Opinion
News
Guest Voices



Tom Fox steps over a purple line painted on a road leading to the Kansas City National Security Campus on Memorial Day, May 28, in Kansas City, Missouri. (Jeff Davis)



by Thomas C. Fox

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I go to trial Dec. 7.

With four other nuclear weapons protesters, I will appear in Kansas City, Missouri, Municipal Court, charged with trespassing at a sprawling 122-acre nuclear weapons manufacturing complex 12 miles south of the city. It's officially called the Kansas City National Security Campus, conjuring up images of college courses being taught, not weapons capable of leveling cities being built there.

On Memorial Day, the day to commemorate the dead in wars, we crossed a purple line painted on a road leading to the plant's entrance. We were immediately taken into custody by police and other security agents and booked for breaking the law.

The Kansas City plant, operated by Honeywell, produces 85 percent of the nonnuclear components that go into the U.S. nuclear arsenal. It was opened in 2015 after its predecessor plant, contaminated by chemical toxins and flooding, was forced to shut down.

I began my public protests against nuclear weapons in 1980, shortly after I became NCR editor. During the early 1980s, the U.S. bishops, encouraged by about a dozen so-called "peace bishops," including now-retired Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Tom Gumbleton, took up the thorny issue of war and peace in the modern era.

They painstakingly drew up and published, in 1983, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response." It offered a "strictly conditioned moral acceptance" of nuclear deterrence — a strategy dependent upon a move toward total nuclear disarmament.

NCR urged the bishops to advocate for a complete moral rejection of nuclear deterrence. We viewed this as an unacceptable policy of terror. In the end, we were encouraged by the bishops' pastoral. We hoped it would stir consciences. We hoped

our nation would move toward reducing its nuclear stockpiles.

Nuclear disarmament has been painfully slow. The world made progress in the 1980s and 1990s, but then the movement stalled.

In recent years, we have begun a process of "updating" our nuclear weapons. In fact, we have replaced some weapons systems with other, sometimes "smaller" nuclear weapons (still as large or larger than the one dropped over Hiroshima, Japan) that could plausibly be used in wider circumstances. Critics worry these weapons can blur the line between conventional and nonconventional weaponry, making their use more likely, while moving the world into larger nuclear catastrophe.

The United States will need to spend $1.2 trillion over the next 30 years to modernize and maintain its nuclear weapons, according to a government estimate. The report, released in November 2017 by the Congressional Budget Office, said the $1.2 trillion includes $800 billion to operate and sustain existing forces and $400 billion to modernize them through 2046.

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We are being lulled into a false sense that these weapons are deterring war. Meanwhile, we have lost any semblance of moral high ground. Clutching our nuclear weapons, building new ones, how can we reasonably demand that North Korea "denuclearize" its own weaponry? How can we reasonably demand that Iran stop efforts to build a nuclear bomb?

I believe we live on borrowed time. Since 1950, the world has experienced at least 32 "Broken Arrows," meaning unintended accidents involving nuclear weapons. On more than one occasion, only minutes and frantic wise choices separated the planet from nuclear Armageddon.

Our bishops have largely gone silent on the issue of nuclear weapons since the 1980s and since the appointments by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI of less socially inclined church leaders. The Vatican in recent years has been more vocal.

When the new Kansas City nuclear weapons plant was under construction, Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, then the Vatican's ambassador to the United Nations,

came to Kansas City in July 2011. He offered an unequivocal condemnation of nuclear weapons, the strongest to that point by a Vatican representative.

"Viewed from a legal, political, security and most of all moral perspective, there is no justification today for the continued maintenance of nuclear weapons," he said. This was a clear swipe at the U.S. policy of maintaining nuclear weapons to deter their usage.

Since then, Pope Francis has condemned nuclear deterrence with equal vigor. He has said spending money on weapons that cannot be used robs humanity. He has become the first pontiff to condemn the use and very possession of these weapons.

Unfortunately, such condemnations seldom make it to the pulpits of most Kansas City-area parishes, some of which have members who earn their livings at the nuclear weapons plant.

And so I joined Sunny Jordan Hamrick, a member of a local intentional Christian community; Lu Mountenay, a Community of Christ minister; Henry Stoever, an attorney and chair of the local PeaceWorks Kansas City; and Brian Terrell, a Catholic Worker in Maloy, Iowa, last Memorial Day to take my protests one step further, to engage in civil disobedience.



Tom Fox at the 2018 Memorial Day protest at the Kansas City National Security Campus May 28 in Kansas City, Missouri (Jeff Davis)

For a half dozen years, scores of us have trekked from the retired weapons plant to the new one, a 10-mile walk, on Memorial Day. We've carried signs, waved at cars going by. Each year, at journey's end, in front of the plant, we read a list of names of former plant workers who have died of cancers linked to plant toxins.

A friend asked me if I thought my protest would make a difference. I answered that you never know. I've long been impressed by the words of the late Jesuit Fr. Daniel Berrigan who, asked a similar question, answered: "I protest because I cannot not protest."

It is tempting to feel within the belly of the U.S. nuclear beast that pleading to end nuclear madness is done to little or no avail. However, these feelings can be ill-based. In the last decade, countless millions have joined forces to speak out.

After a decade of organizing, a Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons was opened for signature in September 2017. It will enter into force when ratified by 50 countries — currently, it has 19 ratifications.

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, an umbrella group of more than 500 nonprofit organizations in 103 nations, has been responsible for the treaty and was awarded the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize for its work. The campaign's website maintains a page on the status of the treaty.

My protest was public, yet quite personal. I have seven grandchildren, ages 3 to 13, and want them to grow up in a world without nuclear weapons. In the weeks leading to my protest and arrest, I explained to each of them, as best I could, why their grandfather was going to get arrested. I told them not to be afraid, that I would be OK, and that I was doing this because I loved them.

It is my hope years from now they will remember their grandfather was a protester. If nuclear weapons are then still around, perhaps it will nudge them to also become protesters.

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This story appears in the **Making Peace** feature series. View the full series.