
EDITORIAL

The Ground Zero antinuclear movement provides a glimpse into what is quickly becoming the future of American politics. It poses as great a threat to democracy as the invention of thermonuclear weapons does to the future of mankind, for it depoliticizes both the problem of nuclear war and the civic activity that is supposed to prevent it, all the while deluding people into believing that they are being "political." According to its founder Roger Molander, the purpose of Ground Zero is "to restore the basic faith in democracy which says that individual Americans can understand and participate in redefining a strategy for preventing nuclear war. . . ." Convinced that "it's not good to encourage people to think that a nuclear holocaust can be avoided by simple technical fixes," such as the Kennedy-Hatfield proposal for a negotiated nuclear freeze with the Soviet Union, Molander, former staff member of the National Security Council, wants to teach citizens that "arms control is complex."

He thinks it essential that citizens become educated in the pros and cons of deterrence, arms races, and incineration, but he is insistent that it be done in a "nonpartisan" way and that it not encourage mass political action. Accordingly, Ground Zero set about making democracy safe for nonpartisan discussion of nuclear complexities by sublimating it into bicycle marathons, footraces, dances, and teach-ins.

Ground Zero is not unique in seeking a pseudodemocratic basis for technocratic politics. Other antinuclear groups and most of the major environmental organizations conceive of political participation as the opportunity to be informed by experts. Politics is reduced to education conducted within a framework devised beforehand by the authorities qualified to define the choices and the limits of the problem. Discussion then takes place within the terms and on the terrain set by the experts. The new politics has special conceptions of membership, participation, and civic virtue: a member is anyone entered on a computerized mailing list; participation consists of signing a pledge to contribute money; civic virtue is actually writing the check. The culminating moment, the functional equivalent to storming the Bastille, is when the paid advertisement appears in the *Sunday New York Times*.

By striking the pose of being above politics the antinuclear movement set themselves up to be victimized. It took but a few weeks for Ronald Reagan to accommodate them. By the single stroke of his May 9 speech at Eureka College he proved how easy it is to regain the initiative and convince the media of his good

intentions while serving up a disarmament proposal that the Soviets can scarcely take seriously. Nuclear weaponry is a fairly arcane subject with endless possibilities for playing the game of appearances—of appearing to be concerned, responsive, and humane while disarming one's critics. The day after the President's Eureka speech the press suddenly declared—on what evidence was unclear—that the President had abandoned his “past confrontational attitude toward the USSR” and remained committed to “the value of discussion.” In muting its earlier talk of limited nuclear war, the administration was not reacting to the threat of more marathons or nonpartisan discussions. Eugene Rostow, one of the true super-hawks, declared that the administration would welcome “a thorough, civil, and disciplined debate about what our foreign policy is for, what it's supposed to accomplish, and by what means.” The administration's fear is not debate but a general wave of protest. James Reston expressed the real fears of the Establishment: the question was whether “this immensely complicated military and moral issue” would be decided “by government decision, by public education, or by political demonstrations.” The administration is quite aware that it is widely perceived as anti-poor, anti-black, anti-urban, pro-business, pro-bigoted religion, and far more in love with the rhetoric and substance of war than of peace. Its deepest worry is that a broadly-based movement might coalesce around the accusation that this administration is essentially a war regime—nuclear war abroad and class war at home.

In the past, if democracy meant anything at all, it meant the copresence of human beings, the physical reality of people in *this* place and at *this* time arguing and deciding how to find the appropriate means to articulate their needs. The democracy of the future will be wholly abstract, a direct-mail list. The future is already prefigured in the two major political parties: they are their national headquarters.

Unlike the oldtime pressure groups that rarely pretended they were involving people in politics, the new-style movements are essentially antipolitical because they foster the illusion that an issue can be so overriding as to become disconnected from the political and social structures that are daily reproducing and re-enforcing unequal and unjust distributions of the civilized values that collective effort makes possible. Disconnected politics is the condition for the modern-day asceticism of the upper-income and professional classes. Running a footrace for peace punishes the body, purifies the soul, and symbolically transforms the problem of nuclear war into a question of objective “approaches.”

Nuclear weapons do present complex questions, but not of the sort typically raised by either the antinuclear and environmental organizations or their rivals in the establishment. The really complex issues concern what kind of society we have become or want to become that it should require trillions of dollars in coming years to defend it. The problem is complex because in an age of an

international political economy and multinational corporations, it is no longer certain whether "we" exist as a national society in any traditional sense. The aggressive expansion of American political and military power to protect "our" economy in every corner of the globe raises very complex questions, not only of policy but of loyalty. Who wants to pay taxes so that American bankers will not lose the interest payments due to them from the Polish government that is systematically repressing Solidarity? And it is equally complex to ask why we should remain committed to a form of economy that has proved beyond a doubt that it will produce huge concentrations of power in the hands of the relatively few while diminishing the possibility of meaningful work for the many.

People do need to be told again and again of the horrors of nuclear war and of the diminishing margin of safety, but they need as well to reflect on how that danger is inseparable from the deep structure of politics in American society. They need to be roused not only against the danger of being exterminated in a nuclear exchange or of becoming complicit in a nuclear strategy that abets the destruction of another society in order to save our own, but also against the public use being made of their bodies, minds, and labor. A new debate is, indeed, in order, one that is framed around the assumption that radical change is essential and can be started by deciding on how best to meet basic needs through positive common action, and on how best to declare a common refusal to contribute body, mind, and labor to a system that subverts democracy abroad and corrupts while caricaturing it at home.

Sheldon S. Wolin
May 12, 1982