Title of Lesson: Part I: What Gandhi and King Never Knew About Nuclear Weapons

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Grade Level/ Subject Areas: 11/12 U.S. History, U.S. Government, Philosophy

Class Size: Variable

Time/Duration of Lesson: Three Fifty-Five Minute Periods

Guiding Questions:

• What did the bombing of Hiroshima look like on the ground?

• How worried should humanity be about a future hostile nuclear detonation?

Lesson Abstract: Part one of this two part lesson details three lesser-known historical concerns and/or events regarding nuclear weapons - the first occurring in 1945, the second 1962, and the third 2007. Part two hypothesizes the psychological framework that Gandhi and King would apply concerning the nuclear threat in a post 9/11 world.

Lesson Content:

The Genesis of This Two-Part Lesson

Talking about nonviolence is not as easy as it sounds. As a resident fellow at the 2009 two-week Ahimsa Institute on Nonviolence titled Journeys of Nonviolence: Gandhi and King, I found myself feeling frustrated for the first three days. It seemed to me that dialogues concerning the practice of nonviolence at the micro level, while important, were somewhat archaic in a post Hiroshima world. The ultimate weapon of violence seemed to be the elephant in the room that no one was willing to notice, and though I felt an intellectual kinship with my forty fellow educators, I also felt anger. To quote Gandhi: “It is the reformer who is anxious for the reform, and not society, from which he should expect nothing better than opposition, abhorrence and even mortal persecution” (Gandhi 190). I kept thinking, “If I could share but three little-known anecdotes regarding the story of nuclear weapons I am sure the Ahimsa dialogue would shift from micro to macro. My secular humanist cap had slipped low on my brow and was hindering my view.

Then, in an afternoon lecture delivered to Institute fellows by Gandhi scholar Dr. Anthony J. Parel, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Calgary and editor of Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and other Writings, with an indescribable detached intimacy, and kind of languid authority - a softly spoken pre science that held the room in a three-hour contemplative rapture – said, “The practice of nonviolence must take place in speech and thought. We must learn to tone down our rhetoric.” Dr. Parel had just brushed a hat from my head. I frenetically turned two required one-thousand word content essays into one thirty-page paper titled Five Minutes to Midnight: A Personal Journey Through the Micro/Macro Ahimsa Paradox. My two editors pointed out that an eight-thousand word treatise was not a workable lesson plan. And, of course, they were right!

Part I: What Gandhi and King Never Knew About Nuclear Weapons

“Unless now the world adopts non-violence, it will spell certain suicide for mankind.”

Gandhi’s response to the news of Hiroshima (Collected 234)

“It is no longer a choice, my friends, between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence. And the alternative to disarmament, the alternative to a greater suspension of
nuclear tests, the alternative to strengthening the United Nations and thereby disarming the whole world, may well be a civilization plunged into the abyss of annihilation, and our earthly habitat would be transformed into an inferno that even the mind of Dante could not imagine.”

King sermon delivered four days before his assassination (Remaining)

**From Day One**

Both Gandhi and King experienced the news of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in their lifetimes, but neither man lived long enough to appreciate how many times the world has come close to Armageddon since 1945. In Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin’s 2005 biography of Robert Oppenheimer, a startling fact is revealed. Just four months after Hiroshima U.S. officials were worried about small atomic bombs being snuck into the country and used to destroy American cities. When called before U.S. Senators to testify what he would recommend for protecting a city like “New York” from the destruction of a smuggled bomb, Oppenheimer quipped, “a screwdriver” to open every box and crate (Bird 349). This led a nervous Atomic Energy Commission to task two top physicists, Robert Hofstadter and Wolfgang Panofsky, with the job of finding the best way to hunt down and slay these new atomic dragons. Their 1950 study is still classified, but its name isn’t: *The Screwdriver Report* (Garwin 2). These documents record that both scientists from Manhattan Project and members of the U.S. government were worried about “weapons of mass destruction” and terrorism a half century before 9/11.

It’s telling that the successful fifty-year government propaganda campaign to sell the American voter a rational for weapons proliferation was a known fraud to both these early scientists and government insiders. While Americans cheered the end of the war in the Pacific, the U.S. military had personnel on the ground in Japan documenting the destructive power of their new weapon (Bird 320). When the nuclear option was presented to Truman’s successor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, the new president replied,” You can’t have this kind of war. There just aren’t enough bulldozers to scrape the bodies off the streets” (466).

**Thirteen Days in October**

In October 2002, American and Cuban power brokers held a three day conference in Cuba titled: The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A Political Perspective After 40 Years. Attended by Kennedy and Johnson’s secretary of defense Robert McNamara, Cuban president Fidel Castro, and various Russian generals and retired CIA analysts, the dialogue added some frightening narration to the book of humanity. For example, though the Pentagon had not located any nuclear weapons in Cuba, only their delivery systems, Kennedy’s hawks practically begged him to launch a massive preemptive airstrike using conventional weapons. General Curtis LeMay, orchestrator of the WWII fire bombings of Japanese civilians, sank his talons deep into the forearm of Kennedy’s conscious with an almost savage disrespect (Morris). Of course, the U.S. nuclear arsenal was primed and ready to go. At the reunion McNamara said the he learned directly from Castro that not only were nuclear tipped warheads already standing restlessly on Cuban soil, but that he had ordered them to be launched against the United States if Kennedy attacked (Morris). The certain retaliation would have likely ended civilization in the Western Hemisphere, if not the planet. King would have never lived to pen a letter from a Birmingham jail let alone “lead” a march on Washington.

This anniversary dialog revealed an equally disturbing drama that took place in the icy depths of the Atlantic. Frustrated by having his Soviet B-59 sub rattled by depth charges rolling of the decks of the U.S. destroyer Cony, captain Valentin Savitsky of the Korablx authorized
the sinking of the American ship with a nuclear-tipped torpedo. After a fierce argument with his first officer Vasilli Arkhipov, Savitsky “walked back” the order. Arkhipov’s story is now public record (Euro, National, Sources). But perhaps the most apt description of his accomplishment is captured in the tile of a blog posted by Michael Greenwell: The Greatest Hero You Have Never Heard Of (Greenwell).

Too Close for Comfort

To “walk back” an order is Pentagon-speak. The term’s recent history, however, is every bit as nightmarish as the Cuban Missile Crisis. Seymour Hersh of the New Yorker Magazine states that “senior government officials” were preparing to resign if the Bush White House refused quit entertaining the use of nuclear tipped “bunker busting” bombs in a 2006 preemptive strike-plan against Iran. Apparently, the White House asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to submit military options for interrupting Iran’s ability to produce nuclear weapons. Since such an action would require the disabling of Iran’s Natanz uranium enrichment facility, a complex approximately seventy-five feet underground, the JCS report included the use of tactical nuclear weapons as one of the options to ensure unmitigated success. However, Hersh argues, many senior Pentagon planners did not expect the White House to seriously adopt the option and present it to the president. When they found out that that is exactly what the President’s men intended to do, Hersh reported that unless White House staffers “walk back” the nuclear option, “if they refuse to take it out -- and I say this very seriously. I’ve been around this town for 40 years -- some senior officers are prepared to resign.” Hersh was hearing things from senior military insiders such as, “‘Decisive’ is the key word of the Air Force’s planning. It’s a tough decision. But we made it in Japan” (Hersh). It takes little logic to predict the outcome of a Western power using a nuclear weapon in the Middle East. To rob Shakespeare, such stuff as nightmares are made of! As it turns out the nuclear option was “walked back” and the JCS were able to save face.

I have focused on just three of the lesser known atomic tales. No less than sixteen nuclear options are documented between 1945 and 1985 alone by David R. Morgan, National President of Veterans Against Nuclear Arms Vancouver (Morgan). What is most frightening, and again, this is just a simple application of logic, is all of the nuclear options that we have never heard of. Upon reuniting with his former adversaries forty years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, McNamara, the chief architect of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction– the U.S. cold war policy toward the Soviet Union), was shaken enough to exclaim, “There isn't any learning period with nuclear weapons …You make one mistake and you destroy nations!” (Morris).

California State Content Standards:

Historical Interpretation

1. Students show the connections, causal and otherwise, between particular historical events and larger social, economic, and political trends and developments.
2. Students recognize the complexity of historical causes and effects, including the limitations on determining cause and effect.
3. Students interpret past events and issues within the context in which an event unfolded rather than solely in terms of present-day norms and values.
4. Students understand the meaning, implication, and impact of historical events and recognize that events could have taken other directions.
Materials Needed:

- LCD Projector
- Laptop Computer

Suggested Teaching Activities:

- Viewing of a short digital story on the bombing of Hiroshima – Followed by moderated discussion
- Viewing of the documentary: *The Day after Trinity*
- Lecture on three lesser-known nuclear concerns/events

Bibliography:


*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi Online.*
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http://www.math.yorku.ca/sfp/crises.html

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*Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution.*
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