

Nobel Peace Prize winner Jody Williams wasn't always so anti-authoritarian and outspoken.

Williams, who is speaking in Portland this week, says she worried about getting in trouble growing up in a small town in 1950s Vermont. But at age 7, when two boys started harassing her deaf older brother, she stood up.

"I wanted to beat the crap out of them," says Williams, now 60. "But I could never catch them."

Williams went on to stand up for others, and over time, she says, it got easier. In college, Williams protested the Vietnam War. In the 1980s, she worked to raise awareness about U.S. interventions in Latin America. And in 1992, Williams founded the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

Her efforts paid off in 1997, when 122 countries signed the Ottawa Convention, a treaty calling for the end of using, producing, selling and stockpiling land mines. The number of signatories has since climbed to 158—not including the United States. In 1997, Williams won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work. And in 2006, Williams co-founded the Nobel Women's Initiative, an organization that brings together six living female Noble Peace Prize winners to help women's rights activists around the globe.

WW: How do you gauge whether your work has been successful?

Jody Williams: Over 40 million mines have been destroyed from stockpiles. And there have been mine-clearance programs in all of the most-mined countries in the world. One hundred and fifty-eight countries have signed the treaty. That's over 80 percent of the countries in the world. Even countries who haven't joined, like the U.S. and China, have felt pressure.

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The U.S. hasn't used land mines since the first Gulf War. We haven't exported them since 1992. We haven't produced them since the middle of the '90s, and we have

destroyed millions from U.S. stockpiles, which leads to the question: Why won't they just sign the damn thing?

What are the chances the U.S. will ever sign the Mine Ban Treaty?

In theory, the Obama administration is undergoing a serious review of [land-mine] policy. I say that with some criticism because the policy was reviewed under Clinton *and* Bush. I don't know what they can review again. I think Obama has too many things going on with the military to irritate them with this treaty. Joining the land-mine treaty is too much of a small thing in his military agenda and could risk pissing [the military] off.

What did you think about Obama winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009?

I think the Norwegian Nobel Committee erred in judgment. It is always very dicey awarding a sitting head of state—they can wage war. In Obama's case, he was already waging two! I appreciated Obama's recognition that he didn't deserve it. But he should have gone a step further and declined the honor.

What was the biggest mistake you made during the land-mine ban campaign?

My mistakes were mostly haranguing other campaigners. I didn't always play nice, let me put it that way. Now, I've become a picture of grace and empathy [*laughs*]. But from my perspective as a coordinator, I don't know if we did anything major wrong, because we succeeded.

And your worst moment?

We were in Norway. It was September 1997 and it was the last negotiating session on the treaty. The U.S. had not participated and a couple weeks before the end, Clinton decided to send a delegation to participate in the negotiations. But the real intent of

the delegation was to make sure that if a treaty happened it would not take effect immediately.

What did you do?

We threatened some of the governments we had been supposed partners with.

What kinds of threats?

Oh, I was pretty crude. I told the man who was in charge of the [Canadian] delegation that we would fry the [Canadian] prime minister. That we would go after him publicly and shame him hideously because here was the man who had challenged the world to pass the ban and at the last minute wanted to cave to the United States.

Why have you said working for peace is not for the faint of heart?

I get really irritated at the “Kumbaya”-peace dove-rainbow image of peace. The work we did on the land-mine campaign took work every day, seven days a week, for years and years. Martin Luther King—if you think he is a “Kumbaya” wimp, you’d better read the history about his work, or Nelson Mandela, or Aung San Suu Kyi imprisoned in Burma for most of the last 20 years.

What keeps you going?

I’m stubborn and self-motivated. And I do believe that anybody can contribute to making the world better.

GO: Williams is speaking at 7 pm Thursday, April 14, at Concordia University. Free. She is also delivering the keynote address at Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility’s anniversary dinner at 6 pm on Friday, April 15. Call 274-2720 for ticket availability.

