THE
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JOSEPH GERSON is disarmament coordinator, director of programs in New England, and director of the Peace and Economic Security Program for the American Friends Service Committee. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director Erik Owens and undergraduate research assistant Mary Popeo before his presentation on peace activism at the Boisi Center.

OWENS: What is the best argument you've ever heard for maintaining a nuclear weapons stockpile?

GERSON: I don't think there is a decent argument because the use of these weapons is beyond abominable. At the very least, it's genocidal. Even with a small exchange between, for example, India and Pakistan, you have famine across the Northern Hemisphere and an estimated one billion people dead. I think the model should be South Africa, which had a full nuclear program and yet opted to halt, reverse, and get rid of it. As people in Hiroshima say, these are weapons of the devil. Not that I believe in a devil, but nuclear weapons are fundamentally evil, and there's no legitimate argument for their use.

OWENS: What about arguments based on deterrence or future need?

GERSON: The deterrence model has dominated discourse. However, the reality is that the United States hasn't practiced deterrence. As I explained in my book, you can find the documentation from the Pentagon saying that deterrence has never been our policy. The reality is not only the illegitimate use of the nuclear weapons in Japan, but also their repeated use by the United States as a form of extortion and blackmail threats in more than 30 international crises and wars since Nagasaki. This is the area of my specialized research. To speak of deterrent policies, I think we have to look at the Soviet Union, Russia today, and China. This would be a revolutionary approach in our discourse, but one has to pursue truth.

OWENS: What separates nuclear weapons in your mind from other weapons? Let's assume that one would prefer that we eliminate all weapons, but there's a special worry about nuclear weapons.

GERSON: You begin with the mass, indiscriminate murder of huge numbers of people. In addition to the moral outrages involved, you're dealing with fundamental violations of international law. You see that referenced in the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion on the use and threatened use of nuclear weapons. Beyond that, you're dealing with the effects of radiation through time. People who are exposed at one point may be dying of cancer two years, five years, ten years, or thirty years later. And even beyond that, you're looking at the genetic damage. I work with second- and third-generation A-bomb survivors in Japan, who live with a constant fear of cancer. They talk to me about their siblings who have died. The indiscriminate murder through time caused by nuclear weapons certainly separates them from other weapons.

OWENS: Have the nations of the world abandoned the concept of tactical nuclear weapons?

GERSON: I don't think so. They're still in our stockpile, and the Russians have them. When it comes to war, perceived limits and boundaries often disappear. For example, it's interesting to read about Roosevelt's condemnation of aerial bombing in 1939, a few years after which the U.S. was engaged in war. Our allies were bombing Hamburg and we were firebombing Japan. Once the technology and the weapons are in place, they can always be used.

OWENS: Speaking of technology, what do you see as the link between the presumed peaceful use of nuclear energy and the existence of nuclear weapons? Is the former forever tainted as a result of the possibility of the latter?

GERSON: Nuclear power should not be used on its own terms, independent of nuclear weapons. We have clearly seen this in India, Israel, Pakistan and Iran. Once a country has the technology, it is not a big leap from so-called peaceful production of nuclear power to nuclear weapons.

Even before that, there's the implicit danger of nuclear power plants. Fukushima was waiting to happen. Putting nuclear plants on faults is insane. Here in the U.S., we had Three Mile Island and tritium leaks at Vermont Yankee. There are many immediate dangers. We are many years into this and yet no one knows what to do with the waste, which poisons the environment and will threaten human survival for thousands and thousands of years.

This is one of the challenges as we work on the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and its review. The NPT was one of the three most fundamental treaties of the 20th century. It has three pillars. As the Iranians and the North Koreans have been reminding us for years, one of the pillars is that nations that sign on to the commitment to cease development of nuclear weapons have the inalienable right to use nuclear power for peaceful purposes. Having nuclear energy is an international right that they have. This is a major flaw in the NPT.

POPEO: As a program committee member at the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), I know we are currently preparing for the upcoming 2014 Preparatory Conference. What other preparations do you think are necessary for the 2015 NPT review? Ideally, what would come out of the 2015 NPT review and what must we do in order to make that happen?

GERSON: There are two tracks: what needs to happen among the governments, and what needs to happen among popular movements. Speaking about the former, in 2005, the treaty-averse Bush administration sabotaged the NPT review and potentially the NPT itself. No agreement came out of the 2005 conference and the NPT order was threatened.

This made 2010 particularly important. There were intense negotiations down to the last minute, resulting in a fundamental agreement. The nuclear powers reaffirmed their commitments to Article VI and to negotiating the complete elimination of their arsenals. In the diplomacy with the non-aligned nations, the United States committed to co-convene a conference on the creation of a Middle East nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction-free zone in 2012. That got America through the conference, but afterwards the Obama administration was not willing to fulfill its commitment. Needless to say, many governments were very upset with the U.S. At the High Level Meeting on Disarmament at the UN, I watched heads of state, foreign ministers and ambassadors express their outrage at the refusal of the U.S. to fulfill this legal commitment to co-convene the conference.

> **"The reality is that sometimes things get so abstracted that we totally forget the human dimensions. The American Friends Service Committee has always valued that human face."**

As we near 2015, we will see shell game politics from the Obama administration around nonproliferation, nuclear security and so on. However, the United States needs to take meaningful steps toward disarmament before 2015, or the NPT order will be in serious jeopardy. One hopes for deeper commitments from the nuclear powers to move toward fulfilling their Article VI commitments. Nobody has enormous confidence in that, but that's what we have to press for.

At the popular level, in 2010, I found myself at the center of international NGO organizing to put pressure on governments. The peace movement does have allies among governments. There are a number of governments working hard for the NPT's implementation. The UN High Commissioner for Disarmament, Sergio Duarte, was very supportive. We even had Ban Ki-moon involved as a speaker. He came to a conference that I was involved in organizing. It was quite remarkable. Four of us, operating on a shoestring budget, brought other people in along the way with a larger committee overseeing the process. When the movement was at a trough, we assembled 1,000 people for the conference and had a march of 15,000 people from Times Square to the United Nations. We'll have to replicate that in 2015.

OWENS: Could you tell us a bit about the American Friends Service Committee and its work on this particular issue?

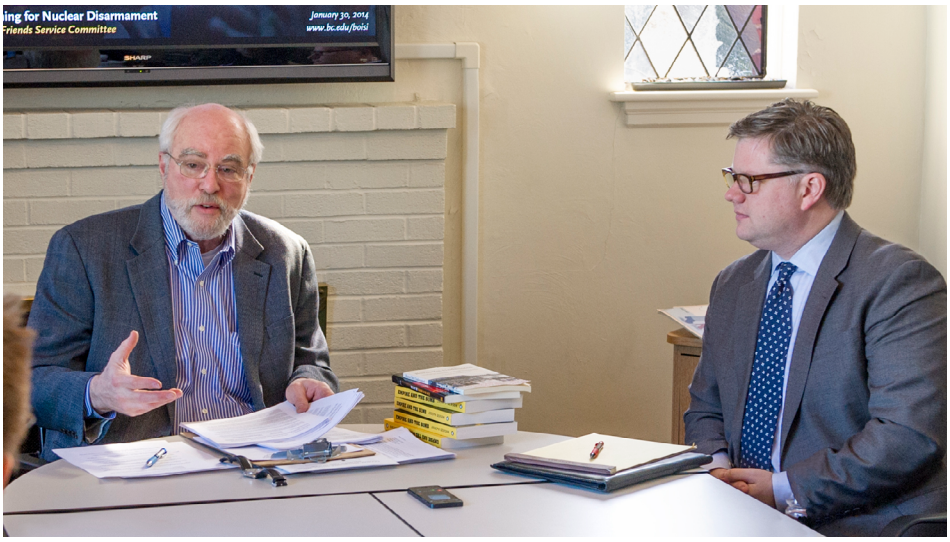
GERSON: The Service Committee is a Quaker-based organization created in 1917, during the First World War. Around this time, many of the other traditional peace organizations were created in the U.S. and in Europe. AFSC has evolved over the years but its principal commitments are to respect the dignity of every individual, to eschew violence and to

work for nonviolent conflict resolution. In the archives, there is a letter written by the head of the Committee in August 1945, just days after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to President Truman, which was sent at the same time as a letter from the forerunner of the National Council of Churches, also condemning nuclear weapons.

The Service Committee did early work with Norman Cousins. For those who survived the atomic bombs, the mutilation and devastation of people's bodies was extraordinary. For women, there was discrimination in courting and marriage due to fears of genetic damage. Because America wouldn't allow the Japanese to learn about the atomic bombings during the occupation, people even feared that radiation was contagious. With help from the Service Committee, Norman Cousins brought a number of young women called the Hiroshima Maidens to New York for plastic surgery. These women are totally innocent. They were given opportunities to speak to the press in order to educate the American public.

My predecessor here in Cambridge, Russell Johnson, was involved with several people at Harvard in a discussion group that led to the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. This Committee was the leading organization working for the Nuclear Test Ban in the 1960s, and was the established heart of the nuclear disarmament movement for decades. Since then, AFSC has played a central role in launching the Nuclear Weapons Freeze movement. An unheralded story, this movement was essential to the end of the Cold War.

I've been leading AFSC's work for quite some time, especially with Japanese movements, touring speakers, conferences, and with Global Hibakusha. A-bomb survivors are not limited to Japan. We have atomic veterans and victims of mining and fallout in the United States. Just about every nation that has developed nuclear weapons has, at least



in its testing, devastated many innocent people.

In some ways, AFSC was ahead of the dynamic of the international disarmament movement, which is now focused on the human consequences of nuclear weapons. The reality is that sometimes people and policy makers lose themselves in abstractions, forgetting the impacts of these apocalyptic weapons on human beings. AFSC has always valued and highlighted that human face, the lives and testimonies of A-bomb victims, including down winders, miners and plant workers, all of whom have been devastated. We've brought Global Hibakusha delegations to the UN's Millennium NGO Forum and to the Hague Appeal for Peace Conference in 1999.

OWENS: It's notable that AFSC is a Quaker organization. You have a complex relationship with the religious traditions that you work with. Could you say a bit about how they all connect?

GERSON: I'm shaped by the Holocaust in Europe, the American Civil Rights movement, and AFSC's commitments to justice and nonviolent social change. My earliest contact with the Service Committee was when I was a student involved in the Poor People's Campaign, Martin Luther King's final campaign. One of the lead organizers was from AFSC.

My second contact was at the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago. The same gentleman, Tony Henry—who I later learned had been one of the four African-Americans who integrated the University of Texas—was involved in the Nonviolent Caucus, which condemned the war in Vietnam, Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and Mayor Daley's police brutality. Soon thereafter, I went to the Service Committee for draft counseling and was trained by them to become a draft counselor. Their literature on war was some of the best, cogent and coherent. These things led me to AFSC.

After the Vietnam War, I lived in Europe for three years and became a Middle East specialist. I was also incredibly privileged to work with and learn from people who had resisted the Nazis. When I was growing up in a Jewish home, Germans were not particularly loved. But one German who was spoken of highly was Martin Niemoller. When I was in Europe, I had the opportunity to see and work with him twice. I've touched history in some interesting ways.

When I came back to the U.S., AFSC had done some cutting-edge work on the rights of Palestinians and the need for a two-state solution. They were looking for someone with the necessary background, and they brought me in. We shared com-

mitments to nonviolence, human rights, and the dignity of all people. They've tolerated me, and over the years, I've certainly absorbed Quaker ways, such as making decisions through consensus and long discussion. Often when I go to meetings where there is voting, I find myself almost physically reacting, because this is often not the best way to discern the truth.

In the 1960s, the Service Committee began to understand that if it wanted to fulfill its mission, it needed to become broader. One of my colleagues was a Burmese Buddhist. As you move up the hierarchy of the organization, the board is almost all Quaker. But as a staff, we're quite diverse. In some ways, I describe myself as a Hesseian Buddhist, profoundly influenced by Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha, which I've taught several times. I've also had the remarkable experience of speaking at the Japan Religions for Peace Conference in Nara and engaging with the Fellowship of Reconciliation in Europe.

OWENS: You have a common cause with religionists around the world who don't share your particular faith commitment, or lack thereof. What's the content of the connection you make with them?

GERSON: At some point, I came across a book by Martin Buber called *Meetings*. Buber says that the key to human engagement is finding the question that reveals the essential dimensions of another person. This is what I look for in engagement with other people. I've had the extraordinary privilege of working with people at the most human level. When people think of A-bomb survivors, they have a certain image in their minds. But I also know them as artists, as friends I drink with, as people I laugh with. I always hope to reach that level of human engagement and solidarity.

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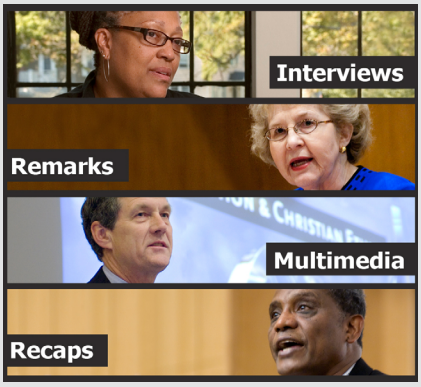

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