



Ethical ction Report

A publication of the American Ethical Union (AEU)

Number 15-05

May 2015

Welcome to the Ethical Action Report 2.0

In this Report:

Rallying for Abolition of Nuclear Weapons, Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader
Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia and Baltimore Ethical Society

Ethics, Oppenheimer, and the Nuclear Peril, Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader
Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia and Baltimore Ethical Society

Rallying for Abolition of Nuclear Weapons, Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader,
Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia and Baltimore Ethical Society

(Note: Thanks for reports from Dan Rosenblum, Ethical Culture Society of Bergen County, NJ, and Elisabeth Leonard and Steve Bremner, both from the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia.)

As previewed in my March Ethical Action Report column, “Demanding Action to Eliminate Nuclear Weapons,” the United Nations met in April to review the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Decades of failure to implement this treaty motivated activists to gather in New York on the eve of the conference. They came for a mass rally called “Peace and the Planet” intended “to further the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament and general and complete disarmament.”

The crowd, estimated to be at least 1000 and perhaps as many as 5000, included Ethical Culturists, including Dan Rosenblum from the Ethical Culture Society of Bergen County, NJ, and Elisabeth Leonard, Steve Bremner, Sylvia Goldman, and Sylvia Metzler, all from the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia. Elisabeth, one of Philadelphia’s most dedicated peace activists, said that the experience was inspiring, particularly the sense of goodwill that lasted all day. The relatively diverse crowd from around the world was united in spirit. Smiles and colorful signs were bright in the spring sunshine. Sylvia Metzler’s banner – reading “You can’t hug a child with nuclear arms!” - got some thumbs up.

The largest contingent seemed to be from Japan, and it included 50 *hibakusha* (A-bomb survivors) as well as the current mayor of Hiroshima. Steve Bremner, chair of the Philadelphia society’s Ethical Action

Committee, was disturbed by the fact that a mayor could come from the other side of the world, but the mayor of New York didn't show up. Few politicians, in fact, did.

Steve's spirit was buoyed when recruited along with Sylvia Metzler to carry from Union Square to the U. N. the banner for the Kanagawa prefecture delegation. In return they each received a book containing personal testimonies and pictures by victims of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Steve shared that someone who was a 13-year-old schoolgirl at the time of the bombing read her contribution to the book at the rally.

Other speakers included former national coordinator for *United for Peace and Justice*, Leslie Cagan, a member of the European Parliament from the United Kingdom, Rev. Jean Lambert, and Daniel Ellsberg from Pentagon Papers fame. During the afternoon, petitions with 8 million signatures calling for an eradication of nuclear weapons were presented to U.N. disarmament chief, Angela Kane. She said she spoke with U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and she told the crowd, "He's with you." Kane, herself, signed the petition.

I hope the spirit of peace evoked at this rally encourages those currently in the middle of the Iran-U.S. nonproliferation negotiations. At the time of this writing, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was meeting directly with Secretary of State John Kerry to try to seal a deal. The world is watching them, sending positive hopes regardless of the many roadblocks that lie ahead.

I was personally disappointed by the lack of press coverage. The horrible earthquakes in Nepal and the protests over Freddie Gray's death while in police custody in Baltimore grabbed the news headlines away from the march. It seems another example of how we focus on suffering and violence after it has happened, rather than working to prevent them in the future. As I watched the massive humanitarian efforts to airlift survivors away from Mount Everest, I shuddered to think how massive the effort would have to be to ease the suffering of even just a single nuclear explosion.

Internationally people are working for total abolition of weapons. Austria, supported by over 70 other nations, is currently leading an initiative to ban nuclear weapons. Dan Rosenblum from the Ethical Culture Society of Bergen, however, was disappointed by the relatively low profile that nuclear arms issues have in the U. S. peace movement. He hopes that Ethical Culturists can better coordinate their efforts in the future to combat the apathy and fatalism and to bring this issue more to the fore of national consciousness.

In that regard, I am currently preparing for *Peace Day Philly*, which honors the United Nations International Day of Peace. This coming September 21 offers a chance for Ethical Societies around the country to coordinate anti-nuclear and peacemaking efforts in marking a global day observed by hundreds of millions of citizens worldwide. For more information and ideas for hosting your own Peace Day event, check out <https://www.facebook.com/peaceday>, as well as the Philadelphia Peace Day site at www.peacedayphilly.org/.

In the meantime, let's hope the diplomats find progress in making the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons more than just a piece of paper. My thanks goes out to all those, including Ethical Culturists not mentioned here, for representing us on April 26!

***Ethics, Oppenheimer, and the Nuclear Peril*, Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia and Baltimore Ethical Society.**

Author's note: This article is adapted from a platform address I delivered this spring. It relies on Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin's biography, American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer

In honor of all those who participated in the April 26 nuclear nonproliferation rally near the United Nations, I offered talks at the Ethical Societies in Philadelphia and Baltimore. [They can be seen via the Society websites – Youtube for Philly and Vimeo for Baltimore.] I hoped they would encourage some small steps toward elimination of the 16,000 nuclear weapons scattered around the world.

My research reminded me how hard it is to live ethically, even when you are someone bolstered by Ethical Culture and provided an opportunity to serve. One such person was J. Robert Oppenheimer. Taught by Felix Adler at the Ethical Culture School, he developed a brilliant mind and an ethical conscience. As a senior, he was taught John Lovejoy Elliott in a course entitled, "Education in Life Problems," with a unit focusing on "the ethics of loyalty and treason." It undoubtedly affected Robert as he navigated the seas of patriotism and principle through WWII and the Cold War.

It was not easy. One of Oppenheimer's classmates, Daisy Newman, explained that, "When his idealism got him into difficulties, I felt this was the logical outcome of our superb training in ethics. A faithful pupil of Felix Adler and John Lovejoy Elliott would have been obliged to act in accordance with his conscience, however unwise his choice might be." (*American Prometheus*, p. 19n)

The Ethical Culture School certainly encouraged Robert's progressive political leanings as a young adult. Beginning in 1934 he donated \$100 each month (about 3% of his salary) to support German scientists escaping Nazi Germany. He supported dockworkers, teachers unions, and liberal reforms. He fought for the civil liberties and against the red-baiting tactics of politicians.

But as anti-communism grew Oppenheimer decided to prove his loyalty despite ethical reservations about war research. He wrote to a friend already so engaged, "I have a lot more misgivings even than you ever had about what will come of all this; but even so I think surely if I were asked to do a job I could do really well and that needed doing I'd not refuse. I'd worry a lot, perhaps even more than you. But we worry anyway." (*The Agony of Atomic Genius*, *Algis Valiunas*) He signed up for the Manhattan Project.

Oppenheimer didn't hide his past, even writing on his security questionnaire that he had been "a member of just about every Communist Front organization on the West Coast." He supervised the team developing the bomb, believing in the "heroic narrative" – that the bomb was necessary to end the war quickly and save hundreds of thousands of lives. He told the *New York Times*, "Lots of boys not grown up yet will owe their life to it."

Oppenheimer hoped his good work would protect him, as reflected in a quotation he shared two days before the first Trinity bomb test. He recalled it from the Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu holy book:

*In battle, in the forest, at the precipice in the mountains,
On the dark great sea, in the midst of javelins and arrows,
In sleep, in confusion, in the depths of shame,
The good deeds a man has done before defend him.*

When witnessing the awesome and horrible beauty of the explosion, he recalled another line: "I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." (XI, 12) Twenty years later in a television interview he repeated that quote, adding, "We knew the world would not be the same."

The day the bomb destroyed Hiroshima, however, was a day of personal triumph. In front of a cheering Los Alamos crowd, he basked in glory displaying what one writer described as "the prizefighter's traditional pose of triumphant manliness, clasping his hands over his head and waving them in the air." To the crowd he shouted one regret - that the bomb was not created in time to use it on the Germans.

Only later did he hear descriptions of the noiseless flash of light, described as a "sheet of sun" that moved across Hiroshima engulfing everything, the deafening blast launching survivors and a hail of splinters into the air, the eerie silence that followed through which survivors walked slowly like zombies, mouths gapping in shock, unaware of the radioactivity that would soon fill their pores and lungs causing nausea, fever, and anemia, and the odd beauty of black ash falling through the smoke like rain. The wounds, the suffering, the horror.

Was it all ethically justified? Joseph Gerson in his book, *Empire and the Bomb*, answers "no." When speaking at the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia in March, Gerson explained the history behind his subtitle, "How the U. S. uses nuclear weapons to dominate the world" - that the bomb was *not* necessary to ensure a negotiated peace, it probably did *not* affect the speed and terms of surrender, that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were *not* significant military bases, and that we used the bomb primarily to advance Cold War political strategy.

Robert began expressing doubts over our Cold War strategy as early as his 1945 farewell speech at Los Alamos, Robert said, "Today...pride must be tempered with a profound concern. If atomic bombs are to be added as new weapons to the arsenals of a warring world...then the time will come when mankind will curse the names of Los Alamos and Hiroshima." He knew his name would be included in the curses; he felt he had blood on his hands.

Robert warned a Senate Committee about the potential that a bomb could be easily smuggled into the center of New York and detonated. When asked what instrument could prevent this, Robert answered, "A screwdriver [to open each and every crate or suitcase.]" One author said that Oppenheimer felt like the Greek god Prometheus who stole fire from Zeus and then was unable to control it.

Robert criticized our aggressive unilateralism, telling the *New York Times Magazine* that some type of world governmental body should handle atomic research and weapons. He opposed production of a much more powerful hydrogen bomb "primarily because we should prefer defeat in war to victory obtained at the expense of the enormous human disaster that would be caused by its determined use."

Oppenheimer criticized weapons testing, such as the testing that was held at the Bikini Islands, and questioned the necessity of the Nagasaki bombing. In 1953 he said the arms race was like "two scorpions in a bottle, each capable of killing the other, but only at the risk of his own life." He urged a new way forward - "The people of the world must unite or they will perish.... By our works we are committed, committed to a world united, before this common peril, in law and in humanity."

In 1954, in a well-publicized hearing about extending his security clearance and service on the Atomic Energy Commission, Robert's integrity, rationality, and leftist sympathies were attacked. His associations with communists led to his public humiliation; he was not given security clearance, forced off the AEC, and marginalized.

It hit him hard. For someone needing praise – for someone recently on the cover of major magazines - this was a painful fall from grace. Eisenhower ordered that “a blank wall” block Oppenheimer’s access to classified material. Stress and despair infected Robert. He began drinking more heavily and using sleeping pills, collapsing once on his bathroom floor. David Lilienthal spoke for many when he said, “It is sad beyond words. They are so wrong, so terribly wrong, not only about Robert, but in their concept of what is required of wise public servants....” What is required is to think ethically, is it not?

In 1963, once McCarthyism died, President Johnson presented Robert with the Enrico Fermi Award as a form of political rehabilitation. Nevertheless, friends saw how public humiliation and private concern about the deaths of so many innocent people weighed on Oppenheimer. When he spoke publicly about Hiroshima he “did so with a vague sense of regret,” adding in 1956 that it may have been “a tragic mistake.” In a letter to a friend he observed that, “Over the years, I have felt a certain disapproval on your part for what I have done. This has always seemed to me quite natural, for it is a sentiment that I share.”

Some thought Robert “oddly passive now, even deferential, in the face of authority.” He was no longer so active in the anti-nuclear movement. And he aged noticeably. Even when receiving the Fermi prize at the White House, he was described as a “figure of stone, gray, rigid, almost lifeless, tragic in his intensity.”

Near the end of his life, suffering from lung cancer, he spoke much with *Look* magazine correspondent Thomas Morgan about “responsibility.” Morgan said he used the term in almost a “religious sense.” Robert agreed, but added that it involved no transcendent being and that he preferred to see it in an ethical sense.

Oppenheimer said that reading Proust taught him that, “indifference to the sufferings...is the terrible and permanent form of cruelty.” Robert could not be indifferent or remain on the sidelines. He jumped into life to prove that he could contribute to a better world. Deep in his heart, doubts about his contributions combined with his public humiliation seemed unfair reward for his good intentions. It’s hard to live an ethical life.

My life has been much easier, and so is my modest recommitment to abolish nuclear weapons. I am connecting more with antinuclear groups, including the *International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons*, known as “ICAN.” I urge you to find ways you can make a small difference - read, learn, join and contribute. Abolishing nuclear terror will not be easy, but as Ethical Humanists we must try.

Ethical Action Spotlight

With many thanks to Dan Rosenblum, Elisabeth Leonard, and Steve Bremner for contributing text and ideas to this month’s EAR, and to Amanda Poppei for her editorial assistance. Let’s continue the dialogue in our national movement – submit comments, articles and suggestions for future EAR editions!

Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader, Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia and Baltimore Ethical Society.

The Ethical Action Report 2.0

As Ethical Societies around the country have begun their 2014-2015 program season, the EAR is evolving to try to be more useful to you and to generate more constructive, engaged dialogue about “deed before creed” throughout the movement. We hope this new format offers stimulating ideas and practical hints that make ethical action more effective and rewarding at your societies and in your lives.

EAR 2.0 hopes to offer:

- More in-depth analysis of particular social justice issues.
- Stories of ethical action projects that worked well at one of our societies and might enliven your home society.
- Discussion of ways to frame Ethical Culture’s commitment to Ethical Action
- Excerpts from recent Ethical Culture platform addresses or statements from around the movement about civic, social, or ethical issues.

Join the fun!

Offer your thoughts and news items –

For the June edition of the “Ethical Action Report,”

And for the ‘Ethical Action Feature’ in the Summer edition of “Dialogue.”

- Write about an issue with which you are familiar due to your professional life or private interest.
- Share news about an interesting ethical action project at your society, current or from the past.
- Write a “letter to the EAR editor” addressing any articles in this or future issues, or about other issues relating to our commitment to action.
- Do a historical reflection on an Ethical Action moment from Ethical Culture’s history.

Submit your essay early and the editorial volunteers can help polish your offering. Feel free to float your idea by me at HughTM@gmail.com or send something to me by the 15th of the month. All final copy has to be sent to me no later than the 25th of May for the Ethical Action Report and the 25th of June for the Dialogue’s ‘Ethical Action Feature.’

Sincerely,

Hugh Taft-Morales, Ethical Culture Leader and Editor, *Ethical Action Report* and *Ethical Action Feature*

American Ethical Union 2 West 64 th Street, New York, NY 10023 www.aeu.org Tel: 212-873-6500 report@aeu.org Fax: 212-624-0203

To share your views on national legislation with the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) visit: www.secular.org

The *Ethical Action Report* does not represent the views of the American Ethical Union. The American Ethical Union takes ethical positions on public affairs only through resolutions adopted by its Assembly or Board.