The Nuclear Freeze and Its Impact

Arms Control Today

Lawrence S. Wittner

Thirty years ago, Randall Forsberg, a young defense and disarmament researcher, launched the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign. Designed to stop the drift toward nuclear war through a U.S.-Soviet agreement to stop the testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons, the freeze campaign escalated into a mass movement that swept across the United States. It attracted the support of nearly all peace groups, as well as that of mainstream religious, professional, and labor organizations.

In addition, the freeze concept secured the backing of most of the general public and was made part of the Democratic Party’s presidential campaign platform. By the early 1990s, despite fierce opposition from the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, the freeze campaign, bolstered by the activities of nuclear disarmament groups at home and abroad, had succeeded in securing its objectives and in building a grassroots, long-term disarmament organization in the United States.

Background

As a keen supporter of peace and nuclear disarmament, Forsberg had been giving talks to peace groups since 1975. Convinced that they needed greater unity of action and attainable goals, she suggested in mid-1979 that they coalesce behind two objectives: a nuclear freeze and a nonintervention regime. Both, she believed, would “fundamentally change the nature of government policies.” In December, when addressing the annual meeting of Mobilization for Survival, a major anti-nuclear organization of that era, she scrapped the nonintervention idea and focused instead on the nuclear freeze. Actually, Mobilization for Survival and the major groups backing it—the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), Clergy and Laity Concerned (CALC), and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR)—were already promoting a U.S. moratorium on nuclear weapons production and deployment. Therefore, as Forsberg recalled, she told the assemblage that if peace activists turned this unilateral moratorium into a bilateral one, “the great majority of the American people would completely agree with you. And you could change the world!”[1]

Forsberg’s speech served as a catalyst for a new movement. Enthusiastic about her idea, peace group leaders urged her to draw up a formal proposal. In late December 1979, Forsberg began drafting the “Call to Halt the Nuclear Arms Race.” Circulated widely among leading peace activists, the “Call” emphasized that the freeze would retain the existing nuclear parity between the United States and the Soviet Union, thereby halting the arms race and opening the way for deep reductions in or elimination of nuclear weapons in the future. In April 1980, having secured adequate feedback and individual endorsements, the AFSC, CALC, FOR, and Forsberg’s own Institute for Defense and Disarmament Studies published the “Call” and began seeking endorsements from other peace groups. Meanwhile, Forsberg and peace activist George Sommaripa drew up a strategic plan designed to run from 1980 to 1984. The plan proposed that, after securing the support of peace organizations, the movement proceed to obtain the backing of major interest groups, mount a widespread public education campaign to convert Middle America, and, finally, inject the issue into electoral politics.[2]

The Movement Advances
Thereafter, the freeze campaign surged forward. To the dismay of movement leaders, enthusiasts jumped the gun by placing a freeze resolution on the November 1980 election ballot in western Massachusetts. Determined not to lose this first test of strength, Randy Kehler, Frances Crowe, and other local activists swung into action, and the freeze emerged victorious in 59 of the 62 towns that voted on it. In March 1981, the first national conference of the freeze movement convened at the Center for Peace Studies at Georgetown University. Thanks to Forsberg’s efforts to keep the movement respectable, this conclave, although led by pacifists and other longtime critics of military priorities, produced a strategy and movement designed to appeal to the political mainstream. Admittedly, Kehler, chosen as the first freeze coordinator, was hardly an average American, for he had been a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War and a longtime peace activist. Yet, he was also a clean-cut, articulate, consensus-building individual, anxious to keep the movement on a mainstream course. In addition, the organizers deliberately rejected the offers of East Coast peace groups to house the freeze and instead established its headquarters in St. Louis, deep in the country’s heartland.

For the most part, early movement efforts focused on popularizing the idea of the freeze on the local level. Activists distributed vast quantities of literature about the nuclear arms race and brought freeze resolutions before organizations with which they were affiliated, as well as before town meetings, city councils, and state legislatures. They gathered signatures on freeze petitions locally as part of a nationwide campaign and placed freeze referenda on the ballot in cities, counties, and states throughout the country. Although these activities were time consuming and labor intensive, they meshed nicely with the efforts of other groups, such as the Union of Concerned Scientists and Physicians for Social Responsibility, to alert the public to the dangers of nuclear war. In general, freeze activism was stronger in northern and western states than in the more conservative South. Nevertheless, by mid-1982 it had taken root in three-quarters of the nation’s congressional districts.

These efforts helped produce a widespread display of resistance by Americans to the nuclear arms race. In March 1982, 159 out of 180 Vermont town meetings voted to back a nuclear weapons freeze by the U.S. and Soviet governments. On June 12, an anti-nuclear demonstration in New York City around the theme “Freeze the Arms Race—Fund Human Needs” produced the largest political rally up to that point in American life, with nearly a million participants. When the freeze campaign delivered its petitions to the U.S. and Soviet missions to the United Nations, they contained the signatures of more than 2,300,000 Americans. Moreover, that fall, when freeze referenda appeared on the ballot in 10 states, the District of Columbia, and 37 cities and counties around the nation, voters delivered a victory to the freeze campaign in nine of the states and in all but three localities. Covering about one-third of the U.S. electorate, this was the largest referendum on a single issue in U.S. history. [3]

Opinion surveys confirmed the vast popularity of the freeze campaign. Five polls taken during 1983 found an average of 72 percent support for and 20 percent opposition to the freeze—results that were virtually unchanged from six polls taken in 1982. [4] Writing in October 1983, Patrick Caddell, one of the nation’s leading political pollsters, called the freeze campaign “the most significant citizens’ movement of the last century.... In sheer numbers the freeze movement is awesome; there exists no comparable national cause or combination of causes, left or right, that can match...the legions that have been activated.” [5]

Organizational endorsements of the freeze provide yet another indication of the movement’s strength. With the exception of fundamentalist denominations, all major U.S. religious bodies expressed their support for the freeze, including the National Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the United Presbyterian Church, the United Methodist Church, the Episcopalians, the Lutherans, and the Synagogue Council of America. [6] Indeed, hundreds of national organizations—many of which had never before taken a stand on national defense issues—came out in favor of the freeze. They included the American Association of School Administrators, the American Association of University Women, the American Nurses Association, the American Pediatric Society, the American Public Health Association, Friends of the Earth, the National Council of La Raza, the National Education Association, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and the Young Women’s Christian Association. Although the labor movement had been rather hawkish during the Cold War, 25 national labor unions backed the freeze, as did the AFL-CIO. [7] Furthermore, by November 1983, the freeze had been endorsed by more than 370 city councils, 71 county councils, and by one or
The Nuclear Freeze and Its Impact
Published on Arms Control Association (https://www.armscontrol.org)

both houses of 23 state legislatures.[8] In 1984 it became part of the Democratic Party’s presidential campaign platform.

Reagan Administration Reacts

From the standpoint of officials in the Reagan administration, who championed a vast nuclear buildup and talked glibly of fighting and winning a nuclear war, the rise of the nuclear freeze campaign was a disaster. As David Gergen, the White House communications director during those years, recalled, “There was a widespread view in the administration that the freeze was a dagger pointed at the heart of the administration’s defense program.”[9] Queried years later about the freeze campaign, Robert McFarlane, Reagan’s national security adviser, observed, “We took it as a serious movement that could undermine congressional support for the [nuclear] modernization program, and potentially...a serious partisan political threat that could affect the election in ‘84.”[10] In March 1982, after Senators Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Mark Hatfield (R-Ore.) announced that they would introduce a freeze resolution in Congress, administration officials sharply assailed the idea and met to plan what McFarlane called “a huge effort” to counter the freeze campaign. According to McFarlane, they organized an interdepartmental group that he chaired and that included representatives from the CIA, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the U.S. Information Agency. McFarlane told the members of the group that they and their deputies should fan out across the United States and make public appearances assailing the freeze.[11] Although the administration denied at the time that a government campaign existed to defeat the freeze referenda of 1982, the effort absorbed the energies of numerous officials, including Reagan. In July, he appeared in his home state of California, where he charged that the freeze “would make this country desperately vulnerable to nuclear blackmail.”[12]

That fall, as the freeze grew increasingly likely to emerge victorious at the polls and in Congress, Reagan grew increasingly strident. Addressing a gathering of veterans groups in early October, he insisted that the freeze was “inspired by not the sincere, honest people who want peace, but by some who want the weakening of America and so are manipulating honest people.”[13] On November 11, he told a press conference that “foreign agents” had helped “instigate” the freeze campaign. There was “plenty of evidence” for this, the president declared, although he did not produce any. Challenged on his allegations, Reagan said that he had leaned heavily for his freeze information on two Reader’s Digest articles and cited a report by the House Intelligence Committee.[14] However, the committee chairman, Representative Edward Boland (D-Mass.), declared that according to FBI and CIA officials, there was “no evidence that the Soviets direct, manage, or manipulate the nuclear freeze movement”—a contention confirmed when a declassified version of the FBI report was released in March 1983.[15] Reagan stubbornly continued to insist that “the originating organization” for the freeze was the Communist-dominated World Peace Council and that the first person to propose it was Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev.[16]

Results

Superficially, the Reagan administration managed to hold the line against the freeze campaign and other critics of its nuclear policies. Although the administration failed in its diligent efforts to prevent passage of almost all the state and local freeze referenda in the fall of 1982 and to prevent passage of a freeze resolution in the House of Representatives in the spring of 1983, it did manage to defeat a similar resolution in the Senate, where Republicans had a majority. Furthermore, despite adoption of the freeze proposal by the Democrats in 1984, Reagan won re-election that year and then saw to it that a bilateral freeze with the Soviet Union was never negotiated. In addition, with the freeze campaign’s momentum blunted by these actions, as well as by a rapid falloff in coverage by the media after 1983, the movement dwindled and dropped out of sight in the late 1980s.

Nevertheless, the nuclear freeze campaign was considerably more successful than it appeared. Under enormous political pressure, the Reagan administration dramatically reversed its rhetoric. In April 1982, shortly after the freeze resolution was introduced in Congress, Reagan began declaring publicly and repeatedly that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” He added, on the first occasion that, “[t]o those who protest against nuclear war, I can only say: ‘I’m with you.’”[17] Increasingly rattled, Reagan, who had opposed every nuclear arms control and disarmament agreement negotiated by his Democratic and Republican predecessors, also began
reversing his nuclear policies. In the fall of 1983, as anti-nuclear protests swept across the United States and Western Europe, he told his startled secretary of state, George Shultz, “If things get hotter and hotter and arms control remains an issue, maybe I should go see [Soviet leader Yuri] Andropov and propose eliminating all nuclear weapons.”[18] Although Shultz and other members of the administration were horrified by this turnabout, Reagan persisted with it and eagerly searched for a Soviet negotiating partner.

Starting in March 1985, he found one in Mikhail Gorbachev. With Gorbachev in power, the way was open for significant arms control and disarmament agreements. Gorbachev was not only a true believer in nuclear disarmament, but a movement convert. The Soviet leader’s “New Thinking,” as his advisers noted, was powerfully affected by the Western nuclear disarmament movement. Gorbachev himself declared, “The new thinking took into account and absorbed the conclusions and demands of...the public and the scientific community, of the movements of physicians, scientists, and ecologists, and of various antiwar organizations.”[19] Meeting frequently with leaders of the Western peace and disarmament movement, including leaders of the freeze campaign, Gorbachev followed their advice by agreeing to the removal of medium-range nuclear missiles from Europe, removing short-range nuclear missiles from Eastern Europe, negotiating major reductions in strategic weapons, and unilaterally halting Soviet nuclear testing.[20]

The result was an important victory for freeze activists and other anti-nuclear campaigners. Boxed in by the movement and Gorbachev, Reagan and his successor, George H.W. Bush, were drawn into the most substantial burst of nuclear arms control and disarmament ventures in history. By the early 1990s, the United States and the Soviet Union had ceased the testing, development, and deployment of nuclear weapons and had reduced their nuclear arsenals. Bush even called on Forsberg to serve as a consultant to his administration on nuclear policy. Yet, the freeze campaign did not evaporate. In 1987 it merged with the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy to become Peace Action, the largest grassroots peace and disarmament organization in the United States. Today, Peace Action remains the largest organization of this kind and continues to mobilize public support for nuclear disarmament.

The success of the freeze movement and its anti-nuclear counterparts of the era provides an important lesson for our own time. If substantial popular pressure can be stirred up by advocates of arms control and disarmament, government officials can be convinced to change their nuclear policies.

Lawrence S. Wittner is a professor of history emeritus at the State University of New York at Albany. His latest book is *Confronting the Bomb: A Short History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement* (2009).

ENDNOTES


2. Ibid.; Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign (NWFC), “Call to Halt the Nuclear Arms Race,” 1980, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri, St. Louis, MO.


8. NWFC, “Citizens Lobby for a U.S.-Soviet Nuclear Weapons Freeze,” 1984, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri, St. Louis, MO.


11. Ibid.


**Source URL:** https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010_12/LookingBack