

EINSTEIN: MAN OF PEACE

By David Krieger

Albert Einstein was the greatest scientist of his time, perhaps the greatest of any time. His genius enabled him to peer far into the secrets of the universe, resulting in profound new insights into the relationships between time, space, motion, matter and energy; but he was also passionately involved in the human and social issues of his time as an outspoken critic of militarism and nationalism and a strong opponent of war.

The celebrity that Einstein obtained early in his life through his scientific discoveries gave him a platform from which to advance his social and political ideas. His life encompassed World War I, Hitler's rise to power in Germany, World War II, and the creation and use of nuclear weapons. Throughout his life but especially during the later years he was a fervent advocate for peace and policies that would promote world peace.

When he recognized the terrible destructive potential of the atomic weapons that his theories had, ironically, at least indirectly made possible, he pleaded for a new way of thinking that would make obsolete nation states and their propensity for war and for the establishment of a world government capable of preventing a nuclear cataclysm.

In 1934, Einstein expressed his support for peace in these words: "The importance of securing international peace was recognized by the really great men of former generations. But the technical advances of our times have turned this ethical postulate into a matter of life and death for civilized mankind today, and made it a moral duty to take an active part in the solution of the problem of peace, a duty which no conscientious man can shirk."¹

Twenty years later, in 1954, toward the end of his life, Einstein gave this modest assessment of his own efforts for peace: "In a long life I have devoted my faculties to reach a somewhat deeper insight into the structure of physical reality. Never have I made any systematic effort to ameliorate the lot of men, to fight injustice and suppression, and to improve the traditional forms of human relations. The only thing I did was this: in long intervals I have expressed an opinion on public issues whenever they appeared to me so bad and unfortunate that silence would have made me feel guilty of complicity."²

Indeed, time and again Einstein spoke out for what he believed was right. He lived as a human being should live, with freedom and dignity, and sought the same for his fellow humans without regard to borders.

I will review below four important areas of Einstein's thinking on peace: militarism, pacifism, nuclear weapons and world government. I will also examine his thoughts on citizen action.

Militarism

Einstein held the individual human in high regard, but despised the “herd” mentality. “The really valuable thing in the pageant of human life,” he wrote, “seems to me not the political state, but the creative, sentient individual, the personality; it alone creates the noble and the sublime, while the herd as such remains dull in thought and dull in feeling.”³ Einstein saw the herd mentality most powerfully reflected in the military system, and he made no effort to hide his disdain for this system. He described the military system as one “which I abhor.”⁴ He wrote: “That a man can take pleasure in marching in fours to the strains of a band is enough to make me despise him. He has only been given his big brain by mistake; unprotected spinal marrow was all he needed. This plague-spot of civilization ought to be abolished with all possible speed. Heroism on command, senseless violence, and all the loathsome nonsense that goes by the name of patriotism – how passionately I hate them! How vile and despicable seems war to me! I would rather be hacked to pieces than take part in such an abominable business.”⁵

Einstein went on to say that he believed this “bogey” of war would have ended long ago had the “sound sense of the peoples not been systematically corrupted by commercial and political interests acting through schools and the Press.”⁶ All of this was expressed by Einstein in 1931, when he was in his early fifties. Einstein returned to the subject of the herd mentality a few years later, stating, “In two weeks the sheeplike masses of any country can be worked up by the newspapers into such a state of excited fury that men are prepared to put on uniforms and kill and be killed, for the sake of the sordid ends of a few interested parties.”⁷ He held in particular contempt compulsory military service, which he described as “the most disgraceful symptom of that deficiency in personal dignity from which civilized mankind is suffering today.”⁸

Einstein was a strong supporter of human rights and extended the purview of human rights to include “the right, or the duty, of the individual to abstain from cooperating in activities which he considers wrong or pernicious.”⁹ He believed that this right pertained in the first instance “to the refusal of military service,” and cited the Nuremberg Tribunal for the proposition that “conscience supersedes the authority of the law of the state.”¹⁰

In an address to a students’ disarmament meeting in about 1930, Einstein told the young people, “The destiny of civilized humanity depends more than ever on the moral forces it is capable of generating.”¹¹ Einstein expressed his belief to the students that the way to achieve a “joyful and happy existence” is through “renunciation and self-limitation,” and called upon the youth “to fortify their minds and broaden their outlook through study.”¹²

Einstein believed that “the state is made for man, not man for the state.”¹³ He elaborated that “the state should be our servant and not we its slaves.”¹⁴ He continued: “The state transgresses this commandment when it compels us by force to engage in military and war service, the more so since the object and effect of this slavish service is to kill people belonging to other countries or interfere with their freedom of

development.¹⁵ Einstein wrote in 1931 that compulsory military service “seriously threatens not merely the survival of our civilization but our very existence.”¹⁶

In an article after World War II, Einstein described the military mentality as making non-human factors essential, “while the human being, his desires and thoughts – in short, the psychological factors – are considered as unimportant and secondary.”¹⁷ Among the non-human factors, he listed “atom bombs, strategic bases, weapons of all sorts, the possession of raw materials, etc.”¹⁸ Einstein found that in the military mentality an “individual is degraded to a mere instrument,” and “naked power” becomes “a goal in itself,” a situation he believed was “one of the strangest illusions to which men can succumb.”¹⁹

Einstein’s deep opposition to militarism extended to preparations for war. He wrote in a message to a world government meeting in 1946: “You cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war. The very prevention of war requires more faith, courage and resolution than are needed to prepare for war. We must all do our share, that we may be equal to the task of peace.”²⁰

Pacifism

Einstein described himself as “a convinced pacifist.”²¹ “To my mind,” he said, “to kill in war is not a whit better than to commit ordinary murder.”²² He considered Gandhi to be “the greatest political genius” of his time, and believed that Gandhi’s efforts for the liberation of India demonstrated “that a will governed by firm conviction is stronger than a seemingly invincible material power.”²³

Einstein viewed pacifism as more than a mere desire for peace or even a refusal to participate in war. “The true pacifist,” Einstein wrote to a student group in 1937, “is one who works for international law and order. Neutrality and isolation, when practiced by a great power, merely contribute to international anarchy and thus (indirectly) help to bring about situations that can only lead to war.”²⁴ Einstein expressed a similar opinion in another letter in 1937, this one to the American League against War and Fascism. He wrote: “The supreme goal of pacifists must be the avoidance of war through establishment of an international organization, and not the temporary avoidance of rearmament or involvement in international conflict.”²⁵

Writing after World War II in 1952, Einstein described the “real ailment” of his time as an attitude created by World War II that “dominates all of our actions.”²⁶ He described this as “the belief that we must in peacetime so organize our whole life and work that in the event of war we would be sure of victory.”²⁷ He believed that this attitude, if not rectified, will “lead to war and far-reaching destruction.”²⁸ Einstein argued that only by overcoming “this obsession” was it possible to reach “the real political problem,” which he described as “How can we contribute to make the life of man on this diminishing earth more secure and more tolerable?”²⁹

The rise of Hitler, however, caused Einstein to modify his stance. “Up to a few years ago,” he wrote in 1934, “the refusal to bear arms by courageous and self-sacrificing persons was such a measure [of pacifism]; it is no longer – especially in Europe – a means to be recommended.”³⁰ It was the fact that non-democratic countries in Europe, such as Germany under Hitler, were basing future plans on military aggression that convinced Einstein that traditional pacifism was no longer viable. “The confirmed pacifist,” he wrote, “must therefore at present seek a plan of action different from that of former, more peaceful times.”³¹

In Einstein’s mind, the advent of nuclear weapons raised terrible new problems for humanity that required bold new and unprecedented action by individual states to prevent war. To achieve this goal, he called for the creation of “a supranational organization supported by military power that is exclusively under its control.”³² Thus, as much as Einstein supported pacifism in principle and opposed militarism, he had arrived at the conviction that military power could not be entirely eliminated. He argued, however, that the control of militarism required supranational control of military power, believing that “[r]eal security is tied to the denationalization of military power,” and that this could come about by “converting national armies systematically into a supranational military force.”³³

Nuclear Weapons

Einstein did not consider himself to have had a direct role in the creation of atomic weapons. He wrote: “I do not consider myself the father of the release of atomic energy. My part in it was quite indirect. I did not, in fact, foresee that it would be released in my time. I believed only that it was theoretically possible. It became practical through the accidental discovery of chain reaction, and this was not something I could have predicted.”³⁴

One of the scientists who did see the possibility of an atomic weapon, however, was Einstein’s friend, the Hungarian émigré physicist Leo Szilard. In the late 1930s, Szilard worried that the Nazis would succeed in developing atomic weapons and this would give them a fateful advantage over the Allied powers. Szilard convinced Einstein to send a letter to President Roosevelt warning of this danger, and it was Einstein’s letter that set the US government on the path of developing atomic weapons.

Einstein was not involved further in advising the government on issues related to the bomb. When he heard about the first bomb being used on Hiroshima, he was deeply disappointed and aggrieved. He is reported to have said later, “I could burn my fingers that I wrote that first letter to Roosevelt.”³⁵

Writing in 1946, Einstein described the changed circumstances brought about by the creation of atomic weapons. “Today the atomic bomb has altered profoundly the nature of the world as we know it,” he said, “and the human race consequently finds itself in a new habitat to which it must adapt its thinking. Modern war, the bomb, and other discoveries present us with revolutionary circumstances. Never before was it possible for

one nation to make war on another without sending armies across borders. Now with rockets and atomic bombs no center of population on the earth's surface is secure from surprise destruction in a single attack."³⁶ He continued, "Rifle bullets kill men, but atomic bombs kill cities. A tank is a defense against a bullet, but there is no defense in science against a weapon which can destroy civilization."³⁷

Alarmed at the frightening prospects of nuclear war, Einstein joined a group of atomic scientists that formed the Emergency Committee of Atomic Scientists in 1946. At a conference held by the committee in Princeton on November 17, 1946, Einstein stated: "Our first task should be to try to communicate to others our conviction that war must be abolished at all costs, and that all other consideration must be of secondary importance."³⁸ The following statement by Einstein and his fellow trustees of the Emergency Committee was released at the end of the conference:

"These facts are accepted by all scientists:

1. Atomic bombs can not be made cheaply and in large number. They will become more destructive.
2. There is no military defense against the atomic bomb and none is to be expected.
3. Other nations can rediscover our secret processes by themselves.
4. Preparedness against atomic war is futile, and if attempted will ruin the structure of our social order.
5. If war breaks out, atomic bombs will be used and they will surely destroy our civilization.
6. There is no solution to this problem except international control of atomic energy and, ultimately, the elimination of war.

"The program of the committee is to see that these truths become known to the public. The democratic determination of this nation's policy on atomic energy must ultimately rest on the understanding of its citizens."³⁹

In Einstein's view, the atomic bomb represented a quantitative rather than qualitative change in weaponry. He described this change in this way: "The release of atomic energy has not created a new problem. It has merely made more urgent the necessity of solving an existing one. One could say that it has affected us quantitatively, not qualitatively. As long as there are sovereign nations possessing great power, war is inevitable. That is not an attempt to say when it will come, but only that it is sure to come. That was true before the atomic bomb was made. What has been changed is the destructiveness of war."⁴⁰

Einstein did provide more nuance in pointing out that the atomic bomb gave "a considerable advantage in the means of offense or attack over those of defense."⁴¹ He believed that this could lead "even responsible statesmen" to "find themselves compelled to wage a preventive war."⁴²

He did not argue in the early years following World War II against the US manufacturing and stockpiling the bomb because he believed that it was necessary for the

US to have bombs “to deter another nation from making an atomic attack when it also has the bomb.”⁴³ He believed that deterrence should be “the only purpose of the stockpile of bombs.”⁴⁴ For the same reason, he believed that “the United Nations should have the atomic bomb when it is supplied with its own armed forces and weapons.”⁴⁵ At the same time, Einstein believed in a policy of No First Use. “To keep a stockpile of atomic bombs without promising not to initiate its use,” he said, “is exploiting the possession of the bombs for political ends.”⁴⁶ He strongly opposed such exploitation and use of atomic weapons.

In a 1947 article in *Newsweek*, Einstein equated nuclear weapons to the French Maginot Line. “The secret of the atomic bomb,” he wrote, “is to America what the Maginot Line was to France before 1939. It gives us imaginary security; and in this respect it is a great danger.”⁴⁷

Einstein’s answer to nuclear weapons, as was his answer to war as an institution, was supranational organization or world government. He wrote in 1948: “Mankind can only gain protection against the danger of unimaginable destruction and wanton annihilation if a supranational organization has alone the authority to produce or possess these weapons.”⁴⁸

World Government

In a 1936 letter responding to a peace plan sent to him by an individual, Einstein expressed his reservations about national governments being trusted to avoid wars. He wrote, “It follows that only a world authority, backed by adequate military power, offers any hope of avoiding war. Indeed, even so radical a step would not guarantee full security. But real protection of peace is certainly not attainable with anything less.”⁴⁹ In another letter in 1936, Einstein rejected the idea that Fascist governments would be willing to explore peaceful alternatives. “I am not in favor of efforts which attempt simply to keep the so-called peace,” he wrote. “The only sensible goal today is the creation of an international system of security, unconditionally subordinated to an international authority.”⁵⁰

Einstein believed that there was no defense against atomic weapons in either armaments or science or in going underground. The only defense that he believed existed was “in law and order.”⁵¹ He wrote in 1946: “Henceforth every nation’s foreign policy must be judged at every point by one consideration: does it lead us toward a world of law and order or does it lead us back toward anarchy and death?”⁵²

Upon receiving the One World Award in 1948, Einstein told the audience in Carnegie Hall: “There is only one path to peace and security: the path of supranational organization. One-sided armament on a national basis only heightens the general uncertainty and confusion without being an effective protection.”⁵³

Einstein believed that the path to supranational government lay through strengthening the United Nations. He called for increasing the authority of the General

Assembly by making the Security Council and all other UN bodies subordinate to it; for electing delegates to the General Assembly directly by the people rather than by appointing them by governments; and for keeping the UN in session constantly.⁵⁴ He believed that “the UN must act with utmost speed to create the necessary conditions for international security by laying the foundations for a real world government.”⁵⁵

While favoring inviting the Russians to join a world government, if they were unwilling to join, Einstein advocated proceeding without them, but always holding open the door to them.⁵⁶ He thought that the path to world government could be led by the US, UK and Soviet Union. He proposed that a single representative of each government could take on the task of devising a constitution for this government. The principal power of this world government would be over military matters. The only other power that he thought it would need would be “to interfere in countries where a minority is oppressing a majority, and so creating the kind of instability that leads to war.”⁵⁷

Einstein said that he feared the tyranny of a world government, but feared “still more the coming of another war or wars.”⁵⁸ He believed that world government would come, but that it was possible that it could come in the aftermath of a war in which the victor would establish the government under its control. He predicted that such a world government, achieved by military might and war, could “be maintained permanently only through the permanent militarization of the human race.”⁵⁹ For Einstein, this was a dreaded outcome, and he hoped that ordinary people would lead the way to world government that would be capable of preventing war.

Einstein’s views were succinctly expressed in a 1947 message to a gathering dedicated to world law: “Mankind must give up war in the atomic era. What is at stake is the life or death of humanity. The only military force which can bring security to the world is a supranational police force, based on world law. To this end we must direct our energies.”⁶⁰

Citizen Action

Einstein placed his hope for the future on the actions of informed citizens. He believed that if citizens accepted the premise of war, there would be a gradual diminishment of civil liberties and that military secrecy would be “one of the greatest obstacles to cultural betterment.”⁶¹ The way out for Einstein was achieving supranational government through strengthening the United Nations, which Einstein thought citizens would do if they understood that it was “the only guarantee for security and peace in this atomic age.”⁶²

He noted early in the Nuclear Age that the determination to avoid atomic warfare was lacking in American leaders and also in its public. “Unless there is a determination not to use [atomic weapons] that is far stronger than can be noted today among American political and military leaders, and on the part of the public itself,” he wrote, “atomic warfare will be hard to avoid.”⁶³

Einstein pointed out that atomic scientists did not believe that the American people could be aroused “by logic alone” to meet the challenge of the atomic era.⁶⁴ He argued: “Unless the cause of peace based on law gathers behind it the force and zeal of a religion, it hardly can hope to succeed. Those to whom the moral teaching of the human race is entrusted surely have a great duty and a great opportunity.”⁶⁵ He called upon all the institutions that molded opinion – including churches, schools and colleges – to “acquit themselves well of their unique responsibility in this regard.”⁶⁶ He called upon schools to present history “from the point of view of progress and the growth of human civilization, rather than using it as a means for fostering in the minds of the growing generation the ideals of outward power and military successes.”⁶⁷

Einstein believed that to insure peace, it was necessary to bring the vital issues to the attention of young people, and that “[t]he spirit of international solidarity...should be strengthened and national chauvinism combated as a harmful force impeding progress.”⁶⁸

Despite all the carnage and bloodshed associated with wars that he had witnessed in his life, Einstein retained great faith in humanity. In his contribution to a college debaters’ handbook in 1948, Einstein expressed this faith: “I believe that mankind is capable of reason and courage and will choose the path of peace,” a path that he always believed required far more courage than war.⁶⁹

Einstein’s Last Legacy

The last public document that Einstein signed before his death in 1955 was the Russell-Einstein Manifesto. The document was written by British philosopher and Nobel Laureate Lord Bertrand Russell, but contained ideas that Einstein had put forward throughout his life. It is, in my opinion, one of the great documents of the 20th century, and remains highly relevant in the 21st century. Concerned about the enormous power of thermonuclear weapons, the Manifesto maintained that humanity had a choice: “Shall we put an end to the human race; or shall mankind renounce war?” Near its end, the signers asked, “Shall we...choose death because we cannot forget our quarrels?”⁷⁰

The Manifesto appealed to scientists and the general public to subscribe to the following resolution: “In view of the fact that in any future world war nuclear weapons will certainly be employed, and that such weapons threaten the continued existence of mankind, we urge the governments of the world to realize, and to acknowledge publicly, that their purpose cannot be furthered by a world war, and we urge them, consequently to find peaceful means for the settlement of all matters of dispute between them.”⁷¹

In addition to Russell and Einstein, the document had nine other signers. One, Joseph Rotblat, the only signer still living, and the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995 for his efforts to engage scientists of East and West in the effort to abolish nuclear weapons and war, wrote in 2005: “Einstein made us think about everything – nothing is absolute, everything is relative. He was a scientist but a realist and aware of what was going on in the world. He was quite the opposite of what people think about scientists – being absent-minded and immersed in their work and naïve. He was fully aware and

trying to do something about it. I admire him not only as a great man of science but also as a great human being. I think if he were still alive, he would still be working on his theories. But he would be working towards peace.”⁷²

Einstein was a giant among men, who throughout his life stood courageously for peace. He was a scientist who accepted public responsibility for the dangers that science and technology had created. He was never afraid to speak out, nor did he hesitate to do so. Einstein was a citizen of the world, and throughout his life he advocated a government of the world that would bring an end to the institution of war.

Einstein’s message to humanity is as relevant today as it was during his life. His is a life not only to be celebrated but also emulated, not least for his deep and abiding commitment to building a peaceful world.

David Krieger is president of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation (www.wagingpeace.org), and the deputy chair of the International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility. He is the author of many studies of peace in the Nuclear Age.

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 - ²⁴ Nathan and Norden 274.
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 - ³⁰ Einstein, Albert, Out of My Later Years (New York: Wings Books, 1956) 209.
 - ³¹ Einstein, Later Years 210
 - ³² Einstein, Later Years 143
 - ³³ Einstein, Later Years 144
 - ³⁴ Nathan and Norden 350.
 - ³⁵ This comment by Einstein is widely quoted, but without a clear source. See, for example, Richard V. Duffy, Science Hero: Albert Einstein, <<http://myhero.com/myhero/hero.asp?hero=einstein>>.
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 - ³⁷ Pauling 8.
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⁵⁴ Einstein, Later Years 158.
⁵⁵ Einstein, Later Years 159.
⁵⁶ Einstein, Later Years 196.
⁵⁷ Einstein, Later Years 186.
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⁵⁹ Einstein, Later Years 199.
⁶⁰ Nathan and Norden, 407.
⁶¹ Einstein, Later Years 157.
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⁷⁰ Russell-Einstein Manifesto, <http://www.pugwash.org/about/manifesto.htm>.
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