



Engineering Peace and Justice: The Responsibility of Engineers to Society

P. Aarne Vesilind

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Some years ago when I was chair of the department of civil and environmental engineering, a colleague introduced me to a visitor from Sandia Laboratories, perhaps the largest developer of armaments and weapons systems in the world. We had a nice visit, and as we chatted, the talk naturally centered on the visitor's engineering work. It turned out that his job in recent years had been to develop a new acoustic triggering device for bombs. As he explained it, the problem with bombs was that the plunger triggering mechanism could fail if the bomb hit at an angle, and thus the explosives would not detonate. To get around this, he developed an acoustic trigger that would detonate the explosives as soon as the bomb hit any solid surface, even at an angle. As he talked, I watched his face. His enthusiasm for his work was clearly evident, and his animated explanations of what they had developed at Sandia exuded pride and excitement. I thought about asking him what it felt like to have spent his engineering career designing better ways to kill people or to destroy property – the sole purpose of a bomb. I wondered how many people had been killed because this man had developed a clever acoustic triggering device. But good sense and decorum prevailed and I did not ask him such questions. We parted as friends and in good spirits.

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