

THE NUCLEAR WEAPONS FREEZE MOVEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF DISSENT, VIOLENCE AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE AMERICAN CONTEXT

J. STUART LEMLE

The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking, and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophe.

—Albert Einstein, 1946

I Introduction

With names ranging from War Resisters League to Peacemakers and tactics spanning production of educational films to violent direct action, over 3000 distinct organizations have self-generated in the United States in the last three years with the principal objective of preventing nuclear war by curtailing the international nuclear arms race. Many have expressly adopted *Einstein's warning as their rallying cry* and, with virtually no coordination, have succeeded in establishing a true political movement dedicated to utilizing legislative processes to the achievement of major societal changes.

The effort to forestall a nuclear holocaust surely is not a result of current anxiety: from the day in August 1945, when Hiroshima was flattened by a single explosive, individuals and groups in the United States and Europe have actively sought this objective. Every government and political leader, has vocally espoused this policy, some with more good faith efforts than others. What is unique about the recently revitalized anti-war disarmament movement is that it already has achieved considerable success in mobilizing public opinion and effecting legislative impact, entirely based on grass roots, anti-Establishment political action.

The subject of dissent, violence and development in the context of the contemporary American society is a difficult one to analyze because of the rare, usually random nature of "violence" and the special definition that must be provided to "development". Consequently, it is particularly vexing to identify an appropriate American example of this equa-

tion that is suitable for analysis as a case study by this seminar. This anti-nuclear arms movement closely serves this objective. It has the additional benefit of involving issues and tactics of considerable relevance to the Indian context. Finally, it continues to evolve and thus permits the seminar participants to postulate alternative strategies to achieve an unknown conclusion, much like the military war game activities.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the basic tenets of the anti-nuclear arms movement and the tactics that have been employed to achieve them. To the extent there is public dissent on a political issue with the intended effect of altering the course of American development, and violence is being utilized as a tool to express it, we should find this illustration as a useful means to appraise the equation that is the subject of this portion of the seminar.

II The Objectives of the Freeze Movement

While the plethora of anti-nuclear weapons/war organizations that have been established in the past three years have espoused a variety of goals and of vehicles to achieve them, the most widely accepted common denominator appears to be an immediate freeze of nuclear weaponry, followed by an orderly destruction of existing arsenals. It is that consensual position that is the focus of this paper.

Most simply, the intent of the activists is to induce the United States Government to undertake with the Soviet Union (1) a bilateral, verifiable and comprehensive halt to the production and deployment of nuclear weapons and then (2) good faith negotiations to reduce existing weaponry. While the most radical—and violent—of the “peace” forces insist on immediate unilateral disarmament steps by the United States, the more widely endorsed position requires prior agreement with the Soviet Government.¹

Pending a bilateral agreement, the programme calls for immediate suspension of financial support for the testing, production and deployment of additional weapons (*e.g.*, the Cruise and Pershing II “Euromissiles”), presently scheduled for December 1983. These first steps are intended to elicit a corresponding response from the Soviets to further the negotiation process, though are not conditional upon it. The ancillary purpose of the freeze movement is to educate the American public to the fact that a nuclear attack would not be survivable nor would it be worth surviving. To counter Reagan Administration scenarios of “limited nuclear war” and

1. Each new item on the disarmament agenda seemingly rekindles the debate as to whether “unilateralism” is tolerable. The response, for public consumption, is routinely negative, with sufficient rationalizations to satisfy all but the most conservative critics. Upon closer scrutiny, the validity of this response occasionally appears dubious.

“nuclear warning shots,” the activists contend that it would be impossible to contain the antagonists after the first use of a nuclear weapon, whether by design or accident. Further, they have amassed considerable data to demonstrate that the information being provided the public grossly understates the health, safety and socio-economic effects of even a small scale nuclear exchange. They note, for example, the incapability of a severely crippled medical profession to simultaneously handle the millions of instant victims and the false and dangerous sense of security created by the civil defense programmes that counsel survival techniques in case of nuclear attack. Similarly, they publish materials that graphically detail the disease, psychological stress, and total breakdown of social organization that would likely confront those few who would not be killed in the war.

Finally a sizeable component of the freeze movement insists that disarmament be “linked” to other issues—*i.e.*, the nuclear strength question can only be handled in the context of the resolution of other pressing policy matters. Most of the issues are viewed as directly related to the curtailment of the nuclear arms race—for instance, criticism of policy decision that destabilize U.S.-U.S.S.R. relations or that accelerate the deployment of non-nuclear (conventional) weapons. Others are more distant, such as demands for government funds for corporate “conversion plans” that utilize weapons manufacturers’ technology and skilled workers to produce socially “useful” products. Some are as remote as trying nuclear arms reduction to Soviet actions in Eastern Europe or Afghanistan.

What is most striking about the movement to precipitate a bilateral freeze on nuclear weaponry is that its basic principles do not appear to be of the extreme, controversial nature of such other occasionally violent dissident undertakings as that to end the Vietnam War or the military draft. The demand for an American policy commitment to limit and reduce nuclear arms only when the Soviet Union makes a similar commitment is the essence of the official pronouncements on strategic arms limitation of both countries for the past 20 years. Nevertheless, recent American presidents have been increasingly resistant to accommodating these demands and, in response, the tactics used by the activists have escalated reciprocally. The following section reviews those efforts and then their impact on the formulation of public policy.

III The Tools Employed to Effect a Basic Change in United States Policy on a Nuclear Defense

The means being utilized to achieve the goals of the freeze movement can be described in three categories: (a) public education, (b) traditional political process, and (c) coercion. Though only the last has involved the use of violence, each will be summarized here in order to gain a more complete perspective.

A. Public education

While a major strength of this dissident movement is that its origin and continuing support derives from a large number of common citizens who have responded, largely on emotional grounds, to the disarmament rallying call, that fact poses a significant challenge. Not only are the substantive issues complex but the strategy being pursued by the movement is rather sophisticated. In order to both gain the commitment of its own citizen army and mobilize it, the movement must maintain a considerable educational programme. These efforts have been as simplistic as poster advertisements in the New York City subway and public endorsements by notable persons, such as famous actors, a list of 97 Nobel Prize recipients, and an award-winning basketball coach ("Winning the national championship was a great thrill. But there's one contest which body wins—the international arms race.")

Several of the major national nuclear disarmament organizations have focused entirely on developing more intellectually oriented educational material. For example, SANE has produced a large quantity of substantive literature and programming, including a nationally syndicated radio series, "Consider the Alternatives and Insights." Ground Zero, a group entirely devoted to facilitating public understanding of the nuclear disarmament issue and awareness of the positions of public officials, has sold over 250,000 copies of its 1982 *Nuclear War: What's In It For You?*. Among the numerous publications available, *Nuclear Times* provides a monthly compilation of articles, lists of resources, calendar of activities around the United States, and serves a clearinghouse function for coordinating the efforts of the numerous disparate groups involved in the "movement."

It appears that this public education endeavour has been well conceived and implemented. A large proportion of it has been provided with basic information on the threat of nuclear war and the alternatives. In April, 1982, Ground Zero coordinated "Ground Zero Week," a nationwide series of educational events in which over one million people in 600 cities participated. Millions of other citizens have been exposed over the subsequent year to television and print media discussions of the subject as well as involved in rallies, college teachings, symposiums, lectures, and special academic programmes. In recent opinion polls, public recognition of the issue has been extraordinarily high; a *New York Times* poll found that 87% of the American public would support a bilateral nuclear weapons freeze that would give neither country the strategic advantage. As the following section suggests, the fact that the disarmament activists have succeeded in disseminating a large body of useful material is most immediately apparent in the effect of the newly informed public opinion on the political process.

B. Political process

The principle of those agitating for nuclear disarmament has been to influence the national policy formulation process by having an obvious impact on the electoral process. The programme was inaugurated in early 1981 with the successful effort to gain favourable votes on the issue of a nuclear weapons freeze by a large number of New England town meetings (where, symbolically at least, democracy is most authentic). Over the next 18 months, the question of whether the United States should pursue a bilateral freeze with the Soviet Union was endorsed by 11 state legislatures and then, after intense lobbying, by a startling majority of citizens in November 1982, non-binding plebiscites across the country. In the largest referendum ever in the United States on any single issue, over one-quarter of the population had the opportunity to indicate their dissent from American policy on the nuclear arms race. A similar 1982 referendum in Canada demonstrated the support of that country's population for a freeze by a three to one majority.

With these early successes, the freeze activists began planning for their major political objective—influencing the 1984 Presidential and Congressional elections. The Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign, the coordinating body for the movement, utilized its 1983 annual convention to announce its new action programme: "From Popular Mandate to Public Policy." At least eight political action committees (PACs) have been formed to raise funds for selective 1984 campaign contributions. Three elements comprise the movement's strategy: direct endorsement and financial support of candidates, election of freeze proponents as delegates to the national presidential nominating conventions, and provision of volunteer support to pro-freeze candidates. Each is a time-honoured component of a lobbying plan; their uniqueness in this context is in the breadth of public interest and involvement in their implementation. Well over a million people actively participated in "Project 84", far more than in any previous citizen-based lobbying effort.

A secondary political priority is to have an immediate effect on public policy through the legislative process. In 1982, Senators Edward Kennedy and Mark Hatfield introduced a Congressional Resolution which urged the President to actively pursue with the Soviet Union a nuclear weapons freeze and then substantial disarmament. The resolution failed to gain a favorable vote by even the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and a parallel measure was defeated on the floor of the House of Representatives. Similarly, the anti-nuclear weapons groups can claim credit for inducing Congress to delete less than \$ 1 billion (3.5%) from the current Defense Department budget for such weapon systems. The freeze proponents redoubled their efforts to influence the 1982 Congressional elections and they did it with obvious success. Three months ago, in a dramatic vote, the

House reversed itself and, by a significant margin, affirmed its support for a freeze.

The effect to date on the Reagan administration of the movement's success in the national referendums, 1982 Congressional elections and 1983 Freeze Resolution has been negligible. The Administration's official position is that a freeze of the current nuclear balance of power would greatly advantage the Soviets and would severely undermine its attempts to negotiate a comprehensive arms agreement. The 1984 Defense Department budget proposal of \$ 274 billion called for \$ 110 billion for "general purpose forces" (a 4% increase in real dollar terms) and \$ 28 billion for nuclear forces (a 30% increase in real dollars). The latter figure represents an 100% increase in four years. Despite the Administration's occasional rhetoric supporting the concept of a bilateral, verifiable, and comprehensive freeze on nuclear weaponry, the clear weight of its actions have been to the contrary and pose the principal challenge to the movement.

C. Coercion

The use of force, both for symbolic and practical purposes, has assumed a small but significant role in the process of American development since (and including) the country's founding. Most recently, the organized struggles to eliminate race and sex-based discrimination, and to terminate United States involvement in Vietnam and the military draft all relied on a combination of tactics, including force. The movement to induce an end to the nuclear arms race has adopted this pattern, with similarly small but dramatic violent components.

Non-violent direct action has assumed a number of modes. Probably the most unique has been the adamant refusal of every major hospital in New York City to implement the government-ordered emergency preparedness plans for the contingency of nuclear war. The Defense Department's programme presumed the ability of the medical profession to efficiently cope with the health effects of such warfare; the hospitals' governing boards flatly rejected that presumption, noting that it was absurd to conceive of having the capability to treat the millions of projected, simultaneous casualties and that to presume otherwise only served to weaken the deterrent to using the weapons. An analogous argument has been used successfully in a number of communities to bar the expenditure of funds for civil defence purposes.

Refusal to pay government taxes, initiated here in Boston at a pre-Revolution Tea Party and later romanticized nearby by Thoreau, has become a much publicized component of the nuclear disarmament movement. The National War Tax Resistance Coordinating Committee has shifted its objective from terminating on-going wars to preventing new ones by cutting off government revenues. While minor in terms of numbers, the

tax resisters readily achieved their immediate goal of receiving considerable media and political attention.

The tactics intended to more directly threaten the established order have included the blockage and occupation of military bases, missile silos, and weapons manufacturers involved in the testing and storage of nuclear arms. The British activists have well developed the use of "peace camps," which recently have been adopted by their American counterparts: the creation of permanent encampments at the entrance to facilities involved in the production or deployment of nuclear weapons. On occasion, that vigil has been transformed into violent confrontations, resulting in large numbers of arrests of local, only minimally politicized citizens.

Several groups are devoted solely to violent means to induce policy changes. Direct Action, an amorphous, clandestine organization, has claimed credit for a number of bombings of industrial facilities involved in the production of nuclear arms-related equipment, most recently the explosion at the Litton Systems plant in Canada that manufactures guidance systems for American cruise missiles. Similar steps have been threatened but rarely implemented by others seeking to dramatically focus public attention on the issue.

IV Conclusion

Dissent and the operation of legitimate channels for factoring it into the political decision-making processes have become an American hallmark and a linchpin of American "development." As a function of that phenomenon, confrontation, with disruption of the social order as its objective, has become a standard element in the channeling activity.

On the nuclear disarmament question, every such channel has been utilized with notable success except the critical one: inducing the Executive Branch to alter its policies. During the Williamsburg Summit *The New York Times* headline read: "Arms First Topic as Leaders Gather for Summit Talks." Many observers noted that the real agenda item was a means of maintaining military vigilance and the talk of pursuing disarmament was for public consumption and insincere. For example, Senator Kennedy stated: "The promise we hear is arms control...but the reality we see is MX missiles and continuing nuclear escalation."

While the coercive/threatening tactics of the nuclear weapons freeze movement are gaining the most public attention, they have not been credited with having any greater success. They do, however, highlight the tragic irony that intimidating force must be employed in the effort to prevent the use of even more destructive violence.