

The Impact of a US Public Constituency on Arms Control*

Sidney D. Drell

Professor and Deputy Director, Stanford Linear Accelerator Center, Stanford University. Co-Director, Stanford Center for International Security and Arms Control. Dr. Drell is a member of the National Academy of Sciences and past President of the American Physical Society. He has been an arms control advisor in Congress and the White House.

It has often been said that war is too important to be left to the generals and that peace is too vital to be left to the politicians. So, too, are matters of nuclear weapons and policy too important to be left to the nuclear-strategy “experts.” In reality, there are no experts on nuclear war. We have never had a nuclear war, and any scientist knows that you must have data before you can become an expert. We do not know how a nuclear war would start, be waged, or finally stopped. No one, including nuclear-strategy “experts,” knows what would be left after such a “war.”

What this means is that the public must inform and involve itself actively in the formulation of policy on these issues. This requires public outreach, public education, and active dialogue with our public officials. The record we will explore in this article shows that an informed and active public constituency can have a significant effect in shaping sound policy in highly technical areas that determine our very survival.

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The H-Bomb

In the United States, there was no public debate at the time of the fateful decision by President Truman in 1950 to develop the second generation of nuclear weapons, that is, the H-bomb or hydrogen bomb. This was early in the cold war period, and secrecy was applied broadly. As a result, the public played no role in the decision to move ahead to the megaton-scale H-bomb.

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The debate within government on whether, and then how, to proceed with work on the H-bomb in response to the first Soviet A-bomb explosion in late summer of 1949 was carried on almost completely under a thick cloak of secrecy. We have no idea whether in those strained times, an effort to negotiate with the Soviet Union to head off the development of the H-bomb might have succeeded, but we didn't even try. It was nine years later before a serious initiative on peaceful uses of nuclear energy was made in 1958 - but by then it was too late. The genie was out of the bottle and there was no way to deny the basic scientific reality of the hydrogen bomb.

By the early 1960s the design and building of hydrogen bombs had advanced to a mature technology. The scientists in the nuclear weapons laboratories had become what Lord Zuckerman calls “the alchemists of our time, working in secret ways that cannot be divulged, casting spells which embrace us all.”

A Powerful Coalition

Testing of H-bombs in the atmosphere continued at a hefty pace through most of the decade of the 1950s, leading to a substantial, worldwide build-up in the level of radioactivity. By 1960, an active and vigorous public constituency around the world had become concerned about this radioactive fallout and its effects on the health of their families and friends. They joined many scientists who understood the weapons in detail to protest continued testing. Scientists could bring a highly informed judgment to bear on the question of how the cessation of nuclear tests in the atmosphere would affect our national security.

This was the first important issue of nuclear weapons in which the public in the US played a major role. Around the same time, some scientists in the USSR, and in particular Andrei Sakharov, were also advocating a ban on testing. In the Western world, concerned citizens by the tens and hundreds

of thousands applied strong political leverage while the technical case in support of an atmospheric test ban treaty was presented by concerned scientists. These forces inside and outside of government enhanced one another. Working together, they helped accomplish what may well have been beyond the power of either alone: the Limited Test Ban Treaty signed in 1963 by President Kennedy and General Secretary Khrushchev.

Antiballistic Missiles and Multiple Warheads

By the end of the 1960s, scientists had developed important new weapons technologies which could potentially alter in a fundamental way the nuclear forces of the US and the USSR. One new development was antiballistic missile (ABM) systems, using advanced computers, very high acceleration interceptor missiles, special nuclear warheads, and phased array radars.

The original proposal to deploy ABM systems near large population centers in the United States stirred a major public debate, primarily because many people did not want nuclear-tipped missiles located, figuratively, “in their own backyards.” Triggered by these public concerns, the ABM decision became an opportunity for extensive public debate. The halls of Congress and the media became vital educational forums for careful and informed technical analysis of the effectiveness and arms control implications of the proposed ABM system.

Through this unprecedented public debate on a weapons system Congress came to understand that the proposed ABM system was not going to do what was promised. By 1970, it was clear on the basis of technical facts alone, that offensive missiles could respond with relative ease to any practical ABM system. Technical arguments for deployment collapsed and the ABM debate boiled down to its value solely as political leverage for the arms control talks - its value as a bargaining chip for the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) negotiations.

The outcome of this was the successful negotiation with the Soviet Union at SALT I of the ABM Treaty severely limiting deployment of ABM systems. That treaty is currently in force. I consider it to be our most important arms control achievement to date.

At the same time as the ABM debate, however, the United States moved ahead rapidly with the development and deployment of Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs). The original American justification for MIRVs was that they would penetrate ballistic missile defenses by overwhelming their defensive firepower with an intense rain of many warheads. They were offered as an insurance policy against Soviet ABM deployments which had then begun around Moscow. When, however, the SALT I treaty of 1972 prohibited the deployment of

nationwide ABM defenses, American MIRV programs proceeded full tilt. The new rationale for MIRVs became our alleged need for counterforce - the need to threaten a wide repertoire of Soviet military targets, including their retaliatory forces.

MIRVs did not lead to an increase in the visible presence of nuclear weapons. Therefore, in contrast to ABMs, they did not cause a reaction from citizens who wanted no nuclear weapons nearby. In such circumstances we deployed MIRVs with very little public attention or concern, the USSR responded with its own major buildup of MIRV'd forces, and arms control suffered a setback. It is not that there was no opportunity for serious public debate about the pros and cons of MIRVs and their impact on the arms race and our national security. It was simply that there was no specific issue to bring the MIRV decision home to the man in the street and arouse public reaction. Therefore, no US public constituency was created to nurture the cause of arms control in opposition to the MIRV. Moreover, the country was becoming increasingly concerned first with Vietnam and then with Watergate.

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The Failure of SALT II and the Success of the MX Debate

There was also little expressed public interest in the SALT II treaty when it came up for ratification by the US Senate in 1979. The arms control advocates and a few politicians pitched in and argued mightily. However, there was no public outcry as there had been at the time of the ABM debate that set the stage for SALT I. The Senate debate on SALT II dragged on with little public pressure for ratification. Debate was eventually terminated as a result of the Soviet armies entering Afghanistan, and the reaction of the American public to it, making it politically impossible to obtain ratification in the United States. In a reverse way, Afghanistan mobilized public opinion in the West against arms control, which again demonstrates the essential power of public opinion.

The original rationale for the United States developing the MX missile was to respond to the buildup of highly MIRV'd Soviet ICBMs and to decrease the vulnerability of our land-based missile force, thereby improving deterrence. We sought to base the new ICBM so that it could not be attacked and destroyed. However the debate in the United States, which was covered in the media much more thoroughly than the original MIRV

decision, revealed deep differences of opinion on counterforce versus deterrence, on the effectiveness of the proposed basing scheme, and on its environmental impact.

The MX basing plan, as it was originally perceived, is no longer with us. Claims of the survivability and effectiveness of “Densepack,” “Bigbird,” and “Racetrack” – the three schemes with, at one time or another, administration backing – just did not stand up under close technical scrutiny. Today we are deploying only fifty MX missiles, and they have little to do with our security or with deterrence. They are not a major arms control issue.

A Mixed Record with One Conclusion

I see a pattern in this mixed record of the past. The atmospheric test ban treaty and the ABM debate that culminated in SALT I are two major successes in American nuclear weapons policy. Further, the MX program has been restructured and sharply cut back from the original plans. It is notable that these results were achieved with vigorous and constructive public participation and support.

By contrast, the development of the H-bomb and of MIRVs greatly increased the devastating potential and the threat posed by our nuclear weapons. As such, they may be considered failures of our nuclear weapons policy. Although there may have been no feasible alternative to developing the H-bomb, we didn’t try to head it off. I find it significant that these technical escalations were undertaken without public involvement or debate, and also without a serious effort at negotiating them away. Another serious setback, after years of negotiating, was the Senate’s failure to ratify the SALT II treaty because of a similar lack of an involved public constituency.

The Current Debate: ‘Star Wars’

On March 23, 1983, the president of the United States described to the nation his vision of the future in which we are protected against nuclear weapons by a space-age defense, popularly labelled “Star Wars,” and no longer have to live in a balance of terror. We are, therefore, encountering once again major decisions that will determine the course of our nuclear weapons policy until the end of the century and beyond. These decisions present challenges and opportunities to our citizens, scientists, and government.

The good news is that this issue is itself not shrouded in secrecy or ignored in the shadows of apathy – to the contrary. In the press, in the churches, in civic organizations, in universities, and in the political arena, a

process of education about deterrence has begun in earnest, and nuclear weapons policy is commanding priority attention at this time. There now exists an active and concerned arms control constituency ready to participate in a national debate that we all should welcome – scientists, government, and citizens alike. As a result of this public-inspired debate, Star Wars is still undergoing tough, critical scrutiny, including in particular its technical prospects and its impact on arms control progress. And certainly the president, when he gave his speech in 1983, did not expect to find himself in 1987 with only half the money he wanted to get.

Essential Characteristics of a Public Constituency

The public arms control constituency created during the past few years must continue to grow and prove that it is enduring, informed, constructive, energetic, and has a broad political base.

To endure it must have a clear and understandable goal. This means going beyond a freeze which was an important movement to build a constituency, but was inadequate to sustain it.

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The public also has to be informed. It has to have a realistic sense that there are no easy, absolute solutions - not in the short term. We have to keep working at the issue to make it become part of the public agenda through public education, public outreach, and meetings with our elected officials. We can make sure that public officials know that this is one of the issues on which they are going to be elected or not elected.

It is effective to choose a few issues and to be very informed on them, so that one does not get caught out or discredited as a result of using shallow overgeneralizations, then stick to those positions like a bulldog. And do not just go talk to friends. It is every bit as important, if not more so, to spend time reasoning with those who hold opposing views.

The public constituency must also be constructive. The attitude has to be one that takes other people’s arguments seriously, recognizes that opponents feel deeply about what they believe, and engages in civilized, constructive debate.

The public arms control constituency has to be energetic. Every citizen has his or her talents. Consequently, different people are going to be effective in different ways: in the electoral process, through public outreach, or through active research on the issues.

Finally, one needs to go for a broad political base, that is, not just from the left or the right or the extremes. Support will be required from a broad spectrum of the public.

Public involvement in these issues is not only useful, it is essential. We've had no progress without it. Stimulated by the involvement of the public, we negotiated and ratified SALT I. Without it, we ended up with MIRVs and failed to ratify SALT II.