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A Time for Boldness

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This is the transcript of a talk given at a side event hosted on April 26, 2013, by the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation and Soka Gakkai International entitled "Nuclear Abolition: A Time for Boldness and Hope" at the 2013 Non-Proliferation Treaty PrepCom in Geneva, Switzerland.

Dear Friends,

First, I thank you for being here today, **in this 27th anniversary of the beginning of the Chernobyl catastrophe.** Together we honour the memory of its victims, as well as of the victims of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Fukushima.

I thank David Krieger and Rick Wayman for inviting me to this panel and for prompting us to think about an unusual and stimulating subject. The subject of boldness is a bold subject to choose.

When David offered me the chance to address you on it, I thought he was alluding to the words of Kissinger, Nunn, Shultz and Perry in the "Wall Street Journal" of January 2007. They requested (quote) "**a bold** initiative consistent with America's moral heritage", that is an initiative to go by practical measures to a world free of nuclear weapons. However, I was very surprised. I asked him: "Really? Why me?". He replied: "Because your hunger-strike was a bold action". That answer only increased my perplexity.

So now, let me put to you the thoughts that resulted from that surprise, and, as David requested, let me use my hunger-strike as a way of raising one or two questions that I'll try to answer without claiming to solve them. I'll refer to my own experience in an attempt to draw conclusions that others can use - because, as Hannah Arendt said, it is in specific things that universal things can be readable.

First question: was my hunger-strike really a bold act? What defines the boldness of an action or a person?

Note first that the word "bold" is often used in the military, in games like chess, and generally in context of competition, for example when a yacht in a sailing race chooses a surprising course to sail.

Boldness is often a synonym of courage. But it's a particular form of courage. It consists, certainly, of confronting a situation that is difficult, painful, scary, even desperate, but not simply by doing one's duty. Boldness consists in taking the initiative of doing something unusual, unpredictable or unforeseen. Bold people are not content like "ordinary" brave people to resist the course of history, they try to reverse it. They take risks, they strive to overcome adversity by surprising the adversary. And often they win, although success is never guaranteed (otherwise there would be no risk). However, although the risks that the bold take can be considerable, they are still reasoned, calculated risks. Boldness is never madness or foolhardiness. Sometimes bold people make very quick decisions, but they remain nevertheless cool-headed. Their actions are in proportion with their objectives, and that is what gives them a serious chance of success.

Now, if we apply these criteria to my hunger-strike, was it, as David thinks, a bold action? On reflection I think it could be.

I needed, in truth, a certain courage: enough to « take the plunge» into unknown waters, for I had never fasted

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before. I didn't know I would even get beyond day three, which some fasters had told me is a frightening one. And I still remember the precise minute when I took the plunge by sending off a media release.

It was also an action I took out of desperation. ACDN since it was founded in 1996, and I myself since 1986, had done all we could to involve France in the abolition of nuclear weapons. I shan't give the details of our activism, just a few "bold" actions: like my candidacy for the Presidential Elections in 2002 or my applications to the Constitutional Council in 2002 and 2012 asking for the main candidates (Chirac and Jospin, then Sarkozy and Hollande) to be excluded because they were preparing crimes against humanity, violating Article VI of the NPT, and not honouring the French Constitution. Moreover, during the 2012 campaign, we wrote to François Hollande seven or eight times without ever getting a reply. Actually, he replied indirectly, in December 2011: he said in an article in the « *Nouvel Observateur* » that he would continue the nuclear deterrence policy, a presidential prerogative that he intended to assume. In other words this humanist, this socialist declared himself capable of pressing the nuclear button. That was unacceptable. On 15 May, the day he became President, I began my hunger-strike.

Let me add that my objective was reasonable and accessible: I did not fast to demand the abolition of all nuclear weapons, or for France to renounce her own weapons, but only to obtain an audience with the new president to expound our arguments and to ask him to organize - for democratic reasons - the referendum that would at last enable the French people to express their opinion ... and would enable him to change policy without losing face or breaking his commitments.

On 25 June, day 42 of my hunger-strike, I was in Paris with Luc Dazy - a friend who had joined me in fasting since 1 June - and we were barred by the police from entering the Elysee Palace where we were to have had an audience. We never could find out why. Even the socialist MP of my city - who had herself handed candidate Hollande a letter from me, and who has later signed the Open Letter to the President, even she was not able to find out why.

Must we conclude that this "bold" action was doomed to failure? Frankly I don't think so. Our hunger-strike was not useless.

On 24 June, the Federal Council of the EELV Party (Europe Ecologie- Les Verts), of which I was a former Councillor, gave me an enthusiastic and impressive welcome (including a standing ovation of one hundred fifty or more people, a minute of applause). On a motion of its president and committee, the Federal Council paid tribute to our action, said they endorsed our struggle, and committed to support it. They wished Luc Dazy and me to stop our hunger-strike, they expressed solidarity with us, and they wished that President Hollande would listen to our requests.

After a solemn debate, the Federal Council decided unanimously with one abstention (quote) *"to ask all its representatives in parliament and in government to do all they can to ensure that a bill or a governmental proposal is drawn up without delay with a view to establishing a wide debate and a referendum on the following question:"*

"Do you agree that France should participate with the other states concerned in the complete elimination of nuclear weapons, under mutual and international control that is strict and effective?"

Previously, in October 2011, ACDN and 6 other national organisations working in other fields from ours, such as ATTAC, the Confédération Paysanne or Human Rights League, had organised a big gathering in Saintes. Three hundred people did attend this event and about 150 wrote and discussed a *"Charter for a Livable World"* which they definitely adopted by consensus. A few later, during the presidential campaign, we proposed this charter to every candidate. François Hollande never answered, but six other candidates answered and three of them explicitly approved, amongst 103 articles, the article 1.2.F. By this approval, Eva Joly (EELV), Philippe Poutou (New Anticapitalist Party) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon (Parti de Gauche, Left Party) - had undertaken to consult the French

people by referendum on the aforesaid question. Together these candidates won around 15% of the votes.

Currently, the Greens have around 45 MPs, Senators and MEPs, they have 2 ministers in the French government. If each of them follows up the aforesaid commitment of their own party, it seems that the French people should not be far from deciding by themselves whether they must stop or pursue the archaic and criminal nuclear policies decided in their name by a handful of schizophrenic deciders. According to two polls, one ordered in 2008 by Global Zero, the second ordered in 2012 by the Mouvement de la Paix, more than 80 % of French wish for a world without any nuclear weapons, not even French ones.

So, even if a referendum is never won before being voted, even if our opponents are very strong in the art of manipulating opinion and the media, I think we have to go to a referendum on such an important, decisive and vital issue. If we lose the referendum, we will lose nothing, since for more than 60 years the French nuclear policy has been conducted without any democratic debate and without voting. A defeat of the abolitionist camp would result simply in the continuation of a policy which is already planned. On the other hand, a success would be the beginning of a complete change, a reversal of situation. Let us remember the sentence of Lenin: *"When an idea takes over masses, it becomes a historic force"*. We have to attempt it, or else admit that we are mere sheep destined to become mutton.

Personally, I'm convinced that the French people are not more intelligent than any other people, but very likely have more good sense than their political leaders, and are perfectly able to decide by themselves on the most important issues. Is that democratic idea a too bold idea? In that case, I accept being called a bold guy.

Friends from abroad, I thank you for supporting in great numbers the Open Letter to the French President. If you have not done it already, please support and sign it now.

Before concluding, I would like to ask and quickly answer **a second question**: If that hunger-strike was truly "bold", how did it happen that an eminent figure in the international abolitionist movement, a US citizen, considered it important, whereas in France the national media, with very few exceptions, didn't even mention it? That paradox deserves explanation.

When an event escapes the attention of most people, including professional observers like journalists who ought to notice, those who do notice need to have been on the lookout for a subject they are already sensitive to. Thus, David has struggled for ages for the abolition of nuclear weapons and like us keeps meeting a sort of wall. He is therefore on the lookout for anything that could open a breach in it. Similarly, it's because I was interested in international relations and Russian history that I heard, at the very moment in January 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev's call for "No nuclear weapons by 2000!". That call, certainly unexpected and bold, was to overturn my life.

Prior sensitization creates a vicious circle for whistle-blowers and activists for causes like ours: by what we say and write and do, we wish to draw public attention to a problem that we deem particularly serious, but the public cannot pay serious attention unless they are already sensitized... In our media-dominated world, journalists play an essential role in informing and sensitizing the public. So we first need to gain their attention, and since the media love anything sensational, that's where boldness can play a role.

But that's not enough. For instance, our hunger-strike was well covered by the press, radio and TV in our region, where ACDN and myself are already known. That didn't happen elsewhere, and when TV France 3 of our region asked the national France 3 to film us outside the Elysee Palace, the footage was broadcast in our region but not nationally. Why so? It would be too long to explain, but it could be also an interesting topic by comparing the various situations we are faced with in our different countries.

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In conclusion, permit me to ask you two questions without answering them:

First: What enables us now to say that "The Time for Boldness has come"?

And, last question: What kinds of boldness must we manifest in order to respond to the challenges of the present time?

I would have several suggestions to make on that last item, some of them could perhaps interest you. But my time of speaking is over. Generally, I would say: we need to demand with determination **our right to have truth, freedom and life.**

I thank heartily David and Rick to have permitted me to speak for the first and perhaps for the last time at a side event in this arena. Thank you for your attention.

Jean-Marie Matagne