

SCIENCE for PEACE BULLETIN

Special Issue

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FROM THE EDITOR

It had been hoped to produce a third number of the Bulletin in 1990. News items of considerable interest were accumulating. Science for Peace members gave evidence before The Foreign Affairs Committee in Ottawa in late November on renewal of the NORAD agreement. Letters to the media by David Parnas, Eric Fawcett, Terry Gardner and John Valleau on NORAD and on the Gulf crisis were published. David Parnas, Eric Fawcett and Alan Weatherley wrote to the Prime Minister on the subject of Canada's ominous change in its position in foreign affairs as exemplified by the country's possible involvement in a shooting war. These and other related matters would have been the subject of an end-of-1990 number, or some of them would have spilled over into the first number of 1991.

But the Gulf situation has changed everything. Newspapers can track international Gulf-related events by the day, broadcasts and telecasts by the hour. The Bulletin cannot. This is why this present version of the Bulletin is reaching you in this highly abbreviated form by e-mail or post.

The persistence of the Gulf threat, the enormous deployment of arms and personnel, the vicious rhetoric of name-calling by both 'sides' have led the opposed forces to the brink of a devastation. At last we can see how wars begin. It is claimed that no one wants one – not even George Bush and Saddam Hussein; according to various statements by them studded among their warlike imprecations. But we may be about to have a war because of the iron stubbornness of a few people and their ability to inflame the passions of their peoples. Discussion, negotiation and sanity are going out the window and we seem set for an appalling blood bath, with the promise of a permanently destabilized Middle East to follow. Terrorism, sectarian warfare and widespread misery will result. Economics already made unhealthy by the recent arms race will become sicker. It will doubtless be decided that the presence of large military forces of the US and its allies will become required on a permanent basis in the Middle East – that is, assuming they eventually prevail militarily over Iraq.

In a single year we have lurched from international celebration at the end of the Cold War to an attitude of fearful but fatalistic paralysis as we slide towards a Hot War: true human madness!

What could have been done? In Canada, church leaders and physicians have spoken out against the country's involvement. So have peace groups – Science for Peace among them. Newspapers and journals have printed a plethora of analyses and situation reports, but on the whole have declined to take a really forceful anti-war position or to attempt to lead public opinion to deplore the war option in the settlement of international disputes. It is, however, interesting to note that Joe Clark and Brian Mulroney have recently avoided the strident rhetoric against Iraq of a few weeks ago. Perhaps the prospect of the actual deaths of Canadian service personnel understandably fills them with dismay ...

The question for Science for Peace, the one we now must face, along with various other organizations devoted to the cause of peace and social justice is this: In light of the events of the last five months and the evident inexorability of the 'Gulf process', can we honestly claim that our impact is more than miniscule?

Let me turn to the recent past. In the editorial of Volume 9, No. 2 of the Bulletin (June 1989), it was said that:

It may be that some members of peace organizations are beginning to hum a refrain to themselves: 'We have a partial thaw, at least; things may get better; perhaps we can dare to revise our priorities; the environment needs healing; there's a hole in the ozone; the world's warming up; big things to get our teeth into - but not things that will destroy all life before the next millenium ...' Most members of peace organizations are amateurs with other jobs and interests. Not enough of them are young people. It is easy to feel tired and want to get on to other concerns. But we can't get tired. Not yet! The long haul is what will count. After all, the peace movement of the 1950's with such marvelous intellectual leaders as Einstein and Russell somehow lost its way - and we had the Cold War.

I think that to all members of Science for Peace it must by now be evident that although matters like concern for the environment and Third World poverty can be, and will continue to be, major factors that contribute towards the continuation of global military threats and socio-economic instability of the worst kinds, it is to trying to find ways to avoid shooting wars that we should still devote our best efforts.

But what can we mean by best efforts? The members of peace organizations have probably been happier (until 5 months ago) in 1989-90 than at any time in recent memory. They have frequently allowed themselves to be persuaded that their various messages about the causes of armed conflict and how these may be defused and avoided have - at long long last - been sinking into the soft, unstable intellectual soil that forms the substratum and nutrient supply for the mighty tree of state! Something to give that soil a little texture, to let a bit of air in.

We must no longer deceive ourselves. The dogs of war can still slip their leashes with uncanny ease. They did so five months ago, and with mind-boggling speed the air was thick with the fury of words, words that lacked meaning but that had the power to inflame and insist against all logic, all sober analysis. And peace organizations learned, rapidly, that, in the face of presidential decrees, prime ministerial declarations, and chauvinistic utterances of Foreign Affairs Ministers, their careful and sincere urgings for caution, wisdom, and expenditure of time rather than lives, were not only disregarded, in many cases they were not even responded to!

In short, peace organizations in this country and elsewhere have - let us freely and fully admit it - failed the acid test. Those of us who have already devoted much of their spare time, in mostly busy lives, to the activities of various peace organizations must now acknowledge that we are as powerless to influence our country's part in an international crisis of the gravest sort as we ever were.

This means we have failed to influence our fellow citizens to any degree that is justified by our efforts and time, and that we can expect to have no impact whatever on the analyses, evaluations, decisions and actions of elected members of our government in times of national crises ... if we continue as before.

What, then, is to be done?

Some might believe that Science for Peace should become radicalized, transform itself

into a group of peace activists who prefer to present their views in a more direct, public and confrontational way than hitherto. Most Science for Peace members could not accept this for several reasons. First, one of our organizational strengths has been our essentially non-political stance (our only political assumption has been that people of goodwill of every political persuasion will want to avoid wars). Our non-political stance means that we neither ally ourselves with, nor oppose ourselves to, whatever political party happens to govern the country, except where we believe that our advice, or suggestions, or expertise, or criticism may assist the government in reaching positions inimical to war and favourable to peace and justice.

Yet we have failed, because we are not capable of influencing the Canadian government to revise or review its present Gulf attitudes or policies by even a particle by anything our membership have said or written.

If Science for Peace is to have a future that can break it out of the chains of impotence that presently constrain it, several things will be needed:

- (1) Science for Peace must, as a matter of urgency, become more involved in public education at various levels;
- (2) Science for Peace members must make it their business to communicate strongly and frequently with local members of parliament and inform them directly of important matters that may eventually influence the government's attitude to peace and security matters;
- (3) Science for Peace members should, both as private individuals and in their membership capacities, write letters and articles more frequently to newspapers, magazines and senior politicians of all parties.

We have seen the world plunge from the splendid euphoria of an ended Cold War and a politically liberated Eastern Europe to the present disaster within a single 12 month span. We cannot afford the extended luxury of a belief that if all is not yet well, it is at all events a lot better than it was. The facts utterly belie this. (It was T.H. Huxley who spoke of beautiful theories being slain by brutal facts!)

Those of us who still have faith in an ideal, if not very much in the means we have been employing to achieve it, had better be prepared to restructure our approach – not necessarily work harder, but somehow find ways to work smarter. Science for Peace is essentially an organization for scientists. Scientists are supposed to be intelligent folk. Now is the time when we must rise to the challenge to employ our intelligence as creatively as possible. And we must, somehow, remain patient.

‘The long haul is what will count.’

I feel it would seem frivolous to wish you a happy new year. Instead, let me offer you season's greetings and the earnest hope that we will all find ways to shake off dangerous feelings of inertia produced by our perception that a world disaster is brewing – indeed is almost at the boil – and that one is powerless to contribute even thoughts that will be taken note of.

The next full number of the Bulletin will appear when international events have developed or stabilized to the point that detailed reflection, critical commentary and some analysis of their significance and impact appear feasible.

Alan Weatherley
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