

Peace 2010

A look backward from the future

by Richard D. Lamm

[Richard Lamm wrote a prize winning essay for the "Peace 2010" contest sponsored by The Christian Science Monitor in 1995. The invitation was to write an essay from the point of view of someone in the year 2010 telling how peace had been established among the nations of the world. Lamm pretended his essay was an excerpt from a book entitled A History of the Twentieth Century written by someone named Cornelius Barnes.]

"Against our will comes wisdom."
– Aeschylus

"When we released the energy from the atom, everything changed except our way of thinking. Because of that, we drift toward unparalleled disaster. We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if mankind is to survive." – Albert Einstein

Albert Einstein's prophetic words foreshadowed The Time of Peace: 1994 was the year of the ultimate war and the year that a lasting peace finally arrived on earth.

History shows periods of peace to be the exception rather than the rule. Since the dawn of history, neighbor has fought neighbor; tribe has fought tribe; religion has fought

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religion; nation has fought nation. The history of man is partially written in blood: construction giving way to destruction; peace and stability turning into war and chaos. Wars have been as inevitable to history as storms are to weather.

Violence and terrorism increased dramatically as the 20th century, already history's most destructive century, lurched to a close. In the 1970s and 1980s, violence seemed to reach a crescendo. By the late 1980s, Russia and the United States both instituted "launch on warning" nuclear systems. A myriad of local wars, revolutions, incidents of religious and sectarian strife, terrorism, and random acts of violence were made even more frightening by the rapid growth of the nuclear club. Peace was a stranger. Man seemed to have lost his capacity for shock, inundated as he was – wherever he lived – by daily news bulletins and TV reports of wars, terrorism, and violence.

One American wit, Woody Allen, seemed to sum up the dilemma: "More than any other time in history, mankind faces the crossroads ...one path leads to despair and utter hopelessness, the other to total extinction. I pray we have the wisdom to choose wisely."

The flash point came, with history's usual irony, in the least expected place. Although India and Pakistan had fought three wars (1947, 1965, and 1971), an uneasy

truce had existed between them. Despite their legacy of hate and distrust, no significant increase in tensions is known to have preceded the devastating nuclear exchange. None of history's usual causations seemed to trigger the conflagration: no jihad, no territorial dispute, no recent reason for revenge. History's most bloody war was apparently caused by some minor miscalculation. Like the War of Jenkins' Ear, the cause, while lost in the radiated ashes, was so insignificant as to conjure up Hannah Arendt's phrase, "the banality of evil." No international threat or declaration from either country harbingered the holocaust. It just happened.

The morning of November 29, 1994, dawned clear and cool over the Indian subcontinent. The harvests had been sparse, but adequate. The border between India and Pakistan, long filled with minor incidents, had been exceptionally quiet.

Granted, the religious differences were as strong as ever, but no known incident or aggravation was present. November 29th was so like so many similar days – alive with pungent smells, buzzing women on the way to market, mischievous children, men sweating in the fields. True, the Hindus worshiped a myriad of gods, while the Muslims worshiped one. The Muslims eschewed pork and were quiet in

their worship, while the Hindus proscribed beef and had music in their worship. Both shared a legacy of religious strife and conflict that defied even a peacemaker such as Gandhi and resulted in the partition of a continent. But nothing in the mind or imagination of man could have justified or explained a spasm of hate equal to "The Great Annihilation."

Simply put, one moment tens of millions of people were going about

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their daily routines and the next moment they were ashes. For historical accuracy, it must be pointed out that satellite pictures confirm that India was attacked first, but American satellites monitoring radio traffic over the Indian subcontinent recorded that the Indians had a sudden, unmanageable fear that the Pakistanis had mobilized and were prepared to launch their recently acquired, supposedly obsolete, American-purchased cruise missiles. So India sent its rockets, just purchased from Russia, on a preemptive strike. Analysts later agreed that there must have been a computer failure in New Delhi. But in the end, it is impossible to assign "blame," even the concept seems irrelevant to the horror that

followed.

What is important to note is the unpredictability of events and how easily one minor event led to another, with increasing speed and significance, until a human chain reaction caused a nuclear chain reaction. The 20th century had seen a world of isolated, independent events become an inter-dependent global village. Just as an assassination in Sarajevo started a chain of events, one following inevitably after another, it is likely that on the Indian subcontinent some slight error led to an insult; an insult to an incident; an incident to an outrage, and an outrage to a holocaust. Events soon passed beyond all human control. The "Guns of August" became the "Missiles of November."

"If the iron dice must roll, may God help us," anguished Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg on August 1, 1914. Eighty years later the nuclear dice rolled – on a scale that eclipsed even the destruction of two world wars. But the rolling dice did something else more important: it made absurd such concepts as "winners" or "losers" in modern warfare. President Dole, in her characteristic way, put it succinctly: "Winning a nuclear war is like saying, 'Your end of the boat is sinking!'"

The total devastation of modern weapons is seen in the absence of reports from either Pakistan or India. Few were left to carry the word. The first news came from U.S. and Russian satellites that reported a nuclear exchange

involving at least 20 detonations. There were no "stop the presses" telegrams from Sarajevo, no cacophony of reports from Pearl Harbor. The first sound of this war was silence – chilling, eerie silence.

When reports did come, they were of "multiple blinding flashes seen to the northwest," as radioed from Colombo, Sri Lanka. A radio operator in Mangalore, India, reported "large mushroom clouds rising from Bangalore and Madras." Seismic recorders around the world registered multiple shocks in both India and Pakistan.

If one could pinpoint the beginning of The Time of Peace, it would be December 1, 1994, when the first television reports burst upon a world that had thought itself beyond shock. The initial images were pictures taken from the air by American network news organizations in leased airplanes hurriedly flown to India from Sri Lanka and Thailand. The first images were sweeping panoramas of a moonlike landscape. Nothing stood but charred rubble. News reports repeated Robert Oppenheimer's observation at the first successful atomic test five decades earlier, when he recalled the Bhagavad-Gita: "I have become Death/Destroyer of Worlds!" Here was a world destroyed.

In those moments – with a horrified world glued to its television sets in homes or in windows of stores with TV sets – came the horror of modern weapons: craters where cities once stood; a myriad of people struck blind whose only mistake had been to look at the fireball. Into every world capital, country, town village, barrio, ghetto,

fravello, and most huts, the universality of suffering was dramatically played out before shocked eyes. Nuclear war, like Medusa, consumed all who looked it in the face.

Thus wisdom came not through treaty but through tragedy. The goal of peace was no longer something left to politicians, but became the demand of every citizen. If “war was too important to be left to generals,” in Clemenceau’s famous phrase, peace became a groundswell that swept over politicians and nationalities. The demonic horror of the Indian subcontinent brought home to everyone the universality, not of brotherhood, but of the vulnerability of man. Man looked into the abyss and he was horrified beyond words. No religious or national goals could justify destruction and desolation on this scale. War was mutual suicide. The message went not only to the head but to the heart. As Aeschylus had said:

*Even in our sleep
Pain that we cannot forget
Falls drop by drop upon
the heart
Until in our own despair
Against our will
Comes wisdom
Through the awful grace
of God.*

One is cynically tempted to cite Tacitus: “When they made a desert, they called it Peace.” The aphorism would seem appropriate if restricted to the survivors of India and Pakistan. Those two countries were left with a desert, their people too exhausted and traumatized to fight. They could only suffer. Hundreds of millions of refugees in both

countries rushed to escape the fallout. Survival was determined by the caprice of the winds.

But this “desert” aphorism misses the symbolic value of the horror. It ignores the vividness of the pictures sent around the world. Unlike Carthage, whose destruction was witnessed by few, The Great Annihilation was witnessed by all. Grim pictures of the widespread suffering were transmitted to the end of the globe. Children died who were guilty of no sins save those of their fathers. The whole world could clearly see that in a nuclear war, the survivors would envy the dead. In a thousand languages and dialects, people of different faiths recognized, “There but for the grace of God, go I.”

As if to drive the point home came The Years Without Summer. The nuclear explosions and resulting fires put large quantities of fine dust and soot into the atmosphere and changed the climate of the entire Northern Hemisphere. Actually, everyone outside the Indian subcontinent was fortunate, even though all suffered through three successive summers that were 10 to 15 degrees below normal, with resulting crop losses that were barely overcome by emptying America’s gigantic grain storage bins. But if it had been 50 bombs instead of 20, the “nuclear winter” would have destroyed all life on earth.

Tests showed that in addition, the atmosphere’s ozone, which shields man from the carcinogenic ultraviolet radiation, had been permanently damaged. Man learned unequivocally that a depletion in the stratospheric ozone by nuclear

explosions would dangerously increase solar ultraviolet radiation. Nuclear war was hydra-headed: first the catastrophe of the blast; then the devastation of the fallout; then the climatic disaster of a nuclear winter; and finally, after the soot and dust had settled out, the continuing curse of ultraviolet radiation.

No formal arms control agreement followed the holocaust. Politicians continued to find barriers to treaties. As always, technical problems and difficulties of ensuring compliance were solemnly cited. But peace is neither the absence of war nor the presence of a disarmament agreement. Peace is a change of heart. Both the USSR and the U.S. simply stopped building new weapons and missiles. These were not weapons but suicide devices. Man had at last invented a doomsday machine.

The revulsion came in many forms and in many languages. The nations of the world clearly shared too small a star to allow this to happen again. Peace was not negotiated: it burst on a stunned mankind. Multiple Messiahs preached the common theme of Peace on Earth. “Blessed are the peacemakers,” urged Christian ministers, “Never in the world can hatred be stilled by hatred; it will be stilled only by non-hatred – this is the law eternal,” quoted the followers of Buddha. A religious leader from China, quoting an old Vietnamese proverb, “If we take vengeance on vengeance, vengeance will never end” gained millions of converts. The ancient simple truths of love and charity were reinforced by the terror of

example.

In the words of Shelley:

Most wretched men

Are cradled into poetry

by wrong,

They learn in suffering what

they teach in song.

A tidal wave of peace swept the world.

Other factors supplemented the change of heart. Both the U.S. and Russia were increasingly frustrated by the pouring of resources into the arms race. Each had to match the other, but the cost was high. Both had built the 21st-century equivalent of the Maginot Line: an awesomely expensive but unusable defense system. This system gave little military security, and that at the expense of economic security. Both nations suffered domestically because of the resources put into arms. Both had lost the economic race while struggling to win the arms race.

By 1994, the U.S. was allocating 40 percent of its scientists and 9 percent of its gross national product to the military. Its previous role as world economic leader was suffering severely. Once having had the highest per capita income, by 1994 it was down to seventh in per capita income. Once the world-leading exporter, it had become the world's leading importer, with a devastating negative balance of trade. Once the financier of the world, since 1987 it had been a debtor nation. America was an economic giant crippled by the costs of defense and an economy that had lost its magic.

The Soviet Union was similarly beset. Its expensive nuclear arsenal was no help for its real problems.

The Russian Bear was beset by multiple problems: a billion Chinese on one border who hated Soviets; an unwinnable war in Afghanistan; a military machine that drained 20 percent of its gross national product; restive national minorities and rebellious satellites; a history of bad harvests, and the highest alcoholism rate in the world.

Like two clumsy, muscle-bound fighters eyeing each other suspiciously, the two superpowers added useless missile upon useless missile while other sectors of their economies suffered and while living standards started to decline. The peace process, once started, also became an economic issue. The wisdom came because the cost of war in economic as well as human terms became manifest.

One additional result completes the picture: the "Adopt a Refugee" program. So many children were orphaned, so many needed extraordinary medical care that the developed world agreed to take in these children for treatment and adoption. The one international conference that did succeed was the "Save the Children" conference, organized by Switzerland. At that conference, Russia made a dramatic announcement that it would accept the same number of children that the U.S. did. All nations took in some of the injured, and as these children spread across the world, they served as a grim reminder of the human costs of breaking the peace.

John Locke observed, "Hell is truth seen too late." In our time, peace was hell seen just in time. Peace came not from the efforts of

the actors on the world stage who had failed so often, but through a preview of coming events.

The front line of nuclear war was everyman's backyard. It was neither idealism nor love of mankind that brought peace, but the reality therapy of war. It was not the abstract odds of war, but the recognition of the devastating stakes. Man looked into the abyss and saw an irradiated hell and recoiled in horror. Both heads and hearts came to realize that war was mutual suicide that would destroy not only nations but the species.

The cost was high, but in the end, reality was the only effective teacher. •