

# An appreciation of Vic Sidel's lifelong contributions to peace and social justice

*Robert M. Gould, MD*

---

## Abstract

This article presents a personal appreciation of the lifetime contributions of Victor W. Sidel, MD, to peace and social justice, exemplified by his work in Physicians for Social Responsibility and the American Public Health Association.

• • •

It is a tremendous privilege to be invited to speak at this symposium honoring my friend, mentor, and inspiration Victor W. Sidel, MD. This has been a memorable return for me to Montefiore Medical Center, where I received my health care when growing up close by at the Gun Hill Projects, under the coverage afforded by the Health Insurance Plan (HIP), in which my family was enrolled through my father's work for the City of New York. In fact, it wasn't until I later attended the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the 1970s, including service on the wards of Montefiore, that I learned how HIP had been an aberration within the prevalent fee-for-service mode of practice, and that our wonderful family physicians Drs. Wellemeyer and Krakauer had been working within a system categorized as "pinko" by mainstream medicine for providing affordable health care to working people.

In many ways, my experience with HIP encouraged me in my subsequent career choice to work at Kaiser Permanente in California, which also offered high quality and affordable employment-based health care. Kaiser physicians were similarly ostracized

from local medical societies from the founding of Kaiser in the 1940s through the early 1970s because of the allegedly "socialist" nature of this form of practice.

Growing up in the Bronx in the 1950s and 1960s, spanning the events of the Civil Rights Movement through the antiwar protests during the Vietnam War, opened my eyes to the range of social justice issues that Vic Sidel has spoken so eloquently about through the years. It was at the Allerton Theater, just a few miles from Montefiore, where at the age of 12 or so I got to see the movies *Fail-Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove*. These had a major impact on my thinking about the nuclear weapons issues that Dr. Sidel and our esteemed symposium colleagues Sidney Alexander, MD, and H. Jack Geiger, MD, MSci-Hyg, were working on so diligently after the founding of Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) in 1961. And to this day, I credit *Dr. Strangelove* with providing a trove of life-sustaining black humor that helps me to withstand the otherwise rather depressing nature of a never-ending nuclear arms race.

I first encountered Dr. Sidel soon after starting medical school at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in 1973, through his direction of what was then called the Community Medicine course. Ruth and Vic Sidel were fresh from their groundbreaking trip to China,<sup>1</sup> and our course was suffused with the insights and experiences garnered from this trip, including implications for providing medical care to the underserved populations in the Bronx and throughout our country. In this class, against the background of the tumultuous events of the September 1973 coup that overthrew the Salvador Allende regime in Chile, I was inspired by the profound insights and teaching of Dr. Sidel that flowed from his unswerving commitment to social justice. It was at this time that I became aware of the anti-

---

## Robert M. Gould, MD

Associate Adjunct Professor  
Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences  
UCSF School of Medicine  
311 Douglass Street  
San Francisco, CA 94114  
Email: [rmgould1@yahoo.com](mailto:rmgould1@yahoo.com)

nuclear heritage of PSR and the role of Dr. Sidel in its founding. Dr. Sidel illustrated to our first-year class the deleterious impact of the massive expenditures for the nuclear arms race, and military budgets in general, on the health of our communities. I remember well Dr. Sidel's use of a political cartoon depicting a missile representing military spending siloed amidst dilapidated tenements so characteristic of the South Bronx where I practiced in many of my clinical clerkships, a slide I've subsequently borrowed for many of my own presentations.

As a core text of the Community Medicine curriculum, Dr. Sidel utilized the book *Billions for Band-Aids*,<sup>2</sup> which effectively made the case for profoundly changing our health care system. I remain grateful to Vic for putting me in touch with some of the authors when I moved to California to start my residency in pathology. These new connections greatly influenced the course of my subsequent work within PSR and the American Public Health Association (APHA).

In 1981, in the midst of a revitalized global movement against nuclear weapons within which PSR and its affiliated International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) figured so prominently, APHA notably adopted its first nuclear weapons policy statement, titled "Nuclear War and Nuclear Weapons."<sup>3</sup> This resolution vigorously opposed the development of nuclear weapons by the United States and their deployment in Europe, and strongly supported a multilateral thermonuclear arms freeze consistent with the concurrent political objectives of the Nuclear Freeze movement. In 1985, when Dr. Sidel was APHA's outgoing president, he spoke about "Prevention of Nuclear War as a Public Health Priority" at the closing General Session of the organization's Annual Meeting. This was an unprecedented and momentous address that kicked off a significant movement within the public health community against nuclear weapons, underscored by the founding of the APHA Peace Caucus in that same year.

In advance of APHA's 1986 Annual Meeting in Las Vegas, Lawrence Egbert, MD, a PSR Board member and one of the founding members of the APHA Peace Caucus, worked with the anti-nuclear organization American Peace Test to organize a

massive anti-nuclear demonstration of public health professionals at the Nevada Test Site, calling for a global end to nuclear weapons testing. More than 400 participants at the Annual Meeting, including many leaders of APHA such as Dr. Sidel, took part in the demonstration, with more than 140 of us arrested for conducting nonviolent civil disobedience. This action initiated a series of ongoing demonstrations that included many public health leaders and celebrities over the next few years, which contributed significantly to political pressure on the United States to join the Soviet Union in a moratorium on underground explosive nuclear testing, a prohibition that was, and still is, considered integral to stopping the development of new nuclear weapons.

Over the next two decades, the Peace Caucus, working closely with Dr. Sidel and other distinguished APHA leaders, developed numerous public health-based policy statements that were adopted by APHA in opposition to the continued design, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons, as well as related militaristic aspects of U.S. foreign and military policy. For example, in 1989, Dr. Sidel authored the policy statement "Public Health Hazards at Nuclear Weapons Facilities,"<sup>4</sup> which mirrored PSR's definitive publication "Dead Reckoning: A Critical Review of the Department of Energy's Epidemiologic Research"<sup>5</sup> that detailed the vast and pervasive environmental and occupational health hazards throughout multiple Department of Energy (DOE) sites. Co-authored by Jack Geiger, David Rush, and David Michaels, among others, the report supported the efforts of numerous PSR chapters across the nation that joined with communities to address serious toxic and radiological contamination at nuclear weapons facilities. Such efforts contributed to the ultimate shutdown of facilities such as Rocky Flats outside of Denver, Colorado.

In my own neighborhood, our San Francisco-Bay Area chapter of PSR joined with community partners such as Western States Legal Foundation and Tri-Valley Communities Against a Radioactive Environment (Tri-Valley CARES) in a wide range of activities opposing continued nuclear weapons work at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL). As part of its central role in modernizing the nuclear arsenal, LLNL has released approxi-

mately one million curies of radiation into the environment since the 1960s (Personal communication, Marylia Kelley, Executive Director, Tri-Valley CARES), and it is on the Superfund list of worst contaminated sites in the U.S., a status all too typical of DOE nuclear weapons facilities around the country. We continue to work with our community partners in opposing nuclear weapons research and development at LLNL, including supporting student efforts to end the University of California's historical direction of the nuclear weapons laboratories, and partnering in annual Hiroshima Day events against nuclear weapons at the gates of the lab.

Since its inception, the APHA Peace Caucus has sponsored numerous, well-attended educational sessions at the APHA Annual Meetings on a variety of war and peace subjects germane to public and environmental health. Of special note have been the recurring sessions mirroring the themes of the exceptional books co-edited by Vic Sidel and Barry S. Levy, MD, MPH, *War and Public Health*,<sup>6</sup> *Terrorism and Public Health: A Balanced Approach to Strengthening Systems and Protecting People*,<sup>7</sup> and *Social Injustice and Public Health*.<sup>8</sup> These sessions unfailingly drew on expert speakers from a wide array of backgrounds and disciplines who provide comprehensive, evidence-based presentations illustrating the true health and social costs of militarism to U.S. and global populations.

With the onset in 2001 of what has unfortunately become an unending "War on Terror," such presentations have also taken an appropriately critical view of the impact of U.S. counter-terrorism policies on all aspects of public health. In this regard, I have had the privilege of collaborating with Vic Sidel and Hillel W. Cohen, DrPH, on a number of articles and presentations critical of the negative public health impacts of various "bioterrorism" initiatives. Among the issues examined was the post-9/11 smallpox vaccination campaign that was widely rejected by health professionals throughout the U.S. despite a concerted effort by the Bush administration to vaccinate 500,000 health providers in addition to the half million members of the armed forces, most of whom were unable to resist.

Addressing the U.S. government policies of perpetual warfare that framed such ill-conceived coun-

ter-terror campaigns, Dr. Sidel and partners within the Peace Caucus have developed policies that were adopted by APHA in opposition to the war in Iraq, and subsequently in opposition to a military attack on Iran. In connection with such policy work, in 1997 the Peace and Labor Caucuses co-sponsored with APHA and PSR a major independent photo-journalism event. An exhibit titled "Unembedded" documented the pervasive negative impact of war on Iraq, an impact that remained unseen by much of the "embedded" media. The exhibit premiered at a gala event at AFL-CIO headquarters in Washington, DC, which represented a watershed coming together of peace, health, and labor activists and movements.

Such work paralleled contemporaneous work by Dr. Sidel and PSR colleagues in opposition to the thrust of U.S. counterterrorism policies, proposing instead a SMART (Sensible Multilateral American Response to Terrorism) security program. SMART called for reliance on upstream, "primary prevention" measures against terrorism, which included developing and strengthening global treaties against all weapons of mass destruction. SMART also elaborated other measures that would address global sources of violence and terrorism—such as poverty and lack of clean water and sanitation—measures that could be adequately funded for far less than the burgeoning U.S. and global military budgets of the last decade.

Recent work of the Peace Caucus in partnership with leaders of the International Health Section of APHA has included the development of the comprehensive policy document "The Role of Public Health Practitioners, Academics, and Advocates in Relation to Armed Conflict and War,"<sup>9</sup> which was adopted by APHA as policy in 2009. This document effectively tied together the impact of war on every level of public health throughout the planet, and aimed to become the basis for establishing war and other armed conflicts as central concerns of public health education and training. At recent APHA Annual Meetings, this policy has formed the basis for Peace Caucus sessions aimed at encouraging public health professionals to advance understanding of these issues among colleagues in their own academic and public health departments. Health professionals in such institutions have increasingly faced the

decimation of core public health programs, exemplified by the impact of what Nobel Prize Laureate Joseph E. Stiglitz and co-author Linda J. Bilmes have scrupulously examined in their book *The Three Trillion Dollar War: The True Cost of the Iraq Conflict*.<sup>10</sup>

More recently, Drs. Sidel and Levy have co-authored a number of important articles addressing the adverse global and domestic health consequences of the U.S. government responses to the September 2001 terrorist attacks on American soil, with reference to the devastating domestic budget cuts imposed in the wake of the massive military outlays for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. When speaking to medical students, Dr. Sidel has captured the essence of such cutbacks by quoting the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who, in his April 1967 address about the Vietnam War, “A Time to Break Silence,” observed: “a nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”<sup>11</sup>

This reality has certainly been recognized by younger physicians and medical students who daily see the impact of the eroding social fabric on their patients’ lives, as evinced by the activities of Doctors for the 99%, who were involved in Occupy events in New York City in 2012. For those of us in organizations such as PSR who continue to focus on issues such as nuclear weapons that often lack familiarity among younger health professionals, it is our challenge to connect the total fiscal, health, and social costs of producing such weapons that threaten planetary annihilation with the growing and very visible crises of homelessness, joblessness, and communities generally falling apart.

In this regard, the challenges Nobel Laureate Sir Joseph Rotblat spoke of in his compelling keynote address to the 2002 World Congress of IPPNW regarding the elimination of nuclear weapons are analogous to the struggles for social justice that resonate strongly among younger health providers:

*A colossal effort will be required.... the courage and the will to embark on this great task, to restore sanity in our policies, humanity in our actions, and a sense of belonging to the human race.*<sup>12</sup>

If there is anyone I know who has daily exemplified these words and actions in his life, it is Vic Sidel, who has moved so many of us to dedicate our own lives to the service of humanity and a future protective of all life on our planet.

#### References

1. Sidel VW, Sidel R. *Serve the people: observations on medicine in the People’s Republic of China*. Boston: Beacon Press; 1974.
2. Harding E, Bodenheimer T, Cummings S, editors. *Billions for band-aids: an analysis of the US healthcare system and of proposals for its reform*. San Francisco: San Francisco Bay Area Chapter, Medical Committee for Human Rights; 1972.
3. American Public Health Association. *Nuclear war and nuclear weapons*. Policy Number 8117. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association; 1981 [cited 2013 Oct 11]. Available from: [www.apha.org/advocacy/policy/policysearch/default.htm?id=989](http://www.apha.org/advocacy/policy/policysearch/default.htm?id=989)
4. American Public Health Association. *Public health hazards at nuclear weapons facilities*. Policy Number 8917. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association; 1989 [cited 2013 Oct 11]. Available from: [www.apha.org/advocacy/policy/policysearch/default.htm?id=1196](http://www.apha.org/advocacy/policy/policysearch/default.htm?id=1196)
5. Geiger HJ, Rush D, Physicians Task Force on the Health Risks of Nuclear Weapons Production. *Dead reckoning: a critical review of the Department of Energy’s epidemiologic research*. Washington, DC: Physicians for Social Responsibility; 1992.
6. Levy BS, Sidel VW, editors. *War and public health*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press; 2008.
7. Levy BS, Sidel VW, editors. *Terrorism and public health: a balanced approach to strengthening systems and protecting people*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press; 2011.
8. Levy BS, Sidel VW, editors. *Social injustice and public health*. New York: Oxford University Press; 2006.
9. American Public Health Association. *The role of public health practitioners, academics, and advocates in relation to armed conflict and war*. Policy Number 20095. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association; 2009 [cited 2013 Oct 11]. Available from: [www.apha.org/advocacy/policy/policysearch/default.htm?id=1391](http://www.apha.org/advocacy/policy/policysearch/default.htm?id=1391)
10. Stiglitz JE, Bilmes LJ. *The three trillion dollar war: the true cost of the Iraq conflict*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.; 2008.
11. King ML Jr. *A time to break silence*. In: Washington JM, editor. *A testament of hope: the essential writings and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers; 1991. p. 234-44.
12. Rotblat J. *The nuclear issue: where do we go from here?* *Med Confl Surviv* 2003 Jan-Mar;19(1):4-16.