

Nuclear Policy in a Democracy: Do Educators Have a Choice?

This basic power of the universe cannot be fitted into the outmoded concept of narrow nationalism. For there is no secret and no defense; there is no possibility of control except through the aroused understanding and insistence of the peoples of the world.

—Albert Einstein, speaking of atomic energy in 1947.

Leaders of the nation's cities urged President Reagan to cut back the growth in defense spending, but they got from Reagan only the admonition that if they could see classified documents, they'd agree with his call to increase the military budget.

—Associated Press wire in the *Houston Chronicle*, March 8, 1983.

ALEX MOLNAR

It is axiomatic that in a democracy (even a republican democracy such as ours), all matters of public policy are, by right, every citizen's business. It is also generally accepted that in the exercise of their rights as citizens, individuals are free to follow the dictates of their conscience. One of the challenges faced by educators in a democracy is to prepare children to intelligently exercise their rights as citizens in a manner that does not distort or limit their knowledge of the issues before them. The tension between the right of individuals to "vote their conscience" and the responsibility of educators to teach truthfully is often at the heart of struggles over what shall be taught in the public schools. This tension is especially visible when the "what" being considered is a controversial social issue.

This month's subject, nuclear policy, is by all accounts controversial. Concern over the potential danger attendant to applications of nuclear technology,

whether to produce electricity or to manufacture weapons, is increasing throughout the world. Although the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes is a matter of considerable debate, no one professes love for the bomb. Virtually everyone expresses horror at the possibility of a nuclear exchange between the Soviet Union and the United States. We find ourselves with both the bomb and the horror every moment of every day.

As a citizen, I have made my choice and my responsibility is clear to me: work against nuclear power and for nuclear disarmament. My professional responsibility as an educator is less clear. I

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suspect my uncertainty is shared by many others. The lines of the argument over this or any social issue are familiar. There are three basic positions, each of which accepts, openly or tacitly, the responsibility of public education to help prepare the young for citizenship. However, each position prescribes a different role for educators.

Position 1: Educators must learn and teach about nuclear policy. In an article in the January 26, 1983, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Malcolm G. Scully reported that the number of college courses devoted to nuclear issues has been rapidly increasing. He quoted from the course description for "World Crisis in the Nuclear Age: Introduction to Nuclear War," taught at the University of Minnesota,

Our democratic system is meaningless in the absence of a concerned, informed public. Therefore, teaching about nuclear war must be an urgent priority of our nation's educational institutions.

Position 2: The schools should provide a broadly based, humane education that helps students develop fundamental modes of thought. The curriculum does not need to reflect current social issues if it is grounded in the enduring knowledge of the various disciplines. In this month's "Interchange" section, Gaddy and Kelly write: "If we create an educational system that trains students intellectually, we do not have to worry. . . ."

Position 3: Any intrusion of social issues into the school curriculum raises unacceptable risks of indoctrination because social issues are, by their nature, values issues. Schools should stick to the basics and let other institutions, such as the family, help children understand the meaning and proper use of what they have been taught. Values, according to this argument, are best left outside the schoolhouse door.

These positions are like old friends who love a good quarrel every once in awhile; they are familiar and comfortable. Education professionals have, for the most part, long since settled on one of them. When the debate heats up periodically over this or that social issue, most people don't really expect to either

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Photo: Ground Zero

hear anything new or to change their minds. Nuclear policy may prove an exception.

The development and application of nuclear technology has presented us with an issue inside an issue. What sets this controversy apart is the continuing secrecy surrounding it. Citizens cannot exercise their right to "vote their conscience" effectively on U.S. nuclear policy while most of the information necessary to make responsible judgments about that policy is classified. The argument for classification is principally that if sensitive documents were to fall into the hands of our nation's enemies, our national security would be threatened. It is difficult to assess the validity of this argument since it is a judgment said to be based in part on information denied the public.

Whether one accepts this argument or not, however, the connection between nuclear technology and governmental secrecy is clear and direct. Policy making about nuclear technology is largely outside the realm of the democratic process because a substantial amount of the information on which those policies are allegedly based is kept secret. Chronic secrecy is deadly in a democracy because citizens are denied the right to knowledgeably consider an issue and vote as their conscience dictates. Instead, they are required to vote for a person they think they can trust to properly interpret information they are denied. This is rather more like being a contestant on the old TV quiz show "Who Do You Trust?" than a citizen in

a democracy.

Instead of dutifully walking the familiar parapets of our old positions and staring across our lines at each other, perhaps we educators can find a common ground in the struggle against the secrecy surrounding nuclear technology. Regardless of the position one takes on discussing nuclear policy in the curriculum, regardless of how one believes students are best prepared for citizenship, perhaps we can work together to assert the right of U.S. citizens (most of whom we have educated) to have access to the information necessary to participate in the policy-making process.

I think it is at least possible that humankind may survive nuclear technology. I am less confident that democracy can survive the imposition of secrecy on significant public policy information. No one, from the dullest to the brightest among us, can participate responsibly in the policy-making process without the information necessary to do so. During the War in Vietnam, President Johnson used to tell reporters that if only the people could be told what he knew, they would surely support his policies in Southeast Asia. If we take seriously our professional rhetoric about preparing the young for citizenship in a democracy, one of our responsibilities is to stand against that anti-democratic logic. For educators, trusting that politicians in Washington will make the same decisions citizens would make about nuclear policy "if only they knew" is an evasion of our professional responsibility. □

For Your Information

- Ground Zero, Suite 421, 806 15th St., N.W., Washington, DC 20005. Phone: (202) 638-7402.

- Educators for Social Responsibility, 639 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, MA 02139. Phone: (617) 492-1764. Resources available from ESR include *Decision Making in a Nuclear Age* (2nd ed.) and the ESR *Planning and Curriculum Resource Guide*. Membership in Educators for Social Responsibility is \$20 per year and includes a subscription to the ESR Newsletter.

- For reprints of articles on nuclear policy published in *The Progressive*, write: *The Progressive*, 409 East Main St., Madison, WI 53703. You might find reprint

R28, "Doomsday Minus One," and reprint R34, "The Arms Race: A Primer," both by Sidney Lens, of particular interest. All reprints are 50¢ each.

- An excellent source of information about the case being made for nuclear disarmament is *Freeze It: A Citizens Guide to Reversing the Nuclear Arms Race*; 50¢ for a single copy, post-paid from the Norwich Peace Center, Box 283, Norwich, VT 05055. Phone: (802) 649-1000.

- *The Effects of Nuclear War*, Office of Technology Assessment, Congress of the United States. The Sycamore Community, P.O. Box 1325, State College, PA 16801. \$3.00 in paperback.

This book assesses the effects of a U.S.-Soviet nuclear exchange, including the fictional account of what happens to an unharmed city overrun by refugees. The reprint of the original government study is prefaced by an appeal to end the arms race.

- *The Last Epidemic*, a 16 mm film produced by Physicians for Social Responsibility in 1981, details the medical consequences of nuclear war. Rental is \$25 from the Physicians for Social Responsibility National Office, 639 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, MA 02139. Phone: (617) 491-2754. Check with the National Office for rental availability in your state.

Interchange

The Issues Will Change

Environmentalism, racism, sexism, ageism: these are the pressing social issues that emerged during the past decade. As society changes, so will the social issues warranting attention. As John Naisbitt states in his recent book, *Megatrends*, "A person can only keep so many problems and concerns in his or her head or heart at any one time. If new problems or concerns are introduced, some existing ones are given up."¹ Therefore, our responsibility as educators in helping students cope with social issues resides in providing sound training in fundamental ways of thinking.

Education should ready students for the future, but not for any particular future. A high-quality, general, liberal education makes separate and distinct curriculum additions unnecessary because it prepares students to cope with a myriad of social, global, and ethical issues.

If we create an educational system that trains students intellectually, we do not have to worry about their ability to cope with social issues. As John Stuart Mill wrote, "Men are men before they are lawyers or physicians or manufacturers, and if you make them capable and sensitive they will make themselves capable

and sensitive lawyers and physicians." Students who have been taught to think in the various disciplines represented by the sciences, humanities, and social sciences will be responsive and perceptive to social issues—not only understanding what needs to be done, but possessing the capacity and resolve to do it. □

¹John Naisbitt, *Megatrends* (New York: Warner Books, 1982), p. 4.

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