

## Peace Action: A Short History

Peace Action originated with the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (better known as SANE). In 1957, a group of prominent Americans, headed by Norman Cousins and Clarence Pickett, launched an effort to focus American opinion on the dangers of nuclear weapons testing. “The normal drive for survival has been put out of action by present propaganda,” declared the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, and “we must . . . bring the voice of sanity to the people.” By the summer of 1958, SANE was the largest peace group in the United States.

SANE quickly became a very visible presence in American life. Hollywood SANE, organized by Steve Allen and Robert Ryan, mobilized a bevy of movie stars. In May 1960, SANE held an overflow rally at Madison Square Garden, with speeches by Eleanor Roosevelt and other luminaries. Its newspaper ads were signed by influential world leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Albert Schweitzer, and Bertrand Russell. The best-known ad featured the world’s most famous pediatrician, Dr. Benjamin Spock, looking gloomily at a young child under the headline: “Dr. Spock is Worried.”

These ventures—and others by comparable movements in other nations—had a powerful effect upon nuclear weapons policies. Responding to the popular clamor, the U.S., British, and Soviet governments agreed in October 1958 to halt nuclear testing as they negotiated for a test ban treaty. Later, President Kennedy dispatched Norman Cousins for talks with Soviet Premier Khrushchev—action that led to the Partial Test Ban Treaty of 1963.

SANE had been an early critic of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, and in November 1965 organized the largest antiwar demonstration up to that time. In 1967, SANE’s co-chair, Dr. Spock, headed up the Spring Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam. SANE became the first non-partisan group to oppose the re-election of President Lyndon Johnson and the first to support the peace candidacy of Senator Eugene McCarthy, thereby initiating a process that drove Johnson out of office. Although the war ground on under the Nixon administration, it could not be sustained. As Henry Kissinger complained, the war and the peace protests “shattered the self-confidence” of U.S. officials.

Although SANE declined after the end of the Vietnam War, it began to revive after 1977. With Soviet-American détente deteriorating, SANE focused upon backing the SALT II Treaty and securing economic conversion legislation. Its recovery quickened thanks to the new Reagan administration’s militarist program and loose talk of nuclear war, which sparked a vast upsurge of peace activism around the world. Denouncing Reagan’s priorities, SANE condemned plans for the deployment of new nuclear missiles in Europe and, in Congress, fought the administration to a near standstill over building MX missiles.

Just as SANE became a major force, so did a new organization: the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign. The Freeze arose in 1979 as the brainchild of Randy Forsberg, a defense and disarmament researcher. Recognizing that the division among peace groups rendered them ineffectual, she urged them to unite behind a proposal for a U.S.-Soviet agreement to halt the testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons. When they proved enthusiastic, she began circulating a “Call to Halt the Nuclear Arms Race.”

Organizing all across the country, the Freeze campaign made remarkable progress. On June 12, 1982, when peace groups sponsored an antinuclear demonstration in New York City around the theme of “Freeze the Arms Race—Fund Human Needs,” it escalated into the biggest U.S. political demonstration thus far, with nearly a million participants. That fall, Freeze referenda appeared on the ballot across the nation. In this largest referendum on a single issue in U.S. history (covering about a third of the electorate), the Freeze emerged victorious in nine out of ten states and in all but three localities. Five different polls taken during 1983 found average support for the Freeze at 72%.

The Reagan administration, on the defensive, was forced to modify its policies. In an effort to dampen popular protest, the President endorsed the “zero option,” a proposal to remove all intermediate-range nuclear missiles from Europe. In April 1982, shortly after a Freeze resolution was introduced in Congress, Reagan began declaring publicly that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” He added: “To those who protest against nuclear war, I can only say: ‘I’m with you!’”

The Freeze also hit paydirt in the Soviet Union. Taking office as Soviet party secretary in March 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was profoundly influenced by the worldwide antinuclear campaign. His “new thinking” about war and peace, Gorbachev declared, was based on the “demands . . . of . . . antiwar organizations.” At international disarmament conferences, he set aside time to confer with leaders of SANE and the Freeze.

Responding to advice from antinuclear activists, Gorbachev took Reagan up on the President's offer of the zero option. The result was the INF Treaty of 1987, which eliminated all intermediate-range nuclear missiles from Europe. This opened the way for further nuclear disarmament accords, as well as for an end to the Cold War.

Meanwhile, SANE and the Freeze united, forming Peace Action, led by the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr. The new organization threw its efforts into halting U.S. nuclear weapons production, reducing military spending, cutting off funding for U.S.-backed wars in Central America, and supporting sanctions against the apartheid regime in South Africa. It also mobilized public support for a peace economy and backed the Middle East peace process.

Peace Action's efforts to end nuclear testing proved particularly successful. In 1992, it helped steer legislation through Congress that terminated funding for the only kind of U.S. nuclear tests permitted under the Partial Test Ban Treaty: those conducted underground. With U.S. nuclear testing now halted, the new president, Bill Clinton, negotiated a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

Although Peace Action lost momentum after the Cold War ended, the militaristic policies of George W. Bush's administration helped spark its revival. Peace Action's membership grew dramatically and, in 2003, it launched a Campaign for a New Foreign Policy. Forging a close alliance with the Progressive Caucus in Congress, Peace Action worked successfully to block the Bush administration's proposals for new nuclear weapons and pressured the Obama administration to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, “Move the Money” from military

spending to domestic social spending, settle the U.S. conflict with Iran through negotiations, and back a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

Thus, Peace Action can look back upon an impressive record of campaigning for a saner, more humane world.