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The Power of Protest

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The campaign against nuclear weapons was not simply an ideological movement; it was a potent political force.

by Lawrence S. Wittner

[Introduction: Six decades into the nuclear age, it is worth reflecting on the fact that the United States remains the only nation to have detonated a nuclear weapon in combat, that Japan alone among nations has experienced nuclear attack, and that for all the terror unleashed in subsequent wars, no nation has launched nuclear weapons on an enemy since 1945. What forces have prevented nuclear war, and what lessons can be drawn from this experience for the future? Lawrence Wittner finds important answers to these questions in the world anti-nuclear movement.

Japan has played an important role in this world movement from its inception. The Japanese antinuclear movement began in response to the atomic bombing of Japan. In 1946, citizens' groups in Hiroshima, meeting to commemorate the sufferings of the population, gradually, turned to agitation against the nuclear arms race. By warning the world of the horrors of nuclear war, hibakusha and their supporters believed, the suffering and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki would acquire transcendent meaning. Although U.S. censorship and other restraints barred publication detailing the horror inflicted by the atomic bombs, a campaign against the Bomb gradually gathered strength.

That campaign took off as a mass movement after March 1954, when U.S. nuclear testing irradiated the crew of a Japanese fishing boat, the Lucky Dragon and citizens of Bikini. This led to an antinuclear petition initiated by women and eventually signed by 32 million people in the largest anti-nuclear protest ever. The movement quickly became international. In August 1955, tens of thousands of delegates -- most of them Japanese -- convened in Hiroshima for the First World Conference Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs. The Japan Council Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs (Gensuikyo) was organized to continue the antinuclear crusade in Japan, which continued to rage in the following years.

However, the Cold War partisanship of the Japan Communist Party (JCP) within Gensuikyo generated intense friction inside the organization. Consequently, in 1965 the Japan Socialist Party, Sohyo, and other organizations calling for a more evenhanded approach critical of the nuclear stance of all nuclear powers created a rival group, the Japan Congress Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs (Gensuikin). Attempts in the late 1970s and early 1980s to foster greater cooperation between the two organizations resulted in another outpouring of nuclear disarmament activism in the early 1980s. Hundreds of thousands of Japanese demonstrated against nuclear weapons in Hiroshima and Tokyo. Once again, tens of millions of people signed antinuclear petitions. Although this activism fell off in subsequent years, the idea of nuclear disarmament, a centerpiece of Japanese pacifism, has retained enormous popular appeal. Polls in 1998 showed that 78 percent of the Japanese public favored the complete destruction of nuclear weapons.

In a post-9/11 world with a single superpower, what strategies will anti-nuclear activists devise to prevent nuclear war? With Japan dispatching troops to Iraq in violation of its own constitution, and with rising pressures to revise the constitutional ban on war, the issues are particularly salient for Japan. The answer to that question may hinge on the ability of anti-war and anti-nuclear activists to unify their movements. By Japan Focus coordinator]

One of the most striking facts about the modern world is that, for the past 58 years, we have managed to avoid nuclear war. After all, a nation that has developed weapons tends to use them. For example, immediately after the U.S. government built nuclear weapons, it employed them to destroy Japanese cities. Just as startling, a nation that has devoted vast resources to developing weapons usually does not get rid of them -- at least until it develops more powerful weapons.

But since August 1945, no nation has attacked another with nuclear weapons, and only a relatively small number of nations have chosen to build them. Also, those nations that have developed nuclear weapons have for the most part accepted nuclear arms control and disarmament measures: the Partial Test Ban Treaty; the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties (I and II); the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty; the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (I and II); and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Why have they adopted these policies of nuclear restraint?

The answer lies in a massive grassroots campaign that has mobilized millions of people in nations around the globe: the world nuclear disarmament movement. Indeed, the history of nuclear restraint without the nuclear disarmament movement is like the history of civil rights legislation without the civil rights movement.

A message from the masses

Nuclear restraint did not come naturally to government officials, who initially viewed nuclear weapons as useful additions to their nations' military might.

This certainly included U.S. officials. Learning of the successful destruction of Hiroshima, President Truman called the atomic bomb "the greatest thing in history" and moved forward with the nuclear annihilation of Nagasaki. He also ordered the creation of a vast nuclear arsenal for the United States, including hydrogen bombs.

Truman's successor, Dwight Eisenhower, came to office with no interest whatsoever in nuclear arms controls or disarmament. Instead, Eisenhower favored what he called "massive retaliation" and the integration of nuclear weapons into conventional war. Nuclear weapons, Eisenhower declared, should "be used exactly as you would use a bullet or anything else." John F. Kennedy campaigned for the Presidency by pledging a U.S. nuclear buildup to close the supposed "missile gap" between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Even Jimmy Carter -- as much a man of peace as any who has reached the White House -- championed the development of the neutron bomb and the MX missile. Ronald Reagan, of course, entered office as an opponent of every nuclear arms control treaty signed by his Democratic and Republican predecessors. Furthermore, he talked glibly about fighting and winning nuclear wars. His successor, George H. W. Bush, halted nuclear arms control and disarmament negotiations in one of his first acts in office.

But they all came around to rejecting nuclear war and championing nuclear arms control and disarmament measures.

This reversal occurred because of a massive, worldwide campaign of public protest against the nuclear arms race and nuclear war. Atomic scientists, pacifists, professional groups, religious bodies, unions, intellectuals, and just plain folks were horrified at the nuclear recklessness of government officials -- including their own -- and demanded nuclear disarmament. Powerful anti-nuclear groups sprang up around the world. In the United States, they included the Federation of American Scientists, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), Women Strike for Peace, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign. These constituencies demanded that the nuclear arms race stop, that nuclear disarmament begin, and that nuclear war be banned. For the most part, the general public agreed. During the 1980s, polls found that 70 to 80 percent of Americans supported the Nuclear Freeze proposal for a Soviet-American treaty to halt the testing, development, and deployment of nuclear weapons. The waging of nuclear war inspired widespread popular revulsion.

This public resistance to nuclear weapons startled government officials and gradually pushed them back from implementing their nuclear ambitions. As U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles put it, there had developed "a popular and diplomatic pressure for limitation of armament that cannot be resisted by the United States without our forfeiting the good will of our allies and the support of a large part of our own people." When the Soviet Union began a unilateral halt to nuclear testing in 1958, the U.S. government could no longer resist. Testing was "not evil," Eisenhower remarked in exasperation, but "people have been brought to believe that it is!" And so the U.S. and British governments joined the Russians in halting nuclear testing. When some Eisenhower administration officials called for greater flexibility in the use of nuclear weapons, the President brushed them off. "The use of nuclear weapons," he said, "would raise serious political problems in view of the current state of world opinion."

The Kennedy administration also felt besieged by protests against nuclear weapons. According to the minutes of a November 1961 National Security Council meeting, "the President voiced doubts that we could ever test in Nevada again for domestic political reasons," while the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, "pointed up the difficulty of testing at Eniwetok." Ultimately, Kennedy turned to Norman Cousins, the founder and co-chair of SANE, and urged him to use his meeting with Nikita Khrushchev to smooth the path toward a nuclear test ban treaty. That's just what Cousins did, and the result was the Partial Test Ban Treaty of 1963. Jerome Wiesner, Kennedy's White House Science adviser, gave the major credit for the treaty to SANE and Women Strike for Peace. According to McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national security adviser, the treaty "was achieved primarily by world opinion."

When it came to the Vietnam War, Bundy recalled, the U.S. government did not dare to use nuclear weapons. Why? There would have been a terrible public reaction abroad, Bundy said; even more significant was the prospect of public upheaval in the United States, for -- as he recalled -- "no president could hope for understanding and support from his own countrymen if he used the bomb." Explaining his own restraint in the war, Richard Nixon recalled bitterly that, had he used nuclear weapons or bombed North Vietnamese dikes, "The resulting domestic and international uproar would have damaged our foreign policy on all fronts."

Taking "yes" for an answer

Even the hawkish Ronald Reagan had the good sense to get out of the way of the political steamroller. In an effort to dampen popular protest against his nuclear buildup, he endorsed the "zero option -- a proposal to remove all the intermediate range nuclear missiles from Europe. Then he dropped plans to deploy the neutron bomb. Then he agreed to abide by the provisions of SALT II -- though it was never ratified and, during the 1980 campaign, he had condemned it as an act of "appeasement." Although Reagan proceeded with the deployment of U.S. missiles in Western Europe, he was so rattled by the massive protests against them that, in October 1983, he told his startled secretary of state: "If things get hotter and hotter and arms control remains an issue, maybe I should go see [Soviet Premier Yuri] Andropov and propose eliminating all nuclear weapons." And, despite protests from his advisers, he did propose that, in a remarkable speech in January 1984. Moreover, as early as April 1982 he began declaring publicly that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." He added, "To those who protest against nuclear war, I can only say: 'I'm with you!'"

All this happened during Reagan's first term in office, during the reigns of Leonid Brezhnev, Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko in the Soviet Union -- before the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev.

Gorbachev's rise to power in March 1985 removed the Soviet stumbling block in the path of arms control and disarmament agreements, for the new Soviet party leader was a movement convert. Gorbachev's "New Thinking" -- by which he meant the necessity for peace and disarmament in the nuclear age -- came from a well-known anti-nuclear statement by Albert Einstein in 1946, reiterated in the famous Russell-Einstein appeal of 1955. Gorbachev's advisers have frequently pointed to the powerful influence of the nuclear disarmament campaign upon the Soviet leader, and Gorbachev himself declared that the new thinking took into consideration the conclusions and demands of the antiwar organizations and anti-nuclear activists.

Gorbachev met frequently with leaders of the nuclear disarmament movement and often followed their suggestions. On the advice of nuclear disarmament activists, he initiated and later continued a unilateral Soviet nuclear testing moratorium, decided against building a Star Wars antimissile system, and split the issue of Star Wars from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, thus taking the crucial step toward the 1987 agreement that removed all intermediate-range nuclear missiles from Europe.

When Gorbachev suddenly called the U.S. bluff by agreeing to remove all the Euromissiles (the zero option), it horrified NATO's hawks -- including Margaret Thatcher in Britain, the Christian Democrats in West Germany, and key Republican leaders in the United States, such as Robert Dole, Jesse Helms, and Henry Kissinger. But, as U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz recalled: "If the United States reversed its stand now . . . such a reversal would be political dynamite!" Or, as Kenneth Adelman, Reagan's hawkish director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, put it: "We had to take yes for an answer."

In response to anti-nuclear agitation during these years, there were also important shifts in other lands. New Zealand banned nuclear warships

in its ports; Australia refused to test MX missiles. India halted work on nuclear weapons, and its prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, joined with Gorbachev in calling for nuclear abolition. The Philippines adopted a nuclear-free constitution and shut down U.S. military bases that housed nuclear weapons. South Africa scrapped its nuclear weapons program. No new nations joined the nuclear club.

Although the movement began to decline in the late 1980s, it retained some influence. President George H. W. Bush and his secretary of state, James Baker, felt that Reagan had moved too fast and too far toward nuclear disarmament and abruptly halted disarmament negotiations. But their reluctance soon collapsed.

The U.S. and British governments wanted to significantly upgrade short-range nuclear forces in Western Europe. However, a number of West European governments, frightened at the prospect of a revival of public protest, resisted. When Gorbachev unilaterally removed short-range missiles from Eastern Europe, thus encouraging popular protests against the missiles in Western Europe, Baker was horrified. "We were losing the battle for public opinion. We had to do something," he wrote in his memoirs. "NATO could not afford another crisis over deploying nuclear weapons. The alliance . . . would not be able to survive." Thus, the Bush administration backed off and agreed to negotiate missile reductions. Eventually, in a sharp departure from past practice, it unilaterally withdrew its short-range missiles from Western Europe.

Stopping the tests

The impact of the anti-nuclear movement upon nuclear testing was even more direct. Since the mid-1980s, disarmament groups around the world had been working to stop underground nuclear weapons explosions. Thanks to their pleas, Gorbachev initiated and continued his unilateral nuclear testing moratorium. But, after eighteen months of Reagan administration rebuffs to the moratorium and to a test ban treaty, in February 1987 the Soviets resumed testing. This setback, however, only heightened anti-nuclear agitation.

Protesters organized large demonstrations at the Nevada Test Site. Police arrested thousands of Americans each year for nonviolent civil disobedience. Inspired by these actions, a massive Nevada-Semipalatinsk nuclear disarmament movement emerged in the Soviet Union, eventually forcing the closure of the Soviet nuclear test sites.

Meanwhile, sympathetic members of Congress introduced a variety of bills to halt U.S. nuclear testing. In 1991, pressed hard by disarmament groups, they pushed for action again. The final legislation, passed in the summer of 1992, halted underground nuclear testing for nine months, placed strict conditions on further U.S. testing, and required test ban negotiations and an end to U.S. testing by late 1996.

Having halted U.S. and Soviet nuclear testing, the movement pushed on in the following years to secure the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). During his presidential campaign, Bill Clinton -- recognizing the popular appeal of ending nuclear testing -- had pledged to support the test ban treaty. But after he entered the White House in January 1993, Clinton began to renege. Disarmament groups and anti-nuclear members of Congress stirred up a test ban campaign later that year, and the administration extended the U.S. nuclear testing moratorium, pressed other nuclear powers to join it, and began worldwide efforts to secure a treaty. Finally, in September 1996, representatives of countries around the world celebrated the signing of the CTBT. Speaking at the U.N. ceremonies, U.S. Amb. Madeleine Albright declared: "This was a treaty sought by ordinary people everywhere, and today the power of that universal wish could not be denied."

That is the good news.

What can be done?

The bad news is that since the end of the Cold War popular pressure against nuclear weapons has waned, and -- as a result -- hawkish government officials have felt freer to go about their traditional business of preparing for war, including nuclear war. India and Pakistan became nuclear weapons powers and threatened one another with nuclear annihilation. The U.S. Senate rejected ratification of the CTBT. And the administration of George W. Bush -- playing upon fears generated by 9/11 -- has withdrawn from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, opposed the CTBT, and laid plans for building new nuclear weapons.

Decades of struggle against the Bomb offer some strategic lessons. One is that the threat nuclear weapons pose to human survival provides a very effective basis for sparking mass mobilization against them. Even so, playing on fear can backfire, for hawkish forces can use it to make the case for more nuclear weapons. Consequently, disarmament advocates must not only stress the dangers of a nuclear buildup, but also provide a practical, positive alternative. On a short-term basis, this means nuclear arms control and disarmament under international control; on a long-term basis, the strengthening of international authority to prevent war and aggression.

Furthermore, because the mass media usually avoid discussing nuclear weapons issues and because much of the public would prefer not to think about nuclear annihilation, many people are ignorant about their governments' nuclear ambitions. Therefore, to stir up mass mobilization against nuclear weapons, disarmament groups must work overtime at raising popular consciousness about what governments are doing to prepare for nuclear war.

Finally, in order to develop that consciousness-raising campaign, as well as sensible alternatives to preparing for nuclear war, disarmament groups (and other civil society organizations) need to adopt a common focus for their efforts. They did this (more or less) in connection with halting nuclear testing, coordinating the European Nuclear Disarmament campaign, and organizing the Nuclear Freeze campaign.

There are also more profound lessons. Left to themselves, governments gravitate toward nuclear weapons and nuclear war as a means of defending national interests. Nor is this surprising, for the nation-state system has produced arms races and wars throughout its history. Fortunately, nations can be compelled to reverse themselves. When the nuclear disarmament movement has mobilized substantial popular pressure, it has succeeded in curbing the nuclear arms race and preventing nuclear war.

What the movement has done before, it can do again.

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