

# War without end

## A response on the Freeze

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In response to "Readers dispute FE on Nuclear Freeze issue," FE #310, Fall, 1982 (this issue).

On one point we all seem to be in agreement: the campaign for a nuclear freeze is not enough. So, I find it perplexing that rather than considering its inadequacies as a basis for investigating ways of moving rapidly beyond it (since we also apparently agree that time is very limited), our critics reiterate all of its conventional arguments. None of the specifics of our analysis are discussed. Instead, the Freeze is presented as the embodiment of the movement against nuclear weapons and war, rather than a single tactical approach among many possible ways to create an opposition.

Betzold claims that "the freeze is what is mobilizing people," and both he and Gramlich credit the Freeze for the large turn-out in New York on June 12. I think that it is presumptuous to claim that the freeze mobilized all those people. It would be more accurate to say that the Freeze has ridden a crest of growing concern and opposition to nuclearism and to war, and that it has inherited at least as many of its supporters from this rising awareness of the threat of nuclear war as it has itself actually mobilized.

A widespread mistrust in politicians, the government and technology has begun to surface, and the Freeze has gained many adherents from that phenomenon, but it cannot take credit for it. This is, in my opinion, an important distinction, since it keeps the concern about the nuclear threat from becoming the property of any single "arms control" organization or proposal.

Defenders of the Freeze, in the face of criticism, argue perennially that it is only a "first step," in Betzold's words, "a talking point." But it seems that the Freeze spends most of its time convincing people that it is not a "radical" proposal, that it does not undermine "America's strength"—in other words, that it will not threaten the underlying myths and assumptions of the American state and capitalist society. What good does it do to have a clean-cut, sanitized "talking point" if only the epiphenomena are discussed and not the causes and motivations for U.S. foreign and military policy?

That the Freeze Campaign has educated many people about nuclear weaponry and war and that it enjoys a sweeping popularity is undeniable. But how profound has that education been and how strong is the commitment? There have been many polls, for example, showing massive support for a bilateral freeze, but that support drops significantly when a freeze is linked to the possibility of a weakening of U.S. nuclear "security." Even the New York demonstration, which I attended, had an air of unreality about it, gave the sense of being a mile wide and an inch deep in its opposition to militarism.

The papers that day were splattered with news of mopping-up operations in the Falklands, Begin's invasion of Lebanon, and more violence and terror by U.S. proxies in Central America. In the wake of the New York march, and the obvious impotence of peace movements to stop the outbreak of war, the *Detroit Free Press* editorialized, "Camp David is dead. The United Nations is irrelevant...the crowd in Central Park cries peace. There is plainly no peace and not much security now..." (6/15/82)

Such was the experience of the British disarmament movement when Argentina invaded the Falklands. The CND was sent into a tailspin, and many of the Labor Party politicians who had paid lip service to the peace movement wrapped themselves in the Union Jack and fell into line with Thatcher. That confrontation could have easily become nuclear, and yet the peace movement was incapable of creating a significant opposition to it. Freeze activists in the U.S. need to take a long, hard look at this problem, but most do not. The Freeze continues to surrender to the ideological pillars of U.S. imperial power: national security, bilateralism, arms control negotiations, and electoral politics. I made these observations already in my original article. But perhaps it would be wise to summarize the main points. First of all, it is necessary to see the nuclear freeze for what it is, an arms control proposal among many. It is not even a very profound proposal since it leaves intact the notion of a bilateral freeze, and with it the ideology of national security and of deterrence, which has brought us to the crisis we are in today.

As the German writer Walter Suss has pointed out in an article on NATO and the Warsaw Pact (translated and printed in the Spring 1982 *Telos*, a special issue on European peace movements and the Polish crisis, available through the FE), "...the slogan of bilateral disarmament over the last three decades provided the mystifying ideology behind which armament was carried out. The elastic clause of bilateralism privileges the 'experts,' who generally represent interests contrary to those of the peace movement."

The whole notion of bilateralism is as old as arms control, and has proved as effective in preventing war. It avoids the underlying question of militarism and war and maintains a status quo in which each captive population is left behind its leaders who bargain with the enemy. Such a perspective encourages illusions about the politicians' desire for peace and disarmament.

Treaty after treaty—from the Hague Conference of 1907, to the Kellog-Briand Pact of 1928, to the League of Nations Disarmament Conference of 1932, to the negotiations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union after World War II, has proved to be worth less than the paper it was written on. The freeze proponents who argue that a freeze will at least pressure the government to negotiate in good faith (as many have done) are only promoting such fantasies of arms control.

As Theodore Draper recently observed, "Negotiations are not the answer. They invariably hinge on establishing some form of parity. In this world, no one is going to negotiate himself into inferiority or out of superiority. Once different weapons and even different weapons systems must be evaluated and balanced off against each other, negotiations inevitably degenerate into endlessly futile haggling sessions, brought to a close only by agreement on a crazy quilt of trade-offs and loopholes. Negotiations of this sort become more important for the mere consolation that the deadly antagonists are negotiating than for anything the negotiations may bring forth." ("How Not to Think About Nuclear War," *New York Review of Books*, July 17, 1982) He mentions the Kellog-Briand Pact as an example of the worthlessness of treaty negotiations. "In 1928...sixty-two nations signed a pact outlawing war. Its enforcement was supposed to rest on the moral strength of world opinion. It was signed, celebrated and forgotten."

Alva Myrdal, writing of the negotiations between the Soviet Union and the U.S. in 1946 in *The Game of Disarmament*, reveals the pattern set then in arms negotiation: "Both sides would present proposals for disarmament agreements, of often wholesale dimensions, but would be careful to see to it that these would contain conditions which the opposite side could not accept." In fact, since the end of World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union have met more than 6,000 times to discuss arms control without dismantling a single weapon. And the dismal failure of the United Nations Special Session on Disarmament to even come up with a ritual gesture towards peace shows that none of the major military powers has any intention of giving up one weapon. (For a report on the Special Session, see Susan Jaffe's article, "Why the Special Session Flopped," in *The Nation*, 9/14/82.)

The Freeze does not even touch on the question of national security, does not begin to challenge the legitimacy of the American empire. And, damnation by association or not, the freeze campaign uses as a source material the Kennedy-Hatfield book *Freeze!*, in which the editors argue that "some of the savings from a freeze can be reallocated to improve the readiness and the reliability of our conventional forces." This kind of argument is not an aberration, but a key argument among arms control and freeze proponents, that a freeze represents an alternative way of defending U.S. security and national interest.

By concentrating on the outcome of all-out nuclear war and avoiding the question of conventional forces, the rapid deployment forces, the draft, U.S. intervention abroad, and the causes of militarism and war, the freeze contributes to the mystification and thereby paves the way to war. In a real war crisis, such as an intervention in Latin

America, or an attack on Syria (which was actually seriously proposed by staff members of the National Security Council during the spring of 1981), or a widening of the Iran-Iraq War, or any number of unforeseen possibilities, the Freeze movement (and much of what we saw in New York) would evaporate in a matter of days.

The Freezers, by ignoring U.S. intervention and military bases around the world, by their complicit silence on the war in Lebanon, and rather by concentrating instead on hypothetical nuclear attacks on Dayton, Ohio or Tulsa, Oklahoma, give the impression of chasing after a “dummy missile.” It is sort of an ultimate bomb shelter fad, which won’t do anything to prevent a war from taking place, but which will only lull people to sleep, renew their trust in politicians like Kennedy and others who sell themselves as peace candidates, and in farcical arms control negotiations, as well as bolster an already collapsing legitimacy by registering people to vote. No war has ever been stopped by a referendum. If it could be done, voting would be outlawed. War is a fundamentally undemocratic phenomenon.

This is why, given the present circumstances, Betzold is right when he argues that “Even a Freeze would mean profound changes,” and why there will be no freeze, not even if the politicians presently advocating it are elected to office, unless it puts U.S. military power at an advantage. It is not a question of politicians, but of an entire system. And a “talking point” which does not talk to people about the nature of that system and the real causes of war is doing nothing to prepare anyone to prevent war from breaking out. “We are under no illusions about the political process,” claims Betzold, but the nuclear freeze campaign does everything to foster such illusions in the people that it is attempting to reach.

All of the correspondents, but particularly Betzold and Nielsen, make a false dichotomy between theory (represented by the Fifth Estate’s criticisms of the nuclear freeze campaign) and practical action (embodied in various reformist campaigns, the nuclear freeze, the activities of Michael Harrington, etc.). Betzold pleads, “Show me how it works, not in theory, not in print, but in practice, in the world.” And Nielsen sees in coalition campaigns a coherence which can neither exist in “theoretical” criticism nor in insurrections.

I cannot help but suspect that when Betzold refers to “the world,” he is referring to the world...of electoral politics, of business-as-usual, of all the same old knee-jerk responses to the threat facing us all, whereas Nielsen’s conception of “coherence” is the coherence of this world and all its presuppositions, the same political cycle of reformist betrayal and political and social defeat. I consider the activities of the FE, and of the anti-nuke war conference we participated in, to be practical activity, just as the activities they defend have an unstated theoretical basis—that by presenting a watered-down program palatable to all but the most reactionary forces, they can eventually lead people to radical conclusions somewhere down the road. For people who claim that there is so little time, this seems a rather roundabout approach, not to mention a trifle manipulative.

(An example—now that the nuclear freeze referendum has won in the state of Wisconsin, what will happen now? Not in theory, not on paper, but in the world? Once the message is sent to Reagan that the people of Wisconsin want a freeze, what will they do, wait for the other forty-nine states to pass a freeze? Will they await marching orders from the Freeze campaign organizers? Will they begin to occupy the military installations and the war materiel industries once they have lost their illusions about the political process? Or will they vote in “peace candidates,” or pass another referendum next year which is more, or less, radical than the first? What is their next step? I am genuinely curious.)

The same desperation that drives self-described radicals and anarchists to become runners for reformist political campaigns which in no way challenge the ideological edifice of this society, inspires us to raise the criticisms that we raise. I think that people are ready to hear more fundamental critiques than the Freeze activists offer. They had better be, or they won’t have a chance of keeping out of a war and eventually getting obliterated. But whereas taking part in the activities presented by this society as “practical,” “coherent,” and “realistic,” is considered practice “in the world,” the criticisms and doubts of a small group also just at a “talking point” is written off as “theoretical” and “sitting on one’s hands.” I for one refuse to be blackmailed by this dichotomy.

Perhaps Nielsen is right, and we won’t be able to sustain our activities. After all, our numbers are very small and our perspective is very uncommon. But whether or not we can sustain our critique and our practice, and whether or not we can widen it and extend it, to link our projects and our desires with those of others “to form a movement that can really confront the power structure, instead of just make noise about it” (Nielsen), has no bearing on the importance and the practicality of what we are saying. And we would have a much greater chance of sustaining a

radical vision and concretizing it if the many radicals who have been recruited to the Freeze would stop settling for “first steps” and start investigating the possibilities of next steps and start talking about what they desire and not what they think is simply possible within the given terrain.

As Rudolf Bahro and Michael Vester pointed out (in the same *Telos* symposium cited above), “When all proceeds without interruption, World War III will erupt.

Hence, this is clearly not the time for opportunistic *Realpolitik*, and not the time for what is viewed as ‘feasible’ within the power apparatus, within the system-conformist brain of the megamachine. Left to itself, this structure is incapable of producing anything but its own program for catastrophe.”

The world political and military situation is getting deadlier and more volatile every day. Several wars are going on at once, and could easily explode into larger conflicts. As even an analyst in *Newsweek* magazine realized in late June, “If the world can’t put out its brush fires, more Falklands and Lebanons will flare. And if nobody stops the smaller wars, who on earth will prevent another big one?” (6/28/82)

Of course, the United States is already at war, in Central America specifically. But whether one wishes to describe this period as one in which we are at war (as Nixon has) or as a “pre-war” period, as Presidential Adviser Eugene Rostow has declared, very little seems to stand in the way of this country actually sending troops or naval ships into a conflict and eventually getting drawn into an all-out confrontation from which there will be no return.

In 1914, there was widespread opposition to war, but when marching orders came down, it all but vanished. As Marc Ferro noted in his introduction to his book on World War I, *The Great War*, some “unanswered questions” remain about that period. “What were people’s aspirations before the war?” he asks. How did those people who opposed war suddenly find themselves without the means to resist it? I think that for us these questions remain largely unanswered. But I sense that we are running short on time, and we are going to have to take some qualitative leaps in the next period or we are going to be left behind by events.

The lesson to be learned from the Falklands/ Malvinas war is that a war is fought to divert a crisis in the legitimacy of the rule of capital and its institutions. Or, as John Zerzan pointed out in relation to 1914, “The scale and conditions of the war had to be equal to the force straining against society...” (See “Origins and Meaning of World War I,” *Telos* No. 49, Fall 1981) This society faces a legitimacy crisis of great dimensions today—its economy is collapsing and its institutions are in disarray. We can either contribute—in a large way or a small way, whatever our resources—to that deepening crisis of legitimacy and participate in the development of a vision of opposition to this society, or we can serve to shore up its institutions and its ideology.

Without the emergence of a conscious resistance to war linked to a resistance to capitalist institutions, the rage and the disaffection we see everywhere today will be channeled into support for military adventure, as it was in Argentina and Britain. Therefore, opposition to war must go beyond the boundaries of the alternatives presented to it by arms control, the concern for “national security,” and the initiatives of politicians to devise “alternative military strategies” to defend the interests of the capitalist nation state.

A massive opposition must emerge, but in order to really stop war, it must move past the realm of politics and go to where the “first strike” has already taken place, in the war-zone of everyday life, in the factories, offices and schools, in the unemployment lines and welfare lines, where that society which makes war and which thrives on war is reproduced by its victims. Unless the war is stopped there, no arms control proposal will save us.

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