of 1995 and 2000, the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice of 1996, the formation of the New Agenda Coalition, the discernible restlessness within NATO, the formation of the Abolition 2000 network, the growing effectiveness of research centres and other institutes, the public opinion polls – all this constitutes movement forward. From a historical point of view, humanity has already begun the long journey from Hiroshima to a nuclear weapons-free world.

The challenge for Pugwash is to show how both the short-range and the long-range strategies can be advanced at the same time. While concentrating on the steps toward the abolition of nuclear weapons, Pugwash must continue to illuminate the integrated agenda for human security. Pugwash's work on issues related to development, the environment and human rights is instrumental in addressing the seeds of conflict.

Towards the end of his life, Rotblat began insisting that Pugwash must reach out to other civil society groups, collaborating in appropriate ways to work for human security and nuclear weapons abolition. Many NGOs need the expertise on nuclear weapons issues that Pugwash can provide. Pugwash itself can be strengthened by working relationships with others who have expertise in the range of human security fields.

Combining short-range and long-range strategies for the abolition of nuclear weapons, Pugwash must go forward, reaching outward in a collaborative effort with other civil society leaders to bring about true human security.