



# Standing for Peace Without Weapons

Guest post by Maria Flora Mangano

Eighty years ago this July, in the Los Alamos desert of New Mexico, a group of physicists led by Robert Oppenheimer completed the “Manhattan Project”: they developed the atomic bomb. Observing the huge explosion and the resulting production of enormous energy, Oppenheimer immediately understood the tremendous effects that this discovery could bring to the world. Soon after, he was forced to deliver to the US government the group’s notes and lab books, to keep the secret of their experiments, and to leave the leadership of the Manhattan Project. Oppenheimer’s fear was dramatically confirmed by the two explosions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which followed their discovery.

In 2025, we are celebrating the eightieth anniversary of several events related to the end of World War II, including the launch of the bombs which devastated Japan. Oppenheimer immediately realized the need to avoid global destruction, and soon he stepped back from atomic weapons, instead promoting disarmament and peace among the international community of physicists and scientists. His commitment to peace encountered strong opposition among the political and government contexts of that time. At the end of the war, he was removed from government and academic positions, and he charged with supporting communism through his pacifist ideas. He was rehabilitated, teaching in the US before his death. A few months after the creation of the atomic bomb, Oppenheimer delivered a speech in the same place where the group of physicists worked and helped to create the Association of Los Alamos Scientists. They, in turn, mobilized the scientists of the world to support a peaceful use of science and knowledge, arguing for global disarmament.

I usually tell this story to the PhD students when introducing my course on the communication of scientific research, and I often read some extracts of Oppenheimer’s speech at Los Alamos. The doctoral students frequently come from the natural sciences, sometimes also physics. Their reaction is generally strong, as is that of the young researchers drawn from social and the human sciences when I mention this in my courses.

In these months of anniversaries related to the end of World War II, yet with ongoing wars, dramatic escalations of violence, hate, and dehumanization, especially in the Middle East and Ukraine, I have often thought about the events of Los Alamos. I continue to think of the words of Oppenheimer, and of his choice to protect peace and denounce the non-sense of weapons and war.

What may his words suggest to us, in this tragic and dark time for the whole world, when it seems that history has taught us nothing? When we may feel helpless reading the news, as individuals, as

part of a global community, especially as members of the Center for Intercultural Dialogue, therefore as teachers, educators, scholars, professionals who have chosen dialogue among cultures as our field of study and our perspective?

We are scholars drawn from the whole world, only a few directly involved in the political and military choices of our governments, unable even to influence local or international decisions. Nevertheless, as scholars and professionals of intercultural dialogue, at different levels, we may have contacts with institutions, responsibilities in some national or international realities, reaching beyond the academic context. Our voices, our words, may be more important than we think, in building and bridging peace. Especially as teachers and educators, we have a responsibility to our students, for what we say and write, what tone we use, which words we choose. Our words, in class and far more broadly beyond, may bridge or destroy, may encourage or avoid violence (verbal and physical).

We may choose “to disarm our words and our heart,” as Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV declared in these years of endless wars, trying also “to disarm” the Other’s words and heart. Our everyday relationships with students, colleagues, scholars abroad, may influence more people than we realize. In everyday life we may be involved in conversations, encounters, events, with many more than our closest connections. Any of these relationships may become precious opportunities for promoting a nonviolent commitment to peace, either personal or collective, which may improve and increase our chances of action. We have daily opportunities for choosing words with care, for sharing ideas and projects of peace, for creating activities and involving other people, even strangers. With the unique use of the word, written or oral, verbal or nonverbal, silent and gentle, we can point to the Other.

Are we really powerless and inexorably in the hands of our politicians’ choices, as the obvious vision of the world seems to suggest? Do we really believe that the end of the wars come from those with the loudest voices and as a result of weapons?

Are we still convinced that the Other is - and has to remain - the enemy, according to the restricted dichotomy of the war, which imposes just two sides of reality, in a Manichean perspective of life?

What happens if we allow to the Other to become *other-as-us*, rather than *other-from-us*? It might encourage us to discover new colours, moving beyond the black-and-white vision of the world which this hard time seems to impose.

If it is true that change starts with each of us, and depends on us, as many leaders of nonviolence in the last century have claimed and witnessed with their lives, perhaps it is our turn to stand for peace, without weapons, in the place where we are, by doing – or even just starting – personal, collective, and daily acts of protecting and promoting peace.

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## Reference

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Oppenheimer, J. R. (1945, 2 November). Speech to the Association of Los Alamos Scientists. Available from: <https://www.atomicarchive.com/resources/documents/manhattan-project/oppenheimer-farewell.html>