

Rev. Jesse Jackson, SANE and the Test Ban Campaign

Excerpt from David Cortright, “Rev. Jesse Jackson’s deep commitment to peace,” *Waging Nonviolence*, February 20, 2026, <https://wagingnonviolence.org/2026/02/rev-jesse-jacksons-deep-commitment-to-peace/>

I first met Rev. Jackson in 1980 soon after I became executive director of SANE, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. Jackson invited SANE and other national peace groups to join a march in Washington, D.C. for jobs, peace and justice. I also allied with Jackson and civil rights leaders in supporting the proposal to establish a national holiday for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

To deepen cooperation, I invited Jackson to serve as a member of SANE’s Board of Directors and join our national executive committee. Jackson agreed and designated his foreign policy adviser Jack Odell as his representative on the board. Odell had served as the head of fundraising and voter registration for King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He brought decades of labor and civil rights experience to his role at SANE and was an invaluable adviser as we sought to build a larger and more diverse peace movement.

In the early 1980s the peace movement [grew rapidly](#) by supporting the [Nuclear Weapons Freeze](#), which called for a bilateral halt to U.S. and Soviet nuclear weapons testing, production and deployment. Jackson was an early and active supporter of the freeze. He was the keynote speaker at one of the largest public rallies for the freeze, the Peace Sunday event of 90,000 people in Pasadena, California in June 1982. Jackson went beyond the freeze and called for reversing the arms race and slashing military spending, positions we also adopted at SANE. He was a strong advocate of no first use of nuclear weapons.

When Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev announced in August 1985 that Moscow would begin a unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing, launched a petition drive to gather a million signatures in support of that goal. We also decided to create a peace movement delegation to deliver the petitions in person at the planned Geneva summit between Gorbachev and President Ronald Reagan. Jackson enthusiastically supported the idea and agreed to head the delegation and serve as our spokesperson. Many in the peace movement considered Jackson a people’s secretary of state and were happy to have him as our leader.

By coincidence, the annual Nuclear Freeze conference in 1985 was scheduled for the weekend of Nov. 15-17 in Chicago, two days prior to the beginning of the Geneva summit.

The conference was turned into a rally and send-off ceremony for the citizens' delegation to Geneva. Jackson was the keynote speaker, and rallied the crowd with an exhilarating and impassioned plea to "give peace a chance."

Balloons were released and music blared, and the conference turned into a rollicking celebration. In the midst of the excitement, with delegates cheering and reaching out to us as we passed by, our delegation with Jackson at the lead left the stage and marched out through the hall to depart for O'Hare airport and the flight to Geneva. It was an exhilarating moment. We had the sense of being emissaries for peace to demand that world leaders halt the arms race.

Prior to the trip we had sent numerous letters and inquiries to the White House and the Soviet embassy in Washington requesting meetings. We received no response from the U.S. government, but when we arrived in Geneva the next day we were informed by the Soviet mission that a "high official" would meet with us the next day.

We huddled late into the night with Jackson to discuss how to handle the meeting. We agreed that we would urge the Soviet Union to extend its moratorium on nuclear testing. We also agreed, at Jackson's urging, that we should show our political independence by challenging the Soviet Union on human rights concerns. He recommended that we focus on the plight of Soviet Jews and other minorities in the Soviet Union, and we agreed.

The next day we waited anxiously in the hallway of the Soviet mission. Soon a fleet of limousines arrived and Gorbachev and his entourage swept into the building. He approached us with outstretched hand to greet Jackson and members of the delegation. Jackson immediately got down to business and raised the points we had agreed upon the night before. Gorbachev responded positively to our appeal on nuclear testing and spoke about the need for "real disarmament."

He did not address the concern about human rights, however. At this point, as the interpreter was translating Gorbachev's remarks, Jackson interrupted and challenged the Soviet leader to respond to the question about human rights. Taken aback by Jackson's audacity and obviously shaken by this unexpected challenge from the peace movement delegation, Gorbachev quickly regained his composure. He denied the issue, saying that Jews have made valuable contributions to disarmament.

For the rest of the encounter the atmosphere was more cordial. Justine Merritt from a group called Women for a Meaningful Summit presented Gorbachev an artistic image of flowers and children. Jackson then directed Gorbachev to the table where the boxes of petitions were placed and he and I formally presented them. "How many signatures are here?" he asked. The final count was 1.2 million, we reported. Impressed at this outpouring of public

concern, Gorbachev responded, “these petitions represent the hopes of millions of Americans.” It was a fitting final comment, as he shook hands again with everyone and departed.

News of the citizens summit and the dramatic photo of Jackson squaring off with Gorbachev appeared in newspapers and on broadcast outlets all over the world the next day. Much of the reporting was negative, as journalists paid little attention to the test ban appeal and accused Jackson of upstaging Reagan, but the core message of the action was clear and undeniable. The peace movement was on the global stage, with Rev. Jackson as our spokesperson, presenting our appeal to end nuclear testing and reverse the arms race.

Change did not come immediately, but in the following years, with citizen pressure continuing to build, Gorbachev and Reagan agreed to negotiate for arms reduction and the Cold War came to an end. Jackson and the peace movement helped to make that possible.