John C. & Chara C. Haas Award for International Peace and Social Justice

Joseph Gerson – November 24, 2013

Friends,

I was surprised when Tammy Murphy contacted me with the news of the Haas Award. Many have done more than me to clear the way to a future free from the dangers of nuclear annihilation. Many of you have made sacrifices for peace, justice and for a nuclear-free world so that your families and future generations can live in real security. So it’s been a bit of a challenge to discern what I could meaningfully say this evening. I’m happy to help provide an occasion to support PNA’s important work, and I hope you can be patient with me as I read my speech. There’s much to share and limited time.

I’ve been fortunate to work as long as I have in the peace and justice movements. I’ve been privileged to work with extraordinary people and dedicated community activists who have opened the way for me and others, people like David McReynolds, Noam Chomsky, Daniel Ellsberg, Randy Forsberg and Randy Kehler, Tony Palomba, Frances Crowe and Joseph Gainza. And I am deeply indebted to friends and colleagues in the American Friends Service Committee and to colleagues from other U.S. and international peace movements.

As I thought about what to say this evening, three things occurred: beginning with ironic humor, sharing a little about my ways into the nuclear weapons abolition movement, and saying a few things about our current situation and opportunities that we need to take advantage of.

Beginning with irony, the Haas award is not only an honor; it helps to restore my self-respect. The first award I received was the Edward Douglass White Award as an outstanding student at Georgetown University in 1968, primarily for my involvement in the civil rights movement. But, several years later, while doing graduate work, I learned that unbeknownst to those who gave me the award, Edward Douglass White was the most vocal supporter of the Ku Klux Klan in Woodrow Wilson’s cabinet. White and his family must have been major donors to Georgetown, because the University has never responded to my appeals to retire that award!

And, during the Nuclear Freeze movement era, New Jersey Peace Action asked me to accept the honor of their award. I was certainly honored, but when I showed up, I learned that it was named for George Kennan, the author of the U.S. Cold War containment doctrine, a racist, and who, as I later learned, when he was head of Policy Planning at the State Department in 1948, had advised President Truman that:

We have about 50 percent of the world’s wealth, but only 6.3 percent of its population…In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity … We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction … We should cease to talk about vague and … unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts…

That was three years after fealty to “straight power concepts” resulted in the mass murder across decades with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, at a time that President Truman and his advisors knew that Japan’s leaders were attempting to negotiate their surrender. The war crimes were committed primarily to avoid having to share influence with the Soviet Union in Northeast Asia and to send Moscow a message at the dawn of the Cold War.

So, I trust you appreciate the liberation, as well as honor, that come in receiving an award that both advances PNA’s work and contributes to my inner peace!

As you will understand, the names John and Chara Haas are not household names in Boston like the Kennedys, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn or James Whitey Bulger. But I did a little research that left me impressed not only by John’s business acumen, but by his and Chara’s roles in the democratic life of Philadelphia.

I’ll frame this appreciation with another story. Several years ago, I fell into conversation with a Philip Czachorowski, a modest man in a suburban Boston community. It wasn’t until last winter that I learned that he works in the banking industry. In addition to leading the social service work of two churches and serving on the board of the friends of the local library, he was leading local protests on the town green and organizing public forums to oppose the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq.

What Philip told me rang true with my understanding of 20th century history. A man of Polish ancestry, he said that one of the key lessons he took from the rise of fascism in Europe and the still incomprehensible calamities that followed was that if concerned and democratically minded citizens fail to engage and provide leadership in their communities, the way is opened for disturbed and dangerous people to fill that void.

Sad to say, this history seems to have returned in disguise to this side of the Atlantic. With the rise of fascism in Europe in the late 1920s and early 30’s, important sectors of corporate power have made common cause with right-wing fanatics, the better to increase and secure their privilege and power. With extremist corporate, racist and Tea Party forces wielding significant power in Congress and the Supreme Court, leaders of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and corporations like Honeywell are recognizing that the center they depend upon is barely holding, and they are attempting to reverse course before our continuing crisis becomes complete catastrophe. Former President Jimmy Carter put it well, saying that we no longer have a functioning democracy. This, of course, presents still greater challenges to movements for justice, peace and human survival.

Returning to my inquiry into the lives of John and Chara Haas, I learned not only about John commercial successes, but also of John’s service as an MIT trustee, the stewardship of the William Penn Foundation and support for many other charities. In the absence of government funding for essential institutions and social services, these are major contributions to the life and fabric of liberal democracy, something many of us take too much for granted. And, the Haases went further. By co-founding PNA, they moved to engage one of the central issues of justice and human survival. So it is indeed an honor, not only to follow in the footsteps the other Haas Award recipients, who I have worked with over the years, but to receive an award that highlights the achievements of John and Chara Haas.

**About my path:** Like you, I didn’t come into the world obsessed with eliminating what President Kennedy later termed the nuclear sword of Damocles, or what Yamaguchi Senji, among the most seared and courageous of the Hibakusha (witness/survivors of the atomic bombings) called “weapons of the devil.” Instead, my engagement with the world was largely shaped by three lessons my Jewish family took from the European Holocaust and from the nonviolent resistance of the Civil Rights movement which put those lessons into practice.

First, Never again to anyone.

Second, Never participate in the crime of silence.

And, third, that there is a direct correlation between intellectual integrity and who lives, who dies, and how.

These lessons led me into the Civil Rights movement, the struggles to end the Vietnam War and for a just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and to my limited role in launching the Nuclear Weapons Freeze movement. But there were two quite unanticipated paths that led me beyond the margins of the nuclear weapons abolition movement.

The first began on an October morning in 1973. After the signing of the Paris Peace Accords that we mistakenly believed had ended the Vietnam War, my wife and I joined the staff of the War Resisters’ International in London. We’d traveled to Copenhagen for a meeting, and along the way were reassured by press that the Arab-Israeli war was essentially over. So, we were stunned to wake to news that U.S. military forces were on a DefCon 1 – the highest level of nuclear alert. My first reaction was to call friends back home to see if President Nixon was orchestrating a military coup as the Watergate crisis approached its climax. They laughed, but I later learned that to prevent President Nixon from doing exactly that, Secretary of Defense Schlesinger had issued orders that there were to be no significant U.S. troop movements without his personal authorization.

The crisis passed, but I later learned that the alert was directly related to the Mid-East War. After the decisive Egyptian defeat and the negotiation of a cease fire agreement, Golda Meir kept moving the ceasefire line in the direction of Cairo, and – worse - the Israeli military had surrounded Egypt’s Third Army and was denying food and water to these thousands of defeated soldiers. In desperation, President Sadat appealed to President Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev to seek U.N. authorization for the superpowers’ militaries to break the siege. Brezhnev responded in the affirmative. But Henry Kissinger, who was then conducting U.S. foreign and military policy in the absence of our depressed and drunken president, had gamed the war to serve U.S. imperial interests in what was then the geopolitical center of the struggle for world power. He was not about to share the fruits of the war with Moscow. So Kissinger’s response to Sadat and Brezhnev was to warn the Soviets to butt out with the mobilization of U.S. nuclear forces, while simultaneously signaling Gold Meir that it was time to respect the ceasefire line and to end the siege of the Egyptian Army.

This is how I began to learn that the U.S. nuclear arsenal was about more than deterrence, and that during wars and international crises every U.S. president since Truman – including Barack Obama – has prepared and/or threatened to initiate nuclear war.

The next step on this journey came in June, 1982. Some here may remember that in planning for what became the largest peace demonstration in U.S. history, a vote was taken that rally speakers limit their remarks to the need to halt the nuclear arms race. Speaking about foreign military interventions was verboten. Days before the demonstration, Israel invaded Lebanon, and knowing my history, I was painfully aware that the invasion carried the potential of escalating to nuclear war. U.S. nuclear forces would stand behind Israel, while those of the Soviet Union would be behind Syria. I was frankly at my wits’ end and succeeded in convincing only one rally speaker to break ranks and address the possibility of a real world manifestation of our nuclear nightmares.

In the following months, I consulted Daniel Ellsberg, learning more about the history of U.S. use of nuclear weapons in international crises and wars. As he put it, the U.S. had repeatedly practiced nuclear extortion “in the way that you use a gun when you point it at someone’s head in a confrontation….whether or not you pull the trigger,” and “You’re also using it when you have it on your hip, ostentatiously.” That led to organizing the first “Deadly Connection” conference on “Nuclear War and U.S. Intervention” at M.I.T., to my book of the same name, and to continued research that culminated in Empire and the Bomb, detailing the motivations for the A- bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the profoundly disturbing history of the more than thirty occasions since Nagasaki when the U.S. has prepared and threatened nuclear war. The most recent such threat was made last March at the height of the Korean crisis, when the U.S. Air Force conducted B-2 and B-52 simulated nuclear attacks against North Korea.

The sorry and dangerous reality is that every other nuclear power has on at least one occasion similarly prepared and/or threatened nuclear war, and all of the nuclear powers are now modernizing their nuclear arsenals, with the U.S. of course leading the pack. There is even coordination among the P-5 (the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, all of which are nuclear powers) in resisting the demands of the non-nuclear nations to fulfill their Article VI NPT obligation to engage in good faith negotiations for the complete elimination of their nuclear arsenals.

My second path into what became deep engagements with Hibakusha and collaborations with the Japanese peace and other anti-nuclear movements, after having stumbled on the deadly connection between empire and nuclear weapons, began as a response to what Hannah Arendt would have described as a manifestation of the banality of evil, Ted Kennedy’s campaign to transform Boston Harbor into a nuclear weapons base.

In 1983, I had a call from a friend who explained that plans were afoot to take the WW II Battleship Iowa out of mothballs, fill it with nuclear tipped sea-launched cruise missiles and to base it in Boston. As we later learned, it was to be anchored just across from a runway at Logan Airport. This floating Armageddon was to be reinforced by a fleet of destroyers also armed with nuclear-capable cruise missiles, and also in the flight paths of incoming and outgoing commercial air traffic.

This was an expression of President Reagan’s escalation of the nuclear arms race, with the fleet designed to take the nuclear challenge closer to the Kola Peninsula, where the Soviet nuclear fleet was based.

In fact, the Reagan administration planned to create four such fleets. Others were to be based in the South and in San Francisco. With exquisite cynicism, Reagan and company organized a competition between Boston, Rhode Island and New York – all states that had supported the nuclear weapons freeze - for the northern fleet. The evil took on its banal dimensions when Kennedy waged a campaign to win the fleet for Boston in order to reinforce his conservative Democratic base after providing Congressional leadership for the Freeze and, as his staff told us, to prove that he could “bring home the bacon” even with a Republican in the White House. Under the illusion that the fleet would bring jobs and riches to Boston, he took Reagan’s bait, with the state’s Democratic Establishment and Boston’s business elite clicking their heels behind him.

Suffice it to say, this was one campaign Ted Kennedy lost. We sobered Boston and cities in eastern Massachusetts by teaching the Navy’s history of nuclear weapons accidents, demonstrating that the fleet would bring few permanent jobs, pointing to more productive economic development alternatives, and highlighting the hypocrisy of supporting these new weapons systems after having worked for the Freeze. Raising the alarm, we also rallied Rhode Island and New York City to prevent the homeporting, and our allies in San Francisco also prevailed. Those battleships never got out of mothballs.

What I didn’t know at the time was that nuclear armed sea-launched cruise missiles were the cutting edge of Reagan’s nuclear escalation in Asia and the Pacific. An older friend, who had long collaborated with the Japanese peace movement, had kept people there abreast of our struggle, and I was invited to speak at the annual World Conference against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs in Tokyo and Hiroshima for the first time in 1984. My role, I believe, was simply to be an encouraging symbol of the reality that popular movements can prevail.

Of course, I learned far more than I taught. Engaging Hibakusha more directly than I could in the U.S, hearing their testimonies, witnessing their courage, being confronted by the A-bomb dome and challenged by the hellish exhibits in the Peace Museum, participating in the official commemorative ceremony at the hypocenter, and experiencing the size, commitment and power of the Japanese peace movement were – to say the least – transformative.

Not incidentally, I also learned that the U.S. had - and it still has - more than 100 military bases and installations across Japan, inflicting what our Declaration of Independence described as intolerable “abuses and usurpations” that came with placing “standing armies” in communities during times of peace. I also learned about the secretly imposed U.S.-Japan military alliance which – like NATO in Europe - has been the foundation of U.S. post-war regional hegemony.

These engagements with the people and history of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and others across Japan and Asia and the Pacific, generated much of my work over the last three decades, including the books With Hiroshima Eyes and The Sun Never Sets….Confronting the Network of U.S. Foreign Military Bases and a host of other initiatives.

While writing With Hiroshima Eyes, I had to confront the question of whether I truly believed that the complete elimination the world’s nuclear arsenal is actually possible. My experiences in the Civil Rights and Freeze movements taught that mobilized popular will can transform and overcome intransigent governments. The vision and profound commitments of the Hibakusha and their allies reinforced this belief. And the work of Dr. Joseph Rotblat demonstrated that while not easy or inevitable, with commitment, imagination and will, we can prevail.

Let me say a few words about Joseph Rotblat, 1995 Nobel Peace laureate. I had the privilege of first hearing him, the only Manhattan Project scientist to resign as a consequence of his moral values, speak in Hiroshima and later during a conference we organized at MIT. Born in Warsaw, Rotblat explained that his once comfortable family was devastated by the First World War – and he teased that he’d never gotten an education. That wasn’t quite true. After the war, he worked as an electrician, and learned that he could take a test that could get him into the Free University. From there he went on to become one of the world’s leading nuclear scientists. After resigning from the Manhattan Project, Rotblat played a leading role in nuclear medicine, and he and his friend “Bertie” Russell opted to do a division of labor. Russell would co-found the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and Rotblat founded the Pugwash Conference. And it was Rotblat who authored the seminal Russell-Einstein manifesto (about which I have another story) echoing the Hibakusha with the warning that our species and nuclear weapons cannot coexist, and that the world’s leaders must “remember our humanity and forget the rest.”

In Hiroshima Rotblat warned that humanity faces a stark choice. We can either completely eliminate nuclear weapons or witness their increasing proliferation and the nuclear wars that will follow. Why? Because no nation will long tolerate what it experiences as an unjust imbalance of terror. This, of course, is confirmed by Russian, British, French, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, North Korean and Israeli nuclear weapons programs.

And, it was in his book A Nuclear–Weapon-Free World: Desirable? Feasible? that I came to intellectually understand that abolition is indeed feasible. The steps that he outlined can all be implemented if we have the will: Dismantle nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons installations and place them under international control; end production of weapons-grade fissile material and verify and contain existing stockpiles, verification – including social verification, intrustive inspection systems, and establishing a supranational authority – possibly the U.N. Security Council – with the authority to isolate, contain or remove threats to the nuclear-weapons-free order.

In fact, the governments of Malaysia and Costa Rica long ago submitted draft treaties to the U.N. providing a model roadmap for complete nuclear disarmament.

Over the years, I have returned many times to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. With Japanese partners, we have organized Hibakusha and global Hibakusha (down winders and atomic veterans from other nations, including the US) to international conferences. And on the eve of the 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, we organized an international peace conference at the Riverside Church that was addressed by U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, a march of 15,000 activists from Times Square to the U.N. with 200 Hibakusha and the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the lead, and we delivered seven million abolition petition signatures to the U.N. High Commissioner for Disarmament and to the Review Conference president.

We are now in the early stages of organizing for the 2015 NPT Review Conference, and I trust that PNA will be an important partner in this work.

Let me then turn to the current situation.

It has been nearly two decades since the NPT was extended on the basis that the nuclear powers would pursue the “systematic and progressive” reduction and elimination of nuclear weapons globally. Yet, our survival remains in the balance against the world’s estimated 17,000 remaining nuclear weapons. U.S.-Russian discussions for a follow-on to New START have stalled, and as I said earlier, all nuclear-armed states are modernizing their nuclear weapons.

The extremely limited and halting steps taken by the nuclear-armed states to fulfill their nuclear disarmament obligations are more than a little alarming, and reinforce the dangers of nuclear weapons proliferation. During the High Level Meeting on Nuclear Disarmament, the lowly U.S. spokeswoman sent to add injury to insult highlighted the way that the P-5 have “moved beyond dialogue to concrete actions, under China's leadership.” Pointing to their singular achievement, with a straight face she announced that “we are developing a common glossary of nuclear terms.” I hope that encourages you!

More, the statement presented on behalf of the P-3 (the U.S., France and Britain) argued that multi-lateral conferences like those on the Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear War, the U.N.’s Open Ended Working Group, and the High-Level Meeting were “diversions” that set back efforts to create a nuclear weapons free world. Instead, they told the world, they should sit back and let the U.S. and Russia take the next step to the New START Treaty (which is not about to happen in the lifetime of the Obama Administration as NATO’s expansion continues and the U.S. races ahead with so-called missile defense deployments, the militarization of space, and its cyber warfare capabilities). The P-3 also reaffirmed the importance of fulfilling the 2010 NPT Review Conference’s Action Plan, even as the U.S. refused to co-convene the conference for a Middle East Nuclear Weapons and WMD Free Zone which was mandated by the Review Conference.

The sorry truth is that the Obama Administration has not seriously attempted to fulfill the Prague promise of creating a nuclear weapons free world, and has instead focused on non-proliferation and reinforcing Washington’s hypocritical ability to maintain the discriminatory hierarchy of terror.

Yes, non-proliferation efforts are important. But, as U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon observed, and numerous heads of state and foreign ministers repeated during the High Level Meeting, “there are no good nuclear weapons and no right hands for them,” just as there are no good chemical or biological weapons. Nuclear deterrence policies, belied in large measure by first-strike doctrines, are predicated on the willingness and capacity to inflict genocidal or omnicidal destruction. Nuclear weapons do not and cannot bring security. They drive proliferation, increase the dangers of nuclear war, and divert vast and essential resources needed to address real human needs.

Friends, we are not dealing with abstractions. In addition to the history of threats and preparations to initiate nuclear war, humans and our technologies are anything but infallible. Accidents happen. Systems fail. And miscalculations are endemic to the human condition. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the day that Col. Petrov, the duty officer at a nuclear early-warning system command center near Moscow, may have saved humanity by reporting a false alarm when his systems mistakenly warned that the U.S. had launched a nuclear attack. Earlier this year, an official Pentagon report advised that cyber-attacks may need to be countered by nuclear attacks. And in Northeast Asia the nuclear crisis is not confined to Korea. A year ago the world was brought to the brink of war, potentially nuclear war, over the increasingly militarized Japanese-Chinese territorial dispute over the uninhabited Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Both the Obama Administration and Congress warned that, regardless of the legality of either nation’s claims, if it came to war, the U.S. would fight as Japan’s ally. To the west, tensions between nuclear India and nuclear Pakistan flared once again. And, IPPNW, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War tells us that in the case of a nuclear exchange of just 50 of their nuclear weapons fallout would cause a global famine claiming at least a billion lives across the planet.

It is thus long past time to begin and to conclude comprehensive negotiations for the time-bound, verifiable, and irreversible abolition of nuclear weapons. There is no lack of ways and means. We have the model treaty put forward by Malaysia and Costa Rica. This summer’s UN Open-Ended Working Group developed a host of proposals to advance multilateral disarmament negotiations. And Ban Ki-moon has put forward a realistic five-point proposal for nuclear disarmament.

With Congress’ reenactment of the Perils of Pauline, the groundswell of popular opposition that prevented further escalation of the Syrian war and opened the way for renewed diplomacy is fading into memory. But, the Russian-US agreement on removing Syria’s chemical weapons stocks provides us with a reminder of what mobilized popular will and urgent and committed diplomacy can achieve. Nuclear weapons abolition needs to be pursued with the same urgency and dedication. Here are key steps that we recommended at the U.N.:

1. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, Presidents Gorbachev and Bush each unilaterally withdrew thousands of nuclear weapons from deployment without the laborious and obstacle-filled process of treaty negotiation. It is a model to be emulated. Similar withdrawals or unilateral disarmament initiatives would reduce the threat of nuclear war and stimulate multilateral nuclear weapons abolition negotiations.
2. The modernization of all nuclear forces and infrastructure should cease. The price tag for the U.S. modernization is $185 billion over a ten year period. That would reopen a lot of schools and hospitals and help fund the job-creating economic conversion we need from producing weapons like the F-35 boondoggle to the rapid transit and infrastructure our economy really needs.
3. Begin comprehensive negotiations for the abolition of nuclear weapons required by the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty and the International Court of Justice, and repeatedly urged by the U.N. General Assembly.
4. The conference for a Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Middle East should be convened, and the world’s Nuclear Weapons Free Zone Treaties should be reinforced with commitments by the nuclear powers to fully respect them.
5. There are many ways for us to reinforce the campaign to mobilize popular will by focusing increased attention on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. In addition to the Oslo and Mexico conferences, campaigns to divest from companies that produce nuclear weapons and their components are building. Norway and New Zealand prevent their pension systems from making such investments, and IKV Pax Christi in The Netherlands is attempting to launch a more grassroots campaign. No one should profit from the production of inhuman, genocidal, and potentially omnicidal weapons.
6. Finally, the NPT recognizes that reduction of military tensions, elimination of biological and chemical weapons, and limitations of so-called “conventional” weapons will facilitate nuclear weapons abolition. We need to reduce so-called missile defense systems, cyber warfare and other high-tech capabilities to win the complete elimination of all nuclear arsenals.

Friends, as I said during the High Level Meeting, each of us, be he or she a head of state, minister, ambassador, an activist, or a scholar, has agency. Each of us is responsible to our loved ones and to future generations to protect human lives and to preserve the human species. Each of us – to different extents – can impact our nations’ policies. As we were reminded by the Russell-Einstein Manifesto, we must remember our humanity and take bold actions to eliminate the danger of nuclear war and annihilation.

As I conclude, let me thank you again for the honor of the Hass award. We have a lot of campaigning ahead of us, not the least to cut U.S. spending on its nuclear arsenal, to reinforce international efforts to create the Middle East Nuclear Weapons and WMD-Free Zone, and to build pressure on the nuclear powers to finally fulfill their NPT commitments. I look forward to working closely with PNA in the coming years as we fulfill the Hibakusha’s vision: No More Hiroshimas. No More Nagasakis. No More Hibakusha. No more war!