

Readers dispute FE on Nuclear Freeze issue

Various Authors

1982

Dear Fifth Estate,

Thank you for your criticisms of the Freeze campaign [FE #309, June 19, 1982]. I agree wholeheartedly that the Freeze is not enough. The Freeze is just a first step, it is a talking point. Whatever its limitations, it has engaged the interest of millions of people in the subject of nuclear terror, and it has helped people start to think about the issue.

I don't know anyone in the Freeze campaign in Michigan who believes the Freeze is anything more than a first step. We are under no illusions about the political process. And it is hardly a case of passively letting others act for us.

Of course, politicians have jumped on the bandwagon. They always do. But, at least in Michigan, none have been allowed to speak for us, or at our rallies or meetings.- The Freeze is not in anyone's pocket. (Damning by association is hardly a worthwhile method of criticism, by the way.)

Your assertion that the Freeze will actually accelerate the chances of war is curious. You know about first-strike weaponry. Would you have us wait until everyone's consciousness is sufficiently raised to demand disarmament (complete and unilateral)? By then the planet will be gone. We can't afford the luxury of waiting. There must be a freeze before the first-strike weapons are built.

It is an impossibility that nuclear weapons will be abolished and we will live as we did in the past with old-fashioned military power structures. In order to get rid of nuclear weapons, everything would have to change. Even a Freeze would mean profound changes. How, in your analysis; could the military-industrial complex survive a Freeze with its power base intact?

The Freeze is what's mobilizing people today. I notice you, too, have jumped on the bandwagon of the growing concern about nuclear war, and now devote much space and even conferences to the issue. What do you think is responsible for this concern, which brings 750,000 people to New York when a year ago you couldn't get three people at a party to talk about nuclear war?

Nuclear war is indeed the clearest threat to survival; it is the ultimate instrument of destruction, and it dwarfs all other concerns, rightly so. Any and all methods that oppose nuclear war, that seek to move toward the goal of disarmament, are necessary. The more people involved in this, the better.

If we can take all the steps at once, if we can take the steps faster, let's do it. Show me how. Show me how it works not in theory, not in print, but in practice, in the world. Then I'll be ready to forgo the first step, which is a Freeze. Absent that convincing, I'll continue to work for a freeze, because if we don't get a Freeze, we won't long have the luxury of these kinds of interchanges.

Michael Betzold

Freeze Is A Process

Dear Fifth Estate,

You know that I love you people for your crusty-prickly (no sexual or sexist pun intended) individualistic intellectualism. And while I may not always agree (even when not disagreeing) with what you have to say, I will defend with my life (within reason) your right to say things and will pledge to my utmost to keep Reagan and Company from dropping the bombs/Bombs on your heads.

Being “in the head” can be fun, so I will lay out three analogies: that of the infant, that of the toddler, and that of the rattlesnake. An infant is, from the very beginning, a social being: dependent on others for survival. And, if parents weren’t to a large extent socialized, they might, if the infant is an inconvenience, walk off and leave it. It is only when the infant reaches the stage where it is an adult and capable (somewhat) of taking care of itself—that it can afford the luxury of saying that cooperation is poppy/mommycock.

The Nuclear Freeze Movement (a process, not a “thing”) can be compared to a toddler; first steps into action for many people who signed the petition. Not everyone in this world is ready to “storm the barricades” or to persuade others to do so. I’ve been in the “Anti-Nuke Protest Biz” since 1959: it took 7 years for me to move from the terrifying first-hand view of the hellish weapon in action (Frenchman’s Flats, 1952) to a very “antsy” participation with “what must be real life commies” in a Hiroshima Day observance. At least people are looking at these things and are moving. Can you imagine 800,000 in New York? People from mid-America, too, who got off their butts and onto their bunions. Glory be. I trust that all you people were in Nueva York to show Mr. Ray-gun that you “cared enough to send your very best.”

Then there is the analogy of the rattlesnake. As Rep. Elizabeth Holzman said in New York, “We are 500,000 today. And if things do not change, we will be 5 million. And if things do not change, we will be 500 million.” Just as your “die-in” at Eastern Market in Detroit was a symptom/expression of your concern, so, New York was an expression of concern on the part of 500–800,000 people. While your activity may have made the CIA, the FBI and the Security Policemen take note, I do not think your demonstration (as good as it was) worried them one-thousandth as much as New York.

If you think that the Freeze is static, if you think that the Freeze is merely political, then I would be ashamed of you. To deny human political nature is to deny humanity. This is not to say that a hooman-bean is all political. But the political is a reflection of and an expression of that human’s persona. The thing that will change the politics is a change in the underlying; the political is a reflection of the person’s attitude. Just laws would reflect a just society. Eventually, a society would grow up enough so that it would not need laws or guides; but we are a long way away from that Ho hum. You know this. You also know that if you study the teachings of Jesus in the synoptic gospels they provide a code of ethics that is akin to the anarchistic belief system in its individualistic-encouraging approach. But it also goes beyond by offering a way of compassion and humanistic interaction that makes the world a much better place.

In summation, all I am saying is: whoever sits on hands and sour-grapes will not change things; whoever seizes opportunities for education and (self-expression) no matter the form, makes a better place for little kids, for flowers and for growing people.

Love,

Michael Gramlich

Highland Park MI

Weak As Usual

Dear Fifth Estate,

Your articles against the nuclear freeze campaign were excellent theoretical criticism, as usual, but weak on practical application, as usual. Even Michael Harrington has pointed out the freeze’s inadequacy (*Democratic Left*, May 1982); the difference is that he’s trying to bring his arguments to people in the mainstream of U.S. political life, an attempt you would denigrate as hopelessly compromised.

By your own admission, you yourselves don't seem to be able to break out of the swamp of stereotyped leftist and pacifist activity that you despise so much. You have done what everyone else has—hold a “die -in,” sponsor a symposium and publish critiques of everyone else's work.

The Grinning Duck symposium (Note: held March 5–7, 1982; see FE #309, June 19, 1982) I admit, sounds like a step in the right direction, but can you sustain it? (You can't even keep up a regular publishing schedule.) Once people have gotten the idea of contesting the rule of capital and the state wherever they find it, what are they to do besides engage in a lot of fragmentary small-group community activities? How can they link up both issues and projects to form a movement that can really confront the power structure, instead of just make noise about it?

Even a movement as large as the German disarmament movement can't go much beyond its narrow range of issues without forming something like a political party (the Greens and the Alternative List) to serve as a nerve center for coalition efforts and to gain a measure of influence on the mainstream political process. Without that kind of political presence, the most they can do is march and riot. The state has demonstrated that it can tolerate a hell of a lot of marching and rioting; what it can't tolerate is a cohesive political movement. Insurrections like May 1968 in France are wonderful, but without a coherent movement and a broad support base they don't sustain themselves.

Your continuing practice of exhorting people to comprehensive libertarian revolutionism, without either proposing strategy and tactics or doing much yourselves besides criticizing others' halting attempts, ends up looking as moralistic as Christianity. Worse than that, it looks like an elaborate justification for noninvolvement. It's easy to be critical when you don't sully your hands in the problems of creating a movement. You sometimes seem to just want to set yourselves up in a pontifical position where, when the worst happens, you can smugly say, “we told you so” as you watch the flash over downtown Detroit.

Love anyway,
Chris Nielsen
Portland, OR

FE Note: “Why We Didn't Sign Your Petition: The Nuclear Freeze” appeared in the June 19, 1982 *Fifth Estate*.

The discussion on technology has appeared in the FE of July 1981, Nov. 1981 and June 19;1982 Check bookstore page for information on ordering back issues.

Related in this issue

See “War without end: A response on the freeze,” FE #310, Fall 1982.

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