



**THE POWER OVER THE ULTIMATE EVIL: IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF
GANDHI AND KING**

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Acknowledgments

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MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. succinctly described our current predicament posed by the threat to use nuclear weapons: nonviolence or nonexistence.

The friends of violence are fear, denial and falsehood. The friends of nonviolence are love, truth and peace. The dynamics of both begin in the hearts of each of us.

The most offensive expression of the violence that grows from the heart bereft of peace is the threat to use nuclear weapons and ultimately destroy all life on the planet earth in order to exalt a human creation, a nation state.

Not only do nuclear weapons constitute a threat to our physical security and our sense of reason and proportionality, but they also exemplify a thoroughly modern dilemma where the means of pursuing security undermine the end of obtaining security.

In his Nobel Lecture of December 11, 1964, Dr. King said:

Our problem today is that we have allowed the internal to become lost in the external. We have allowed the means whereby we live to outdistance the ends for which we live. So much of our modern life can be summarized in that arresting dictum of the poet Thoreau: 'Improved means to an unimproved end.' This is the serious predicament, the deep and haunting problem confronting modern man. If we are to survive today, our moral and spiritual 'lag' must be eliminated. Enlarged material powers spell enlarged peril if there is not proportionate growth of the soul. When the 'without' of man's nature subjugates the 'within', dark storm clouds begin to form in the world. Nothing so dramatically expresses the discordance between physical capacity and moral immaturity than a thermonuclear device.



As General Lee Butler, former head of U.S. Strategic Command said on December 4, 1996 before the National Press Club:

We have yet to fully grasp the monstrous effects of these weapons, that the consequences of their use defy reason, transcending time and space, poisoning the earth and deforming its inhabitant.

Imagination is not sufficient to grasp the magnitude of what we have created. The Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons reads: *The destructive power of nuclear weapons cannot be contained in either space or time. They have the potential to destroy all civilization and the entire eco-system of the planet.*

In that landmark opinion of the highest court in the world, Judge Weeramantry tried to convey the unimaginable:

Before 1945 “the highest explosive effect of bombs was produced by TNT devices of about 20 tons.” The nuclear weapons exploded in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were more or less the explosive power of 15 and 12 kilotons respectively, i.e. 15,000 and 12,000 tons of TNT (trinitrotoluene) respectively. Many of the weapons existing today and in the process of being tested represent several multiples of the explosive power of these bombs. Bombs in the megaton (equivalent to a million tons of TNT) and multiple megaton range are in the world’s nuclear arsenals, some being even in excess of 20 megatons (equivalent to 20 million tons of TNT). A onemegaton bomb, representing the explosive power of a million tons of TNT, would be around 70 times the explosive power of the bombs used on Japan, and 20 megaton bomb well over a thousand times that explosive power.

Since the mind is numbed by such abstract figures and cannot comprehend them, they have been graphically concretized in various ways. One of them is to picture the quantity of TNT represented by a single one-megaton bomb, in terms of its transport by rail. It has been estimated that this would require a train two hundred miles long. When one is carrying death and destruction to an enemy in war through the use of a single onemegaton bomb, it assists comprehension of this phenomenon to think in terms of a 200-mile train loaded with TNT being driven into enemy territory, to be exploded there. It cannot be said that international law would consider this legal. Nor does it make any difference if the train is not 200 miles long, but 100 miles, 50 miles, 10 miles, or only 1 mile. Nor, again, could it matter if the train is 1,000 miles long, as would be the case with a 5-megaton bomb, or 4,000 miles long, as would be the case with a 20-megaton bomb.

Such is the power of the weapon upon which the Court is deliberating – power which dwarfs all historical precedents, even if they are considered cumulatively. A 5-megaton weapon would represent more explosive power than all the bombs used in World War II and a 20-megaton bomb “more than all the explosives used in all the wars in the history of mankind.”¹

The US Nuclear Posture Review contemplates indefinitely keeping thousands of these weapons in a state of readiness. Others will continue to mimic this posture. A cold logic is at work: possession by some states is the strongest stimulant to others to acquire them. Over time, through accident or design, human fallibility will cause the unacceptable use of these weapons unless they are eliminated.

But logic will not persuade anyone until they contemplate seriously an actual event. The Mayor of Nagasaki pleads with us to understand the human dimensions of the small device exploded on his city:

The explosion of the atomic bomb generated an enormous fireball, 200 metres in radius, almost as though a small sun had appeared in the sky. The next instant, a ferocious blast and wave of heat assailed the ground with a thunderous roar. The surface temperature of the fireball was about 7,000 degrees C, and the heat rays that reached the ground were over 3,000 degrees C. The explosion instantly killed or injured people within a two kilometer radius of the hypocenter, leaving innumerable corpses charred like clumps of charcoal and scattered in the ruins near the hypocenter. In some cases, not even a trace of the person’s remains could be found. A wind (over 680 miles per hour) slapped down trees and demolished most buildings. Even iron-reinforced concrete structures were so badly damaged that they seemed to have been smashed by a giant hammer. The fierce flash of heat meanwhile melted glass and left metal objects contorted like strands of taffy, and the subsequent fires burned the ruins of the city to ashes. Nagasaki became a city of death where not even the sound of insects could be heard.

After a while, countless men, woman and children began to gather for a drink of water at the banks of the nearby Urakami River, their hair and clothing scorched and their burnt skin hanging off in sheets like rags. Begging for help, they died one after another in the water or in heaps on the banks. Then radiation began to take its toll, killing people like a scourge (of) death expanding in concentric circles from the hypocenter. Four months after the atomic bombing, 74,000 people were dead and 75,000 had suffered injuries, that is, two thirds of the city population had fallen victim to this calamity that came upon Nagasaki like a preview of the Apocalypse.

When Mahatma Gandhi heard of this horror he said:

What has happened to the soul of the destroying nation is yet too early to see. Forces of nature act in a mysterious manner. We can but solve the mystery by deducing the unknown result from the known results of similar events. A slaveholder cannot hold a slave without putting himself or his deputy in the cage holding the slave.²

The psychologist Robert Jay Lifton has described part of the cost to the small handful of nuclear weapons states as “a collective form of psychic numbing.” I recall descriptions of the striking banality of the notorious Nazi Adolph Eichmann during his trial as a shocking gray haze of insensitivity that executes orders for the annihilation of innocents without remorse. I think of our readiness to unleash, in short order, devices that will rapidly transform cities into concentration camp-like ovens. These weapons are ovens with wings. I think of the arrogance of continuing to keep the nuclear arsenals on hair trigger alert twelve years after the Cold War has ended. Even George Kennan, the distinguished American diplomat who originated the Cold War containment policy toward the Soviet Union, admonishes us now:

The readiness to use nuclear weapons against other human beings – against people we do not know, whom we have never seen, and whose guilt or innocence is not for us to establish – and, in doing so, to place in jeopardy the natural structure upon which all civilization rests, as though the safety and perceived interests of our own generation were more important than everything that has taken place or could take place in civilization: this is nothing less than a presumption, a blasphemy, an indignity – an indignity of monstrous dimensions – offered to God!”³

This expression of ultimate human arrogance hides a fundamental weakness. It demonstrates a failure of respect for the power of love, the reality of God, from which we arise and to which we must return. That power is denied by this present and threatening violence. This ultimate violence is idolatry without boundary, exalting human ideas and force above the creator’s gift, the very life of the creation.

Dr. King said in his Nobel Speech:

Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends up defeating itself.

The violence of threatening to unleash the Apocalypse represents an immorality of vast proportion and calls us to an affirmation of faith of vaster proportion. Gandhi stated his faith in the reality that must inform those of us who will stand up to prevent the destruction of God's gift:

Do I still adhere to my faith in truth and non-violence? Has not the atomic bomb exploded that faith? Not only has it not done so but it has clearly demonstrated to me that the twins (nonviolence and truth) constitute the mightiest force in the world. Before it the atom bomb is of no effect. The two opposing forces are wholly different in kind, the one moral and spiritual, the other physical and material. The one is infinitely superior to the other which by its very nature has an end. The force of the spirit is ever progressive and endless. Its full expression makes it unconquerable in the world. In saying this I know I have said nothing new. I merely bear witness to the fact. What is more, that force resides in everybody, man, woman, and child, irrespective of the color of the skin. Only in many it lies dormant, but it is capable of being awakened by judicious training.



It is further to be observed that without the recognition of this truth and due effort to realize it, there is no escape from self-destruction. The remedy lies in every individual training himself for self-expression in every walk of life, irrespective of response by the neighbors.⁴

But, we cannot be passive in pursuing this capacity. Dr. King's words from his Nobel Lecture burn through the haze of today's daily news reports:

Recent events have vividly reminded us that nations are not reducing but rather increasing their arsenals of weapons of mass destruction. The best brains in the highly developed nations of the world are devoted to military technology. The proliferation of nuclear weapons has not been halted in spite of the Limited Test Ban Treaty...The fact that most of the time human beings put the truth about the nature and risks of nuclear war out of their minds because it is too painful and therefore not 'acceptable', does not alter the nature and risks of such war. The device of 'rejection' may temporarily cover up anxiety, but it does not bestow peace of mind and emotional security...There may have been a time when war served as a negative good by preventing the spread and growth of an evil force, but the destructive power of modern weapons eliminated even the possibility that war may serve as a negative good. If we assume that life is worth living and that man has a right to survive, then we must find an alternative to war. In a day when vehicles hurtle through outer space and guided ballistic missiles carve highways of death through the stratosphere, no nation can claim victory in war. A so called limited war will leave little more than a calamitous legacy of human suffering, political turmoil, and spiritual disillusionment. A world war – God forbid! – will leave only smoldering ashes as a mute testimony of a human race whose folly led inexorably to ultimate death. So if modern man continues to flirt unhesitatingly with war, he will transform his earthly habitat into an inferno such that even the mind of Dante could not imagine...I do not wish to minimize the complexity of the problems that need to be faced in achieving

disarmament and peace. But I think it is a fact that we shall not have the will, the courage, and insight to deal with such matters unless in this field we are prepared to undergo a mental and spiritual reevaluation – a change of focus which will enable us to see that the things which seem most real and powerful are indeed now unreal and have come under the sentence of death. We need to make a supreme effort to generate the readiness, indeed the eagerness, to enter the new world which is now possible, “the city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God”...It is not enough to say “We must not wage war.” It is necessary to love peace and sacrifice for it...we have inherited a big house, a great ‘world house’ in which we have to live together – black and white. Easterner and Westerners, Gentiles and Jews, Catholics and Protestants, Moslems and Hindu, a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interests who, because we can never again live without each other, must learn somehow, in this one big world, to live with each other.... This means that more and more our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. We must now give an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in our individual societies. This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all embracing and unconditional love for all men.

He continues stating that developing this kind of love is not weak and cowardly nor only a personal path to salvation but a necessity for human survival. It is an aspect of Being itself to which King makes reference and he invokes this power as a tool for geopolitical and personal survival.

When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response, which is little more than emotional bosh. I am speaking of that force which all the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality.

He has placed before us a choice of Dante’s hell or a door to ultimate reality.

I believe that the mystery that placed the power of destruction in the binding forces of the atom has placed the healing power of love in our hearts and further gifted us with both the courage and wisdom to use that power effectively. I thus agree with Dr. King when he stated:

I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of nuclear annihilation.

Thus I commit to work to cause my country to disavow its unlawful, immoral posture of failing to negotiate the elimination of nuclear weapons. I commit to work through national and international legal mechanisms to curtail, control and abolish these devices. Will not some of you join this call from the conscience of humanity?

King further said:

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality.

Thus, I commit to dig deep into my own heart and open that spring from which God’s spacious pure love flows. Can we not join together in this work of becoming fully human? Then we can

share in the ultimate optimism of Gandhi and King. As King said:

I believe that even amid today's mortar bursts and whining bullets, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow. I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood flowing streets of our nations, can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men. I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits. I believe what self centered men have torn down, men other centered can build up.

We have the choice to respond to this call from a conscience awakened by nonviolent redemptive goodwill. With the help of each, which is a gift in our hands to choose, and the help of God, which is a gift surely granted, we can and will become the change we want to see. We can and will realize ourselves as the children and thus rightful heirs of the power which brought us into this world, the power of love itself. We can and should be grateful for the wisdom that people such as Gandhi and King have shared, and we can and will be correct, if we live that gift from now on.

1 Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons, 1996, International Court of Justice at 452-53 (Separate Opinion of Judge Weeramantry, footnotes omitted).

2 For Pacifists (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1949) pp. 83-84.

3 Douglas Roche, The Ultimate Evil (1997), p.13, quoting George Kennan, The Nuclear Delusion 206-207 (1982).

4 M.K Gandhi, Non-Violence in Peace and War (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1949), Vol II, p. 94.