

# Where Is the Protest?

**With little public awareness, the United States has entered a new costly, potentially disastrous, nuclear arms race.**

BY JIM CARRIER

When Robin Lloyd opened her laptop to scan the news on March 7, a large headline stopped her: “It’s time to protest nuclear war again.”

A graphic op-ed in *The New York Times* warned that a new arms race was underway.

“Nuclear powers are getting more numerous and less cautious. We’ve condemned another generation to live on a planet that is one grave act of hubris or human error away from destruction without demanding any action from our leaders. That must change,” wrote the *Times*’ opinion editor, Kathleen Kingsbury.

Lloyd’s reaction?

“Dread! Exasperation! Now we have to educate and look the human death wish in the face again. We had worked so hard, and we hadn’t succeeded in burying the terror of nuclear weapons and nuclear war.”

At eighty-five, moving cautiously with a cane, the indefatigable activist, whose grandmother was a co-founder of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom in 1915, poured herself a cup of tea and tapped out an email inviting sixty people to gather at the Quaker meeting house in Burlington, Vermont, “to discuss rebuilding a peace movement.”

Twenty-seven people showed up on March 19, in person and online, the elders of Vermont’s social conscience. Forty years earlier, they had transformed the second-smallest state by population into a national leader of grassroots nuclear opposition by persuading



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Activist Robin Lloyd, a member of Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom in Vermont, shows a photo of herself from the 1980s, in June 2018.

177 of Vermont’s towns to vote for a nuclear weapons freeze. That fact was painted on a twenty-foot banner and paraded through New York City to Central Park among one million people on June 12, 1982. It was the largest disarmament rally in American history and is credited with helping persuade President Ronald Reagan to meet with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and negotiate the first meaningful nuclear arms reduction treaty.

Jointly declaring, “A nuclear war cannot be won and should never be fought,” Reagan and Gorbachev “came within an inch of eliminating all nuclear weapons and changing the world forever,” writes historian Vincent Intondi in his book *Saving the World from Nuclear War: The June 12, 1982, Disarmament Rally and Beyond*.

But as Lloyd’s colleagues gathered four decades

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A group of Vermonters carry a banner during the June 12, 1982, Rally for Nuclear Disarmament in New York City. Vermont first started using its Town Meeting Day to weigh in on social issues in 1982, when more than 200 communities called for a nuclear weapons freeze.

later and heard details of a \$1.7 trillion “modernization” of the United States’ nuclear enterprise, there was a palpable sense of fatigue. Still engaged individually in peace and justice issues, ranging from PFAS (known as forever chemicals) to F-35s to U.S. meddling in Africa, they were all busy. Why, they wondered, hadn’t they heard about this new nuclear arms race? Where was the outrage? And where would they find the spark, the energy, and fresh troops to fight again to rid the world of nuclear weapons?



“It was truly frightening and eye-opening to hear what would happen to the world if even one nuclear bomb were dropped.”

Rishi Gurudevyan  
 Founder of Students for Nuclear Disarmament

Unbeknownst to them, 190 miles away in neighboring New Hampshire, a sixteen-year-old high school junior, Rishi Gurudevyan, inspired by Vermont’s example, was launching Students for Nuclear Disarmament.

“Our generation—Gen Z, people born in the late 1990s, early 2000s—hasn’t lived through intense geopolitical events related to nuclear weapons, like Hiro-

shima and Nagasaki, the Cuban missile crisis, and the rest of the Cold War,” Gurudevyan tells *The Progressive*. “That’s really before our time. So we’ve been lulled into a false sense of security about this issue.”

It was a talk in January 2023 at his school, Phillips Exeter Academy, that awakened Gurudevyan. The speaker was Dr. Ira Helfand, an internal medicine



physician in Springfield, Massachusetts, who helped found the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 for persuading the United Nations to create the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

“It was truly frightening and eye-opening” to hear Helfand describe what would happen to the world “if even one nuclear bomb were dropped,” says Gurudevan. After writing a history paper on the 1982 march and Vermont’s part in it, Gurudevan felt, “I had a sense of disappointment in myself and my peers that we hadn’t been doing anything about this issue when the risks are as great as they are. I knew that I had to take action somehow.” As of this writing, he has organized five chapters with 100 active members across the country.

Gurudevan’s initial ignorance of the new nuclear arms race is widely shared. One can search the Internet the world over and find few news stories about nuclear modernization or voices opposed to it. *The Nuclear Resister*, an online newsletter based in Tucson, Arizona, tracks protests and arrests—ten here, four there—but these stories are not widely distributed.

In March, five members of the Catholic Worker movement were arrested for blocking the gate of General Dynamics in New London, Connecticut, to protest the building of twelve Columbia-class nuclear submarines.

One of the five, Scott Schaeffer-Duffy, who has

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**“Almost everyone is uninformed, including politicians, regarding the severe medical consequences of nuclear power and war.”**

Dr. Helen Caldicott

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been arrested “at least fifty times” over the years, told *The Progressive* he “used to think you make a point, you raise the issue, and people will remember it. It’s just not true. You have to constantly refresh people’s memory about things.” Peace movements rise and fall with threats, he said. “We have to rebuild it.”

Dr. Helen Caldicott, eighty-five, an Australian pediatrician who famously met with Reagan, and spoke of the nuclear peril all over the world, including in Vermont, tells *The Progressive* in an email, “Now almost everyone is uninformed, including the scientifically illiterate politicians, regarding the severe medical consequences of nuclear power and war. The public

again needs to be educated and made fearful of our current nuclear situation, and then they will rise up and act as they did previously.”

**H**istorians and activists cite a number of factors for today’s nuclear silence:

- The end of the Cold War with the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union and a series of treaties that reduced the number of nuclear warheads worldwide from more than 70,000 to 12,500 today. “I think the public attitude was that it was behind us,” said John Tierney, a former Congressman who heads the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation. “And other interests came up—the Vietnam War, the Iraq [and] Afghanistan War[s], Black Lives Matter, economic inequality, women’s rights. All of these things were competing for the public interest. And they sort of assumed that this nuclear thing was no longer a problem, was under control, or moving in the right direction.”
- The 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, though still unsigned by India, Pakistan, and North Korea and since revoked by Russia, brought relief to downwinders, even as their compensation remains incomplete. Previous anti-nuclear activism was motivated by a “direct, personal sense that they really felt they could be harmed,” said Jeff Knopf, chair of nonproliferation and terrorism studies at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, California. Without explosions, radiation releases, or accidents, the world became inured to the presence of thousands of warheads.
- The U.S. news media essentially stopped covering nuclear weapons after President Barack Obama’s 2010 New START Treaty reduced U.S. and Russian warheads to 1,550 each. In doing so, the media largely missed or accepted the tradeoff he made to get it ratified that allowed Congress to begin a thirty-year overhaul of the U.S. Nuclear Security Enterprise and the nuclear triad, a project that is now forecast to cost \$1.7 trillion.
- Major foundations have stopped funding the issue. Notably, after three decades of grants, including \$100 million between 2015 and 2020, the MacArthur Foundation announced that it would “exit the nuclear field” by the end of 2023. With a farewell grant round of \$30 million, MacArthur sought to replace nuclear deterrence theory “as the predominant lens through which we view nuclear weapons strategy,” while fostering a “more productive dialogue about the role of nuclear power

as a climate solution.” In those few words, MacArthur highlighted the divide between “deterrence” and “disarmament” and widened a split among groups that once opposed both nuclear power and nuclear weapons.

- Sada Aksartova, then a researcher at Princeton, counted 1,829 “peace” grants totaling more than \$193 million between 1988 and 1996. Eighty percent of the money went to professional and academic recipients, which conferred “legitimacy” on the foundations, and not to grassroots efforts, a bias Aksartova attributes to ties between foundation trustees and corridors of power in government and business. Such “normative” ties steered foundations “away from funding citizen peace groups that questioned the policies and actions of the state.” As a result, the arms control and disarmament community “is sort of breathing on fumes . . . a major reason why we can’t tell our story and get the word out as well as we really need to,” says Sean Meyer, a co-founder of Back from the Brink, a coalition of communities formed in 2017 to eliminate nuclear weapons.
- The defense industry overwhelms peace groups with its lobbying power. In the first half of 2023, defense contractors spent nearly \$70 million lobbying the federal government, mainly to promote the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act, which budgeted \$841 billion to the Defense Department and \$24 billion to the National Nuclear Security Administration, which develops all nuclear weapons, according to OpenSecrets, a nonprofit that tracks money in politics. General Dynamics, the company producing submarines that was picketed by those five Catholic Workers, spent \$6.3 million. With defense contracts strategically distributed in many states, “they can mobilize to put pressure on members of Congress in different districts with jobs on the line,” says Knopf. “And they’re not hearing from other people on the other side. If a member of Congress only hears noise on one side of the issue, that’s what they go with.”
- The last Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors are dying, and with them the power of their stories. So too are the peace activists of the 1960s and 1970s. Every week, the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation receives messages from loved ones of long-time supporters asking to take them off its lists because they have died, admits Tierney. “Others are on a fixed income and older and not able to be as engaged as they were,” he says.

- Young people have a lot of issues competing for their attention. “If I was twenty years old today and just getting my feet wet doing political activism, I don’t know that I would choose to work on nuclear weapons,” says Knopf. “There’s climate change, gun violence, the rolling back of access to abortion and birth control, racial justice, the next pandemic. I think people’s attention is divided across so many different urgent issues that it may be hard for them to find the mental time and space to deal with nuclear weapons.”
- Nuclear Armageddon is not as visible in popular culture as it was in the days of *On the Beach* (1959), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), or *The Day After* (1983)—movies that “helped you imagine what a nuclear war might be like,” Knopf says. *Oppenheimer* (2023), while winning multiple Academy Awards, was a history piece, sealed in the amber of World War II—not the start of the Cold War nor today’s arms race. Without these widely viewed, emotional movies, nuclear activists struggle with communicating the threat. “This is not an issue like education or hospitals, health care, things like that where people just know what you’re talking about,” says Tierney. “If they haven’t been engaged in the issue, you first have to spend a considerable amount of time explaining these very complex issues in order to engage them and have them become full supporters.”

The good news is that beneath the fog of this nuclear fatigue, new seeds of awareness and activism have been planted and are growing.

Back from the Brink now has eighteen “hubs” of activists promoting the organization’s five policy solutions: elimination of the \$1.7 trillion modernization program; taking U.S. missiles off “hair-trigger alert”; renouncing first-use of nuclear weapons; ending the President’s power to launch; and working to eliminate nuclear weapons worldwide. The strategy, much like Vermont’s 1982 town meeting project, is to begin with local support. To date, more than eighty legislative bodies, mostly cities and towns, and nearly 500 organizations have adopted resolutions based on the five points.

The ultimate goal is to persuade Congress and the President to sign the U.N. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. “Our tagline is bringing communities together to abolish nuclear weapons. We’re just hyper focused on movement building and activism at the local community level,” Meyer says. “We’re actively now trying to get some of those 400 officials

who represent their communities and their constituents to be more outspoken. Mayors matter to people in Washington. The President is not going to act unless he or she feels like there's some level of support from Congress."

In Salem, Oregon, Peter Bergel, an independent activist, organized a worldwide virtual conference of more than twenty peace groups on May 4 to strategize next steps. "If you look at *The Nuclear Resister*, you'll find that there's actually quite a few things going on. But they're all small. We haven't been able to light a fire under the bulk of people so far," Bergel tells *The Progressive*. House Resolution 77, calling on the President to embrace the United Nations nuclear ban treaty, has attracted only forty-three Congressional co-sponsors. "We had forty-some people, mostly from the United States, but also Australia, Geneva, Africa," Bergel said following the conference. "Our group filled a page with ideas. The rest of the world is way ahead of the United States. It's our job to build the movement and forget about Congress for a while."

In New Mexico, longtime nuclear watchdog Jay Coghlan, executive director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, perceives a "steady rise in public concern" prompted by Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine and several new books, including Annie Jacobsen's *Nuclear War: A Scenario*, which envisions a first strike in the United States by North Korea. It paints a picture similar to *The Day After*, the ABC television film that frightened Reagan and pushed him to negotiate with Gorbachev. Daniel Ellsberg's death in June 2023 revived interest in his 2017 book, *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*, a look inside the United States' nuclear policy by a man who helped write it.

While watchdogging Los Alamos and its new plutonium pit production, Coghlan said he came to the realization that "we're getting creamed politically. So therefore, I intentionally sought out a higher power. I specifically targeted the Catholic archbishop of Santa Fe, New Mexico. And lo and behold, we have become very close personal friends. We went to Japan last August for the atomic bombing anniversary. We're going again this August."

The Archdioceses of Santa Fe and Seattle have formed a formal working partnership with the Diocese of Hiroshima and the Archdiocese of Nagasaki in Japan. The Vatican was the first to sign the U.N. treaty, and Pope Francis, on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, declared that the mere possession of nuclear weapons is immoral, Coghlan noted. "We hope to foment an international inter-

faith movement against nuclear weapons."

In Los Angeles, California, Maylene Hughes, twenty-three, after earning a degree in critical theory and social justice from Occidental College, has begun a new grassroots organizing job for Physicians for Social Responsibility. As a queer Black person, Hughes is widening the frame in which nuclear issues are discussed. "There's a racial aspect," she notes. People of color and marginalized people, such as those from the Marshall Islands with relatives in Los Angeles, are still

fighting for compensation for health issues from the sixty-seven nuclear tests conducted between 1946 and 1958. "The racial makeup of the folks who are fighting for this issue are known to be an older demographic and a whiter demographic. That's a main reason why this issue isn't as attractive to younger folks or to folks of color, because they feel like they don't have a way in or would not have a voice if they were to join the space. That's something I'm trying to change," she says.

"The thing that bothers me the most is the amount of money the United States is spending on this . . . billions of dollars, when these funds could be directed to our communities and make a direct impact domestically on the folks living in the United States—for the homelessness crisis, for environmental issues, for infrastructure. Instead, we're using it to build more weapons that we don't use.

"If we can change legislation in Los Angeles and California, we can help influence federal legislation. That's the goal. And I know that we can do it. It's power building—not just with folks in the nuclear space. It's also folks who are working in climate justice, racial justice, because all of our issues are intertwined. Young folks—they want to do something. I know that this is something that we have the power to change. We're the constituents. Our representatives listen to us. I want folks to know that we have the power." ♦



CHELSEA GROVES

Maylene Hughes is an organizer for Physicians for Social Responsibility in Los Angeles, California.

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