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Background Paper

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A NUCLEAR FREEZE?

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INTRODUCTION

Several versions of proposals for a comprehensive freeze on the production, development and deployment of nuclear warheads and their delivery systems were again on the agenda of the United Nations General Assembly in 1985. In November, President Reagan and Soviet leader Gorbachev met in Geneva to discuss, amongst other things, the arms control issues which are at the heart of their differences.

They probably gave little attention to the freeze, notwithstanding the fact that one of the freeze resolutions before the United Nations was sponsored by the Soviet Union, and, indeed, notwithstanding the tide of support for the freeze that swept across the United States and Western Europe in 1982 and 1983. The comprehensive freeze proposals appear to have been successfully by-passed, at least as far as the United States is concerned.

What happened to the freeze proposal? Perhaps more than any other idea since the 1950s, it appeared to offer a cogent, realistic 'instruction' which citizens could provide to their governments. Moreover, the freeze proposal itself was eminently understandable — the momentum of the arms race must be stopped in much the same way as a train must halt before it can be reversed. It commanded the support of distinguished and experienced people, including some former high-level officials in Washington. And finally, it provided a common point around which concerned citizens in the peace movement could join their concerns and hope to influence their governments.

THE DEBATE IN THE UNITED STATES

"... the United States and the Soviet Union should stop the nuclear arms race."

This simple, stark message introduced the *Call to Halt the Nuclear Arms Race*, a resolution drafted in

March 1980 by Randall Forsberg of the Institute for Defense and Disarmament Studies in Boston. For several years thereafter, the *Call* served as the rallying point for a rapidly growing coalition of peace groups and civic organizations in the United States. The *Call* demanded "a mutual freeze on the testing, production and deployment of nuclear weapons and of missiles and of new aircraft designed primarily to deliver nuclear weapons." In the years ahead, and in various forms, it was carried into the Congress, into the domestic political debates of the allies of the United States, including Canada, and, repeatedly, into the United Nations. It is hardly an exaggeration, therefore, to say that throughout the first term of President Reagan, the freeze proposal focussed public anxieties about the nuclear arms race, and centred the public (but not necessarily the official) debate about the best way to reverse the increasing tensions in the superpower relationship.

Why did the freeze catch the public mood so quickly and successfully? There were several reasons, but perhaps one was central. In early 1980 there was a growing sense in the United States, fostered by Ronald Reagan's Presidential candidacy, that there were grave imbalances in the superpower holdings of nuclear weapons. Candidate, then President Reagan promised to remedy this situation by accelerating modernization programmes such as the MX missile, the Trident Submarine and the B-1 bomber. In doing so, he set the scene for the struggle between those who believed that stable deterrence, and successful negotiations with the Soviets, required increased American military strength, and those who believed that the superpowers "should stop the nuclear arms race."

There had been earlier proposals for various kinds of freezes. Largely unnoticed, President Johnson had proposed a freeze on strategic weapons in 1964. It was quickly rejected by the Soviets who, previewing and mirroring the debates of the 1980s, saw no benefit or security in a freeze that would lock in the overwhelming nuclear superiority that the

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