

Steven Leeper
Chairperson, Hiroshima Peace Culture Institute

A Request for Help from Mayors for Peace

I write today to ask for help from the Association of Asian Studies in the struggle to liberate the human family from the threat of nuclear annihilation. The issue of nuclear weapons may, at first glance, appear beyond the scope of your organization, but I assure you that your organization is not beyond the scope of those weapons.

We stand collectively at a crossroads. Will we eliminate nuclear weapons? Or will we let them spread uncontrolled around the planet? If they spread, they will be used, so we are really deciding in the next year or two whether to eliminate nuclear weapons or use them.

You are teachers, not activists or politicians. If your students go home and tell their parents that you are training them to invade military bases and pour blood on missiles, you could be accused of being too political. On the other hand, you are in a position to affect how your students and our society in general think about nuclear weapons, and ultimately, this is where the struggle will be won or lost.

I would like to suggest three approaches. First, you can teach the facts about the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Simply bringing this subject up would be a radical departure from the status quo. While the Nazis holocaust and other aspects of World War II are studied extensively, the atomic bombings get barely a mention in most classrooms. My organization in Hiroshima will be more than happy to send you posters, CDs, DVDs, and other materials that tell our side of the story. The other side of the story should be easy to find in the US. As a teacher, you don't even have to take a position. Just get the facts and the controversies out in the open. Is the mere mention of nuclear weapons too political?

The most intractable obstacles for anti-nuclear activism in the US are ignorance and indifference. Merely by bringing the issue of nuclear weapons into the consciousness of your students, you will be making an enormous contribution to protecting them from catastrophe. I say this because I am 100% convinced that, if they get all the facts, the vast majority of your students and everyone around them will understand that nuclear

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weapons are cruel, inhumane, indiscriminate, and not limitable to the battlefield in either time or space. Thus, they are illegal weapons. They should never have been invented and should have been banned and eliminated decades ago.

A second approach would be to add nuclear weapons to the agenda when you are discussing environmental issues. Here you can point out that the Hiroshima bomb was a toy compared to the bombs we have today. The fireball over Hiroshima grew to 300 yards or three football fields in diameter, and that fireball was enough to crush and burn an area three to four miles in diameter. A 20-megaton bomb would create a fireball two miles in diameter. Luckily, we have no idea how large an area it would destroy, but we do know that just a few such bombs would be enough to cause nuclear darkening, which would cause billions to starve. Ten or twenty such bombs could cause nuclear winter, which would kill us all. Again, if your students were to go to the website at www.nucleardarkness.org and obtain the facts, they would see immediately that these weapons pose a clear and present existential threat. Which is more important, to protect them from this threat or protect them from knowledge about this threat? So far, the US educational system is doing the latter.

A third approach would be to study nuclear politics. What is the role of nuclear weapons in international relations? What is the role of nuclear weapons at the United Nations? Over the years, who has been trying to eliminate nuclear weapons and who has been insisting on maintaining them? And why? This approach will lead students directly into the realm of realpolitik and the way power flows through the world, which most young people find fascinating if given a window to look through.

In this connection, you might also study the nuclear non-proliferation treaty as an example of international politics and international law. The NPT is among the most successful treaties in history. Nearly all nations are parties to it, and, until 1998, it was quite effective in preventing nuclear proliferation. It is a treaty well worth studying as an example of international problem solving, and it is especially relevant today because it is teetering on the brink of collapse. Civilization as we know it depends on this treaty, and your students should be aware that their future is being decided by a handful of world leaders jockeying for dominance and wealth in the name of security.

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As Asian specialists, you are in a particularly good position to examine the role of nuclear weapons in Asia, or perhaps more importantly, between Asia and the West. Many analysts believe that the US is clinging to nuclear weapons because they represent the only possibly way to maintain US and Western dominance in a world where social, political and economic power is rapidly shifting from Europe and the US to Asia and China. It is certainly obvious to all that the US will not be able to maintain its current level of dominance in any other way. Is this why the US is circling Russia and China with bases and working so frantically to get its missile defense system up and running? Wouldn't your students enjoy a chance to think about this? A broad spectrum of literature addresses this question. Just raising it is not too political, is it?

From October 2007 to November 2008, the Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation sponsored about 120 A-bomb exhibitions throughout the United States. I took 11 A-bomb survivors to 53 cities and did well over 150 presentations. Our exhibitions have been seen by over 60,000 people. In all of this, we expected to run into considerable resistance, but didn't. We were threatened with a counter-demonstration by veterans in Louisiana, which never materialized, and our only visit to an elementary school stirred up a public row in Bozeman, Montana, where, it turns out, A-bomb survivors are not allowed to advise 9 to 11 year olds not to join the military. However, those were the only two hints of trouble we encountered. Instead, what we found was massive, debilitating, determined ignorance and indifference.

Most of our organizers were amazed by the difficulty they encountered drawing an audience. Most of them assumed that by offering an opportunity to hear direct, eyewitness testimony from an A-bomb survivor, their normal PR activities would draw a substantial crowd. That turned out not to be the case. We did speak to large crowds when students were encouraged or bribed to attend, but only rarely did we speak to a large audience of purely voluntary interested adults. Our organizers often commented that they would have had twice or three times as many people if the meeting had been about the war in Iraq. We were surprised to find that even activists for peace and justice are neither aware of nor interested in nuclear weapons.

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During our travels through the States, my impression was that most participants over 60 were thinking about nuclear weapons for the first time in years, maybe decades. The people under 30 had never given nuclear weapons a serious thought in their lives. A high percentage of the information we were providing was entirely new to most of our audience.

Of course, some who remember World War II were eager to make sure we understood that Japan was an aggressor as well as a victim. A few of the younger people expressed the belief that nuclear weapons are peacemakers or, in any case, cannot be un-invented. However, the majority expressed shock. They were shocked at what they did not know about the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. They were also shocked to discover that they are actually still in danger from weapons they thought had disappeared with the end of the Cold War.

Before speaking we would sometimes ask people how many nuclear weapons they thought the US possessed. Most suggested extremely low figures, like 100 or 200. This symbolizes perfectly the general public underestimation of this problem. Are you aware, for example, that the US and Russia still, 20 years after the Cold War, have at least 2500 nuclear warheads aimed at each other ready to launch on warning? The Cold War is over, but when it comes to nuclear weapons, not much has changed. We are still in danger of an accidental holocaust that could easily terminate all human life on Earth.

My point here is that most people, especially in the US, have learned to deal with the nuclear threat by not thinking about it. However, this head-in-the-sand strategy is no longer appropriate. Nuclear weapons represent a serious, imminent problem that is demanding to be solved now, and you can do a great service to humankind simply by bringing it to our attention. If we wake up to this problem, we will probably take steps to save ourselves. If we don't, we will continue our sleepwalk toward disaster.

As teachers, you will probably find it difficult to begin actively campaigning to eliminate nuclear weapons. However, you are in an excellent position to bring this problem to light. You can help or even require your students to think about it. You can help them bring it to the attention of your academic community or the wider community

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in which your school is located. You cannot be accused of being political if you are simply raising the issue. After all, it is a legitimate, crucial issue. No subject you could possibly teach will have a more decisive effect on the future of your students. In fact, unless the problem of nuclear weapons is solved properly, your students will have no future at all.

The human family will decide in the next year or two whether to eliminate nuclear weapons or let them spread. In making that decision, we will simultaneously be deciding whether to solve our myriad political, social, economic, religious, and environmental problems through peaceful problem solving or through a paroxysm of violence that will make World War II look like a picnic. It is absolutely vital to the safety, happiness, and survival of your students that we make the right decision. I hope you will pay close attention to this issue, get your students to think about it, encourage them to do what they can to save themselves, and do it now.