

# The scientist who said 'no'

*A funny thing happened to Joseph Rotblat on the way to the bomb. He heard his conscience.*

The recent passing of Sir Joseph Rotblat leaves the world to make its way with one less decent human being.

Rotblat cofounded the Pugwash Conferences in the 1950s to be a regular opportunity for the world's

## Worldview by

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leading thinkers to gather away from the spotlight and informally discuss ways of nurturing peace throughout the world. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995 for this work. While most will focus on his honors and accomplishments, I prefer to remember him for a single decision he made back in 1944.

During World War II, Rotblat was a leading scientist in the Manhattan Project, America's all-out bid to invent the atomic bomb. Initially, the Polish-born scientist felt his participation was a moral responsibility in order to prevent Hitler from getting the bomb first and winning the war. Rotblat eventually learned, however, that the Germans were no where near success. There was no threat of the Japanese getting the bomb either, so Rotblat suddenly realized he was unable to personally justify further participation in the Manhattan Project. Showing remarkable courage and independence, he listened to his conscience and walked away.

When atomic bombs fell on

Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, Rotblat was so horrified that he committed the rest of his life to pushing for nuclear disarmament and world peace.

Rotblat never tired of this mission. Just this year, for example, at the age of 96, he issued a strong statement on the 60th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima:

*"The original nuclear weapon states not only hold on to their nuclear status, but seek to augment their nuclear armory... Other states seek to acquire nuclear weapons to deter an attack from others that possess them. Carried to its logical conclusion, this would mean that every nation will acquire its own nuclear weapons.*

*"This is no way to run the world. Imagine a world governed forever by mutual fear. Surely, that is not a world in which any of us would want to live, yet it is the way the politicians are taking us."*

Rotblat stressed to me in a 2003 interview that the world's scientists must take more responsibility for their work. He believed they need to think deeply about the dangers of some research to humankind. Rotblat

called for a universal scientists' pledge to "do no harm", something similar to medicine's Hippocratic Oath. It would, he said, at least give scientists some small sense of responsibility.

It would be beneficial if this one scientist's act of moral strength will be remembered and honored far into the future. Back in 1944, Rotblat swam against the surging tide of current events. He was neck-deep in difficult times, when fear and anger were on the march like never before. However, he found the courage to rise above it all and do what he felt was best not for an army or a nation, but for a world.

Scientists are, of course, smart people. While I understand the "us" versus "them" dynamics of the real world that leads to arms races and defensive concerns, I cannot help but feel disappointed that so many scientists are not smart enough to recognize that their talents would be better utilized serving life rather than death. It is sad that on the passing of Joseph Rotblat there are still thousands of scientists out there working hard to produce a better bomb, better germ or better chemical weapon.

If only they could hear their conscience and walk away, just like Joseph Rotblat did.

*To receive a copy of Guy P. Harrison's 2003 interview with Roger Rotblat via email, send a request to [guy@cfp.ky](mailto:guy@cfp.ky)*



**Dr. Joseph Rotblat**  
1908-2005

