

Stopping the MX

Excerpts from David Cortright, *Protest and Policy in the Iraq, Nuclear Freeze and Vietnam Peace Movements* (Cambridge University Press Elements), 2025, pp. 32-35.

The battle against the MX was the most extensive political fight of the disarmament movement during that era. The campaign had direct effects in reducing the scale of the nuclear buildup and also had the indirect effect of motivating congressional efforts to demand progress in arms control negotiations. It spurred the creation of a diverse and effective coalition against the missile system and the refinement of targeted grassroots lobbying efforts.

The stop MX campaign had two phases, the fight against the mobile basing system starting in 1979, and the legislative battle against the missile itself which stretched into 1985. In the initial phase, peace advocates, environmentalists, religious groups, taxpayer organizations, trade unions, Native American communities, ranchers, farmers and other local and national partners came together to mobilize opposition to the missile deployment plan in the Great Basin. It was a diverse coalition, bringing together a wide range of unusual partners who did not agree on many things but were united in their determination to stop the MX – a dramatic illustration of the importance of cross-constituency alliances in achieving political change.

The decisive voice in the region was that of the Church of Latter-day Saints, headquartered in Utah. In May 1981 the Church spoke out against the nuclear arms race and declared its opposition to the deployment of a “mammoth weapons system capable of destroying much of civilization.”¹

The Mormon statement and the growing opposition in the region killed the basing plan. The Reagan administration formally canceled the mobile missile system in October 1981. For the MX coalition, it was a landmark victory. Derailing the basing plan was only the first step, however, and a relatively easy one compared to the more challenging task of stopping the new missile system. Halting the basing system saved the Great Basin from environmental ruin, but the threat to international security posed by the new missile remained.

The campaign against the MX shifted its focus from cooperation with local partners in Utah and Nevada to working with arms control supporters on Capitol Hill. The campaign pivoted from local grassroots action in the Great Basin to national political action. The momentum gained in defeating the basing system carried over into the fight against the missile itself. A protracted legislative battle ensued in Washington and in legislative districts across the

country as SANE, the Council for Livable World, the Coalition for a New Foreign Policy and other national groups mounted a legislative fight in Congress to cut funding for the missile. When the venerable citizen lobbying organization Common Cause entered the fray, the legislative campaign acquired additional sophistication and political heft. Working closely with the leadership of the House of Representatives and senior members of the Armed Services Committee, the coalition gradually succeeded in winning passage of amendments to cut the number of missiles, first in half and ultimately to just fifty weapons, as determined in a final compromise vote in 1985.

The legislative campaign against the MX became the dominant arms control issue in Congress, as dozens of climactic votes on missile funding occurred from 1982 through 1985. It was a classic David versus Goliath scenario, a growing but relatively small number of disarmament lobbyists battling against legions of 'congressional liaison' officers from the Pentagon and major weapons contractors. The peace lobbyists had their own army of supporters, not in Washington but at the grassroots level, as many thousands of committed activists urged their congressional representatives and senators to vote against the missile.

The anti-MX coalition lost many of the major congressional votes, but it won often enough to stay in the legislative game and over the course of several years was able to whittle down the missile program to one-quarter of its original scale. It was not a complete success, but it was a substantial victory that reduced the scale of the threat posed by the new missile.

Some in the broader disarmament movement questioned the value of campaigning against a single weapons system rather than challenging the entire nuclear buildup. The point of the freeze proposition was precisely to halt the development of all nuclear weapons, not just a single weapon. There was no contradiction between the two efforts, however. SANE and other groups in the Stop MX coalition also supported the nuclear freeze. The MX campaign was a way of focusing pressure on a particularly dangerous part of the nuclear buildup, one that was also politically vulnerable because of its massive environmental footprint and the dangers it posed to international security.

One of the principles of strategy is to focus on objectives that are clear and achievable within a realistic time frame. Success in a specific campaign can motivate and empower activists and build momentum and organizational capacity to address larger strategic objectives. The MX issue fits that description as an example of low-hanging fruit. It was a Rube Goldberg scheme that was ripe for attack and might collapse of its own weight, especially if given a push by a well-organized citizen lobby. For the disarmament movement of the 1980s, focusing on the MX was a way of winning an important fight,

strengthening coalitions and networks, and establishing the basis for a broader challenge to the entire arms race.

The MX campaign also served as a proving ground for enhanced methods of citizen lobbying in the local districts of key legislators. The ability of lobbyists from SANE and other groups to gain access to decision-makers in Washington depended on the extent of constituent pressure and press attention they generated in local districts. The coalition gained that attention by demonstrating the ability to activate hundreds or even thousands of registered voters from a legislator's home state or district on short notice for a specific legislative proposal. Activists also turned heads by attracting press coverage and media attention in local congressional districts. Backed up by a formidable presence at the local level, the representatives of the Washington-based groups were able to exert influence in Congress.

The campaign had the serendipitous effect of redirecting grassroots pressure on legislators against the MX into congressional pressure on the White House to negotiate for arms control. After the Reagan administration suffered a major defeat on the missile program in late 1982, Representatives Al Gore (D-TN), Senator William Cohen (R-ME) and other legislators developed the idea of conditioning their support for the missile on a more serious White House commitment to arms negotiations. In essence they traded the MX for arms control. It was a bizarre formulation that disarmament supporters rejected, but it had significant influence on the White House.² By late 1983 the administration was forced to accept congressional proposals for a new more flexible US approach to negotiations.

Grassroots demands on Congress against the MX generated pressure on the White House to moderate its previously hardline stance against arms control. One can argue whether the change in policy was meaningful (negotiations remained largely deadlocked until Gorbachev arrived on the scene), but the process was clearly a direct response to the anti-MX campaign and the power of grassroots lobbying against the arms race. It was an important example of the ways peace and disarmament activists can generate unintended but in this case positive effects on policy making by leveraging grassroots action to influence institutional politics.

¹ B. Prochnau, "Mormon Church Joins Opposition to the MX," *Washington Post*, May 6, 1981.

² Strobe Talbot, "Buildup and Breakdown," *Foreign Affairs* 62 (Winter 1983-1984), 609-610.