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# Journey to New Mexico: Notes on Nuclear Disarmament

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On 16 July 1945, the United States conducted the world's first nuclear detonation (a 21-kiloton implosion device using plutonium-239), at Alamogordo Bombing Range in the Jornada del Muerto desert, New Mexico. This ushered in the atomic age. After the detonation, Robert Oppenheimer, the scientific director of the Manhattan Project, quoted a passage from the Bhagavad Gita, a classic Vedic text: "If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst forth at once in the sky, that would be like the splendor of the Mighty One... I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." Sixty-four years later, on April 5, 2009 in Prague, President Barack Obama clearly stated America's commitment to pursue peace and the security of a world free from the threat of nuclear weapons by saying:

Just as we stood for freedom in the 20th century, we must stand together for the right of people everywhere to live free from fear in the 21st. And as a nuclear power – as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon – the United States has a moral responsibility to act. We cannot succeed in this endeavor alone, but we can lead it. So today, I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. This goal will not be reached quickly – perhaps not in my lifetime. It will take patience and persistence. But now we, too, must ignore the voices who tell us that the world cannot change.



Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley Jr. at Church Rock, New Mexico

As Obama stated in his Prague speech, we must fight together for the right of people everywhere on the globe to live in peace and harmony in the 21st century in the face of the dangers of nuclear proliferation and terrorists who are determined to buy, build or steal atomic bombs. This is why I went on a journey last July to New Mexico, the birthplace of the atomic age, with two colleagues. It was shortly after the 2009 Annual Spring Conference of the Peace Studies Association of Japan (PSAJ) where participants from various academic backgrounds had focused on the possibility of making peace sustainable.

Needless to say, sustainable peace requires the elimination of nuclear weapons. In New Mexico, we visited Los Alamos and Alamogordo. Los Alamos, 56 km northwest of Santa Fe, is home to the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) which was founded in secret to undertake the Manhattan Project. LANL's work resulted in the creation of several atomic bombs, one of which was detonated in the first nuclear test, code-named "Trinity." The other two, "Little Boy" and "Fat Man," were used for the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The site of the first nuclear explosion, Trinity Site, is located approximately 97 km from Alamogordo. It is opened to visitors twice a year on the first Saturday in April and the first Saturday in October, so we were not able to visit it this time.

The main purpose of our journey, however, was to attend the 30th anniversary of a massive spill from a uranium mill at Church Rock in the northwestern part of New Mexico. Church Rock belongs to the Navajo Nation which is a semi-autonomous Native American homeland occupying all of northeastern Arizona, the southeastern portion of Utah, and northwestern New Mexico. On 16 July 1979, a breach opened in the dam at the Church Rock uranium mill operated by United Nuclear Corporation (based in Virginia),

spilling 1,100 tons of milled uranium ore and 94 million gallons of heavy metal effluent into the Rio Puerco. The amount of radiation released in the Church Rock uranium mill spill was comparable in magnitude to the leak at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania during the same year and has been reported as "the largest radioactive accident in U.S. history."

As Sue Major Holmes reported in her article "Navajos mark spill's anniversary" in the *Cortex Journal* (Saturday, July 18, 2009), Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley Jr. marked the 30th anniversary of the nuclear spill at Church Rock by reaffirming the Navajo Nation's 2005 ban on future uranium mining and processing. Speaking in Navajo and English, he addressed about 100 people who had made a seven-mile walk to the site of the accident (unfortunately, we arrived too late to join the walk). Shirley said the spill barely registered on the historical memory of the U.S., but will not be forgotten by the Navajo and non-Navajo residents "who still worry today about the potential impacts of this tragic accident." He proclaimed July 16 Uranium Legacy and Action Day, commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Church Rock spill and the impacts of 60 years of uranium mining. "The American people need to be educated and reminded about the disproportionate sacrifices made by Navajos so the United States of America could win the Cold War," he said.

The uranium miners of the Southwest, many of whom were Navajo, had their health compromised by the U.S. nuclear weapons program. From 1944 to 1986, 3.9 million tons of uranium ore were excavated from the mountains and plains of the Navajo Nation. The mines provided uranium for the Manhattan Project and for the nuclear weapons stockpile built up during the Cold War. The demand for uranium lasted through the early 1960s. As the threat of the Cold War gradually receded over the following two decades, four processing mills and more than 1,000 mines on tribal land were shut down, leaving behind radioactive waste piles, open tunnels and pits. Uranium mining was also a significant industry in New Mexico from the early 1950s to the early 1980s. Peter H. Eichstaedt, author of *Uranium and Native Americans*, describes the current situations as follows:

Today Native Americans continue to reap a bitter harvest for their patriotic role in World War II and the Cold War. Undetermined tons of exposed radioactive mine waste remain on native land. Rainwater has leached uranium by-products and toxic metals into underground water, with potentially long-lasting consequences. Small uranium pit mines remain open, filled with water, inviting children to swim and animals to drink. At Laguna Pueblo, an open-pit mine that covers nearly 3,000 acres remained untouched for seven years after operations stopped, until the pueblo itself started reclamation (Eichstaedt, 1994, p.xvi.).

His book tells us "the story of how uranium mining began on Indian lands in the American West, how it was conducted, and how its deadly legacy still lingers in the lives of the men, women, and children whose harmony and homelands have been destroyed." Consequently, when we discuss how to put an end to Cold War thinking, we should remember the date of July 16 (in New Mexico: the world's first nuclear explosion and the largest radioactive accident in U.S. History) as well as the dates of August 6 & 9 (in Japan: the atomic bombings carried out as acts of war). As we go forward step by step towards a world without nuclear weapons, let us also keep in mind the name of Church Rock as one of the unforgettable places in the history of nuclear disasters in addition to Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Nevada, Eniwetok, Bikini, Moruroa, Semipalatinsk and Chernobyl.

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