

Speaking Truth To Power

by Julia Bolton Holloway

There were clumps of molten objects at the center of the Senate Office Rotunda. Around the circle were hung photos of burned children. Seven Quakers in silence walked around the Hiroshima exhibit, more determined than ever to "speak truth to power." We were members of a delegation gathered by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting from Friends across the nation having a call to witness to peace and to "wait upon the heads of state."

The next day the group of seven Quakers entered the Treaty Room of the Executive Office Building and were placed in seats around a great table. The room was enormous and oppressive with power. As the delegation began to explain the purpose of the visit the double doors opened and Zbigniew Brzezinski walked briskly in. His aides stood and—alas—so did the Quakers. We sat down again and Zbigniew Brzezinski began by saying he had discussed our letter with President Carter and would go over its text with us. We had already been told he was busy and would only be with us a few minutes. He rapidly discussed the several points of the letter: the arms race, Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf, Cambodia, the "China card." At times, as we had been told to do, we interrupted. Throughout he maintained the need for U.S. superiority over Russia. But he also stressed the need for ratification of SALT II and for immediately proceeding to SALT III with "deep cuts" because of the probability, otherwise, of nuclear war between the two nations. We offered our delegation's support for the SALT treaties. He stated that the U.S. was not aiding the Afghan rebels. "What evidence is there?" he asked. We questioned him about Cambodia. If it were the choice between Pol Pot and Heng Samrin, he implied he would prefer the Chinese backed dictator to the Vietnamese and Russian "Quisling." He would support a third party if one came forward with ASEAN support, perhaps Sihanouk. He insisted that we would not sell arms to China. He stated that increased militarism was essential to the nation's security. We maintained the opposite, that arms, and particularly nuclear weapons stockpiles, led to global

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fragility. He discussed all these matters with us, and then left. He had spoken with the Quaker delegation for forty minutes. The aides were surprised he had stayed so long and told us that Washington was only hearing from the "hawks," not from the "doves." It was a difficult dialogue. We were attempting to speak truth to power to those whose premise is that power is truth.

Three days later the seven Quakers entered a room in the Soviet Embassy and were seated around a tea table. Ambassador Vladillen Vasev entered without ceremony. He asked to speak. In accordance with our experience with Zbigniew Brzezinski, we tended to interrupt while he explained to us the United States' and Soviet perspectives. Brzezinski and his aides had claimed that they understood the Soviets better than the Soviets understood the United States. The Soviet ambassador appeared to understand the United States very well. He noted that there is no word, and therefore no concept, in Russian for "deterrent." He was asked whether the United States was aiding the Afghan rebels. He said there was no direct evidence of our aid though he asserted that tens of thousands of armed, trained troops were crossing the border from Pakistan into Afghanistan daily. He repeated that the Soviet troops were there at Afghanistan's request and would withdraw if aid to the rebels was stopped. He noted that the Soviets were aiding the Cambodian famine relief with trucks and dockworkers. The famine in Ethiopia, on the other hand, he dismissed as endemic in that region. On nuclear arms he asked for Soviet equality with the United States, not inferiority. Then both sides could proceed to disarm fairly without the risk of war. He felt that the current crisis is happening because the United States is having an election. Brzezinski's aides also gave this as the reason for the non-ratification of SALT. Vasev stated, "We understand this, but we do not accept it." He assured us that both sides were meeting on these issues. At the end of two hours the Quaker delegation got up to leave, the ambassador's parting comment to us on the stairs being, "Nations are like relatives. You have to live with them."

At Davis House where the seven Quakers were staying is a poster. It gives a portrait of Einstein with his statement, "You cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war." That became the truth which the seven Quakers tried to speak to power—which insisted instead that the only way to prevent wars is to prepare for them. We asked in Washington whether the original purpose for draft registration was for the use of "Rapid Deployment Forces" in nuclear war in Europe. The answer we were given was "Yes." We left Washington with the resolve to support SALT and oppose the draft. We were deeply concerned about the use of Cambodia and Afghanistan as battlegrounds for the three superpowers. We had met with an ocean of darkness. Nor could we forget the Hiroshima exhibit's dying children and clumps of metal and china fused into uselessness. □