



# impressions

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From the left: the President of the United States of America, Donald Trump, and the North Korean dictator, Kim Jong-un.

*In the current phase of loose words and large egos on the world political stage, here's a timely reminder about the complete madness of playing with the fiery hell of atomic warfare. Bluffing in the gamesmanship of provocation is dangerous beyond belief as it's being played out between two men who like to be known as absolutist autocrats. But why should the rest of us go along with it?*

*By avoiding the words 'atom bomb' and instead using babble – such as 'an intercontinental ballistic missile system', 'all options are on the table' and even 'the likes of which this world has never seen before' – aggressive politicians might think their bellicose posturing and language will distract the masses from the base facts of nuclear war. And they're right! What makes Donald Trump think that nuclear holocaust is manageable? No one survives that ultimate scenario. So why aren't we out in the streets protesting?*

*In this international belligerent climate, Jenny Neil thinks back over earlier conflicts, including cutting her teeth in anti-apartheid protests when Nelson Mandela was in prison. Her reflection is titled, 'Walking the Road of Direct Action'.*

**Christine Williams**

## Walking the Road of Direct Action

**I**t was virtually impossible to have any kind of direct action in South Africa in the 1950s. Everything had to be done secretly, as if by chance meetings at someone's house. Africans were not permitted to go into white areas and 'pass laws' kept Africans out of the white areas after dark. I did not get very involved but did attend some meetings. I was a member of the Black Sash Women's Movement early in life, from the age of fourteen. But my contribution against the white South African racist government fades in significance when I consider the overwhelming gallant efforts of the African population to rid South Africa of its white racist government.

Later, while living in Oxford, I started to take direct action seriously when a friend told me he was going to demonstrate against capital punishment.



*Jennifer Neil was born in 1937 in Edinburgh, Scotland. She and her identical twin sister were adopted as babies and taken to South Africa. Jennifer became politically active against the apartheid regime in South Africa and left in 1960 for England. She has lived in Australia since 1963. Jennifer describes herself as a feminist, lesbian, environmentalist and loving Nana.*

Colin and I stood together at the top of the high street, holding signs saying, 'It's not the state's job to become killers' and 'Stop capital punishment'. People walked past showing all kinds of reactions; some were supportive but most totally ignored us. I was surprised how angry some members of the public became. I remember thinking that I should explain that I did not support murder – I just didn't think I should become a murderer by accepting what the state did.

The public perception of what you are doing as a protestor leads to a constant battle between your propaganda vs. the government of the day. Democratic societies declare they are in favour of freedom of speech and assembly, as long as it does not inconvenience anyone, or you make a public spectacle of yourself, but these are the only ways to use direct action. Getting the public's attention is a cheap form of advertising your cause.

The Anti-Apartheid Movement taught me that nothing changes unless you take direct action, the more direct the better. Then the Vietnam War came along, a terrible war that cost the lives of so many Vietnamese, American and Australian mothers' sons.

I went to the first massive American anti-war demonstration in Washington DC. in 1969. There were one million people there, and still the government took no notice. This war of lies made me more radical than any other issue I can remember.

This was a war most Americans did not want to fight: students in American universities took radical action and burnt down army recruiting offices on campuses; church assemblies joined the students and read out the names of the war dead every day on the Pentagon steps, only to be arrested time and time again.

Some Catholic priests even broke into

a recruiting office in Delaware, and stole all the files with the names of boys to be drafted, pouring napalm on them, the recipe for which they'd sourced from an army manual. Then they burnt the list of names in a car park. I was there and had great admiration for the Berrigan brothers who spent years in jail for their actions.

American and Australian kids were expected to die for their country by a draft system of conscription. By the time we came back to Australia in 1971, Australians were raging against that unjust war. I became national secretary of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in Australia and organised campaigns against the Vietnam war and French tests in the Pacific with the help of courageous women from all over Australia.

The United States and Russia have enough atomic bombs to kill every man, woman and child in the world several times over. Why? In 1954 the Americans tested their atomic bombs in the Marshall Islands, part of the Bikini Atoll in the Pacific, which has left the surrounding areas affected by radioactive fallout. Between 1956 and 1963 our British invaders tested their atomic bombs in the centre of Australia at Maralinga. Tests later showed a dramatic increase of strontium-90 in the bones of deceased children as far south as Adelaide. The French also chose to test their bombs on Mururoa, showering vast areas of Polynesia with radioactivity. These major powers are now railing against North Korea for testing their bombs from their own country, unlike the testing carried out by the USA, Britain and France. I find it sickening to watch testosterone-charged national leaders thumping their chests, excited about rushing into war to maintain their own position of power in the world.

Why are people taking no notice of the current bellicose talk of war? Why are we not out in the streets? Because

we are taught from an early age to believe everything adults and politicians tell us, and God forbid that we ever question anything. Well, here is some sobering information for my granddaughter, whom I sincerely hope learns to question everything:

Radioactive elements are tasteless, odourless and invisible. When they enter the environment, they concentrate at each step of the food chain: in an aquatic environment in algae, crustaceans, and fish small and large; and on land in grass, milk and meat. These elements also include radioactive iodine, which concentrates in leafy vegetables and milk and, when ingested, migrates to the thyroid gland, where it causes cancer. In Belarus, near Chernobyl, more than 2000 children have had their thyroids removed because of cancer since the reactor melted down in 1986. Then there are: strontium 90, which concentrates in milk, including human breast milk, and can induce bone cancer and leukaemia; caesium 137, which concentrates in meat and induces a malignant muscle cancer; and, plutonium, named after the god of hell, which is so carcinogenic that one-millionth of a gram causes cancer.

The only country to ever drop atomic bombs has been the USA, on Japan, and according to the Nixon files, as President he also wanted to drop atomic bombs on Vietnam, because he could not win that war. In 2011 America dragged us into yet another war in Iraq and Afghanistan, based on more lies. Why would citizens of any country believe politicians with this record?

Eve since the Vietnam war ended and Nelson Mandela was freed, I am more sure than ever that direct action is the most valued form of confrontation with governments when they are not listening to the will of the people who voted them in.

**Jennifer Neil**