Randall Forsberg: Ignition of the Freeze Movement & The Deadly Connection

Joseph Gerson

Cornell University, September 13, 2018

I want to thank Matthew Evangelista and Neta Crawford for organizing this conference and Zia Mian who nudged me to share what I can in deepening our understandings of Randy Forsberg and her invaluable contributions.

There are two unique memories that I can share that may add to our shared knowledge about Randy: the unique role of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in transforming Randy’s inspired vision of a nuclear weapons freeze into the mass social movement that was critical to ending the Cold War, and second, Randy’s analytical contributions to the concept of “The Deadly Connection” between U.S. nuclear weapons and war policies and so-called “conventional” U.S. foreign military interventions.

In late 1979 or early in 1980, during a meeting of AFSC’s New England Peace Committee, staff and committee members considered whether to support Randy’s Call to Halt the Nuclear Arms Race. She had circulated the Call to several peace organizations who were discerning how to relate to it.

The concern that gave us pause was that the Call didn’t advocate nuclear weapons abolition. By freezing the development of new nuclear weapons, at a time of increasingly dangerous U.S.-Soviet tensions, it did not envision a nuclear weapons-free world. We labored with this concern for what must have been hours, and as a Quaker-based organization, a majority vote wasn’t going to settle the issue. We searched for a deeper truth around which we could unite.

As the discussion proceeded, we found ourselves acknowledging that if nuclear weapons abolition is ever to be achieved, one of the stages would have to be halting nuclear weapons development. So, short of deciding precisely how we would support the Freeze, we agreed to make it a priority in our organizing.

During the summer of 1980, Frances Crowe, our indomitable Western Massachusetts AFSC organizer, worked with Randy Kehler, the draft resister who had inspired Daniel Ellsberg to release the Pentagon’s secret history of decision-making for the Vietnam War, on Nuclear Freeze referenda. That fall, even as people voted for Ronald Reagan and his Cold War rhetoric, people voted for nuclear weapons freeze resolutions in three Western Massachusetts senate districts.

Months later, as AFSC faced a budget crunch and the likelihood of possible layoffs, we had another Peace Committee meeting. Our Vermont organizer, David McCauley, armed with a newsprint chart, used a tortured segue to take the floor. His words and his chart were incredible. That winter and spring, David audaciously claimed, fifteen Vermont town meetings would vote for the Freeze, to be followed by 175 towns and cities the next year. This struck us as an outrageous fantasy, but there was unspoken agreement that the ambitious effort would be a great way to save David’s job.

When town meeting time came around, seventeen Vermont town meetings voted for the Freeze, and an op-ed article published in the *New York Times* celebrated the victories, signaling a model that could challenge Reagan and his “with enough shovels” nuclear war can be won coterie. Among the most imaginative mobilizing efforts for the 1982 town meeting season was the “Washington to Moscow” march across Vermont, Washington and Moscow being village crossings. In 1982, Vermont and its 179 towns and cities voted for the Freeze. They were hardly alone. Randy’s Call and the example of people having the opportunity to vote on U.S. nuclear weapons policies, led 370 New England town meetings and one or both houses of 23 state legislatures to vote for the Freeze.[[1]](#endnote-1) This and other campaigning served as the foundation for the largest single peace demonstration in U.S. history, the International March and Rally for a Freeze and Reduction of Nuclear Arms and Transfer of Funds from the Military to Human Needs in New York City.

Anxious not to miss a political wave that they could ride, Senator Ted Kennedy and Congressman Ed Markey moved to seize national leadership of the movement that soon forced President Reagan to do what he had long resisted: engage the Soviet Union in nuclear disarmament negotiations.

The Freeze movement had its weaknesses. The concerns of suburbanites, who were a powerful force in the movement, seemed limited to their families and life styles. They resisted raising deeper questions about why states created and relied on nuclear weapons, the circumstances in which they might be used, if the United States might have had some role in initiating the war in Afghanistan, or about the political and institutional violence responsible for oppression of people of color across the United States.

The June 12, 1982 rally and march in New York City served as the connecting tissue to make these connections, first with its call to fund human needs and, unintentionally, to the Deadly Connection between nuclear war and U.S. foreign military interventions.

First some historical background. On October 25, 1973, when a ceasefire had apparently ended the Egyptian-Israeli war, the world woke to the news that U.S. nuclear forces were on heightened nuclear alert. With President Nixon drunk for days on end as he drowned his Watergate fears in alcohol, Henry Kissinger was dictating U.S. foreign and military policies. He and Golda Meir, Israel’s Prime Minister, had agreed that the Israeli military could violate and move the ceasefire line. The Israeli military had isolated Egypt’s already defeated Third Army, and was denying it food and water, threatening President Sadat with further deadly humiliation.

In response, Sadat notified Washington and Moscow that he would seek a UN resolution calling for U.S. and Soviet military intervention to break the siege and enforce the ceasefire. This was not to Kissinger’s liking. He had been using the war to reinforce and maximize U.S. Middle East hegemony, first and foremost by bringing Egypt within the U.S. sphere. His response was two-fold: the nuclear alert to warn the Soviets to stay out of Egypt, and an order to Golda Meir to finally observe the ceasefire.

The U.S. peace movement didn’t know this history. Due to intellectual laziness and taboos against seeing and naming deeper truths, much like what Randy had encountered in academia, the U.S. peace movement has long been divided into two wings: an anti-interventionist/anti-imperialist wing and a nuclear disarmament wing. Anti-interventionists focus on ending the suffering and horrors of imperialist wars: Vietnam, Afghanistan, Serbia, Iraq, and Yemen to name just a few, while refusing to acknowledge or engage the reality that U.S. first-strike nuclear war threats and nuclear weapons are the ultimate enforcer of Empire. At the same time, by refusing to confront uncomfortable realities about the evils inherent in the imperial state, much of the nuclear disarmament movement has believed in the myth that the sole driver of U.S. nuclear weapons policies is “nuclear deterrence,” refusing to acknowledge nuclear weapons as the physical expressions of enduring political cultures and values (in the case of the U.S., the legacy of the colonial settler state) and the economic, political, and social structures of the military-industrial complex.

Which brings us back to the organizing for the June 12, 1982 march. A series of national meetings brought together grassroots Freeze movement organizers from across the country to frame and mobilize for what we knew would be a major political demonstration. During one of those meetings, votes were taken to set the demonstration’s demands. It was decided to limit demands to nuclear disarmament and addressing human needs. Opposition to U.S. military interventions and “conventional” wars were out of bounds, verboten.

I had been in Lebanon in December 1981, where it was obvious that Israel was preparing to invade the country to destroy the Palestine Liberation Organization. That invasion began on June 5, 1982, a week before the New York march and rally. A few of us, remembering Henry Kissinger’s 1973 October War nuclear alert, were deeply concerned that behind the Israeli military stood the U.S. nuclear arsenal, and behind possible Syrian military intervention to resist the Israeli invasion stood the Soviet nuclear arsenal. This led me, David McReynolds of the War Resisters League (WRL), and several others to contact the lead rally organizers and speakers to press them to revise the protest’s demands or to break ranks with the misguided discipline, by naming this immediate danger and urging mobilization to prevent it.

With one exception, Norma Becker of the WRL, who warned of the dangers of escalation to nuclear war, the discipline held. And, fortunately, our worst fears were not realized.

That summer, after reading Daniel Ellsberg’s essay “A Call to Mutiny” in E.P. Thompson’s *Protest and Survive* and having an extended conversation with him, I resolved to learn more and teach about relationships between nuclear war preparations and U.S. foreign military interventions. That led me to Randy and to organizing the first “Deadly Connections” conference at MIT in December 1982. Dan and Randy served as the lead speakers, and the conference spawned more than thirty other similar events across the country.[[2]](#endnote-2)

As he had written for *Protest and Survive*, Dan explained that during numerous international crises and wars the U.S. had used its nuclear weapons in the same way that an armed robber uses his gun. Whether or not the trigger is pulled, the gun has been used. Dan stressed the centrality of U.S. first-strike nuclear warfighting policies and named several of the times the U.S. had considered, prepared and/or threatened to initiate nuclear annihilation in support of its wars and hegemony: in the Middle East, Berlin, Korea, and Vietnam. This practice has continued throughout the post-Cold War period with similar preparations and threats to initiate nuclear war in the run-up to the Gulf War and Iraq wars, the “all options on the table” threats against Iran, and the simulated nuclear attacks against North Korea.

In her speech, titled “Behind the Façade: Nuclear War and Third World Intervention,” Randy spoke autobiographically, drawing on what Neta Crawford and Matthew Evangelista describe as her “bean counter’s” methodology. First, and consistent with where her dissertation was taking her, Randy was clear that “My personal goal is to see war ended, completely, throughout the world, to see complete disarmament,” and she described the impact the Vietnam War had had on her. She explained how what she had learned at SIPRI about the scale of global military spending and the U.S.-Soviet strategic balance had led her to explore the question of “Why don’t they just both cut by 50%?” at MIT. She described her studies about U.S. conventional and nuclear war planning, and her reaction to Professor William Kaufman’s final lecture in a course about “conventional” weapons. Aircraft carriers and amphibious assault ships, she was reminded, are “floating military bases.” At the time the U.S. was the only country to have aircraft carriers. Randy explained that because they were slow and thus vulnerable to Soviet cruise missiles, U.S. aircraft carriers were of limited value in a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union.

But, she explained, “they could be used…They… carr[ied] not only conventional bombs, they also carr[ied] a large arsenal of nuclear bombs, usually about 2 per plane, or about 200 weapons per aircraft carrier. This means,” she concluded, “that they are the single most potent nuclear weapons system in the world.” Where had they been used, without being threatened by Soviet missiles? “[N]ot against the Kremlin but against Third World Countries”: Vietnam, Korea, and in the Middle East.

This understanding, on the last day of her studies with Prof. Kaufman, led her to ask this senior Pentagon consultant “How come no one ever explains this? How come when we have policy discussions of military forces and military strategy in the newspaper, on television, in Washington…it is never made clear which of our forces are for defenses and which of our forces are for intervention? It’s all just thrown together in a soup.” To which Professor Kaufman responded “If you think I don’t do a good job teaching this course, I’m sorry. Next question.”

Randy told us that she thought “he had done a very good job.” She understood “perfectly well” that “[t]he Soviet Union has no capacity to get this country with conventional military force. So, no part of American military forces has anything to do with the defense of this country. The only attack that might affect us, ‘a nuclear attack,’ is one against which we have no defense.”

Randy then decried what she termed the “schizophrenia” that prevails in Washington, the claim that “We have nuclear deterrents: we only strike second, only for retaliation,” while “we have a first use policy” for our wars overseas, and that our Inter-continental nuclear forces are aimed at pre-emptive widespread, first strikes against the nuclear forces of intercontinental range and against the command and control systems of the Soviet Union.” Randy explained that our first-strike weapons are designed to threaten escalation, and that “escalation has nothing to do with deterring nuclear attack on cities. *It is the opposite.* Escalation has to do with conventional warfare.”

As she explained, the driving force behind the arms race was the U.S. goal of achieving nuclear superiority “at every level of nuclear warfare, at every amount of weapons or at every geographic range…. We might have a monopoly on intervention. The United States could intervene wherever it wanted to, but the Soviet Union would be deterred from intervening.”

Randy’s analysis was consistent with that of Noam Chomsky, who had deconstructed Secretary of Defense Harold Brown’s valedictory testimony to Congress as meaning that “under this umbrella of strategic nuclear weapons…we have succeeded in sufficiently intimidating anyone who might help protect people who we are determined to attack. So…if we want to overthrow the government of Guatemala…or send Rapid Deployment Force into the Middle East, or if we want to back a military coup in Indonesia…if we want to invade Vietnam, we can do this without too much concern that we’ll be deterred because we have this intimidating power that will threaten anyone who might get in our way.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Despite Randy’s work, the thirty Deadly Connection conferences and forums held across the country, several books on the subject, and a film,[[4]](#endnote-4) the U.S. peace movement, mainstream media, and popular culture still fail to recognize that the primary driving forces behind the trillions of dollars spent by the U.S. and the other nuclear powers in preparation for nuclear omnicide serve primarily to enforce or to deter imperial ambitions.

What will it take to achieve a nuclear weapons-free world? For years I have failed in my effort to imagine a formula as rational and obviously fair as *The Call to Halt the Nuclear Arms Race* which might again ignite a nation-wide social movement. The Physicians for Social Responsibility has launched its Back from the Brink campaign, which is an important contribution, but it doesn’t light a movement fire. The rage of many non-nuclear weapons states and many people across the planet at the refusal of the nuclear powers to fulfill their Article VI NPT obligation to engage in “good faith negotiations” for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons, has resulted in the Nuclear Weapons Prohibition Treaty (NWPT). But, unless some NATO or other nuclear weapons umbrella states break with their nuclear masters, the NWPT threatens to become an echo of the NPT, but one without even the initials of the nuclear powers.

Years ago, in his book *The Future of History*, the economist Robert Heilbroner argued that the United States’ endless wars would end only after we suffer massive and disastrous military defeat, one far greater than the 58,000 sacrificed in the Vietnam War.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Midst the Thucydides Trap and rising tensions with China, and with U.S.-Russian relations and their qualitative nuclear arms race now worse than at any time since the Cold War, our responsibility is to join the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* and others in warning that we are just 2 minutes from Doomsday. As with the growing fear of nuclear war in the late 1970s and early 1980s, focusing national attention on the dangers posed by preparations for nuclear omnicide today may inspire one of us or others to imagine the key to unlock a social movement, much as Randy did with her Call.

That said, with the decline of economic, social, and political democracy here in the United States, accelerated by Trump and the forces behind him, I think we need to go further in our understanding of Deadly Connections. It will take the strength of an intersectional movement to prevail, one engaged and allied with people and forces challenging climate change, racism, staggering economic inequality, racist ethnic cleansing of immigrants, the prison-industrial complex. and the assaults on values and structures of democracy.

In his seminal novel, *The Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison wrote that “All roads lead to the Golden Day.” He was playing with us, but Randy may well have been right that we won’t be able to eliminate the nuclear danger, to which we must now add other post-modern weapons of mass destruction, without ending war itself. She understood that, like ending slavery and winning the right to vote, ending the scourge of war cannot simply be dictated by the UN Charter, but will take generations of dedicated and imaginative struggle and change. Let me suggest that arriving at the Golden Day of a nuclear weapons-free world and the elimination of war itself require resistance and vision across the spectrum of their inter-related military, economic, political, intellectual, social, and spiritual dynamics and foundations.

1. https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010\_12/LookingBack [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Randall Forsberg’s and Daniel Ellsberg’s speeches at the December, 1982 Deadly Connections conference appear in Joseph Gerson, ed., *The Deadly Connection: Nuclear War & U.S. Intervention*, Philadelphia, Tokyo, Manila: New Society Publishers, 1986. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Cited in Joseph Gerson, *Empire and the Bomb: How the U.S. Uses Nuclear Weapons to Dominate the World*, London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007, p. 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Gerson, op. cit; Barry Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan, *Force Without War*, Washington, D.C.: The Brooking Institution 1978; “The Last Empire,” Cambridge Documentary Films, 1986. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Robert Heilborner, *The Future as History*, New York: Grove Press, 1959. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)