

# Open Letter to the Disarmament Movement

Norman Solomon

1985

Late 1985

Dear People:

North America's disarmament movement has gone from momentum to defeat during the first half of the 1980s, but we have not heard much candor about the dimensions of the loss. Arms-race boosters see little reason to taunt floundering adversaries—who tend to be busy cheering for the disarmament team while steering clear of somber assessments. Increasingly, the anti-nuclear movement's propaganda of the word is being outmatched by the nuclear establishment's propaganda of the deed; disarmament advocates decry while thermonuclear advocates deploy.

As resolve to achieve drastic change becomes corroded, so does vocabulary. To the extent that a "disarmament" movement calls for "arms control," it is furthering deadly confusion—particularly with U.S. first-strike nuclear weaponry going into place around the world—since arms control has always aided the arms race. If, as in our more lucid moments we observe, modern nuclear weapons are instruments of unparalleled genocide, then to urge arms control today could turn out to be akin to having urged "gas chamber control" in Europe five decades ago.

The disarmament movement's timidity belies its rhetoric. We say how urgent the nuclear weapons issue is, yet we move so slowly and with such caution that the canyon between our professed sense of urgency and our deeds continues to widen. (By analogy: Insisting that the basement is ablaze, while urging everyone to write letters to the fire department, will hardly inspire the organizing of a vigorous bucket brigade.) The mainstream of the disarmament movement has produced its own credibility gap, and no amount of words or political action committees can do more than paper it over.

Anyone who contends that the keys to disarmament can be found in the elections of 1986 and 1988 (and beyond them, presumably, of 1990, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1998 and the Twenty-first Century) is whistling past a very large nuclear graveyard in which several billion unmarked graves have already been plotted. Corporate-owned mass media, which do such a shabby job of evaluating their own credibility, can be expected to tout scenarios for traditional political progress. But there are solid reasons to believe that if peace activists confine themselves to lawful forms of organizing and action, nuclear war will occur.

Nonviolence, if it is to be effective, must develop new forms of community, social organization and strategy that grasp a challenging and crucial reality: Nonviolent civil disobedience and various other forms of non-cooperation are necessities in a world of first-strike nuclear weapons. With all of its pitfalls and difficulties, assertive nonviolence—disregarding legal constraints—holds out our best hope for the quantum leaps of consciousness and activity needed to overcome the momentum of the nuclear arms race.

Meanwhile, it may seem tempting to downplay such issues as racism and economic exploitation. Yet they have much to do with daily life in our own communities—and are central to the causes and purposes of U.S. militarism sustaining the world's premier nuclear arsenal and supporting brutal repression in places like Central America, Chile, South Africa, the Philippines, and South Korea. This militarism is integral to the steady drift toward worldwide holocaust; anti-nuclear sentiment which ignores its basic elements will be riding on a streamlined bandwagon

that isn't going much of anywhere. Such a bandwagon may indeed manage to avoid offending political moderates as it proclaims that a nuclear war must never be allowed to happen. But it will be a flimsy and superficial force for preventing one.

In retrospect, it should become painfully clear that we believed our success could be easier than it must be. We signed petitions, wrote letters, voted, attended rallies, put bumper stickers on our cars, pinned buttons on our lapels, tacked posters on our walls. And we kept track of what media pundits had to say about what such activities meant. Sometimes our lives changed in the process. But not enough.

For a long time now we have weighed our competing fears—of global holocaust and of personal legal/financial/social jeopardy. We desire to avoid both. But to bell the nuclear cat requires risking the system's claws.

"The possibility of liberation which is always real is also always painful, since it involves such an overhauling of all that gave us our identity," James Baldwin wrote a quarter-century ago.

Addressing racial issues, his words also aptly describe the predicaments and possibilities of disarmament advocates who, in the mid-1980s, can only overcome their fears by responding to them bravely: "We will need every ounce of moral stamina we can find. For everything is changing, from our notion of politics to our notion of ourselves, and we are certain, as we begin history's strangest metamorphosis, to undergo the torment of being forced to surrender far more than we ever realized we had accepted."

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Fifth Estate #321, Indian Summer, 1985

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