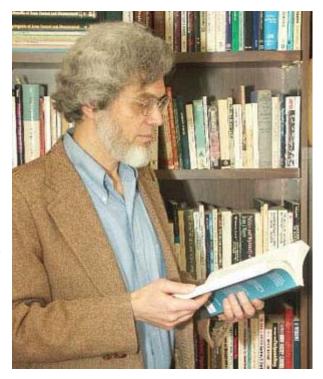The Danish Peace Academy

Have Peace Activists Ever Stopped a War?

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The role of peace activism in ending U.S. wars has received very little attention from scholars. Despite the fact that historians and social scientists have studied U.S. peace movements extensively in recent decades, we know much more about peace movements' organizational history than we do about their impact upon public policy. Thus, what I have to say today is a preliminary report.

Let me begin by examining the provocative comment by some observers that, rather than peace movements putting an end to wars, wars put an end to peace movements. This is sometimes the case, for--given the strength of nationalism--many people tend to rally `round the flag of their nation once war is declared. Thus, not surprisingly, substantial U.S. peace movements largely collapsed with the entry of the United States into the Civil War, World War I, and World War II. In more recent years, polls indicate that U.S. peace sentiment declined significantly (albeit temporarily) after the entry of the United States into the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the Iraq War. Furthermore, direct government repression in wartime--for example, during World War I--has sometimes dramatically undermined or destroyed peace movements.

Moreover, even when powerful peace movements have persisted in wartime, they have not always been very effective. The War of 1812 might well have been (as Samuel Eliot Morison claimed) the most unpopular war in U.S. history. Certainly it drew a tidal wave of criticism, especially in the Northeast. But the frequent denunciations of the war did not halt its progress. The same phenomenon can be glimpsed in the case of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century "pacification" of the Philippines. Although a powerful Anti-Imperialist League consistently challenged this war (which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Filipinos and 7,000 U.S. troops), it continued to rage right up to a U.S. military victory.

On the other hand, there are instances in which the peace movement brought an end to U.S. wars. The Mexican War of the 1840s provides us with one example. Condemned from the start as a war of aggression and as a war for slavery, the

Mexican War stirred up remarkably strong opposition. Thus, although the war went very well for the United States on a military level and President Polk pressed for the annexation of all of Mexico to the United States, when Nicholas Trist, Polk's diplomatic negotiator, disobeyed his instructions and signed a treaty providing for the annexation of only about a third of Mexico, Polk felt trapped. In the face of fierce public opposition to the conflict, he did not believe it possible to prolong the war to secure his goal of taking all of Mexico. And so Polk reluctantly backed Trist's peace treaty, and the war came to an end.

Another example of peace movement effectiveness can be seen in its impact upon the Vietnam War. By late 1967, as Lyndon Johnson recalled, "the pressure got so great" that Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara "couldn't sleep at night. I was afraid he might have a nervous breakdown." Johnson himself seemed obsessed with the opposition his war policies had generated. Conversations with Cabinet members began: "Why aren't you out there fighting against my enemies?" After McNamara resigned and Johnson was driven from office by a revolt within his own party, it was the Nixon administration's turn to be caught, as Henry Kissinger complained, "between the hammer of antiwar pressure and the anvil of Hanoi." Kissinger noted: "The very fabric of government was falling apart. The Executive Branch was shell-shocked." The war and the peace protests, Kissinger concluded, "shattered the self-confidence without which Establishments flounder." In a careful and well-researched study, Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves, the historian Melvin Small concluded that "the antiwar movement and antiwar criticism in the media and Congress had a significant impact on the Vietnam policies of both Johnson and Nixon," pushing them toward deescalation and, ultimately, withdrawal from the war.

Yet another example of the peace movement's efficacy occurred in the context of the Reagan administration's determined attempts to overthrow the Sandinista-led government of Nicaragua. As in Vietnam, despite the immense military advantage the U.S. government enjoyed against a small, peasant nation, it was unable to employ it effectively. Popular pressure against U.S. military intervention in Nicaragua not only blocked the dispatch of U.S. combat troops, but led to congressional action (i.e. the Boland amendment) cutting off U.S. government funding for the U.S. surrogates, the contras. Although the Reagan administration sought to circumvent the Boland amendment by selling U.S. missiles to Iran and sending the proceeds to the contras, this scheme backfired, and did more to undermine the Reaganites than it did the Sandinistas.

There is also considerable evidence that it was the peace movement that brought an end to the Cold War. The peace movement's struggle against the nuclear arms race and its clearest manifestation, nuclear testing, led directly to Kennedy's 1963 American University address and to the Partial Test Ban Treaty of that year, which began Soviet-American détente. The speech was partially written by Norman Cousins, founder and co-chair of the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, America's largest peace group. Cousins also brokered the treaty.

When the hawkish Reagan administration revived the Cold War and escalated the nuclear arms race, these actions triggered the greatest outburst of peace movement activism in world history. In the United States, the Nuclear Freeze campaign secured the backing of leading religious denominations, unions, professional groups, and the Democratic Party, organized the largest political demonstration up to that time in U.S. history, and drew the support of more than 70 percent of the public. In Europe, much the same thing occurred, and in the fall of 1983 some five million people turned out for demonstrations against the planned deployment of intermediate range nuclear missiles. Reagan was stunned. In October 1983, he told Secretary of State George Shultz: "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." Shultz was horrified by the idea, but agreed that "we could not leave matters as they stood."

Consequently, in January 1984, Reagan delivered a remarkable public address calling for peace with the Soviet Union and for a nuclear-free world. His advisors agree that this speech was designed to signal to the Russians his willingness to end the Cold War and reduce nuclear arsenals. But the Soviet leadership was not interested in following up on Reagan's proposals until the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev in March 1985. Gorbachev, unlike his predecessors, was ready to take action, for he was a movement convert. His "New Thinking"--by which he meant the necessity for peace and disarmament in the nuclear age--was almost a carbon copy of the peace movement's program. As Gorbachev himself declared: "The new thinking took into account and absorbed the conclusions and demands of . . . the movements of physicians, scientists, and ecologists, and of various antiwar organizations." Not surprisingly, then, Reagan and Gorbachev, spurred on by the peace movement, moved rapidly toward nuclear disarmament treaties and an end to the Cold War.

We might also give some thought to the wars that, thanks to peace movement activism, did not occur. Historians have maintained that the anti-imperialist crusade against the Philippines war blocked the occurrence of later U.S. wars of this kind and on this scale. They have also suggested that peace movement pressures helped to block war with Mexico in 1916 and helped to soften the U.S.-Mexican confrontation of the late 1920s. And how many wars, we might ask ourselves, were prevented through the implementation of many ideas and proposals that originated with the peace movement: international arbitration; international law; decolonization; a league of nations; disarmament treaties; a United Nations; and nonviolent resistance. We shall probably never know.

We do know, however, that the peace movement played a major role in preventing one kind of war since 1945: nuclear war. Given time constraints, no more than a tiny portion of the evidence for this point can be presented today. But it is laid out in great detail in my trilogy, The Struggle Against the Bomb.

In 1956, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, complained that the atomic bomb had acquired " 'a bad name,' and to such an extent that it

seriously inhibits us from using it." Later that year, when the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other administration officials called for greater flexibility in the employment of nuclear weapons, President Eisenhower responded: "The use of nuclear weapons would raise serious political problems in view of the current state of world opinion." In mid-1957, brushing aside ambitious proposals for nuclear war-fighting, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles told a National Security Council meeting that "world opinion was not yet ready to accept the general use of nuclear weapons."

This belief continued to haunt U.S. officials during the struggle in Vietnam when, in Dean Rusk's words, the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations deliberately "lost the war rather than 'win' it with nuclear weapons." McGeorge Bundy, who served as the National Security Advisor to two of these presidents and a consultant to the third, maintained that the U.S. government's decision not to use nuclear weapons in the war did not result from fear of nuclear retaliation by the Russians and Chinese, but from the terrible public reaction that a U.S. nuclear attack would provoke in other nations and, especially, in the United States.

The proof of the pudding came during the Reagan administration, whose top national security officials -- from the President on down -- entered office talking glibly of fighting and winning a nuclear war. But this position quickly changed thanks to a massive popular outcry against it. Starting in April 1982, Reagan 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!'"

Thus, although there is considerable room for additional research on peace movement efficacy, I think it is fair to say that, on numerous occasions, peace activism has exercised a restraining influence on U.S. foreign and military policy.