

TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL MATERIALS:
TEACHING ABOUT THE NUCLEAR ISSUE

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The problems incurred in the teaching of controversial materials at a small, private liberal arts college that is unaffiliated with any church organization or other ideologically committed institutions would appear to be minimal. And indeed they are as compared with the problems that must confront primary and secondary teachers offering courses in religious studies, sex and gender education, and contemporary social issues in the public schools. Grinnell College enjoys a long tradition of both academic freedom and of dealing with contemporary controversial issues from the abolition movement in the 1850s through the social gospel era of the 1890s on up to the civil rights and Vietnam teach-ins of the 1960s. With the complete autonomy that the individual instructors, regardless of rank and tenure, have in their classrooms to select materials and to give their own interpretation to those materials, and with the remarkable and in some respects regrettable homogeneity of the student body and the faculty in their liberally oriented social and political biases, there would appear to be little possibility of arousing controversy among the various college constituencies in the teaching of any subject, least of all a course on Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control. After all, it would be hard to find anyone who would openly advocate a nuclear war or who does not fear the existence of the present nuclear arms stockpiles. Given that quite impossible opportunity of putting the evil genie of atomic fission/fusion knowledge and technology back into the bottle and corking it up for all time, I daresay that 99 percent of the world's population would jump at the chance. So where is the controversy? Why should the study of nuclear weapons and what should be done about them be any more controversial than, let us say, the study of the history of the immunization against small pox? Or so I naively thought when I first considered the possibility of offering such a course at Grinnell College three years ago. The full extent of my naivete did not become apparent until after the course had been taught for the first time in the spring semester of 1984 and particularly after I wrote a short piece for the college alumni magazine, explaining the nature of the course and detailing some of the difficulties as well as the successes my three colleagues and I encountered in team-teaching this course.

To understand fully the kinds of controversy that are aroused in the teaching of a course on nuclear weapons, it is necessary to say something about the genesis of this course. In the spring of 1983, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation agreed to fund a two-week summer workshop on nuclear weapons and arms control sponsored by Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology to be held in Cambridge on the two campuses. Professors Jack Ruina and George Rathjens of MIT, along with several of the faculty at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, proposed the program to encourage undergraduate colleges either to introduce new courses or to strengthen existing courses on the technology and politics of nuclear armaments. The Sloan Foundation was particularly receptive to this proposal after having made substantial grants in 1982 to several colleges, including Grinnell, to develop a new understanding of modern technology in its relationship to the liberal arts. Each college that had received a Sloan

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grant was invited to send two faculty members to the Harvard/MIT workshop in the hope that the participants would represent a variety of disciplines in the liberal arts. Grinnell's Dean of the Faculty, Catherine Frazer, nominated Gene Wubbels of the department of chemistry and me, a historian, to represent Grinnell at the workshop. So for two weeks during one of the hottest July summers on record in Cambridge, we two, along with some forty other teachers from twenty-five colleges and universities, participated in an intensive training session on the technology and politics of nuclear armaments.

My first intimation that a course on nuclear weapons could arouse controversy came during the first few days of the workshop. Although this distinguished Cambridge faculty of physical and political scientists insisted that they were presenting us the "facts" of nuclear technology and offering us an "objective" and "value-free" analysis in which we would be taught "not what to think but how to think" about nuclear weapons and arms control, it was quickly apparent to me that we were subtly, by the use of language and metaphor and not so subtly through the particular bilateral, Euro-Americancentric model used, being taught both what to think about nuclear weapons and how to think like the Kennedy-Johnson best and brightest. At first, I thought I was alone in my reaction to the lectures and discussions, but I soon discovered that I was not. About fifteen to twenty of us began to meet in the evenings to hold our own rump discussion sessions of that day's lectures and readings. And at the conclusion of the workshop, we dissidents presented to the workshop our own separate evaluation of the sessions. Included in the statement were the following remarks:

Within the diversity of faculty viewpoints on matters of detail, we perceive an overriding view of the world and its dominant realities which is deeply disturbing. The prevalent paradigm is one of bilateral conflict among prudentially rational agents, each interested solely in its own security interests and relying ultimately on military power as an instrument of satisfying those interests. . . . And, whatever disclaimers are made, there is a presumption that one power is well-intentioned and the other of dubious integrity. This paradigm is egregiously narrow and produces as its most likely result treading the abyss of nuclear destruction with mounting probabilities of eventual misstep or accidental triggering.

What then are the questionable premises, and how can we search for alternatives? First, a more global perspective should inform the analysis. The two-party model must give way to multiparty or multilateral analysis. The preoccupation with bilateralism undermines the capacity to think creatively about possibilities for reduction of tensions through supranational "regimes." Further, the approach should consider more fully the vast majority of the peoples of the world who are not members of the "nuclear club" but are nonetheless held hostage to it. The Eurocentric focus tends to ignore the burdens that nuclear weapons and superpower hostility thrust upon others, directly or indirectly: military budgets that third world countries can ill afford; super-imposition of Moscow-Washington conflicts upon regional issues; the temptation of both superpowers to employ local tyrants as allies merely because they are "anti-communist" or "fraternal socialists"; and the interpretation of local economic, social and political problems as amenable to military

solution There has been little mention of costs that fall outside the presented system, but they are nonetheless real: the daily psychological and economic weight on the world's peoples; missed programs of education, refugee resettlement, money supply and inflation problems, starvation, etc. Even within the Eurocentric focus, we have observed with great concern an unquestioned valuation of Soviet and American motivations and actions, according to which the USSR is "aggressive," "paranoid," and "insecure" (terms used freely in the lectures), while the U.S. appears defensive, benign and generally rational. Virtually all of the conflict scenarios in the workshop are premised upon Soviet initiation and attempts at aggrandizement. These presumptions simply appeared, without adequate justification or explanation. . . . The faculty seems insensitive to the emotive nuances of their language The metaphors, syntax, and imagery of the workshop tended consistently to distance the participants from the human implications of the subject. This objectification is nowhere clearer than in the constant reliance on acronyms and the use of mystifying jargon. These intellectual games are seductive and occasionally amusing. Referring to the bombing of several MIRV warheads as "passengers" getting off a "bus," to a "harvest of silos," to "generations" of weapons--these habits utterly obscure the human and environmental destruction inherent in nuclear weapons. Manipulating language to set up dichotomies, while it may be useful analytically and consistent with the bilateral paradigm, limits the imagination severely. For example, to posit a polarity between "strength" and "peace," as one speaker did, is to assert implicitly that peace cannot be a strong position, that a nation must make an "either-or" choice. To assert that the adage for our age is "Better Armed than Harmed" omits the possibility that arming may itself be harmful. The point is far from trivial, for language delimits discussion In the field of nuclear issues, above all, it is imperative that metaphor not be confused with reality.

We would argue that the possibilities of dialogue, joint problem solving, positive reinforcement, conflict resolution, voluntary hostages, and many other forms of conflict de-escalation as yet unarticulated must be seriously pursued and must be given far greater weight in studying the nuclear dilemma.

When this statement, signed by eighteen of the participants, was read in the final discussion session, the Harvard/MIT faculty were clearly surprised and not a little dismayed. They reacted in a variety of ways--some were hurt, some were angry, and some flatly denied the validity of the criticism offered. It was apparent, however, that all of them had been as naive as I had been in first considering the possibility of offering a course on nuclear armaments. They had not expected their course to arouse controversy. In my opinion, they seriously believed that they had presented "an objective, value-free" course based upon hard facts and irrefutable analyses of those data. Our criticism of the diction and metaphors used was, I am sure, as unexpected and incomprehensible to them as was the feminists' initial attack upon the use of "man" as a generic term for "person" to most males. I don't think we succeeded in our efforts at consciousness-raising among the Harvard/MIT faculty. My own consciousness had been raised, however, in respect to the sensitive aspects of any course dealing with nuclear weapons.

The major objective of those who had developed and funded this workshop had been met, however. I think all of the participants in the workshop--dissidents and supporters alike--returned home convinced that such a course, however differently it might be developed, should be introduced into their institutions' curricula. At least Gene Wubbels and I were determined to do so. And I, for one, was determined that our course on nuclear armaments would be placed within a larger and more accurate historical context than that presented in the Harvard/MIT workshop, and that greater attention would be given to the humanistic and ethical questions involved.

As Wubbels and I began our planning, we learned that two of our colleagues, Alan Jones in history and Wayne Moyer in political science, who had previously team-taught courses in the general area of war and peace, were considering the development of a course on American politics and military strategy in the nuclear age. Clearly, the sensible thing to do was to combine our individual interests into a single course.

Such a team-taught course requires administrative approval and some rather delicate negotiations regarding teaching load. Fortunately for us, the dean was an enthusiastic advocate of introducing the course into the curriculum and willing to give all four of us a full course credit in determining our teaching load for the semester. We were confident that the course would attract an enrollment of at least forty students, which would be large enough to justify a four-faculty-member commitment. Happily for us, our prediction of strong student interest in the subject was more than realized. Fifty-two students registered for the course--the maximum number that could be accommodated in the largest available classroom.

During the first semester, the four of us met weekly, first to select a reading list and secondly to organize a syllabus for the course. The class was scheduled to meet twice a week for a two-hour session. We divided each class meeting into a one-hour lecture followed by a short break and then forty minutes of class discussion. Each of us lectured five times in our particular areas of interest and expertise: Wubbels on the scientific background of nuclear fission and fusion and the technology involved in weapon development and delivery systems; Jones and Moyer on politics and military strategy from both American and Soviet perspectives; and I on efforts toward control and disarmament and the ethical issues that the nuclear age poses. The course followed a roughly chronological order, beginning with von Clausewitz's classic statement on "War is an Instrument of Policy" and Bernard Brodie's refutation of the Clausewitzian thesis for the nuclear age presented in his book, The Absolute Weapon.

The students were drawn from a wide range of majors. Because the course was cross-listed as an advanced-topics course in social studies and an upper-level seminar in political science, a majority of the students came from the social studies disciplines. There were several students from natural science departments and a few from the humanities. As was to be expected, a large majority of the students were attracted to the course because they were active supporters of disarmament or of the nuclear freeze movement. Most of the students had a fairly extensive understanding of the politics of the period, but many lacked knowledge of the scientific and technical aspects. The direction of the course reflected this. Wubbels's lectures on technology had to be fairly basic, while political analyses could be more sophisticated.

One of the great strengths of the course was our utilization of outside lecturers appearing on campus under other auspices. Quite fortuitously,

that particular semester was an exceptionally rich one for outside lecturers who could speak to the question of politics and military strategy in the nuclear age. It was of immense benefit to have George Kennan appear in our class at the same time that students were reading his book, The Nuclear Delusion. In addition to Kennan, we also had on campus and in our class Charles Maynes, editor of Foreign Policy magazine; Gregory Thielman, a State Department officer with the U.S. Embassy in Bonn; George Rathjens of MIT, who could speak authoritatively on Star Wars technology; and Richard Ringler of the University of Wisconsin English and Scandinavian studies departments, who repeated for our class the excellent lecture on "The Humanist Confronts Nuclear War" that he had given at the Wingspread Conference on Nuclear Weapons the previous December.

One of our concerns throughout the semester was that all four of us and nearly all of our guest lecturers approached the topic of nuclear weapons and arms control from essentially the same political and social point of view. Although this approach was quite acceptable to the large majority of our students, there was the disturbing realization, on my part at least, that we were building a bias into this course quite as pronounced as the bias of the Harvard/MIT workshop, even though emanating from the opposite point of view. We needed, I felt, to give some recognition to the existence of the more hawkish-oriented position that presently influences national policy. Unfortunately, our one effort in this direction was unsuccessful. The publisher of one of America's most conservative journals, who was on campus, agreed to appear before the class to present arguments against nuclear freeze and for Reagan's Star Wars technology. He proved to be a skilled polemicist, but his knowledge of the basic facts of nuclear armament was so limited as to vitiate much of his argument for a strong military posture. He succeeded only in underscoring the validity of the nuclear freeze proponents' position. We were even accused by some of our students of having deliberately chosen a patsy to bolster our own biases. The course needed a Paul Nitze or Eugene Rostow to provide an effective counter argument to the Kennan-Rathjens-Maynes position.

Throughout the semester, the four of us continued to meet each week for lunch, at which time the two who were to lecture that week discussed the major points they would develop in their talks. The others then had the opportunity to raise questions, offer suggestions and criticism, and in general sharpen the classroom presentation. I think all four of us were generally pleased with the lecture portion of the class sessions--both our own and the visiting lecturers' presentations.

We did not have a sense of satisfaction with the second-hour discussion sessions. These discussions were generally neither very well directed nor very effective in dealing with the readings or the lectures. We needed more controversy here--and more sharply-directed analysis of the data presented. The one exception to this failure in open discussion meetings occurred midway in the semester. We divided the class into four sections and in each section, with one faculty member present, four or five students would present position papers on one of three assigned and rather highly controversial topics such as "The Soviet Union is responsible for the present nuclear arms race," or "A bilateral nuclear freeze is in our national interest." The students frequently had to take a position contrary to their own political bias, and all became thoroughly involved in exploring every aspect of the issue. We intend to do this exercise at least twice during the semester this year.

At semester's end, students were asked to evaluate the course, and judging from the results of the evaluation, we could take satisfaction in knowing that the course overall had been a success. Ninety-two percent of the students felt that the course had given them new viewpoints on the subject, had broadened their perspectives, and, most importantly, had encouraged them to think for themselves on issues that were of critical importance. Ninety-five percent felt that they were now better able to recognize faulty arguments regarding nuclear armaments and arms control that they might encounter in the media or from political leaders and commentators. We could hardly have asked for a better Nielsen rating. The four of us also felt that we profited as much from the course as had the students--from listening to each other's lectures, from talking to the students, and from meeting with our distinguished guests. We felt that the course merited a repeat performance.

Shortly after the conclusion of the semester, I was asked by Edith Ruina, editor of The Weaver, the journal for the Council for the Understanding of Technology in Human Affairs at Brown University, to write up a short account of our course for the Fall 1984 issue. When the editor of our Grinnell alumni magazine heard that I had written this article, he asked if he might reprint it in the alumni magazine.

I considered the piece to be largely descriptive, quite innocuous in tone, if not actually pedestrian in style, and certainly nothing that would arouse much comment from our alumni. I was quite mistaken. No article in that magazine in recent years has produced such a flood of letters as this little piece. The first letters that were printed in the magazine spawned rebuttal letters, and these in turn may well continue the argument for months. Let me give just a few samples. A letter from a retired lieutenant colonel:

The August issue arrived today of The Grinnell Magazine and the general subject of this epistle is the course and article, "Learning About the Bomb." For anyone to get suckered by the blatantly propagandistic drivel emanating from the disinformation section of the KGB certainly disqualifies them from conducting kindergarten classes A question or two for you to contemplate. How many nuclear wars have there been? . . . What was Viet Nam all about? How many military leaders agitate to become involved in war? How many clandestine agents does the U.S.S.R. have in the U.S.? We in the U.S.S.R.? Have you seen all the segments of "Call to Glory"? Is the national anthem played at your athletic events? Name any one of Von Clausewitz's principles of war that are obsolete?

And in support of the colonel, a doctor in Arizona:

You requested a response to the Colonel's letter. So here it is. He is right. Your school has become so left wing that it is highly dubious that your students can ever get a true perspective on the real world. . . . Your letter from Mr. S___ in the same issue exemplifies the left-wing mentality of Grinnell graduates. May he freeze in the dark.

And a not so supportive response:

In response to Lt. Col. D___ in your Sept.-Oct. issue. . . We are dealing with an environmental issue. The biosphere is at

risk. Granted other problems loom large--military, social, environmental--but if we wipe out the world, who will be around to solve them. Einstein said World War IV would be fought with rocks. He may have been an optimist.

What has this experience in teaching a course on Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control--and in writing a descriptive essay about that course--taught me about the teaching of controversial materials? Several things: 1) That even a small, private, liberal arts college with a long tradition of social concern and action is not immune from controversy, if not from its on-campus constituency then certainly from its off-campus constituencies; 2) that any subject that evokes an emotional concern even if all parties are ultimately seeking the same end--in this case, the avoidance of a nuclear holocaust--is bound to evoke controversy; and 3) and most importantly, controversy, per se, is not a bad thing, even though I must acknowledge, of course, that controversy carried to an extreme within certain organizational structures can mean the end of free inquiry. My experience at the Harvard workshop was enriched by the controversy that course evoked among the participants. I was surprised but not dismayed by the fact that my little piece in the alumni magazine evoked such an emotional and controversial response from our alumni. It at least forced a large number of people to consider the issue and articulate their position. Even blind anger may be preferable to unthinking apathy.