

‘The Children of Adam’

Obama, Canada and Peace

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The Pugwash Peace Exchange, dedicated to the Pugwash goal of a world freed of nuclear weapons as an indispensable step to peace, is coming of age at a new moment of hope for the world. Under the dynamic leadership of Stephen and Dennice Leahey, it has started to play a strong role in contributing to world peace through education. The PPE conferences, expanded by new distance learning materials, are resonating with youth. New partnerships with the post-secondary education sector will help greatly in developing young adults to take positions of influence in society. The intergenerational outreach of the PPE will be a new beacon in the Maritimes, which has always had education as one of its hallmarks. Education, of course, forms the basis of global citizenship. The PPE “branding” of education through the prism of Pugwash’s identification of the human security themes for the 21st century should be a new source of pride for the people of Nova Scotia.

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Obama’s Transformational Moment

The arrival of President Barack Obama in the White House is a transformational moment in world history. It is of the same magnitude as

the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which brought a sudden end to the Cold War. It is not just that he is of African-American descent, though that itself breaks new political ground. It is rather what he stands for: moving the world from a culture of war to a culture of peace.

In his first few weeks in office, President Obama, even though overwhelmed by economic and financial crises, has taken several remarkable foreign policy steps. He announced the closure of the notorious Guantanamo prison and the end of any official sanction for torture. He is winding down the Iraq war and moving U.S. troops out of the country. He has opened a dialogue with Syria and has started a more constructive relationship with Russia.

He has opened the door to U.S. policy changes in global warming, alternate energy development, and respect for science that may enable his country to play a leading role in gathering international cooperation to solve problems, rather than impeding their resolution. The respect he showed the United Nations in appointing Susan Rice, an outstanding scholar, as Ambassador to the U.N. and a Cabinet member was the complete reverse of Bush's appointment of John Bolton whose derision of all things U.N. crippled the organization.

In the light of how Iran was denigrated by the Bush administration as part of the “Axis of Evil,” Obama’s overture to Iran is spectacular. In a special message on the Iranian New Year, the President urged Iran to discuss “in mutual respect” the gamut of issues that for three decades has cast Iran and the United States on opposite sides of a gulf splitting the region. The disputes with Iran, centering on Iran’s refusal to halt the enrichment of uranium, cannot be resolved by threats. Obama recognized the deep culture of Iran: “Over many centuries your art, your music, literature and innovation have made the world a better and more beautiful place.” The president pointed to a future with renewed exchanges among our people, and greater opportunities for partnership and commerce. “It’s a future where the old divisions are overcome, where you and all your neighbors and the wider world can live in greater security and greater peace.” Remember the words of the 13th century Persian poet Saadi, he added: “The children of Adam are limbs to each other, having been created of one essence...” The contrast of Obama’s inclusive imagery with Bush’s slogan, “If you’re not with us, you’re against us,” is startling. The respectful diplomacy of Obama at least stands a chance of being a better tool than the bombast of Bush.

One does not have to agree with all of Obama’s moves to recognize the transformational nature of his leadership compared to the transactional

style of Bush. For example, some have questioned Obama's escalation of American troops in Afghanistan. But his new policy on Afghanistan and Pakistan is meant to dismantle the al Qaeda and Taliban, and stabilize both chaotic countries. He recognizes military means alone will not bring security and is implementing a range of diplomatic and development efforts.

The general charge from the far-right that Obama's emerging foreign policy is nothing more than "supine diplomacy" is, as CNN commentator Fareed Zakaria has noted, "almost comical in its fury." Most importantly, Obama has shown the importance of respect when dealing with the Muslim world. This is a trait foreign to the Bush administration, which treated as treason any thought of compromise or tradeoffs. Bush preferred to deal with countries by issuing a set of maximalist demands. This, however, is not foreign policy, it is imperial policy. And it will not work in today's world.

Obama and a Culture of Peace

A reading of Obama's two books, *Dreams From My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*, combined with analyzing his early moves as president has led me to the conclusion that Obama has a profound understanding of the elements of a culture of peace. These elements are:

- Respect for life and the dignity and human rights of individuals
- Rejection of violence

- Recognition of equal rights for men and women
- Support for the principles of democracy, freedom, justice, solidarity, tolerance, the acceptance of differences
- Communication and understanding between nations and countries and between ethnic, religious, cultural, and social groups.

A culture of peace is an approach to life that seeks to transform the cultural tendencies toward war and violence into a culture where dialogue, respect and fairness govern social relations. In this way, violence can be prevented through a more tolerant global ethic. I am not saying, by any means, that all the political systems of the world are ready to operate on the principles of a culture of peace; nor am I implying that President Obama is ready for canonization. I am saying that the new president has done a startling U-turn in the manner in which he deals with other governments. Just showing some of the attributes of a culture of peace raises the level of hope that the modern world can find a way to turn away from the path of misery and annihilation to sustainable development for all.

It is in the field of nuclear disarmament, the very essence of the Pugwash ideal, that the Obama moment offers the greatest hope for a more peaceful future. As a candidate for the presidency, Senator Obama said: “I will not authorize the development of new nuclear weapons. ... And I will make the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons worldwide a central element

of U.S. nuclear policy.” Shortly after taking the oath of office, he turned what had been a campaign promise into an official presidential commitment: The new administration “will stop the development of new nuclear weapons.” The White House website immediately stated: “They [Obama and Vice-President Biden] will take several steps down the long road toward eliminating nuclear weapons.” The White House confirmed that these steps will include: work with Russia to take U.S. and Russian ballistic missiles off hair-trigger alert; seek dramatic reduction in U.S. and Russian stockpiles of nuclear weapons and material; and set a goal to expand the U.S.-Russian ban on intermediate-range missiles so that the agreement is global.

Again, coming after eight years in which the Bush administration turned its back on nuclear disarmament discussions and negotiations and, in a calculated manner, undermined the Non-Proliferation Treaty at the 2005 Review Conference, these official policy statements are a breath of fresh air. President Obama is now aiming for a radical new treaty between Russia and the U.S., which would reduce the number of nuclear warheads to 1,000 each. At that level, the U.K., France and China are committed to enter into comprehensive negotiations.

Three former American secretaries of state (Henry Kissinger, James Baker and George Shultz) and a former secretary of defence (William Perry)

along with former Senator Sam Nunn recently met with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in an effort to jump-start U.S.-Russian nuclear relations. These high-powered former leaders have all come out for concrete steps leading to a nuclear weapons-free world. So has British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. Obama is putting a team in place to develop initiatives. His appointments, including U.S. Representative Ellen Tauscher, a consistent advocate for nuclear disarmament, as Under-Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security (a post which Obama has revived), are a strong signal to the bureaucracy that the President wants to move forward.

Obama and Ban Ki-moon

Obama's moves are in harmony with the views of U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (even to have the President of the U.S. and the Secretary-General of the U.N. in harmony is a refreshing change), who recently issued a five-point plan for nuclear disarmament:

- All states to negotiate an international Nuclear Weapons Convention for the elimination of nuclear weapons, backed by a strong system of verification.
- The U.N. Security Council to discuss security assurances with non-nuclear states, and convene a world summit on nuclear disarmament.
- The international community to pursue institutionalization of

nuclear treaties, including the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the strengthening of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

- Nuclear states to be more transparent about the sizes of their arsenals, stocks of fissile material, and specific disarmament achievements.
- All states to pursue the elimination of other weapons of mass destruction, including new efforts against terrorist attacks, and new weapon bans, including missile and space weapons.

The Obama and the Ban Ki-moon agendas are cut from the same cloth. They now need a galvanizing centre-piece: the U.S. Senate to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in time to give a spurt to the 2010 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty; and a world summit to start the processes leading to a Nuclear Weapons Convention. Implementing that centre-piece can set the world on a path to peace in the 21st century.

Though Obama and Ban Ki-moon are headed in the same direction, achieving their goals is still fraught with obstacles that often seem immovable. The tentacles of the military-industrial complex are no less relaxed just because the occupants of the White House and the 38th floor of the U.N. want to advance a culture of peace. World military spending stands at \$1.3 trillion a year (\$3.3 billion a day). The Obama defence budget for fiscal year 2010 will be \$700 billion (including expenditures for the wars in

Iraq and Afghanistan), more in real terms than at any time since World War II, and more than what the rest of the world combined spends on defence. It has not yet been brought home to the American taxpayers that they are spending *\$110 million a day* on maintaining nuclear forces. At a time when the U.S. economy desperately needs an infusion of cash for domestic infrastructure (transportation, health, education), it is both scandalous and absurd that so much money continues to be wasted on weapons that even military experts concede can never, in rationality, be used.

Though Obama is trying to “flatten out” future growth of the U.S. defence budget, the U.S.’s continued military might along with NATO’s expansion in Eastern Europe act as an incentive to Russia to keep its military expenditures high. The Russian military will be given \$141.5 billion in the next couple of years just for the purchase of new weapons, while one-fifth of the country’s tuberculosis hospitals function without running water and 70 percent of newborns suffer complications.

It is, unfortunately, the poorest of the world who have suffered most from the ongoing arms races and whose suffering is now intensified by the global financial crisis – a crisis that could be alleviated in part by governmental decisions to rebuild economies with domestic production to meet civilian needs. Last November, at the insistence of Costa Rican

President and Nobel Peace Laureate Oscar Arias, the U.N. Security Council held a day-long debate focusing on Article 26 of the U.N. Charter:

maintaining peace with the least diversion for armaments of the world's human and economic resources. Arias put the case squarely:

We are working to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger and yet armed conflicts constitute the principal cause of hunger in our world. We are working to improve health care, particularly maternal health and the fight against AIDS and malaria. Yet military spending drains millions of dollars from the health care budgets of poor countries. The Millennium Development Goals were brave words, but they will never be more than words if we do not regulate arms or devise incentives to reduce global military spending.

Clearly, by dedicating even a portion of the \$1.3 trillion spent on arms to programs designed to promote the full social, economic and spiritual growth of people, we would not only create a better and safer world, but also promote new respect for life and for one another.

I have put the core issues of the human security agenda – bread not bombs – in a global perspective to make the point that the United States cannot by itself bring peace to the world. Yet it is true, and will remain so for many years to come, that the actions of the U.S. will act as a catalyst or impediment to that goal. Obama wants to be a catalyst. As he argued in his book, *The Audacity of Hope*,

We will have to align our policies to help reduce the spheres of insecurity, poverty, and violence around the world, and give

more people a stake in the global order that has served us so well.

There is a lot of heavy lifting to be done to move the world from a culture of war to a culture of peace. President Barack Obama, impressive as he is, cannot be expected to do this heavy lifting alone. No leader can implement bold steps without a base of strong support. The story is told of a group of activists who met with Franklin Roosevelt in the Oval Office to urge a set of policies on him. The president said he was convinced. “Now go out and put pressure on me.” The point was that often a president needs “pressure” to face down powerful opponents and bureaucratic resistance to provide him with both political cover and supportive energy that permits him to do what he really wants to do anyway.

Who will help Obama to face down his opponents and build the conditions for peace?

Obama and Canadian Values

Peace activists in the U.S. are now challenged to turn a well-honed cynicism about their former president into measures of support and encouragement for the new one. Naturally, Obama needs domestic support. But that will not be enough to enable him to fulfill his potential to lift up the whole world.

Nuclear weapons and the other peace issues are not the purview of the U.S. alone. The globalization of the world shows how inter-connected are all the elements that make up modern life. The obtaining of peace – or at least the resolution of conflicts without escalating violence leading to the use of weapons of mass destruction – is a universal responsibility.

Who should recognize this most clearly than the nations that consider themselves enlightened? Who should be quick off the mark to support the Obama foreign policy agenda than the nations that have fostered respect and non-violence? Who should now rally behind Obama than the U.S.'s friends, who can become independent and trusted partners with him?

By any criterion of political action – action for enlightened self-interest – Canada ought to be in the forefront to align itself with and support Obama's desire to rid the world of nuclear weapons as a step to a firm peace. The values that Obama espouses are the very values that Canada has traditionally tried to advance through its work in the United Nations.

But, as former Prime Minister Joe Clark has eloquently argued, Canada's international performance and reputation have fallen over the past 15 years. In latter years, the government's foreign policy, which centered on Canada's combat role in Afghanistan and virtual silence on George Bush's undermining of the Non-Proliferation Treaty have considerably reduced our

diplomatic effectiveness. About four-fifths of Canada's security spending goes to defence, with less than 20 percent going to development and the remaining 5 percent split among diplomacy, democracy and disarmament. The government needs to re-think its prioritization and strengthen policies on diplomacy and multilateralism. The Obama transformation moment is a new opportunity for Canada to revitalize its human security policies.

Here are five steps Canada should now take that would be of assistance to both President Obama and Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon:

- Become a strong advocate for a U.N. world summit on disarmament, non-proliferation and terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction, as suggested by the Blix International Commission, and offer to hold a preparatory meeting of interested nations in Ottawa.
- Argue forcefully for NATO to review its nuclear policy, stop considering nuclear weapons "essential," and remove all of NATO's tactical nuclear weapons from European soil.
- Convene a meeting of key NATO middle-power states, (Norway, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Turkey) and the seven members of the New Agenda Coalition (Brazil, Egypt, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden) to work out a joint plan setting out

steps that all can take toward negotiations for a Nuclear Weapons Convention.

- Invite Sergio Duarte, High Representative for Disarmament Affairs at the U.N., to Ottawa for discussions with the government and a public meeting to elaborate Ban Ki-moon's ideas for global negotiations leading to the elimination of nuclear weapons.
- Tap into the well-spring of ideas and support of civil society groups in Canada who can make the same constructive contribution to the government taking an active role in nuclear disarmament as was done to obtain the Anti-Personnel Landmines Treaty.

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All of these steps will show President Obama that a like-minded, important country is solidly behind him. More, these steps will re-activate Canada's involvement in the crucial issue of our time: moving the world away from the threat of nuclear Armageddon.

Pugwash, which has a long record of distinguished service for peace, is well positioned to promote a stronger Canadian role in the world. The nuclear threat, attacking as it does every core concept of human rights, calls for urgent and universal action. We, in Canada, who assemble here tonight in the name of Pugwash, should seize the hopeful moment that Barack

Obama is offering the world. New efforts to preserve “the children of Adam” in peace can raise up our civilization.