

Coalition for Peace Action

Hiroshima Commemoration

5 August 2024

PRIMA PARS

Welcome to this hour of remembrance. It marks an anniversary that humankind must never forget, of events it must never repeat. For this is the anniversary of humankind's discovery that it had unlocked the toolkit of its own annihilation.

Of course, at this very hour, there is unfolding a commemoration of this discovery right where annihilation was first, earth-shatteringly, experienced: Hiroshima, today. Nagasaki, three days hence.

We join many others around the world commemorating today this fearsome discovery. But our own commemoration, here in Princeton, has unique resonance. Last year's critically acclaimed – and even more remarkably, commercially successful – film *Oppenheimer* brought home to its audiences the deep connections between Princeton and the brilliant scientific minds who broke the code to the explosive potential of the atom. Albert Einstein and Robert Oppenheimer are only the most famous.

The physicists who led the way in developing the technology of nuclear weapons were also among the first to recognize the horrific moral consequences of their discovery, among the first to want to rein it in.

But once the men of science turned over the keys to the men of power, control over their discovery was out of their hands.

Power has its own dynamic, the dynamic of strength – and all too often, of strength that disparages moral restraints as weakness, as hand-wringing, as immobilizing. Recall the *Oppenheimer* film's portrayal of the deepening conflict between its title character and General Lesley Groves. Recall President Truman's irritation with Oppenheimer's burden of guilt about the lives lost to the applied science of the Manhattan Project.

After I married Yuki Moore of Princeton, I discovered new threads connecting me to those long-ago events. Her father, James Moore, of the Witherspoon-Jackson neighborhood, was a postman delivering mail on Princeton's prized #1 route on the west side of the borough, including the home of the director of the Institute for Advanced Study, Dr. Oppenheimer.

Before setting out on his delivery rounds each day, Brud Moore was required to enter into a log all the mail he was to deliver to Oppenheimer — from whom and from where every letter came. This was one of the less malignant and low-tech ways that the national security state surveilled and scorned those who had broken faith with the marvelous power of nuclear annihilation.

A different thread came through Yuki's mother, Ai, or Connie, a Seattle born and bred Nisei whose school friend Tai-chan had gone back to Japan with her family in 1941. Connie's parents had bought tickets for her to visit Japan the following summer, during which she planned to catch up with Tai-chan. Alas, men of power had different travel plans, involving ships steaming toward Hawaii, and after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor Connie's entire family and neighborhood were rounded up and deported to an internment camp in the Idaho desert. Tai-chan spent the rest of her high-school years in wartime Japan.

Both girls came back to Seattle after the war. Both formed families on the East Coast and stayed in touch by mail. Decades later, when Yuki and I were engaged, Connie was invited to an event at Tai-chan's home in Maryland, and brought us with her. The two 60-somethings were like teenagers again, remembering old times, when I, being a curious guy, asked about Tai-chan's experience during the war. Connie's interest was piqued — she had never asked about it. Tai-chan told us that her family had ended up spending those years with relatives in a small town just outside of... Hiroshima. The room fell silent. Her sister, she added, went into the city center each morning for work. And yes, off she went the morning of August 6th, waving her hand goodbye to her sister, calling out, "*Jaa mata,*" "till later."

But there was no "later." The sister never came back. There was the *pika-don* of the atomic explosion, the fireball rising over the city, the fires and smoke, and then dazed and scarred people trudging out of town as the day wore on. Tai-chan told us she tried to enter the city looking for her sister. She had to turn back. Dante could not have imagined such a Hell.

The horrors of that awful day will be addressed far more powerfully by Shiho Burke in a few minutes. Let me just say that Tai-chan's account left my mother-in-law uncharacteristically speechless. In many years of correspondence, she had never heard from her friend about her presence at the dawn of the nuclear age.

Tai-chan's sister was one of over 66,000 civilians killed in the explosion that day, including over 90% of the city's doctors and nurses. Among the dead were thousands of Koreans, unwilling subjects of His Imperial Majesty brought to labor in the city. Twelve

American prisoners of war were also killed — regrettable collateral damage, as they say in the military. The death toll would double in weeks and months to come, with the insidious effects of radiation poisoning.

A few years ago, Yuki and I went to Nagasaki, the city that is forever twinned with Hiroshima in human memory, like Sodom with Gomorrah. UNESCO has conferred World Heritage recognition on Nagasaki for its “hidden Christian sites,” where Japanese Christians secretly persisted in their faith despite centuries of ferocious persecution by chauvinist shoguns. Ironically, the atomic bomb was dropped just meters from the city’s Catholic cathedral that was packed with worshippers.

UNESCO has also designated a World Heritage site in Hiroshima, a site specific to the ruins of the nuclear attack. UNESCO describes the “Genbaku Dome” as “a stark and powerful symbol of the most destructive force ever created by humankind,” which, it says, “also expresses the hope for world peace and the ultimate elimination of all nuclear weapons.”

Although the United States, joined only by China, opposed World Heritage designation for the dome in 1996, lamenting its “lack of historical perspective,” President Barack Obama went to the site twenty years later. Obama, the only sitting U.S. president ever to visit Hiroshima, told his listeners: “We have a shared responsibility to look directly in the eye of history and ask what we must do differently to curb such suffering.”

More commonly, however, men of power have asked not what we must do differently, but how we can build more. Although the very first resolution of the newly created United Nations General Assembly called for “the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction,” hard-nosed men of power have been notably less sentimental in assessing how such weapons can advance what they call national security.

Over the past eight decades weapons have been built, testing has been halted, weapons have spread, testing has resumed, weapons have been dismantled, delivery systems have advanced, testing has been halted, warhead limits have been breached, treaties have been renounced. Public concern has waxed and waned.

Shortly we will consider where we’ve been and where we are now. But let us first attend to where it all began.

SECUNDA PARS

Thank you, Shiho Burke, for sharing with us the experience of humankind's first encounter with nuclear warfare. It is no wonder that the very first resolution of the newborn U.N. General Assembly, just five months after Hiroshima, demanded the elimination of atomic weapons from all countries' arsenals.

Alas, men of power have thought differently. And while they have eventually accepted disarmament regimes for lesser weapons of mass destruction, whether chemical or biological weapons, or even cluster munitions, they have clung tenaciously to the Gollum's Ring of nukes.

It took concerted public protests and mobilization in the 1950s and early '60s - and such cultural memes as "Dr. Strangelove" - to force the biggest nuclear-armed states to halt nuclear testing in the atmosphere. After President John F. Kennedy secured agreement with the Soviets on this partial test ban in 1963, he was surprised by the depth of public emotion and enthusiasm when he addressed it in his speeches - especially given the furious opposition of Senate conservatives. "If I had known how popular this would be," he joked with his aides, "I would have done it a long time ago."

Public anxieties about nukes were sufficiently intense that a year later, his successor Lyndon Johnson would deploy the famous 60-second "Daisy" TV spot against his challenger for the presidency, a crusty conservative who had vehemently denounced the treaty.

That first achievement in reining in a run-away nuclear arms race was followed by others: the Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968, with its famous but still unenforceable commitment by the nuclear-armed states to negotiate a rollback of their nuclear arsenals; President Richard Nixon's strategic arms limitation treaty and anti-ballistic missile treaty, which helped ignite a rebellion from his party's right wing; and Jimmy Carter's SALT 2.

But the tide was turning in American politics, and an avowedly hawkish administration took power in the 1980s committed to an unfettered nuclear buildup. This was the time when Princeton's own Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament came into its own, leading the fight for a nuclear freeze. The citizenry's fears of nuclear cowboys and "*The Day After*" chastened even an administration that had made its mark with MX missiles, intermediate-range missile deployments, and the "Star Wars" of SDI, such that it seized the opening provided by a new leader in the Soviet Union.

It was none other than Ronald Reagan who declared, with Mikhail Gorbachev, that “nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” The end of the Cold War led to deep nuclear arms reductions, and both Reagan and his successor George Bush basked in the glow of warm public approval for putting the nuclear demons to rest.

Perhaps they were too successful, for citizens let down their guard while the nuclear arms lobby regrouped. When the Clinton administration negotiated the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, an avowed goal of American policy for forty years, conservative hardliners in control of the Senate rejected ratification. The junior George Bush abrogated Nixon’s anti-ballistic missile treaty. When Barack Obama negotiated another round of deep cuts in nuclear arsenals in the New START treaty of 2010, he could only win the needed Republican senators to ratify it by agreeing to a massive so-called “modernization” of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

As an undergraduate at Columbia in 1982, Obama had been mobilized into the campaign for nuclear disarmament – part of the same nuclear freeze movement that was galvanizing us here in Princeton. But as president he had to square off against a nuclear arms lobby that remains deeply entrenched among men of power in Washington, at a time when much of the public had been lulled into complacency and the grassroots organizations for peace had been demobilized.

But let me assure you, our Coalition for Peace Action has not demobilized!

And we must not, for we are at another crossroads today.

For the first time in half a century, a big nuclear-armed power, trapped in a war of its own making, has repeatedly threatened to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine. Another has embarked on matching America’s nuclear “modernization” with a build-up of its own.

The nuclear weapons lobby in our own country has begun agitating for a resumption of weapons testing, ending our de facto respect for the purposes of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. The lobby has powerful friends in Congress and in at least one presidential campaign.

Friends, we cannot afford to demobilize!

Frustrated by the con job of the Men of Power in nuclear weapons states, much of the rest of the world a decade ago launched a negotiating process for a Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The nuclear powers and their allies boycotted the process, but the treaty has been ratified by 70 states and entered into force two days after Joe Biden’s inauguration.

Though the treaty has been scorned by the weapons lobby as performative U.N. gum-beating, a growing number of Members of Congress have rebelled against Washington's blackout on the treaty. Forty-three members have cosponsored House Resolution 77, which explicitly endorses the goals and provisions of the treaty.

These members have laid out an agenda for us all:

(A) to negotiate a new, bilateral disarmament agreement with Russia before New START expires in 2026 and to pursue negotiations with China and other nuclear-armed states for the verifiable and enforceable elimination of global nuclear arsenals;

(B) to renounce the option of using nuclear weapons first;

(C) to end the President's sole authority to launch a nuclear attack – something that people really began to worry about in the last administration;

(D) to take U.S. nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert; and

(E) to halt the three trillion dollar program of nuclear modernization.

I am pleased to report that five members of Congress from New Jersey have signed onto this resolution – the most from any State save California. Moreover, the three Congress members within a 20-mile radius of this plaza, representing Mercer-Monmouth-Middlesex districts, are all cosponsors: Andy Kim, Frank Pallone, and Bonnie Watson-Coleman.

This, I submit to you, is a sign of the effectiveness of our Coalition in *staying mobilized*, and in keeping our elected officials informed.

Remembering the destruction wreaked by the use of nuclear weapons eight decades ago is not just an exercise in idle memory. It is essential to inform our decisions and actions today, so I congratulate you on being here this evening.

Phasing out our nuclear arsenals is not a liberal versus conservative debate. If you are a fiscally conservative citizen who wants to cut wasteful federal spending, squandering another \$300 billion on shiny new Sentinel missiles to deliver nuclear warheads we can't conceivably use is another special-interest boondoggle.

A strong national defense is built on an arsenal you can actually use in a crisis, not weaponry whose use would unite the world against you.

So yes, we have common ground. Let us build on it.

Let us use the heightened attention the public gives to issues during a competitive presidential campaign to engage our fellow citizens – and to tell our would-be leaders what they *must do*.

Let us stay mobilized – for life, for peace.

And let us *NEVER FORGET*.