

Einstein's legacy

Written by Eric Walberg

Tuesday, 11 August 2009 10:34

October 2003 -- The America I once knew seems like a distant memory, says one journalist after another these days. But how about this: "Times such as ours have always bred defeatism and despair." Re-reading Einstein's writings on peace, it is clear that America has been through an equally insane fit in the past - such as the madness following World War II.

Einstein was referring to the rush to build more A-bombs, to develop H-bombs, the plans to launch preventive war against a destroyed and helpless Russia (no UN "food for oil" program then), conscription, the Korean war, loyalty oaths, McCarthyism, and the electrocution of the Rosenbergs.

The rest of the world was revulsed then as it is today, but then it was devastated economically, weak politically, without TV or Internet. After World War II the US emerged virtually unscathed as the victor. Yes, 300,000 US soldiers died, but compare that with losses in Europe and Russia - far more than 30,000,000. And US industry and housing were intact. A colossus in a world of pygmies, and yet it was to launch the most horrific and costly arms race in the history of mankind.

Einstein wrote: "The 'Communist menace' is being used here by reactionary politicians as a pretext to mask their attack on civil rights. The population is too misguided, and the intellectuals too intimidated, to defend their Constitutional rights... We have come a long way toward the establishment of a fascist regime. The similarity of general conditions here to those in the Germany of 1932 is quite obvious. What might happen if, in addition, the dreaded economic depression were actually to take place!" (private letter 1954)

Einstein was a lifelong advocate of détente. While criticizing Soviet internal policies, he sympathized with the dangers that the Soviet Union faced, which convinced him, on the whole, that it was the US that posed the greater threat to world peace. He also counted on Europe, the nonaligned countries (at that time the most prominent being India), and the smaller countries: "The less powerful nations may band together and thus force an international solution; but by no means do I overestimate the realization of that hope." (1954)

Supranational Government

In fact, the main theme that appears throughout his writings from the 1920s until his death in 1955 is the need for a supranational government, with a binding commitment by all member countries on security issues, as opposed to the optional nature of both the League of Nations and the UN, neither of which

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had/has the ability to enforce its security measures.

How to achieve this state of affairs is still a moot point, and Einstein's answers changed as the world political situation changed. Though not a Marxist, he criticized the imperialist ambitions of both Nazi Germany and the post-World War II US. Though initially a pacifist, he quickly recognized the danger of Nazi Germany and supported rearmament to fight fascism. He never advocated fighting the Soviet Union even during the Stalinist purges and the Cold War, unlike such otherwise enlightened intellectuals as Bertrand Russell, who, after World War II, briefly contemplated a preventive atomic war against the Soviet Union.

In his final years, living under the cloud of nuclear annihilation and an increasingly belligerent US, Einstein became convinced that the only way forward was Gandhi's nonviolent resistance combined with a commitment to the Nuremberg principle: "The state has recognized the duty of the individual to act according to the unwritten law when commands based on national laws are in striking conflict with the laws of his conscience.... Let us hope that we may soon come to the point where the Nuremberg principle will not only be enforced upon citizens of vanquished nations!" (Einstein's introduction to conscientious objector Gene Sharp's book on Gandhi, 1953.)

He was convinced that intellectuals have a key role to play: "The intellectual is capable of exerting a strong influence on the formation of public opinion. Those who endeavor to lead us toward an authoritarian government are particularly anxious to intimidate and silence the intellectual." (1954) He recommended that the intellectual learn from Gandhi's "non-cooperation, i.e., he must be prepared for jail and economic ruin... not based on the fifth Amendment, but on the assertion that it is shameful to submit to such an inquisition which violates the spirit of the Constitution." (New York Times letter 7/12/53)

This letter caused a public scandal and he even joked at the time that he feared

imprisonment. In a subsequent editorial, the Times criticized Einstein for promoting civil disobedience in defence of the Constitution: "To employ the unnatural and illegal forces of civil disobedience is to attack one evil with another." To this Bertrand Russell replied to the Times: "Do you condemn the Christian martyrs who refused to sacrifice to the Emperor? Do you condemn John Brown... George Washington? As a loyal Briton, I of course applaud this view; but I fear it may not win much support in your country."

The Russell-Einstein Manifesto

His last hours were concerned with an anti-war project that Russell had instigated and which was signed by nine Nobel Prize winners [see the Rotblat article in this issue] making clear that war must at all costs be avoided, since neither side can hope for victory in a nuclear war and that there is a real danger of the extermination of the human race.

Of course, it does not take a nuclear physicist to see all this. However, it is a balm and an inspiration to commune with the genius of his great mind as revealed in these nonscientific writings. As a passionate lover of science, he was puzzled by the heat of the political debate, and insisted to anyone who would listen that we should not be dogmatic about economics, that socialism and capitalism had good and bad points, and that the important thing was to avoid war by ceding military power to a supranational government. Both sides in the Cold War dismissed this as unrealistic, as indeed it has proved to be so far. But Einstein's argument that survival should come before economic preferences is more relevant than ever. His intuited ideas about how to extricate ourselves from the political impasse are as compelling as ever.

Post(latest)war manifesto

So, what help is Einstein in finding a way forward now? The fundamentals of his equation for peace still hold. To "win the hearts and minds" of ordinary Americans we need a broad-based platform that integrates the US into the community of nations, as opposed to the present platform of USA world domination through intimidation and state violence. A reasonable mainstream political platform to be fought for within the US would entail:

1) a conciliatory approach to "the enemy": "A genuine solution of the security problem presupposes mutual confidence... but what was actually done both in the case of Germany (re demilitarization of Germany in cooperation with Russia) and that of East Asia (re China and Korea) was the opposite of what might have created confidence."

2) a domestic program defending Constitutional rights and promoting economic stability and justice.

This must be backed up by Gandhi-inspired civil disobedience by intellectuals and ordinary people, and refusal to support the militarization of domestic and foreign policy. The role of intellectuals is key - especially after the war in Iraq settles down into postwar routine terrorism, domestically, where

Constitutional rights are eroded.

Israel

Einstein supported Zionism, though he immediately saw the dangers which the foundation of Israel entailed and refused the offer to become Israel's second president. Privately he expressed reservations about the wisdom of the existence of a Jewish state: "My awareness of the essential nature of Judaism resists the idea of a Jewish state with borders, an army, and a measure of temporal power, no matter how modest. I am afraid of the inner damage Judaism will sustain - especially from the development of a narrow nationalism within our own ranks..."

He argued that peaceful coexistence between Arabs and Jews was a prerequisite to healthy development of a Jewish home in Palestine. In 1955 he said that Israel should maintain a "policy of neutrality between East and West and complete equality for the Arab citizens living in our midst.... The attitude we adopt toward the Arab minority will provide the real test of our moral standards as a people."

While it is perhaps comforting to know that the hopeless scenario of today is not unique in recent times, the environmental crisis, the increased deadliness of "conventional" arms of today, and the overwhelming extent of corporate control of life does not leave much room for optimism. However, it is still clear what is to be done.

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