“A Force to be Reckoned With”:
The Antinuclear Revolution and
the Reagan Administration, 1980 - 1984

Henry Maar
University of California, Santa Barbara
hmaar@umail.ucsb.edu
In a recent presidential address to the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations, Thomas Schwartz argued for historians to recognize the “ongoing importance of politics in our work” by acknowledging the impact of traditional domestic politics on American foreign policy.\footnote{1}

Heeding Schwartz’s call, this analysis uses internal documents to reveal the high level of concern the Reagan White House placed on the Nuclear Freeze movement—the largest movement of domestic social-protest in the nation’s history. In a short time, it surpassed in size the movement to end the Vietnam War of the 1960s and early 1970s, and had a wide-reaching effect across American society. Originating in discussions within the scientific and arms control communities, the campaign spread into small communities and became an issue of contention within religious debate. Indeed, with an escalating arms race, in the popular and political culture, nothing short of the “fate of the Earth” was at stake. The overwhelming fear of nuclear catastrophe and of a coming apocalypse can be seen in movies and songs throughout the decade. Debates over the freeze dominated radio and television talk shows, as movie stars and celebrities, prominent intellectuals and scholars, bishops and reverends, and governors and congressional leaders, lined up for and against the idea. Both houses of Congress debated the idea of an arms freeze, with the House of Representatives endorsing it.

Just as the idea of the Freeze was debated in society, so too has the debate over the Freeze campaign’s effectiveness continued in scholarship. Several scholarly works on the Freeze movement standout that can essentially be split into two categories: works that argue for an effective Freeze movement and works that argue against its influence.\footnote{2} This work departs in fundamental respects from previous scholarship both for and against the influence of the Freeze. With regard to sources, the argument and analysis is sustained by extensive use of research undertaken at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, a source used in only limited respect in
one prior account. This resource illuminates the government’s response to the movement, showing us the threat and seriousness in which the White House viewed the Freeze movement, as well as how it sought to defeat and co-opt their momentum.

Despite this powerful and growing movement, a paradox exists: if the Nuclear Freeze movement was such a powerful force and influence over society during the early 1980s, what then explains their inability to make the question pivotal to the 1984 election? I will argue that two factors played a major role in this. First, by growing rapidly, embracing a diverse base, and moving from grassroots campaigns to working inside the beltway, the Freeze campaign was undermined by politicians who used the rhetoric and popularity of the Freeze to gain electoral victories, but watered down and compromised on support for a freeze resolution. Second, alongside the growth of this movement, the administration fought back and eventually undermined the movement with the launching of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI or “Star Wars”) in 1983, which allowed the Reagan White House to steal the momentum of the Freeze campaign. In effect, by becoming a powerful force whose ideas spread across society, the Freeze campaign did not fail, but became the victim of its own successes.

**The Bipartisan Nuclear Arms Buildup and the Emerging Opposition**

During the 1970s, the Cold War appeared to be coming to an end, as a period of détente (or the “lessening of tensions”) guided the United States and the Soviet Union to come to agreements on arms control treaties such as the Strategic Limitation Talks (SALT) and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Richard Nixon, a strident anti-communist, visited China, opening up relations between their communist government and that of the United States that would be formally normalized by President Jimmy Carter. However, by the late 1970s, it all began to
unravel, as Cold War tensions escalated.

On Christmas Eve 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, producing a rippling effect across the globe and precipitating a dramatic decline in U.S.-Soviet relations. In January 1980, the hands of the doomsday clock of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists moved forward two minutes to read seven minutes to midnight–the closest the hands had been to midnight (a nuclear holocaust) since 1968. Ratification of the SALT II treaty would die in the Senate as President Carter began to push for the development of the MX missile, or what Ronald Reagan would later term the “Peacekeeper,” an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) equipped with ten warheads, each capable of being launched independently at different targets.

The repercussions of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan were widespread, and came to affect strategic nuclear planning. Shortly after announcing the return of Selective Service, President Carter issued a new defense strategy: Presidential Directive 59 (PD-59), enshrining the idea of “limited nuclear war” into official U.S. nuclear policy. The new shift in nuclear policy was leaked almost immediately, causing a stir in the Soviet Union, with Pravda reporting it as “a prescription not for preventing a major conflict with Moscow . . . but for stimulating the arms race, with all its consequences.”

As relations between the two superpowers deteriorated, and the arms race escalated, members of the scientific and arms control communities raised significant concerns about the possibility of nuclear war. Most prominently among these was one Randall Forsberg, an arms control expert at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). With the arms race escalating, Forsberg sought to use her skills to reduce the threat of all out war and to scale back military spending. In 1979, Forsberg founded the Institute for Defense and Disarmament
Studies (IDDS) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As freeze-activist Douglas Waller notes, it was at IDDS where in April 1980 Forsberg “would turn the arms control debate on its head” with the founding document of the Freeze campaign: “A Call to Halt the Nuclear Arms Race–Proposal for a Mutual U.S.-Soviet Nuclear-Weapon Freeze.” The four-page proposal suggested in plain language that the United States and Soviet Union simply “stop the arms race,” and, instead, adopt a “mutual freeze on the testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons.”

Forsberg was not the first to propose a “freeze” to the arms race, however. In 1979, during the Senate deliberations to ratify SALT II, Senator Mark Hatfield introduced an amendment calling for a “U.S.-Soviet freeze on strategic nuclear weapons deployment.” Activist organizations, such as the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and the Mobilization for Survival (Mobe) had put forth freeze proposals, with AFSC calling for a unilateral “freeze” and Mobe proposing a three year moratorium on both nuclear power and nuclear weapons. Forsberg’s proposal, however, was bilateral, and called for a halt to production, testing, and development of nuclear weapons.

With the escalation of the Cold War, a backlash had begun to emerge in the grassroots, and the idea to freeze the arms race spread throughout the Northeast, led in part by one Randall Kehler. A Quaker by religious practice, Keheler’s resume included degrees from both Harvard and Stanford, but also boasted of a twenty-two month prison sentence for non-cooperation during his tenure with the War Resisters League. Intrigued by Senator Hatfield’s freeze amendment, in January 1980 Kehler began organizing a campaign in western Massachusetts to place a referendum on the ballot in three state senate districts calling for “a mutual nuclear weapons freeze.” Over the next nine months, Kehler with the aid of activists, collected over 12,000
signatures to put the issue on the ballot. Though Ronald Reagan won the presidential election, the referendum passed in thirty of the thirty-three communities in which Reagan was victorious.\textsuperscript{11}

**Inflammatory Rhetoric and Radical Policies**

Although the “emergence of the freeze concept predated the inauguration of Ronald Reagan,” as David Cortright writes, “the inflammatory rhetoric and radical policies emanating from the White House fanned the flames of antinuclear revolt.”\textsuperscript{12} With the election of Ronald Reagan, the sharp increase in tensions between the superpowers only increased. At his first press conference, Reagan suggested the Soviets “reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat . . . .”\textsuperscript{13} Not long thereafter, Secretary of State Alexander Haig condemned the Soviets for “training, funding, and equipping international terrorists,” although, as \textit{Congressional Quarterly} noted, “Haig offered no concrete evidence to support his assertions.”\textsuperscript{14} As George Shultz, who later succeeded Haig as Secretary of State, wrote in his memoirs, “Relations between the two superpowers were not simply bad; they were nonexistent.”\textsuperscript{15}

In the first year of the Reagan White House, the arms race would escalate, with the pursuit of the MX missile, the B-1 bomber, and the Trident II D-5 (a submarine launched ballistic missile or SLBM), on top of the largest peacetime defense budget in American history. The bi-partisan Cold War consensus of the 1980s emerged not just around the pursuit of new weapons technology, but also around the idea of limited and winnable nuclear war—an idea embraced by members of the Reagan administration and their allies.\textsuperscript{16}

As relations with the Soviet Union further deteriorated, and as members of the Reagan administration openly suggested that fighting a nuclear war was a possibility, the idea of “freezing” the arms race gained ground. Activist campaigns began to coalesce around the idea of
the freeze. The Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) were revived with the help of a
dynamic Australian pediatrician, Helen Caldicott who left medicine to campaign for a freeze to
the arms race. In addition to PSR, groups such as the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS)
also became involved in the campaign to halt the arms race, believing other concerns to be “too
small compared with nuclear war.” UCS gave full backing to the freeze initiative, declaring it
“a simple, unadorned and seemingly uncomplicated notion: the United States and the Soviet
Union should agree to a dead halt in all aspects of the nuclear arms race.” A wide array of
groups representing professionals of all stripes endorsed the freeze concept.

Undeterred by a small movement, however, the Reagan administration pressed on
announcing plans for the production of neutron bombs in August 1981. This “neutron bomb”
would make use of enhanced radiation warfare (ERW) technology previously rejected by the
Carter administration. This ERW-based weapon was widely criticized by domestic opponents as
a “Republican Bomb,” while the Soviets mocked it as a “Capitalist bomb.” As John Newhouse
explains, the nicknames derived from the fact that the neutron bomb “was supposed to spare
property, but destroy lives.” However, there were differences between the neutron bomb and
other weapons. As Fred Kaplan explained in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, the key
difference between a fission bomb and a neutron bomb, lay “in the prompt radiation” which the
neutron bomb enhanced by six times. The decision to equip the Lance missile and eight-inch
artillery shells with “nuclear material tritium to make complete enhanced-radiation weapons”
set off a flurry of antinuclear protests in Europe, while producing a boost to long dormant
antinuclear organizations stateside.

In August 1981, just days after Reagan’s neutron bomb announcement, SANE began
circulating a letter of protest addressed to Reagan and Weinberger. SANE’s letter was signed by more than twenty-four different organizations, from environmental groups, peace groups, and numerous religious denominations.\textsuperscript{24} In Texas, twelve bishops adopted a statement condemning the neutron bomb, while in New York, at the annual meeting of the Pugwash group urged a freeze on nuclear weapons, citing the interruption of the SALT negotiations and the Reagan administration’s belief in “a fallacy . . . that nuclear war can be won.”\textsuperscript{25}

The Expansion of the Freeze campaign from Grassroots to National

The Reagan administration’s open talk of fighting nuclear war, alongside the pursuit of newer and deadlier weapons, fanned the flames of dissent globally. In the hearts of millions, fear of a nuclear holocaust was struck, turning a grassroots campaign into a global phenomenon. In the United States, the “Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign,” too, would expand from the grassroots into the mainstream, becoming hotly debated in diverse circles and communities. As the \textit{Los Angeles Times} reported on the front page in April 1982, “Over 18 months, the notion of a bilateral freeze [emerged] as the inspiration for a coast-to-coast grass roots crusade.”\textsuperscript{26}

What accounts for this sudden bullrush of momentum garnered by the Freeze campaign? The answer it seemed, lay it the policies of Ronald Reagan. As a \textit{New York Times} editorial suggested in March 1982, during his 1980 campaign, President Reagan had managed to evade the tag of “nuclear risk-taker.” But by the end of his first year in office, more than half of those polled saw him as precisely that. Likewise, a \textit{Newsweek} poll taken during the same week as the \textit{New York Times} editorial found a third of those surveyed believed the Reagan administration’s policies were increasing the chance of a nuclear war. Furthermore, among those surveyed, sixty percent were in favor of a freeze. Despite tremendous growth, as the \textit{Newsweek} article indicates,
a large number—forty-three percent—were still unaware of the Freeze campaign. Though the administration had announced the beginning of the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) in the fall of 1981, with no progress made, and a perceived image of an administration dragging its feet on arms control, critics, such as the journalist Strobe Talbott, suggested the true acronym for Reagan’s arms control proposal was “STALL.” In addition to START, the administration proposed a “zero-option.” Zero-zero was a simple proposal: in turn for the Soviets eliminating all SS-20 medium range missiles, NATO would not deploy Pershing II and cruise missiles. Most observers, writes John Lewis Gaddis, viewed both the zero-zero proposal, along with START (which called for cuts to land based ICBMs in which the Soviets had a numerical advantage) as efforts to “stalemate arms control rather than as a sincere attempt to achieve the real reductions the two proposals professed to seek.” Thus, with a perception that the administration had no real interests in slowing down the arms race (let alone halting it), a movement that had begun in the grassroots had become a political wildfire with room to grow further still.

Between 1980 and 1982, over 100 books relating to “nuclear fear” were published. The most prominent of these was Jonathan Schell’s *The Fate of the Earth*. In the thirty-seven years since the birth of the atomic age, as a *New York Times* review suggested, *The Fate of the Earth* managed to do what no other book had been capable of: compel the nation to “confront the nuclear peril in which we all find ourselves.” Originally published in *The New Yorker* as three separate essays on the “Fate of the World,” in harrowing detail and riveting prose, Schell detailed the cataclysmic effects of a nuclear war. In assessing how the movement grew in 1982, sociologists Frances McCrea and Gerald Markle point to two events: Jonathan Schell’s articles in *The New Yorker* and Ground Zero Week. Just as Schell’s work was gaining ample media
attention, the nation underwent “Ground Zero Week.” Ground Zero Week was put together by Dr. Roger Molander, an expert on nuclear weapons, and former employee in the National Security Council under the administrations of Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter, who had participated in the SALT talks. In 1980, Molander created the non-profit “Ground Zero Organization” which aimed to educate the public about the effects of nuclear warfare. Across the nation in the week of April 18 - 25, 1982, millions across the country began coming to grips with the devastating consequences of a continued arms race. In 650 communities, millions listened to speeches, participated in teach-ins, held candle light vigils, viewed films or read Molander’s book, *Nuclear War: What’s in it for You?* (already in its third printing by this time). This new “nuclear consciousness” was developing across the nation among people and in places not typically associated with activist causes.

During Ground Zero Week, President Reagan declared his “heart and soul” were in “sympathy with the people that are talking about the horrors of nuclear war,” but objected to a freeze on weapons since only he had “all the facts necessary” to lessen the threat of nuclear war. While Reagan made public pronouncements to play down the posturing of the administration, staff had begun collecting campaign information on the Freeze and were following events such as Ground Zero Week closely—a fact National Security Adviser William Clark wanted to keep secret from activists. Indeed, in an April 1982 memo, Clark advised that the freeze issue “may be the most important national security opportunity and challenge of [the Reagan] administration.” Another briefing memo prepared for Elizabeth Dole, then director of the White House Office of Public Liaison, gave detailed background information on Roger Molander and the Ground Zero organization which shows us how seriously the administration took antinuclear activists. Lozano
concluded that the Ground Zero group was “a force to be reckoned with,” with the “momentum of the antinuclear movement . . . clearly working to their advantage.”

Several other memos further demonstrate the close attention the Reagan administration paid to the movement, seeking to defeat and co-opt it as it grew in 1982. Likewise, the internal record reveals how White House allies, such as Phyllis Schlafly, who viewed the Freeze as “anti-American,” approached the administration seeking to form an alliance to “lobby against the nuclear freeze propaganda.” In a memo to White House Chief of Staff James Baker dated May 28,1982, David Gergen reported on the creation of a “Public Affairs Group on Nuclear Issues” chaired by himself and Bud McFarlane that would act as an “anti-freeze” group. James Baker’s assistant James Cicconi argued that if the administration did not adopt the “freeze language” they would “not succeed in co-opting any significant part of the freeze movement.” By adopting the “freeze” rhetoric, Cicconi concluded, the administration would “win the propaganda battle.”

A longer memo dated April 16, 1982 from Red Cavaney to White House Chief of Staff Michael Deaver warned of the possibilities of summer demonstrations, propelled by “the grassroots strength of the nuclear freeze issue.” In order to defeat the Freeze campaign, Cavaney proposed solutions that would minimize their influence since any efforts to “totally neutralize” the movement would prove “exceedingly difficult.” “In the final analysis,” noted Cavaney, “it may be best not to deride those who hold the freeze idea so closely, since their beliefs may be strongly rooted in the morals of the argument.”

Cavaney’s proposed strategy avoided a direct confrontation with the Freeze movement and, instead, sought to work within the media to “counter the public momentum.” This would be accomplished through the creation of a “Preparedness Working Group” which would allow the
administration to “speak to the complex issues involved in the [nuclear freeze] debate.” By working through the media with allies in think tanks, the administration sought to counter a movement which Cavaney warned was “rapidly gaining momentum” and “likely to capture the public debate at the expense of virtually everything other than jobs.” With the success of works such as *The Fate of the Earth*, and what was projected to be a very successful Ground Zero Week, “the freeze issue,” Cavaney continued, would be propelled “into the forefront of conventional folklore,” thus, making it “the catalyst for a number of summertime demonstrations.” The issue was “further exacerbated by the moral implications involving the potential destruction of mankind”–an issue that would help mobilize activist clergy and church attendees, lending to “the thoughtful moral weight . . . critical to the success of the grassroots effort.” Cavaney’s memo shows us the deep-seated fear of the growing antinuclear movement. The suggestions formed the strategic basis for the Reagan administration’s response to the challenge of the Freeze movement. They would not reject the idea that nuclear war was harmful or that the continued arms race was dangerous. Instead, they sought to convince the public that by accepting “peace through strength,” the danger of nuclear war would be lessened.

Cavaney’s memo to Deaver warning of summer protests proved prophetic as on June 12, 1982, nearly one million people amassed in New York City’s Central Park in favor of a freeze, culminating in a rally outside the United Nations second special session on disarmament: the largest protest rally in the nation’s history. Taking to the microphone to address the attendees, Randall Forsberg looked out at a massive crowd and announced, “We’ve done it. The nuclear freeze campaign has mobilized the biggest peacetime peace movement in United States history.” “Until the arms race stops,” Forsberg told the audience, “we will not go home and be quiet. We
will go home and organize.”39 Organize the Freeze campaign would, particularly in the religious communities that Red Cavaney thought so crucial to the grassroots effort.

**The Freeze movement and the Debate within Religious Communities**

The momentum of the Freeze campaign and the antinuclear movement more broadly was clearly visible in religious communities during 1982. Within the various Christian churches, a tenacious debate erupted over the morality of the arms race and whether to endorse a “freeze,” fueling discussions throughout the early 1980s, rivaling that of the abortion issue. Religious service advertisements in the *New York Times* reflected this, with the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine hosting speakers to discuss the question of “Disarmament–or Nuclear Holocaust?” and the Universalist advertising for a Sunday service entitled, “The Nuclear Freeze and You.”40

As the political importance of Christian Evangelism grew in the early 1980s, so too did the issue of freezing the arms race. On one side of the split stood Jerry Falwell and the recently created “Moral Majority,” a group Reagan embraced during his 1980 campaign. Falwell’s Moral Majority focused on issues of morality (such as abortion and prayer in school), while espousing conservative political views. On the other side of the split, the Reverend Billy Graham and more liberal and moderate evangelicals disassociated themselves with the politics of Falwell and the Moral Majority, with Graham going so far as to accuse Falwell of “political sermonizing on ‘non-moral issues.’”41 On the nuclear freeze issue, the two took diametrically opposing stands.

By the late 1970s, Reverend Graham had become a forceful opponent of the escalating arms race. Within a week of Reagan’s swearing-in ceremony, Reverend Graham was inducted to the National Religious Broadcasters’ Hall of Fame where he spoke to the audience about both the dangers of the arms race. Despite his friendship and past spiritual influence over President
Reagan, Graham stood on opposite sides with Reagan over the freeze debate. Graham spoke frequently on behalf of the Freeze campaign and, in June 1982, visited Moscow for a conference on disarmament—a trip that became highly controversial within the evangelical community.

During his visit to Moscow, Graham spoke to Soviet audiences about the need for disarmament, but also called for obedience to authority based on scripture. Due to the “determinedly anti-U.S. tone of the conference and the lauding of Soviet virtues,” many in the evangelical community came to believe Reverend Graham had been “duped.” Several prominent evangelicals condemned Reverend Graham’s actions. As The Wall Street Journal reported, “Reverend Edmund W. Robb, president of the largest evangelical group in the United Methodist Church,” thought it was a “mistake of Rev. Graham to go there and talk about obedience to civil authority.” The founding editor of Christianity Today, Reverend Carl Henry, suggested Graham had “made himself vulnerable to being manipulated” by speaking about obedience to authority in “precisely the place where there is a threat to religious liberty.”

As the Journal article points out, both Reverend Robb and Reverend Henry were active members of a newly founded organization, the Institute on Religion and Democracy. The Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD) was founded in 1981 shortly after the inauguration of Ronald Reagan. The IRD opposed churches it suggested used funds to advance causes that were “anti-capitalist, pro-Marxist,” and those it believed “smacked of revolution.” To no surprise, then, the IRD was concerned and firmly against evangelicals involved in the Freeze movement. Thus, Graham’s positions on the arms race and his support for the Freeze campaign garnered him much criticism from more conservative elements within the evangelical community. But with other evangelicals following Graham’s lead, it was “certain,” the Wall Street Journal concluded,
“that soon you will see evangelism fixed atop the banner of the nuclear freeze.”

Though Reverend Graham supported the Freeze campaign, as Lawrence Wittner writes, Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority “worked zealously to foster pro-nuclear sentiment.” Throughout the 1980s, Falwell was a firm backer of the Reagan administration. In a full-page ad that ran across several American newspapers in March 1982, Falwell taunted supporters of the Freeze campaign as “freezeniks,” “ultra libs,” and, “unilateral disarmers” who were after a “President who wants to build up our military strength.” At the bottom of Falwell’s advertisement ran a three question “Peace Through Strength Ballot” which asked readers to cast a vote on three leading questions regarding the arms race and trusting the Soviets. In subsequent interviews, Falwell went so far as to suggest that the defeat of the Freeze campaign was a bigger issue than both abortion and prayer in school.

Despite his prominence in society and on television, within the evangelical community, Falwell was on the fringe of the freeze issue during the 1980s. As a gallop poll showed, Evangelical Christians favored a nuclear freeze “by better than 3 to 1.” With Falwell’s church losing nearly $7 million in contributions in 1982, his antifreeze message appeared to lack a resonance even within his own community. Outside of evangelicals, average readers saw right through his deceptive advertisement. A slew of readers in the Los Angeles Times wrote letters to the editor, with one letter denouncing Falwell as “one of the most dishonest plebiscites I have [ever] seen, slanting each question into a ‘no win’ position.”

While prominent evangelicals such as Graham and Falwell disagreed publically over the freeze, ordinary evangelical practitioners tried to make sense of their place in the arms race. In May 1983, over 2,000 evangelicals attended the “Conference on the Church & Peacemaking in
the Nuclear Age,” in Pasadena, California, sponsored in part by President Reagan’s own home parish, the Bel Air Presbyterian Church. Designed as “educational in nature,” the conference featured a broad array of speakers, from military personnel, to professors of history, philosophy, and theology, as well as journalists and pastors from a variety of churches. Like many other parishes across the nation, members of the Bel Air Presbyterian were divided over the freeze.

But evangelicals were not the only religious community to become strained over the arms race and the freeze initiative. The most prominent aspect of the freeze debate in religious circles arguably took place among Catholics. Like their evangelical counterparts, Catholics, too were concerned over the escalating arms race. Just as issues over abortion and prayer in school were hot-button topics for Catholic debate, so too was the escalating arms race. In 1982, the issue of abortion had been the “chief priority” of American bishops for the past decade. But with the escalation of the arms race, many had now come to believe that nuclear weapons were either “equally important” or, in some instances, “the most important [issue] of all” facing the world in the early 1980s. Prominent Catholic magazines, such as the National Catholic Register objected to placing the freeze question above the abortion debate. With the Senate narrowly defeating an anti-abortion measure in 1982, the National Catholic Register lamented the temptation for many to give up on the abortion question, lamenting, “‘We gave it a good try, but we failed.’”

The National Catholic Register’s editorial came as a response to the controversial decision of the Catholic Bishops to endorse a “nuclear freeze.” In November of 1982, at the annual meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, D.C., 276 Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church debated a pastoral letter pertaining to the escalating arms race. Though addressed to American Catholics, the letter was intended to contribute to the
“wider public debate . . . on the dangers and dilemmas of the nuclear age,” denouncing the arms race as the “greatest curse on the human race . . . a danger, an act of aggression against the poor, and a folly which does not provide the security it promises.”

The letter went on to make many challenges against the Reagan administration, calling for “a clear public resistance to the rhetoric of ‘winnable’ nuclear wars,” and repudiating “unrealistic expectations of ‘surviving nuclear exchanges,’” as well as the “strategies of ‘protracted nuclear war.’” The bishops questioned the premises of mutual assured destruction as not adequate for “a long-term basis for peace,” explaining that nuclear deterrence “should be used as a step on the way toward progressive disarmament.” However, perhaps in anticipation of critics, the letter went on to specifically condemn abortion and challenge peace activists who did not stand with the church on the issue to reconsider it.53

The religious strands of the Freeze movement represented a different challenge to the Reagan administration. Whereas activists to the left of the political spectrum could be dismissed publically or ridiculed, members of the Freeze movement who voted for Reagan and made up part of the governing coalition could not be. Indeed, the administration was led by a devout Christian and featured several cabinet members who were devout Roman Catholics. Religious involvement in the Freeze campaign would force the administration to tip-toe a careful line in trying to convince Freeze supporters to accept “peace through strength.” To counter the momentum in the churches, the administration would work with conservative allies such as Phyllis Schlafly of the Eagle Forum, who suggested someone in the White House “serve as the focal point for coordinating efforts against the freeze and . . . disseminate information about the defense situation,” due to the “many in the church community who are for the Administration's
stand but have no support.” Additionally, Red Cavaney recommended bishop Hannon to Bud McFarlane’s anti-freeze policy group since he was “very supportive of the administration.”

As well as working with both conservative allies and dissenting bishops, President Reagan frequently made appearances in front of religious audiences to dissuade them from accepting the idea of a “freeze.” In August 1982, in an address to Roman Catholics in Hartford, Connecticut, Reagan attempted to “seize the peace initiative in Catholic circles,” telling his Catholic audience that they took “second place to none in the quest for peace through arms control and agreements,” whereas the ideas put forward by the Freeze movement were “obsolete” and “sterile.” While Reagan received wide applause for his remarks about anti-abortion legislation, tax exemption for parents with children in private schools, a constitutional amendment for prayer in school, and a tightening of obscenity laws, the New York Times reported that the president received only “mild applause” for support for “the morality of maintaining our strategic nuclear deterrence.” While outside the Hartford Civic Center antinuclear voices resonated, inside, President Reagan fared no better when a protester shouted in the middle of his speech, “No more nuclear weapons! Jobs for the poor!”

In an address at the Annual National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in Orlando, Florida on March 8, 1983, in President Reagan’s famous evil empire speech, he assaulted the Freeze campaign, attempting to link support for it with Soviet ambitions. “I would agree to a freeze,” Reagan told the evangelicals, “if only we could freeze the Soviets' global desires.” However, freezing the arms race at current levels “would remove any incentive for the Soviets to negotiate seriously in Geneva” on arms control proposals. By linking support for the Freeze to the atheistic Soviet Union, and by enlisting evangelicals in their campaign against the Freeze, the
“evil empire” speech to the NAE was just one of the ways in which the Reagan administration sought to steal the movement’s power.54

The Freeze movement in Popular Culture

As the Freeze campaign expanded in religious communities, so too did it expand to the cultural realms, fusing both the political and popular culture of the United States, with the effects of the movement lingering throughout the decade. From music, to movies, to the musicians and actors themselves, the ideas spurred on by the Freeze movement were everywhere in the popular culture of the early 1980s. Indeed, even viewers of Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood could not escape the nuclear question in 1983, when a week long episode entitled “Conflict” featured one character suspected of making bomb parts, causing another to also build up his stock pile of bomb parts.55 The Freeze intertwined the popular and political culture in lyrics and album covers, with artists as diverse as Metallica, REM, and 10,000 Maniacs among others writing songs evoking the fear of a nuclear war and the dangers of a continued arms race.

While Cold War themes ran throughout popular culture and films in the 1980s, the movie that evoked the most response and internal discussion from the Reagan White House was not a box office hit (or bust), but the made-for-TV film, The Day After, which depicted the grim results of a nuclear war in Lawrence, Kansas–the American heartland. Premiering November 20, 1983 on ABC, it received nearly 100 million viewers, and was one of the top rated television shows in the nation’s history. While the film made a lasting impression on audiences, the behind-the-scenes battle shows us how the administration and its allies sought to control the film’s message. The project was controversial from the start, costing over $7,000,000 to produce and leaving cast members with “nukemares.” As Lawrence Wittner notes, “enraged American hawks
demonstrated outside ABC affiliates,” while commercial advertisers dropped out. Pentagon officials who had originally planned to cooperate with ABC, reneged after reading the script. In the final editing phase, bowing to external pressure, ABC cut the film short, leaving out a scene in which a Pershing II missile heading to Europe becomes the catalyst for the nuclear attack.56

The Reagan administration took particular interest in the film. In an advanced screening, President Reagan described it in his diary as “powerfully done” and “very effective” leaving him “greatly depressed.”57 Elsewhere in the administration, a staff memo circulated “ideas for public affairs strategy” concerning The Day After, listing twenty-six ways in which the administration could respond to the film. While the administration’s ideas to counter the film were wide and varied, they did not seek to counter the violent depiction of nuclear war the film entailed or to dismiss fears, but, once again, emphasized their arms control initiatives as the best way of preventing such a tragedy. In a memo from David Gergen to Ronald Reagan, Gergen suggested the question be framed as “How do we prevent a nuclear holocaust?” to which there could only be one correct answer: “Support [Reagan’s] policies of deterrence and arms reduction.” The Reagan administration blanketed the radio and TV media, and provided six op-ed pieces in various papers. After the film aired, the administration used twenty volunteer telephone operators to take calls and answer questions from the public, while a special rotary hot-line was set up specifically for “Mid-level specialists at the Department of Defense to answer requests from local radio and TV talk shows.”58 The discussion following the film would feature Secretary of State George Shultz in a one-on-one interview where Shultz would, as President Reagan wrote in his diary, “take it over and say it shows why we must keep on doing what we’re doing.”59

The Reagan administration worked closely with conservative allies in the media to frame
the discussion surrounding *The Day After*, including notables such as Pat Buchanan and William Safire among others. “Outside groups” held numerous activities in relation to the film in the days following *The Day After*. Gergen’s memo described how “Citizens for America,” a defense lobbyist organization, “sent out packets of talking points and position papers in support of the Administration’s arms control efforts and deterrence strategy to their chairman in each congressional district where 110 press conferences were held” the morning after the film aired. Other lobbyist groups, such as High Frontier and the American Security Council (ASC), sought to fight back against the film, with High Frontier offering a counter film that would appear on “at least 40 TV stations” and ASC members appearing on talk shows throughout the country to support the administration’s policies. David Gergen praised the “first rate job” of the administration and its allies in fighting back during the “renewed debate over nuclear arms.”

**The Nuclear Freeze on the Political Stage**

Both on the national level and state level, from 1982 through 1984, the Freeze movement gained political currency—a fact not lost on the Reagan administration. In a memo to Chief of Staff James Baker, Elizabeth Dole noted that the Freeze campaign was “rapidly growing among the American public” and had become “of particular interest to some of our major constituent groups.” “[B]ecause of the domestic political implications of the issue,” Dole wrote to Baker, “it seems to me that the various White House liaison and appropriate policy offices should be involved.” The fight over how to best prevent a nuclear holocaust blended into the political culture from 1982 to 1984. It was in this brief stretch of time where the Freeze campaign had both its greatest successes and its most harrowing defeats.

In the fall of 1982, nine states held referendums for a nuclear freeze. The most prominent
battle, mixing both political and popular culture, was in California over proposition 12 (a California state initiative that called on the United States and Soviet Union to bilaterally freeze production and deployment of nuclear weapons). As journalist Paul Loeb explains, “Because [California] was the nation’s largest state, Reagan’s home and known—for good or for ill—as a bellwether of shifts in national sentiment, Freeze supporters believed the outcome would echo across the country.” The campaign for California Proposition 12 was diverse and can be used as a prism to view the Freeze movement’s successes and failures.

The campaign for a statewide nuclear freeze initiative began at the grassroots level. In December 1980, inspired by an article in The Nation describing the Massachusetts freeze referendums, Jo and Nick Seidita began organizing within the Unitarian Universalist Society, and set out on campaign which included mailings, phone banking, and visits to organizations and churches seeking endorsements. By August 1981, Paul Loeb recounts, eighty-four groups were involved in what became “Californians for a Nuclear Weapons Freeze.” Across the state, to gain the required signatures to put the freeze question on the ballot supporters held “petition parties,” sold the “Freeze Bar” popsicle for a dollar on state beaches, and, used more traditional methods such as gathering signatures outside of public venues. With over 750,000 names collected, the question of a freeze would be put to voters in California, November 1982.

As diverse as the national Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign was, so too was California’s coalition. As Nuclear Times, a monthly news magazine dedicated to the antinuclear movement, noted, supporters of the initiative ranged from feminists to Roman Catholic bishops, joining “black ministers with corporate lawyers, and Berkeley radicals with both of Ronald Reagan’s daughters.” Hollywood, too played a part. In “First Steps,” a commercial blending the
political and popular culture, actors Jack Lemmon and Paul Newman played a game of poker. As Paul Loeb describes the commercial, the two argue over their poker hands and begin “splitting off matches from stockpiles in their hands, holding them out to test and threaten,” paying no attention to the gasoline on the floor. With obvious analogies to nuclear stockpiles, Paul Newman shouted “I got forty-four, how many you got?” “Thirty-six,” Lemmon answered. The two struck matches simultaneously filling the screen with flames. Outside of Hollywood, a variety of luminaries from the scientific community expressed support, as well as politicians such as California Governor Edmund G. Brown, Jr.\textsuperscript{65}

Despite a wide coalition in support, a strong coalition campaigned against it. Labor organizations, such as the AFL-CIO, declined to endorse the campaign, arguing that SALT II needed to be ratified before a freeze could be instituted. Whereas Governor Brown supported a freeze, his Republican opponents, Congressman Barry Goldwater, Jr. and San Diego Mayor Pete Wilson, both stood against the measure.\textsuperscript{66} Charlton Heston chided fellow actor Paul Newman, calling him a “good man and a good actor,” but someone who needed to “check the facts first,” regarding the freeze.\textsuperscript{67} Heston also appeared in a “No on 12” TV advertisement “charging that ‘a freeze wouldn’t be honored by the Soviet Union, couldn’t be verified, (would) hurt our deterrent ability and would encourage Soviet aggression.’”\textsuperscript{68}

The California Campaign for a Nuclear Freeze shows the dilemmas the movement faced as it sought to expand its message. While the power of Hollywood may have helped the movement reach a wider audience, it left the grassroots activists resentful. While the actors, writers, and designers donated their services to the commercials, the California Nuclear Freeze campaign still spent approximately $2,000,000 on advertisements in favor of Proposition 12. As
one activist explained to Paul Loeb, by spending such amounts of money on advertisements, the campaign failed to nurture “the kind of grass-roots networks that can generate 100 letters at a moment’s notice, or generate twenty people to sit in at a congressman’s office.”

Further problems were encountered by the top down nature imposed on the campaign by financier Harold Willens who used his money and influence to bankroll the California Freeze campaign. However, as Nuclear Times noted in 1982, “Willens mode politics often clashed with the ideas and style of local activists.” Willens feared the California Nuclear Freeze campaign would be captive to “a stupid, silly fringe group whose efforts could be contained in a telephone booth.” Seeking to operate the campaign like a business, Willens made decisions for the campaign in Los Angeles, then expected everyone else to fall in line—a concept that caused much consternation among Northern Californian activists.

The battle for a freeze referendum was not just limited to California. Across the nation, the administration was deeply involved in trying to prevent nine state referendums in support of the Freeze from passing. In Wisconsin, the Reagan administration sought to pressure the governor and the other major candidates on the issue with Elizabeth Dole creating a “Wisconsin Anti Freeze Effort.” The administration sought to counter the campaign by placing phone calls and writing letters to the governor, sending high level speakers to campaign against the idea, and working within the media by placing op-eds and appearing on radio and television programs. In every state, the administration worked closely with an “anti Freeze coalition” to undermine the Freeze momentum.

Despite the problems the Freeze campaign encountered, both internally and from the Reagan administration, the movement succeeded in passing Proposition 12 in California,
securing an endorsement from the Los Angeles Times.\textsuperscript{71} Nationally, with more than one-third of the nation’s electorate voting on the freeze question, the state referendums became “the closet this nation [had] ever come to a national referendum on the nuclear arms race.”\textsuperscript{72} The referendums passed in eight of nine states, with Arizona the lone dissenter. While an issue like handgun control (Proposition 15) in California was soundly defeated, and Republican Pete Wilson would win the Senate seat, Proposition 12 won by a four percent margin, fifty-two to forty-eight percent, showing how the issue could cross party lines.

At the national level, too, the Freeze campaign forged alliances with unlikely supporters, particularly in the Congress. But the fight in the Congress for a “nuclear freeze” shows one of the major flaws in the success of the movement. While Congressmen such as Edward J. Markey and Mark Hatfield were probably sincere in their support for the Freeze movement, when it came to the actual legislation, many of their colleagues shared the idea of the freeze, but not the commitment. This was apparent in the legislation from the outset which, David Cortright notes, “fell far short” of grassroots activists expectations. The final legislation voted on was non-binding, calling “not for an immediate halt to the arms race,” but for the United States and Soviet Union to decide for themselves “when and how” to call for an immediate freeze.\textsuperscript{73} While this resolution passed in the House May 5, 1983, it was rejected by Senate in November 1983. The week following the House’s passage of the Freeze resolution, Congress authorized funding for the MX missile, proving their allegiance to the freeze concept more rhetorical than meaningful.\textsuperscript{74}

While the Freeze suffered politically from a Congress that offered only tepid support for their cause, during the debate in the House over the Freeze resolution in March 1983, President Reagan announced a new initiative that took even Secretary of State George Shultz by surprise.
The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), theoretically, would act as a shield over the United States, stopping an incoming nuclear assault. Though the idea of shield stopping an incoming attack would resonate with Reagan’s own antinuclear beliefs, many of the administration’s allies viewed this as a way of stopping the momentum of the Freeze. Edward Teller wrote to President Reagan in July 1982 about using the technology not just to stop nuclear weapons, but also as “a uniquely effective reply to those advocating the dangerous inferiority implied by a ‘nuclear freeze.’” In *Conservative Digest*, Gregory Fossedal of the Heritage Foundation wrote of a “secret weapon” under development that would “undercut the freeze crusade,” and make arms control negotiations “irrelevant” since “it wouldn’t matter what the Soviet Union did with its arms.” This “High Frontier” program was a satellite-based anti-missile system, which, Fossedal boasted, “would turn the grass-roots nuclear freeze movement inside out.” Thus, the administration and its allies envisioned SDI as more than just another tool in the Cold War military arsenal—it was, as Freeze activist Pam Solo suggested, the administration’s way of “[co-opting] the movement’s moral and political ground.”

**Concluding Thoughts (or why the Freeze movement was not a failure)**

E.P. Thompson once remarked that “most social movements [only] have a life span of about six years. If they do not make an impact within this ‘window of opportunity,’ they will have little effect on the larger political structures they hope to transform.” The Freeze movement rose to national prominence in such a short time due to the Reagan administration’s escalation of the arms race. As the movement moved away from the grassroots and into the political realm, it began to collapse in on itself. Despite critiques of SDI as “Star Wars,” the creation of a program which, rhetorically at least, insisted it would eliminate nuclear weapons,
undermined the cause of the Freeze movement. During the 1984 election, “Freeze Voter ‘84,” the political lobbying arm of the Freeze campaign, failed to defeat Ronald Reagan. In part, this failure was linked to the Freeze’s alignment with a Democratic Party that was only lukewarm about the proposal. While activists supported Jessie Jackson during the primaries, pragmatists took the middle of the road with Walter Mondale who failed to make arms control a defining issue of the 1984 election.\textsuperscript{79} In trying to appeal to everyone and in linking their future with politicians who could just as easily say they supported the freeze idea, while voting for the MX missile the following week, the Freeze movement lost its message.

While the Freeze movement may not have defeated Reagan in 1984, their ideas did not die. In his 1985 inauguration speech, President Reagan proclaimed that the United States did not just seek to “reduce” the numbers of nuclear weapons in the world, but aimed for “the total elimination . . . of nuclear weapons from the face of the Earth.” This was a stunning reversal from a man who once saw “no useful purpose” in renouncing the first use of nuclear weapons and believed the difference between an ICBM nuclear warhead and an SLBM was that the latter could be recalled.\textsuperscript{80} Indeed, the man who headed an administration that openly talked about fighting and winning nuclear war was now closer to the ideas of Roger Molander and Helen Caldicott than T.K. Jones or Richard Perle. What caused this so-called, “Reagan reversal”?

While recent historiography has neglected the Freeze campaign, favoring Reagan’s own antinuclear views as the basis for policy decisions, this neglects Reagan’s actual role in nuclear policy and the broader effect of the Freeze movement. As Lou Cannon remarks, “On . . . nuclear diplomacy, Reagan was content to be a performer rather than a policymaker,” relying on neo-conservatives who detested arms control as much as Communism.\textsuperscript{81} The antinuclear momentum
forced an administration that dragged its feet on arms control agreements to rethink their positions or face a continued domestic backlash with possible electoral repercussions.

While SDI may have been the shot from which the Freeze campaign could not recover, globally, the Soviet Union did the Freeze no favors when in September 1983 they shot down Korean Airliner 007 after it veered off course, leading to further distrust of the Soviets. With the KAL 007 incident and the administration’s drumbeat that a freeze would maintain a “balance of terror,” popular sentiment for a freeze began to wane. With SDI, the Reagan administration adopted the rhetoric of preventing nuclear war, leaving behind the ideas of fighting and winning limited nuclear conflicts. By 1984, the tone of Reagan’s speeches had notably changed. Gone was the language of leaving the “evil empire” in the “ash heap of history,” replaced instead with language of “compromise” and a poignant tale of Ivan and Anya sharing a room with Jim and Sally. With no language barrier between them, Reagan questioned whether the two couples would “debate the differences between their governments? Or would they find themselves comparing notes about their children and what they did for a living?” Bewildered by the new Reagan, one staff member wondered, “Who wrote this shit?” As Reagan and Gorbachev later leisurely strolled together and engaged the issue of arms control seriously, the Freeze would “melt away,” as Francis FitzGerald remarks, while scandals like Iran-Contra grabbed headlines.

Though the Freeze campaign lost politically in 1984, when measured by its sway across society and by the lengths the administration sought to contain the idea and the movement, the Freeze campaign appears as far from a mirage, and more than just another social movement. It was, as Roger Molander remarked, a “revolution,” a political phenomenon that affected all aspects of society. It was, indeed, “a force to be reckoned with.”
Notes


11. Ibid., 101 - 102.


32. Memo William Clark to Edwin Meese III, James A. Baker III, Michael Deaver, “Nuclear [Freeze] (1 of 8),” Box 4 oa1529, David Gergen Files, RRPL.


35. Memo to Red Cavaney, “Nuclear Freeze (January - June) (1982) [2 of 3],” Series I Subject Files 1981-1983 Box 26 oa6390, Elizabeth H. Dole Files, RRPL. It is not clear on this memo who sent this to Red Cavaney; however, Cavaney’s handwriting on the bottom reveals that the administration wanted to take advantage of this relationship “asap” concluding, “we should do something here.”

36. Memo Bill Triplett to Red Cavaney, “Nuclear Freeze (1),” Series I Box 1 oa7438, William K.Triplett Files, RRPL.

37. James Cicconi memo on “nuclear freeze/arms control,” in “Nuclear [Freeze] (3 of 8),” Box 4 oa10529, David Gergen Files, RRPL.


44. Ibid.


52. James Hitchcock, “A Single Issue,” *National Catholic Register*, December 5, 1982, as found in “Nuclear Freeze [3 of 10],” Morton Blackwell Series I Subject Files Box 8 oa9079, Morton Blackwell Files, RRPL.


64. Loeb, Hope in Hard Times, 69 - 70.


69. Loeb, Hope in Hard Times, 72 - 73, 77.


72. Waller, Congress and the Nuclear Freeze, 163.


76. Gregory Fossedal quoted in “Spaced Out,” Nuclear Times, October 1982, Volume 1, Number 1, 5.


Bibliography

Archives
Nuclear Freeze files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California.

Government Documents

Newspaper coverage via Google News and Proquest, January 1980 - December 1984
*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*
*St. Petersburg Times*
*The Desert News*
*The Los Angeles Times*
*The New York Times*
*The Wall Street Journal*
*Washington Post*

Periodicals
*Diplomatic History*. Volume 33, Number 2, April 2009.
*Human Events*, June 25, 1983

Primary Sources (Print)
Gates, Robert. *From The Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents and How

Secondary Sources
FitzGerald, Francis. Way Out There in the Blue: Ronald Reagan, Star Wars, and the End of the

-35-