

## Einstein on the Military Mentality, and Rotblat on the Culture of Violence

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The names of Albert Einstein and Joseph Rotblat are forever linked by the Russell–Einstein Manifesto of 1955. In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2005, Rotblat told the story:

“I met Bertrand Russell and became a source of information for him. There was the idea that high-level scientists should issue a manifesto to the world to draw attention to the dangers of a nuclear war. Russell wanted to get the best scientists in the field and the greatest scientist at the time was Einstein. So Russell wrote a letter.

By the time Einstein’s reply reached London, he was dead. He had immediately replied, the last act of his life.

We called it the Russell–Einstein Manifesto. It was signed by 11 scientists. Russell insisted they were Nobel laureates, but asked me to sign even though I was not one. He said: ‘You will get it, I’m sure.’”

As the 76-year-old Einstein laid down the torch of leadership in the struggle against nuclear weapons, the 47-year-old Rotblat felt impelled to pick it up and carry it, never flinching in the struggle for nuclear disarmament, for the next 50 years. And indeed he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995.

“Now I’m the only one of the signatories still alive. Because of this I feel it is my duty to go on carrying the message from Einstein.”

Soon after writing this, he in turn laid down the torch last year – or rather handed it over to us.

But Einstein and Rotblat were united not just in opposition to nuclear weapons, but in understanding that the greatest danger these weapons present is not their technological potential for destruction – enormous as that undoubtedly is – but the psychological effect that their possession has in fostering what Einstein called “the military mentality”. It fosters this mentality not only in

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the leaders of those states that possess nuclear weapons, but in too many of the citizens of these states.

By the military mentality Einstein meant the “dangerous delusion” that all international problems can be settled by military power. In a 1947 article entitled “The Military Mentality” he wrote:

“It is characteristic of the military mentality that non-human factors (atom bombs [this was written before the development and testing of the hydrogen bomb in 1951], strategic bases, weapons of all sorts, the possession of raw materials, etc.) are held essential, while the human being, his desires and thoughts – in short, the psychological factors – are considered as unimportant and secondary. The individual is degraded to a mere instrument; he becomes ‘human materiel.’ The normal ends of human aspiration vanish with such a viewpoint. Instead, the military mentality raises ‘naked power’ as a goal in itself – one of the strangest delusions to which men can succumb.”

With remarkable prescience, only two years into the Cold War, he foresaw where this trend was leading the USA:

“Today, the existence of the military mentality is more dangerous than ever because the offensive weapons have become much more powerful than the defensive ones. This fact will inevitably produce the kind of thinking that leads to preventive wars. The general insecurity resulting from these developments results in the sacrifice of the citizen’s civil rights to the alleged welfare of the state. Political witch-hunting and governmental controls of all sorts (such as control of teaching and research, of the press, and so forth) appear inevitable, and consequently do not encounter that popular resistance that, were it not for the military mentality, might serve to protect the population. A reappraisal of all traditional values gradually takes place and anything that does not clearly serve the utopian goal of militarism is regarded and treated as inferior.”

Rotblat speaks about the same problems, using the phrase: “the culture of violence”. In “Remember Your Humanity”, a message to the Seventh Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in May 2005, he wrote:

“Morality is at the core of the nuclear issue: are we going to base our world on a culture of peace or on a culture of violence? ... Nuclear weapons have been kept as a deterrent, to prevent war by the threat of retaliation. For the deterrent to be effective, the threat of retaliation must be real. ... George W. Bush, Vladimir Putin, or Tony Blair, must show convincingly that they have the kind of personality that would en-

able them to push the button and unleash an instrument of wholesale destruction. I find it terrifying to think that among the necessary qualifications for leadership is the readiness to commit an act of genocide, because that is what it amounts to in the final analysis. . . .

It makes a mockery of the claim by George W. Bush that his anti-terrorist campaign is based on moral principles. What sort of morality is it that justifies military action against some states, because of their alleged possession of nuclear weapons, while at the same time insisting on keeping these weapons for oneself, to be used like any other military implement, even in pre-emptive strikes?"

But, as he emphasizes, it is not just a matter of the moral corruption of our leaders:

"Furthermore, by acquiescing in this policy, not only the leaders but each of us figuratively keeps our finger on the button; each of us is taking part in a gamble, in which the survival of human civilization is at stake. We rest the security of the world on a balance of terror. In the long run this is bound to erode the ethical basis of civilization."

It is "the effect on the young generation" that most concerned him:

"How can we persuade the young generation to cast aside the culture of violence, when they know that it is on the threat of extreme violence that we rely for security?"

Judging by what is going on in my country, and throughout much of the world in the name of my country, I would say that "the long run" is here. The ethical basis of American civilization has always been tenuous: think of the genocidal wars against native American peoples, the acceptance of human slavery for a century after the Declaration of Independence and the disenfranchisement of women for a century-and-a-half, the imperial wars against Mexico, Spain and the self-liberated people of the Philippines, for example. But there is also a proud tradition of struggle against these stains on our democratic ethos.

Under the banner of "the war on terror", the opening years of this century have seen an attack on the American democratic ethos that is unprecedented in its ferocity. Today, the struggle against the military mentality and the culture of violence is no luxury – it is a necessity, literally a matter of life and death. My generation will

soon pass from the scene, surely long before victory in this struggle is even in sight. May succeeding generations, those of my children and my grandchildren, pick up the torch so long and nobly held by Joseph Rotblat, and – in spite of all the formidable obstacles – finally achieve success. In the immortal words of Frederick Douglass, the great black American leader, “Without struggle there is no progress.”

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