

The Nuclear Freeze

Why we didn't sign your petition

George Bradford (David Watson)

1982

The rapidity with which a movement against nuclear weapons and war has blossomed has been as surprising to us as it has been to everyone else. There can be no doubt that the possibility of nuclear holocaust, and the understandable concern if not out-and-out terror which accompanies it, is one of the foremost questions on people's minds today. The upsurge began in Europe and quickly spread to the United States. Conferences and convocations; demonstrations (20,000 in Chicago, 30,000 in Vancouver, 12,000 in Seattle to name just a few); the repudiation of civil defense plans in towns and cities throughout the U.S.; the growth of peace and disarmament organizations; and the storm of books and articles on the subject have all revealed a pervasive urgency and a growing sense of horror and resistance to the Reagan administration's recent talk of "limited" and "winnable" nuclear war, demonstration shots, and "first strike" capability.

In general, the momentum against nuclear war has been identified with the massive grassroots campaign (now going on in forty states) for a "nuclear freeze," with even all sorts of politicians, retired military men and celebrities endorsing it as a "first step" towards the reduction (and even abolition) of nuclear weapons. A million people have signed nuclear freeze petitions, and according to a Gallup poll, 72% of Americans support a bilateral nuclear freeze. Its appeal, according to its organizers, resides in its "simplicity," the accessible, commonsense notion that "enough is enough," that both sides should halt the arms race and begin serious negotiations to reduce arsenals and back away from the present trajectory toward confrontation.

In fact, the Reagan administration has been obliged to soften its loose war rhetoric of last year, which set off many of the demonstrations in Europe and got the ball rolling here in the U.S. "This movement," an anonymous White House advisor confided to *Newsweek* magazine, "is very dangerous." William G. Hyland, who was Kissinger's hatchet-man on the National Security Council, admitted that he was "appalled at the popularization of these subjects," adding, "I don't like the idea of a lot of people screaming and yelling that these warmongers in Washington need to be brought under control."

Reagan, on the other hand, has taken a more oblique approach, responding that he is "heart and soul in sympathy with the people who are talking about the horrors of nuclear war and the fact that we should do everything we could to prevent such a war from happening." "To those who protest against nuclear war," he has said, "I can only say, I'm with you." However, in his view, a nuclear freeze would be unacceptable because it is "not enough," hence he has called for reductions in nuclear weapons while endorsing a different freeze proposal in Congress promoted by senators Henry Jackson and John Warner which would demand an immediate arms buildup at even greater proportions than the record-breaking levels already in motion, and the attainment of counterforce (first strike) capability before "freezing" nuclear weapons. Such U.S. superiority would amount to "catching up" to "parity" with the Soviets, or so the argument goes. This counterattack by the Reagan government led nationally syndicated columnist Mary McGrory, a vocal proponent of a nuclear freeze, to comment, "They worry more about the freeze than about nuclear weapons" (*Detroit Free Press*, 6/13/82).

Democratic Party Bandwagon

As is to be expected, Democratic Party politicians have seen the anti-war mood of Americans and the tremendous successes of the freeze campaign as a bandwagon which will carry them back into control of the Senate and the White House. "The American people are out in front of their leaders," noted Republican senator Charles Mathias of Maryland. And in March senators Edward ("We'll-cross-that-bridge-when-we-come-to-it") Kennedy and Mark Hatfield introduced a resolution in Congress urging the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. to negotiate a "mutual and verifiable" nuclear weapons freeze.

All kinds of people have endorsed a freeze as well as other similar arms control proposals, such as cold-warrior-turned-dove George F. Kennan's proposal to reduce nuclear arsenals by fifty per cent. One congressional aide remarked, "It's not the traditional ban-the-bomb advocates, but doctors, lawyers, members of the clergy, business-people who are making waves among the politicians on Capitol Hill. The head of the California freeze initiative campaign, for example is millionaire businessman Harold Willens, who has argued that such a move would save money which could be used to help the U.S. "become competitive in world markets once again." In fact, businessmen have formed an organization, Businessmen Opposed to Nuclear War, with the slogan, "Build Businesses Not Bombs," supposedly on the assumption that nuclear extinction would be bad for business and other dead things. Roger Molander, another former Kissinger flunky who worked on SALT II, has founded an educational organization, Ground Zero, which put on a week-long series of presentations and educational conferences during April. Even such architects of U.S. genocide in Indochina as former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara and Presidential advisor McGeorge Bundy have warned against the doctrine of "first use" of nuclear weapons and the emerging counter-force strategy of the U.S. military, which prompted one pundit to observe, "What irony: War Criminals for Peace. Will the next step be Mass Murderers Against the Bomb?" (*The Nation*, 4/24/82)

The nuclear freeze and its spin-off arms control initiatives have even become a fashionable affair which makes big bucks for the celebrities who manipulate it. Chic "petition-signing parties" have been held and have made the fashion pages of the newspapers, and black tie symphony concert benefits have been held. At Oakland University (in Michigan) several hundred people paid ten bucks a head to attend a symposium, "Peace in Search of Makers," where they heard Detroit Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, radical historian Sydney Lens, Paul Warnke (chief negotiator of SALT II under Carter) and John Anderson (who finished off the day with a talk entitled "The Arms Race and the American Political System: How to Turn It Around"). While Gumbleton (who answer to a young man's question, "What about the Russians?" replied sanctimoniously, "You must be willing to be martyred") played for free and Lens got \$500, Warnke and Anderson both received whopping honoraria of \$1200, proving that there is money to be made even in people's fear of extermination.

Whereas radicals like E.P. Thompson, Daniel Ellsberg and Sydney Lens support a nuclear freeze, albeit critically (in Lens' words "only [as] the first step toward our real goal ... the abolition of all nuclear weapons on this planet" ["How Deep a Freeze?" *The Progressive*, May 1982]), we can rest assured that the debate over a nuclear freeze among the U.S. political and military circles represented by the likes of Warnke and Kennedy does not originate from the same motives and does not intend to be any such first step. Warnke, for example, has made it clear that his reasoning is based on a notion of national security which simply differs in strategy from that of Reagan and his cowboys. In a debate with Eugene V. Rostow, director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, he declared that it was important not to let the U.S.S.R. "interject divisiveness" into the NATO alliance, and therefore it was "terribly important" to reach an agreement on intermediate nuclear forces. "Perhaps I'm old-fashioned," he told an audience in New York, "but I still regard the Atlantic Alliance as one of the cornerstones of national security, one of our key advantages." In fact, he voiced support for an immediate freeze because "it would be much to our advantage because we're ahead." (*New York Times*, 3/21/82) McNamara's reasoning was similar for urging Reagan to renounce first use of nuclear weapons in Europe in order to "defuse anti-American sentiment."

Nuclear Freeze Bolsters National Security

George Ball, former Undersecretary of State under Kennedy and Johnson, also supports a nuclear freeze for reasons of U.S. national security. In an "instant book" recently published by Bantam Books, *Freeze! How You Can Help Prevent Nuclear War*, edited by aides of Senator Kennedy, Ball writes, "We cannot avoid considerable responsibility for the demonstrations in European streets against the implantation of Pershings and cruise missiles on European soil. These demonstrations were temporarily halted when the administration reluctantly began negotiations on this limited area of nuclear policy-but that is only the beginning of the story. As warm weather returns, so will the demonstrators and they will continue to gain in noise and number until we begin prompt and serious negotiations to turn back the nuclear arms race all across the board," Americans, he notes gratefully, have been more "responsible" than their European counterparts. But if "serious arms reduction negotiation" is not pursued, he warns, "the national outcry may ultimately take a more strident and less responsible form."

But Ball sees a way out of this danger for U.S. government interests: "That is the significance of the Kennedy-Hatfield resolution," he concludes, because it gives "responsible expression" to the problem. The Kennedy-Hatfield resolution calls on the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. to "decide when and how to achieve a mutual and verifiable freeze on the testing, production and further deployment of nuclear warheads, missiles and other delivery systems" as a beginning for "major, mutual and verifiable reductions" of weapons and delivery systems, which makes it even stronger than the Michigan initiative, which says nothing about reductions.

From Reagan offering his "heartfelt sympathy" to the demonstrators so feared by Ball, to the radicals and pacifists doing the footwork for the Freeze Campaign, everyone seems to be working towards assuring peace and avoiding nuclear war. Even arch-conservative newspaper columnist James Kilpatrick has taken interest in the freeze issue. Bemoaning the fact that conservatives have shied away from what he characterizes as "the most popular cause in the world," he noted in a recent column, "Unless words have lost their meaning, the Kennedy-Hatfield liberals are proposing exactly what Reagan's START proposed in November."

Indeed, one criticism of the freeze campaign is that it is "all things to all people," as one arms control expert said. Judith Miller reported in the *New York Times* (4/24/82) that Kennedy has frequently spoken of his freeze resolution "as if it called for a freeze now. To arms control specialists, Mr. Kennedy's aides have stressed that the resolution does not call for an immediate freeze. The text calls upon the Soviet Union and the United States to decide 'when and how' to achieve a mutual and verifiable freeze in the arsenals. in other words, it only calls for negotiations now, not an immediate moratorium; in this sense, it is not all that different from the Jackson-Warner proposal, critics assert."

Even Lens, a supporter, warns that "the danger is that in its eagerness to enlist mass support-and Congressional sponsors-the movement will dilute its demands to the point where they are rendered meaningless. After all, most of the Senators and Representatives who have endorsed the freeze vote regularly and without protest for increased military budgets. They may now favor a standstill in the arms race, or even a reduction of each superpower's nuclear stockpile-but they would still insist on the 'sufficiency' of what former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara called 'mutually assured destruction.'" Even Republican political consultant David Keene has observed, "It's like motherhood and apple pie. Who's going to be in favor of nuclear war?"

Michigan Petitions for a Freeze

Michigan is one of the states in which petitions are being circulated for a referendum on a nuclear freeze. (As we go to press we have learned that the petition drive of the Michigan Nuclear Freeze Campaign has been successful.) An organizer for the Michigan Freeze Campaign has written that even though the freeze "would not be binding on the federal government"-state officials would simply be required to write a letter to federal officials urging Reagan to propose a freeze to Soviet leaders-"it would still be an unprecedented opportunity for Michigan voters to take a stand on the arms race." ("State Nuclear Freeze Campaign Underway," *Detroit Metro Times*, Feb. 18-March 4, 1982) But if the freeze is "all things to all people," what kind of "stand" would voters (what few of them there are) be taking?

Let's quote the "text of transmittal" which would be sent to Michigan politicians and presumably to the feds if the nuclear freeze initiative passed:

"The people of the State of Michigan, recognizing that the safety and security of the United States must be paramount in the concerns of the American people; and further recognizing that our national security is reduced, not increased by the growing danger of nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union, which would result in millions of deaths of people in Michigan and throughout the nation; do hereby urge that the Government of the United States immediately propose to the Government of the Soviet Union a Mutual Nuclear Weapons Freeze, whereby both countries agree to halt immediately the testing, production, and further deployment of all nuclear weapons, missiles, and delivery systems in a way that can be checked and verified by both sides, and that Congress transfer the funds which would have been used for those purposes to civilian use."

Some freeze activists have admitted that this document is less than a radical evaluation of the present crisis, and that it leaves intact patriotic assumptions of national security, but they argue that it is a first step in a process of political education which makes necessary compromises to achieve a limited, but concrete goal. After all, in the estimation of one supporter, people aren't ready for anything more radical. One must make compromises if one is going to reach people. But if it is business-as-usual for Democratic Party hacks to make such assumptions about people's readiness to make social change, it is grotesque when self-proclaimed radicals who claim to be starting from an urgent concern over the imminence of nuclear war decide that people aren't ready for anything stronger than such proposals. Thus they begin from the outset with a surrender rather than pushing for more than is perhaps immediately possible and leaving the dealing and compromising to the politicians. The education that they claim the freeze will provide may after all end up just another education in demoralization and cynicism if it makes no radical critique of the process at hand. "Realism" which begins on the terms of the present state of affairs and which echoes its presuppositions can only be a realism of defeat.

What, then, does the freeze proposal leave intact? First of all, it leaves the entire ideological edifice of U.S. imperial power and the cold war in place, by preserving the premises of the established doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD). By arguing that "we have enough weapons" the freeze proposal avoids the question of how and why these weapons were developed in the first place, when the U.S. military had the only atomic weapons in existence. By arguing the "safety and security of the United States" as paramount, they leave intact the myth of nuclear deterrence (which, as E.P. Thompson has noted, is not a stationary state but a degenerating one) and of U.S. national security and national interest. They leave the same hands on the same buttons, and the military imperatives of the U.S. government in place. That is why Ball can argue that a freeze "would quickly reestablish the confidence of its allies now so tragically waning. Even more important, it would restore the faith of rational men and women that our government is earnestly striving to save mankind from its own self-destruction." (sic!) It leaves intact the lie which Ball brazenly repeats that the U.S. ruling class is urgently working toward peace and that it has so far refrained (since Nagasaki at least) from using nuclear weapons, when in fact, as Daniel Ellsberg has observed (in his introduction to *Protest and Survive*, edited by E.P. Thompson and Dan Smith), the United States has repeatedly threatened to use nuclear weapons when its economic and military interests were at stake: "Again and again, generally in secret from the American public, U.S. nuclear weapons have been used, for quite different purposes [than deterring the Russians from attack]: in the precise way that a gun is used when you point it at someone's head in a direct confrontation, whether or not the trigger is pulled..." Among the crises in which the U.S. threatened to resort to nuclear weapons are the Korean War (at different times by both Truman and Eisenhower); the offer by Secretary of State Dulles to French Prime Minister Bidault of three tactical nuclear weapons for use in Indochina in 1954; the Berlin crisis in 1961; the Cuban missile crisis in 1962; when U.S. troops were surrounded at Khe Sanh, Vietnam, in 1968; Nixon's threats against the North Vietnamese, conveyed by Kissinger between 1969 and 1972; and Carter's declaration in 1980 on the Middle East to use nuclear weapons in the event of a threat to U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf. "It is in these unchanging circumstances that the deterrent tactic has recommended itself to a succession of U.S. administrations of threatening and preparing to initiate tactical nuclear warfare in the region, and to escalate if necessary, risking Soviet preemption or counter-escalation," Ellsberg argues.

Maintains Trajectory of Confrontation

This notion of U.S. national security maintains the trajectory of confrontation because it does not challenge the underlying assumptions about U.S. global interests. When arms control advocates argue, as does Eric E. Van Loon, Executive Director of the Union of Concerned Scientists, that one must recognize that “present realities require a strong American defense system,” and refuse (as he does) to call for unilateral arms reduction (let alone abolition), they are simply taking a different road to the same destination of war.

And the potential for and inertia toward war are always present, since the nuclear freeze campaign leaves in place those nuclear weapons already deployed, hence barely diminishing the risk of nuclear holocaust. It leaves the germ and chemical warfare machinery in place. It does not affect the innovations being made in laser and space weaponry, the defensive anti-ballistic weapons, or the innovations in anti-submarine warfare, which are all components in the counterforce system. It doesn't even affect the development of “stealth” bombers and cruise missiles, as some have argued, since these weapons could be employed with conventional bombs and warheads, and are therefore outside the bounds of the language of the proposal. It does not affect the recent moves toward renewing civil defense programs.

It does not even call for the removal of all nuclear weapons from Europe, which is the keystone of the anti-war movement's demands; there. But most of all, it fails to challenge the conventional weapons system. As Seymour Melman, co-chairman of SANE and a leading figure in the disarmament movement since the campaign for a test ban treaty in the 1960s has written, “Indeed, it is a safe assumption that the Pentagon and the weapons scientists will be rewarded for their acceptance of the nuclear warhead freeze by carte blanche approval for a monumental increase in every aspect of the arms race except warheads.” The victory of a nuclear freeze campaign could “taste of ashes,” he writes.

“But it would not be the first time we have known that taste,” he continues, pointing to the experience following the 1963 nuclear test ban. “It, too, was hailed in its time as a ‘first step’ toward general disarmament. In fact, it proved to be the first step toward disaster in Vietnam. President Kennedy bought off the generals and civilian hawks, the military industries and the weapons scientists by dramatically escalating the arms race on every front.”

Melman, who also gives critical support to the freeze campaign for its “useful role in raising public consciousness on this vital issue,” warns that “given the present terms of the Freeze Campaign, and the ambiguous record of American political leaders, this otherwise laudable ‘first step’ could become the last step of a doomed march against Armageddon.” (“Is a Nuke Freeze Good Enough?” *Guardian*, April 21, 1982.)

True enough, Alexander Haig has already argued (in response to the McNamara proposal) that the alternative to the present nuclear buildup of the Reagan administration would be “to reintroduce the draft, triple the size of the armed forces and put the economy on a wartime footing.” (*New York Times*, April 11, 1982). Rather than challenge the presuppositions of militarism in general, the nuclear freeze campaign poses as a more effective military strategy, as the book *Freeze!* reveals, in which the editors argue, “some of the savings from a freeze can be reallocated to improve the readiness and the reliability of our conventional forces.” And Ground Zero Executive Director Molander, when asked in a recent inquiry (in the April 26 *Newsweek*) whether there were “any circumstances under which the United States should use nuclear weapons first—for example, to prevent a victory by Soviet conventional forces in Western Europe,” replied, “It may be the only policy—if we and the Europeans are unwilling or unable to build those conventional forces that would ensure that we could blunt a Soviet attack on Western Europe.” Of course, no matter what the balance of military power of the opposing armed states, historically nothing is guaranteed in war preparations—nothing, that is, except that war is eventually bound to occur.

Negotiations Process a Farce

Despite the claims of freeze proponents that, in the words of one spokesperson, “Ordinary citizens will no longer let the so-called experts decide their fate,” the proposal maintains completely the power of the arms control experts, the politicians and the strategists over their lives. To “urge” the government to “propose” a freeze to the Soviet Union reveals a remarkable ingenuousness about the nature of arms control and treaty negotiations. The

whole process by which arms negotiators sit behind closed doors and argue over the descriptions and the numbers of weapons as a means of reaching an agreement which allows an advantage and which leaves loop holes for their own strategic planning-arms treaty negotiations are nothing less than this-is the epitome of control by experts. To “urge” the government to make a proposal for a freeze at the conference table is tantamount to urging it to bargain in good faith, something which Reagan is already claiming to do. The entire negotiations process is a farce, and to fall prey to it is to invite the government to outflank such proposals with still another phony arms limitation or reduction proposal (as Reagan has done recently on more than one occasion and which he is bound to do again when he speaks at the United Nations on June 12). The reality of the problem is underlined by a statement by Molander, that “Basically, all technical efforts to limit nuclear weapons have failed.” (*Detroit Free Press*, March 25, 1982)

The notion of verification is also a problem. Freeze proponents argue that modern satellite methods of verification and the sophistication of U.S. espionage make the problem obsolete, though it has historically presented an impediment and led to a breakdown in arms negotiations in the past. Obviously, this could happen again, but even if it did not, the result would be that the “fate of the earth” would essentially be left in the hands of the technicians and the espionage agents of the respective governments-in our case, the same “dirty tricks” experts who gave us the “Soviet style” military installations in Nicaragua, ad nauseum. Like the military officers and the arms negotiators, they serve the same State and its ruling class, and when marching orders come down they will do their duty.

The appeal and “good sense” so touted by its organizers that the freeze isn’t unilateral but bilateral is really nothing more than the current state of affairs, for bilateral arms buildups, freezes, or reductions are all part of the very same process of military rivalry-between nation states. California freeze proponent Willens, for example, emphasized in response to critics in the *Los Angeles Times* that the campaign was against unilateral disarmament: “What if the Russians say no, what then? Our answer: ‘Then the whole thing is off.’ For as our initiative says, ‘The safety of the United States must be the paramount concern of the American people.’ “ It is clear that such a movement based as it is on fear of the enemy and the maintenance of national defense will easily fall victim to the machinations of the government at the conference table or the press conference, or to the sudden war frenzy provoked by some international upset (such as the Iran crisis).

A Meaningless Gesture

All in all, even if the freeze were unilateral and anti-militarist, the referendum would be little more than a meaningless gesture, since it is in no way binding on the military strategists who could ignore it altogether as if it had been lost in the mail. The exhortation on the brochure for the Michigan Freeze Campaign to “Become a registered voter, our world needs your signature,” reinforces the same passivity and the same faith in the willingness and the capacity of the leaders who got us into this mess in the first place to find a way out. Kennedy is riding this wave of high hopes and desperation. One can only assume that he anticipates riding it right into the White House in 1984. Similar hopes were founded upon the Carter candidacy when he called for zero nuclear weapons, but it was Carter who signed Presidential Directive 59 (a counter-force doctrine) into policy, who made open nuclear threats over the Persian Gulf, and who introduced the MX and the cruise missiles. As the political illusion rolls on, the counter-force technology is slowly set in place, the world staggers and lurches along toward war, and the military makes its preparations. (One can imagine Kennedy getting elected on a freeze vote, and instead of the obvious “warmonger” Reagan giving the orders to go to war, the “friend of Peace” Kennedy, just as his brother nearly did in 1962, pushing the’ button.)

The nuclear freeze petition, like voting, lets the signer off the hook, as if by signing your name and pulling a lever you could disarm the creatures in the White House and the Pentagon, turn off an entire system based on a permanent war economy, end the conflicts which brought about the creation and use of nuclear weapons in the first place. It presents the government as the responsive instrument of the people’s will, not as an agency of repression; it promotes the myth of the state as the expression of the democratic aspirations of human freedom and life, rather than their archenemy.

Finally, because it does not look at the causes of war in the clash of empires and in the struggle for hegemony and markets, it fosters the illusion of a “rational defense strategy” and balance of power, of a world at peace made

up of capitalist nation states—the very illusions which will be swept away in a period of confrontation and conventional conflict, a mad Falkland Islands adventure over the raw materials and the labor power of some political flash-point. By refusing to confront the question of war and militarism fundamentally beyond the specific fear of all-out nuclear annihilation, the freeze campaign not only fails to consider how such a conflict would begin, it leaves its supporters totally vulnerable to a crisis which would ultimately involve the decision to escalate to the use of nukes. It is based on the false hope that everything would be all right if we could just do away with nuclear weapons, that we could go on living just as before, safe and secure behind old-fashioned armies and military technology. The nuclear freeze petitions the warmakers and the war profiteers and the professional mass murderers to negotiate with the “enemy,” and thus leaves unquestioned all of the myths and the falsifications which conceal the identity of the real enemy. Only when people come to the realization that their own nation-state is the monster with which they must do battle—not because they are willing to be martyred but because they see the state everywhere and the authoritarian emotional plague which allows it to remain in place as the real problem—only when they are willing to dynamite U.S. interests and the “national security” of the conspirators in the war rooms and the board rooms, when they spit on the American flag and on all flags, when they are willing to act, to create and destroy in their own interest, when their resistance to war flows from desire and from a vision of a truly human world and not from fear—only then will they be ready to challenge the nuclear war machine. As Vernon Richards, a participant in the movement against nuclear weapons in Britain during the late ‘50s and early ‘60s wrote in 1959, “Only when as individuals we refuse to have someone act for us, will we begin to find the time and learn how to act for ourselves.”

fifth Estate

George Bradford (David Watson)
The Nuclear Freeze
Why we didn't sign your petition
1982

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/309-june-19-1982/the-nuclear-freeze>
Fifth Estate #309, June 19, 1982

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)