

Introduction:

The Politics of the Nuclear Weapons Freeze

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1. *The Context*

The sweeping electoral victory of Governor Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party in 1980 changed the tune and direction of American defense debate. Reagan was riding a wave of American nationalism emerging from frustration over the lost Vietnam war and the hostages drama in Iran. The public and the media projected a picture of the United States as weak, humiliated and, in general, not respected in the world. Iran and Afghanistan, Ayatollah Khomeini and SALT II became symbols of the futility of listening to and negotiating with other parties. Instead, it was now time for American strength, tough words and good deeds. The perceptions were perhaps not the most accurate. The Carter administration had, in fact, engaged itself in a rather remarkable, consistent effort at settling conflicts, establishing contacts and building a new and different image of the United States: during the Carter administration not one single American soldier died in battle, in contrast to almost all previous American administrations during this century.

President Reagan immediately set out to implement his program of 'restoring respect' for the United States: the major vehicles were a rapid build-up of the military forces, unprecedented in American peacetime history, and a simplified picture of world issues, the Soviet

Union being the root cause of most problems. If America was strong enough, the Soviet Union would not be obstructive and the rest of the world would listen to the U.S.

2. *The emergence of the movement*

When the hostages were safely returned to the United States, public attention came to focus on the conflict in El Salvador. The Reagan administration presented documents to support its contention that the armed opposition was supplied and directed from Cuba and the Soviet Union. Increased American involvement was initiated. However, all of this sounded too familiar to American mass media, which, remembering their uncritical attitude in the initial phases of the Vietnam war, began to ask pertinent questions and send reporters on challenging investigations. A new fear began to arise: maybe there were also dangers in American 'strength' as there previously were fears arising from its 'weakness'?

During the summer and early autumn of 1981, the determination of the Reagan administration to implement its military rearmament program was evident and it was successfully maneuvered through Congress. As this was accompanied by statements from the President and other top leaders on the use of nuclear weapons, on survivability in nuclear war and a renewed emphasis on civil defense measures, worries intensified. When hospitals all over the country received instructions to

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reserve beds for national emergencies, physicians too became alarmed. Could it be that this administration was not only trying to deter the Soviet Union, as previous presidencies had done, but was actually planning to fight a nuclear war?

At the same time as demonstrations took place all over Western Europe, teach-ins were organized on American campuses, church groups began to investigate the issue, physicians began to lecture an ill-informed but alarmed public about the medical effects of nuclear war, and petitions were being circulated; the central theme of all these groups was: freeze the nuclear arms race at present levels. Enough is enough!

The anti-nuclear forces won a crucial battle in Vermont, where on the traditional Town Meeting Day, important issues are voted upon at local community meetings. The question of a nuclear weapons freeze was raised in 193 townships. The proposed resolution, asking the big powers to freeze the nuclear weapon arsenals at present levels, was passed in 160 towns and was rejected only in 18. As other towns had passed the same resolution previously, it meant that by March 2, 1982 the nuclear weapons freeze proposal had been accepted by 175 towns in the small, rural state of Vermont. As Vermont has a national reputation of being a conservative state, this decision had national repercussions, fueling the nuclear weapon freeze campaign all over the country.

An immediate effect of the Vermont decision was to alert and increase support for the nuclear weapons freeze in the U.S. Congress, giving Senators Kennedy and Hatfield additional support in the Senate and House for their version of the proposal.

In April, it was clear that the nuclear freeze would be on the ballot for the November 1982 elections in California; in May the same was true for Michigan. On June 12, 1982 one of the largest demonstrations in American history was arranged in New York, in conjunction with the Second Special Session of the United Nations on Disarmament. An estimated 800,000 people marched peacefully through New York and met in Central Park.

In late June, a version of the nuclear freeze proposal was endorsed by the Democratic Party National Conference in Philadelphia, and in early August the freeze proposal was strongly supported but narrowly defeated in the House of Representatives (204:202 votes). By that time, however, it was clear that the nuclear weapons freeze would be up for referendum in seven states, allowing about one quarter of all American voters to express their opinion on the issue. Such a large coordinated referendum is without precedent in American political history.

Thus, in less than a year the public debate over American defense policy has shifted drastically. In May 1982, President Reagan offered to negotiate with the Soviet Union on strategic nuclear weapons and in early June made clear that the United States would not 'undercut' the SALT agreements, only shortly before described by his Secretary of State as 'fatally flawed'.

Although the public debate has changed, the political decisions have not. In late July, the Democratically controlled House of Representatives passed a record military budget. Within the administration, plans for fighting a prolonged nuclear war were being perfected. The initial positions taken by the United States and the Soviet Union in the strategic arms talks were far apart and did not promise any early result, if anything at all.

Thus, after an intensive period of campaigning, with some spectacular and surprising successes, the nuclear freeze movement faces a protracted struggle. Disarmament will not come from one day to another, and not even a freeze at present levels is easily achieved.

3. The nuclear weapons freeze proposal

The freeze proposal appears in different forms in different contexts, but the basic proposition is identical all over the United States: The two big powers are asked to 'adopt a mutual freeze on the testing, production and deployment of nuclear weapons, and of missiles and new aircraft designed primarily to deliver nuclear

weapons'. Also, the nuclear weapons freeze should be verifiable and be regarded as a first step towards reducing the nuclear arsenals. Although the resolution seldom carries a date on which to be adopted, it is generally regarded to be as immediate an undertaking as possible.

The freeze concept is easily understood publicly and, of course, assumes a stop of the nuclear arms race at *present levels*. It is, then, not a disarmament measure, at least not in the first round. However, it contrasts sharply with the stand taken by the Reagan administration, which suggests that a 'freeze now' would cement Soviet superiority and be disadvantageous to the United States. Thus, President Reagan would favour a 'freeze later' when two things have taken place: when the United States has learned to balance the alleged superior Soviet forces and when the two superpowers have agreed to actually reduce their nuclear arsenals, presumably to a lower level than now is the case. It appears, however, that the Reagan administration has had difficulties in convincing the public that the Soviet Union is in any meaningful way ahead of the United States. The 'freeze now' proposal, in other words, makes sense as the superpowers' mutual vulnerability is too obvious. Rather, it appears that many understand the Reagan counter-proposals to be part of a delaying tactic, hoping to defuse some of the public enthusiasm about the freeze.

However, the question of the *second (and following) steps* becomes important, as the freeze proposal clearly is aimed at achieving a reduction below present levels. In his contribution below, Professor Seymour Melman argues that a freeze, under most optimistic assumptions, could not be implemented until 1987, by which time the arsenals of nuclear weapons would be immense compared to present levels. Thus, he supports more comprehensive approaches.

A proposal that explicitly addresses the question what to do in a second step is the one presented by Congressman Gore from Tennessee. Gore envisages a 15 year freeze and reduction agreement, the first five years freezing

at present levels and the next ten years designedly removing the most destabilizing strategic nuclear weapons, MIRVed land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). As a matter of fact, the number of warheads would remain approximately the same, but the forces would increasingly be moved into submarines, which are less vulnerable, hence maintaining the retaliatory second strike capability – the premise of nuclear deterrence.

A particularly important feature of the freeze proposal, probably accounting largely for its success, has been its emphasis on *bilateral measures*: both the United States and the Soviet Union are expected to 'adopt' a freeze. Mostly, this has been interpreted to be a negotiated settlement, as is clearly expressed in Senator Edward Kennedy's speech. As such this is not a dramatically new step. SALT I and SALT II could both be seen as partial freeze agreements. SALT I held the number of launchers of nuclear weapons at the then existing levels. These numbers have now remained the same for ten years. SALT II tried to address the more difficult question of the asymmetries in the nuclear profiles of the two sides as well as handling the intricacies created by MIRVing, i.e. the augmentation in the number of nuclear warheads. Eventually, SALT II would have frozen launchers at somewhat lower levels than present but with a higher number of nuclear warheads. Yet by 1985, a freeze would, in effect, have been operative. The freeze proposal, although much more comprehensive than SALT I and SALT II, thus rests on an already established praxis.

However, negotiations do not easily arrive at a positive result. At the negotiation table, small numerical discrepancies suddenly become major political obstacles. Thus, it could be of interest to explore other ways in which the big powers could 'adopt' a mutual freeze. Professor Jerome Wiesner from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology argues eloquently in his contribution for the United States to declare unilaterally a moratorium on the production, testing and deployment of new nuclear weapons. If the Soviet Union responded to such a challenge, a mutual freeze would have

been instituted without negotiations, and at a much faster pace than would ever be the case with bilateral negotiations.

Much of the discussion on strategic arms control has concentrated on the question of *verification*. The 1972 and 1979 strategic arms control agreements were to be supervised by national technical means, but in particular the 1979 agreement also provided for ways of preventing the parties from hiding information from one another. In the enclosed contribution by Mark Niedergang, the basic arguments for the verifiability of the nuclear weapon freeze are outlined. As the freeze proposal suggests a halt to testing, production and deployment of nuclear weapons, it can basically lean on the experiences and provisions of other agreements; in addition to the two cited above, we can also mention the draft Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. As to underground nuclear testing, highly reliable methods seem to be available and acceptable to the parties concerned. Also, the deployment stage of major missiles can be verified through the aid of satellites. More intricate, and daring, is the proposition of a production halt. Obviously, such a prohibition would be crucial to the agreement, as clandestine production would immediately undermine the entire concept of the freeze. Niedergang suggests precedents for verifiable production bans, but it is hard to expect such halts to last without provisions for on-site inspection. However, the Soviet Union now seems to accept such procedures in principle.

A most interesting aspect of the freeze is the inclusion of a *freeze on testing of missiles*. This is an avenue that until now has not been explored as extensively as, for instance, the testing of nuclear explosives. Professor Miroslav Nincic indicates some of the important advantages of such a flight test ban. Obviously, such a ban would be verifiable, and it would, as Professor Nincic makes clear, probably be critical in curbing the strategic arms race.

4. *The future*

The nuclear weapons freeze proposal has released an immense potential for popular activity and channeled public anxiety into constructive action. It has stimulated a serious discussion on many related issues outside the small circles of experts. Thus, four leading defense and foreign policy decision-makers from previous administrations suggested in early 1982 that the West could now start considering a declaration *not to be the first to use nuclear weapons*.¹ In exchange, they argued, the West would have to strengthen its conventional forces in Europe. However, closer scrutiny suggests that this is not necessarily the most logical conclusion. A no-first-use pledge can be made in conjunction with an agreed balanced force reduction, rather than with destabilizing one-sided force increases. It is anyhow not rational to substitute the race in nuclear weapons with a race in conventional weapons under the pretense of doubtful balance computations; Professor P. Terrence Hopmann outlines a plausible approach to this problem.

Also, the question of *anti-satellite warfare* has been brought to the forefront, not least as a result of the successful American launching of the space shuttle as well as Soviet manned space expeditions. The existing satellites are of utmost importance for the verification of any arms control agreement. Also, they could play a central role in fighting a nuclear war. Threats to them would, thus, potentially impair verification as well as increase fear about the intentions of the other party. Ken Johnson points to the urgency of also freezing the arms race in space as a complement to the arms freeze on earth.

The nuclear weapons freeze proposal has suddenly broadened the American public debate on defense issues. The Reagan administration has had to change its vocabulary and try to demonstrate its commitment to arms control. It has been forced to present seemingly radical proposals for reduction. However, at the same time it has moved ahead with its vast military acquisition program without much concern for its effect on future arms control, national education, welfare, housing or employment. Al-

though a significant shift in the debate has occurred and hundreds of thousands of people have become involved, more is needed. After all, Ronald Reagan pursues his program and Ronald Reagan remains in power.

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NOTE

1. McGeorge Bundy, George F. Kennan, Robert S. McNamara and Gerard Smith, 'Nuclear Weapons and the Atlantic Alliance', *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1982.