

Why Hiroshima and Nagasaki Day Events Matter. Hiroshima & Nagasaki Peace Declarations

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The 62nd anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima occurs today, August 6, 2007, bringing with it thousands of commemoration ceremonies in cities and towns around the world. Such events have become part and parcel of the nuclear era, and include the lighting and floating of lanterns in memory of the dead, silent vigils, religious observances, the chalking of human "shadows" on the ground, readings of John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, and leafletting.



As touching as these ceremonies and activities sometimes are, have they served any practical purpose? A brief survey indicates that they have.

Fittingly, these ventures began in Hiroshima. On August 6, 1946, the local branch of the Japanese Association of Religious Organizations sponsored a Memorial Day, presided over by Buddhist, Shinto, and Christian clergy. The following August, a broader coalition of Hiroshima-based organizations sponsored a citywide peace festival. At the 1947 event, which drew 10,000 people to a public park, a message was read by the U.S. occupation commander, General Douglas MacArthur, who

emphasized that the development of the atomic bomb had dramatically changed the nature of war and threatened the destruction of the human race. Speaking at the same ceremonies, Hiroshima's new mayor, Hamai Shinzo, organized prayers against the future employment of nuclear weapons and issued a Peace Declaration, calling on the world to rid itself of war.

As demonstrations memorializing the atomic bombings became regular events in Hiroshima, they began to spread to other countries. In 1948, the Reverend Tanimoto Kiyoshi, a Methodist minister portrayed in Hersey's *Hiroshima*, initiated a campaign to have nations around the world draw upon August 6 as World Peace Day. That year, citizens in twenty countries responded to his call, holding prayer meetings and other public gatherings on Hiroshima Day.

Tanimoto had a particular impact in the United States, where--sponsored by the Board of Missions of the Methodist Church--he toured during a substantial part of 1948 and 1949, garnering support from pacifist and religious groups for a Hiroshima peace center. Thanks to the efforts of Norman Cousins, Pearl Buck, Hersey, and other prominent Americans, the center was established in New York City in March 1949. In 1950, it opened in Hiroshima, where it arranged for the "moral adoption" of atomic bomb orphans by Americans and undertook welfare services for other victims of the atomic attack.

Cousins visited Japan in 1949 for the August 6 memorial ceremony, and returned to the

United States with a Hiroshima Peace Petition, signed by 110,000 residents of that city. Although President Harry Truman refused to accept the petition, Tanimoto eventually presented it to Carlos Romulo, President of the U.N. General Assembly.

From the start, then, there were two themes highlighted by the Hiroshima Day ceremonies which have continued for more than six decades. The first was that nuclear war was such an abomination that it should never be waged again. The second was that the development of nuclear weapons brought war itself into question; or, as some have phrased it, in the nuclear age there is no alternative to peace.

Over the ensuing decades, peace groups have hammered away at these two themes--and with some success. Rather remarkably, they have created mass movements that have played a key role in curbing the nuclear arms race and in preventing the waging of nuclear war. This development is unique in human history, for when have governments--which have waged war for as long as there have been competing territories--pulled back from utilizing its most devastating forms and exercised restraint in using its most destructive implements?

Of course, peace groups have been less successful in bringing an end to war itself. And yet, there are signs here, too, that some progress has been made. A United Nations, a European Union, and other viable international organizations have become vital fixtures of the modern world. Not only has the planet not erupted into a third world war since 1945, but--as numerous scholarly studies have shown--in the last two decades the level of international violence has declined significantly. This is why the Bush administration, with its stubborn penchant for military victory, seems so out of touch with the rest of the world, and even with the American public.

Of course, for anyone concerned with building

a sane and secure world, these developments, while heartening, are not sufficient.

Why have the Hiroshima-based arguments for ridding the world of nuclear war and war itself not had a greater impact? One reason is that, over the course of thousands of years, governments have had the prerogative of waging war and, in this connection, employing whatever weapons they want. The "great powers," especially, do not look forward to surrendering this prerogative. In addition, the public is occasionally lured into support for particular wars thanks to deception, nationalism, and what appear to be (and sometimes are) genuine threats to their security. Moreover, for understandable reasons, many members of the public would prefer not to think too much about nuclear war (i.e. universal doom).



August 6, 2007 Hiroshima on the Motoyasu River in front of the Peace Dome

In this context, Hiroshima Day events really do matter. They help break into the consciousness of rulers and ruled alike, telling them that nuclear war is not acceptable. Such events also remind them that, in the modern world, war itself is an anachronism--a deadly habit that must be overcome.

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See the August 6, 2007 Peace Declaration "Aim for a Nuclear Weapon Free World," by Hiroshima Mayor Akiba Tadatoshi [here](#).

See the August 9, 2007 Peace Declaration " " by Nagasaki Mayor Taue Tomihisa [here](#).