

Halting Nuclear Tests

Excerpt from David Cortright, *Protest and Policy in the Iraq, Nuclear Freeze and Vietnam Peace Movements* (Cambridge University Press Elements, 2025), pp. 35-37.

In the wake of the frustrating 1983 freeze vote in the House of Representatives, activists within the freeze movement sought to go beyond merely symbolic measures to the actual implementation of a nuclear freeze. The “quick freeze” strategy, they called it, focused on halting nuclear weapons testing. The test ban was the priority because it was assumed that an inability to test would cut off the development and possible use of nuclear weapons. The proposed ban on nuclear weapons testing became a primary focus of activist attention over the following years.

The test ban campaign received a major boost in August 1985 when Gorbachev commemorated the 40th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima by announcing a unilateral Soviet moratorium on nuclear weapons testing. SANE and the Freeze Campaign jumped on the issue and called for the US to reciprocate the Soviet moratorium. They launched a nationwide petition campaign for a bilateral US and Soviet testing moratorium. The petition drive was successful in gaining more than a million signatures in just three months, an impressive accomplishment in pre-Internet days. Boxes of signed petitions were delivered in person to Gorbachev by a delegation of activists from SANE, the Freeze Campaign and other US and European peace groups at the Reagan-Gorbachev summit in Geneva, Switzerland in November 1985.

Arms control groups also made the test ban a top legislative priority. Representative Ed Markey (D-MA) developed the concept of a “legislative reciprocal arms control initiative,” an independent act of US nuclear restraint if the Soviet Union reciprocated in a verifiable manner. A US testing moratorium in response to Gorbachev’s initiative would be a way to test the strategy. Markey introduced legislation in 1986 to suspend the funding of US nuclear test explosions above one kiloton. The measure won wide backing and swept through the House by a vote of 234 to 155 in August. A parallel bill was introduced in the Senate by Senators Mark Hatfield (R-OR) and Ted Kennedy (D-MA), but it failed to gain a majority.

Grassroots organizers and arms control legislators in Congress kept up the pressure against nuclear testing. In 1986 activists formed a new group, American Peace Test (APT), which focused on mobilizing mass nonviolent civil disobedience at the Nevada Test Site near Las Vegas, where the US had been testing nuclear weapons since 1951. The goal was to bring thousands of people to Nevada to trespass at the site and physically obstruct the continuation of testing.

The impetus for APT came from Oregon Peaceworks, one of the major statewide peace and disarmament groups within the Freeze Campaign. Peaceworks organizers reached out to activists across the country to join the trek to Nevada and engage in civil disobedience to prevent further testing. Many people answered the call. During a series of protests at the test site from 1985 through 1988, more than 13,000 people were arrested. I was one of them, along with Freeze Campaign director Jane Gruenebaum. Also participating in civil disobedience in Nevada were celebrities such as American top 40 radio DJ Casey Kasem

and physicist Carl Sagan. Religious leaders Jim Wallis of Sojourners and William Sloane Coffin of SANE/Freeze also came to be arrested.

The Oregon Peaceworks strategy included working to elect members of Congress who would support the freeze and work for a test ban. When the congressional seat in their local Salem district opened up, they persuaded Mike Kopetski, a local legislator, to run for the position and promised to work for his election. They also asked him to join the protests at the test site. Kopetski made the trip to Nevada and came away from the experience more knowledgeable about nuclear weapons issues and convinced of the urgency of halting nuclear tests. Kopetski narrowly lost his race in 1988 but ran again in 1990 and won a solid victory, thanks in large part to the support of local environmentalists and peace activists. He vowed to go to Washington to help lead the fight against the arms race.

The legislative fight to halt funding for nuclear explosions had continued with partial successes for several years. In 1987 and 1988 the House of Representatives approved measures cutting funds for nuclear weapons testing, although the Senate again failed to go along. The administration of President George H.W. Bush was adamantly against a test ban. In 1991 the White House announced an aggressive program of additional underground nuclear testing, with several explosions planned over the following years.

Kopetski had a reputation as an effective legislator and coalition builder, and he put those skills to work in assembling a broad lineup of support for an amendment, modeled on previous legislation approved in the House, mandating a 12-month moratorium on US nuclear tests. He scored a significant success when he convinced Democratic leader

Richard Gephardt to cosponsor the bill, which was introduced in the fall of 1991. With SANE/Freeze and other disarmament and religious groups mobilizing constituent pressure across the country, the bill easily won passage in the House.

Winning support in the Senate remained a challenge. Kopetski's Oregon colleague Mark Hatfield led the Senate fight in cooperation with Democratic Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-ME), a new bipartisan combination that broke the previous deadlock and helped to gain majority support. When the White House threatened to veto the measure, Senate sponsors of the bill broadened the coalition by lining up hawkish Democratic Senator James Exon from Nebraska to support the bill. A revised bill was drafted that established a moratorium for nine months rather than a year, but it called for ending all testing after 1996 and included a mandate for negotiations to achieve a test ban treaty. The measure passed by a lopsided 68-26 vote, and the House agreed to the Senate bill. For the first time both houses of Congress approved legislation to halt nuclear testing.

President Bush attacked the legislation, claiming it would undermine US security. He could not afford to veto it, however. Congressional sponsors had cleverly attached the measure to the energy and water appropriations bill, which included \$500 million in funding for a super collider project in Bush's home state of Texas. Facing a veto-proof margin in Congress, the President reluctantly signed the bill on October 2, 1992. Disarmament activists and arms control legislators cheered. The fight to halt nuclear testing, which began in 1985 and was sustained through years of grassroots activism, civil disobedience and legislative lobbying, had finally achieved success.

Nuclear testing remained a hot issue in the following years, as citizen movements and governments in many countries worked to achieve a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty. In July 1993 President Bill Clinton announced that the US would extend the nine-month testing moratorium imposed by the legislation and pursue global negotiations for a halt to all nuclear explosions. In that brief period of friendly US-Russia relations in the aftermath of the Cold War, negotiations proceeded smoothly and agreement was reached for a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

When Clinton tried to win Senate ratification for the CTBT, however, he ran into a wall of politically motivated Republican Party opposition. The Senate refused to ratify the agreement, with only 48 votes in favor, far short of the constitutional requirement of a two-thirds vote for Senate ratification.

The US did not become an official party to the CTBT, but the agreement gained nearly universal international support. It remains functional today as a de facto global nuclear testing moratorium despite the worsening of East-West security relations. The International Monitoring System established by the treaty maintains a rigorous network of 321 stations and 16 laboratories in 89 countries to detect potential violations of the treaty. The CTBT has been signed by 186 countries and embodies a global consensus against nuclear explosions, helping to sustain what has been described as a virtual taboo against nuclear testing.