MIT: Voices supporting the nuclear freeze

By John J. Ying

Massachusetts voters will vote next week on a referendum opposing the Reagan Administration’s immediate nuclear freeze with the Soviet Union. The Tech oversee six freeze supporter groups from MIT: Leo Marx, Professor of Science, Technology, and Society; Aron M. Bernstein, Professor of Physics and Chairman of the Faculty Disarmament Study Group; Bernard T. Feld, Professor of Physics and editor in chief of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists; George W. Rathjens, Professor of Political Science; Professor Philip Morrison, Institute Professor of Physics, and Andrew D. Garris G, co-chairman of the MIT Disarmament Study Group.

Q: What is the single most important reason for a nuclear freeze?

Bernstein: “It is that the momentum of the arms race is so great now, and that the new weapons are so damaging to our system. The new weapons are so offensive that they can escalate the nuclear war. They put tremendous pressure on both sides. For example, take the Pershing II missile. It reaches Moscow in five minutes from their base in Western Europe. As a result both sides have to go to a launch-on-warning approach, and the probability of nuclear war goes up.

“The freeze is a brilliant political maneuver because it has captured the public attention and imagination. Thus, it is the most important one from that point of view, but it is not enough. It is just the first step in a process to stop nuclear disarmament.”

Rathjens: “It’s the most obvious approach to reversing the nuclear arms confrontation between the US and Russia. Other things are just as important. But it is as object for which all we should be working—as fast as we can.”

Field: “…In the current situation the US and the USSR are on par, but the probability that both sides don’t have an accident is like an air jet heading toward a precipice; the first thing is to stop.

“The problem is negotiations are so slow. Since the freeze is going to make the war workable, it will become an issue for the US and the USSR. The new weapons are so offensive that they could cause a second strike, which would probably affect all of us. It’s a question of whether we can maintain one. Superiority means nothing since we have enough to destroy the other.”

Q: What do you feel about the contentment the Russians have in the freeze and will not follow any agreements we make with them?

Bernstein: “In this business of politics and policing treaties, we should not rely on the good faith of our enemies. It isn’t good to have blind trust; however, it also isn’t good to have blind fear either. We have to look at this rationally. The Russians have a strong rational interest in stopping the arms race. Their economy is in a mess. But we must remember that they still live under the shadow of World War II—one entire generation of their men were lost.”

Q: What do you think about the belief that a freeze would be unverifiable?

Bernstein: “That’s nonsense. Total bans are much easier to verify than any present agreements. We should stop all test explosions and test missile firings—which would be very easy to verify. As an example of how much we know, Bernstein: “It’s very easy. In deployment, we know everything about their missiles—their number, their accuracy, their positions. In an agreement, our hot verification methods, satellites, and so on, suddenly become useless. Additionally, we have a few more, say 100 instead of 1000; it’s impossible for them to have much more and not to have us know. The whole issue of verification is a red herring. The idea that they can cheat significantly is ridiculous.”

Morrison: “Untrue. Technically wrong. They [the treaties] are highly verifiable.”

Q: What do you think of the recent surge in support for a nuclear freeze?

Rathjens: “The issue has grown enormously both in Europe and in the US. The question is whether it can be sustained. My feeling is it has already started, but I hope not. We must make these issues a matter of public concern. We need support in the employment of nuclear disarmament.

“It is very hard to sustain interest in an issue for a very long time unless the issue has a direct impact on a large group of people. For example, the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty—which prohibited atmospheric testing resulted from people’s concern about radioactivity in the food. If Reagan had not been elected, he would not have made such strong statements, and he would have moved for much more and not to have us know. The whole issue of verification is a red herring. People have a sort of ecological problem and makes his book very powerful this way.

Morrison: “I don’t believe that this is a one-week problem. We’ve been with this for 35 years. Only last year has shows recent public interest. The last time was for the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. This is the next time. I hope the interest lasts long enough to make a political impact because it hasn’t yet. This is a long term issue, and I hope people stay interested.”

Garris G: “Last year at this time we had between six and eight groups at a [Disarmament Study Group] meeting, and this year we have between 15 and 25. Many of the freshmen who are involved in this year who worked on the freeze their senior year. Lots of people came in and got involved in it with us.”

Q: Do you feel the US should spend money on a C-1 (Command, control, communications, and intelligence) system?

Rathjens: “I think we should spend some money on C-1 to make sure we don’t use the weapons by accident. As long as we have weapons, we need to have that level of control. I don’t think it’s ridiculous. In deployment, we know every-thing about their missiles—their number, their accuracy, their positions. In an agreement, our hot verification methods, satellites, and so on, suddenly become useless. Additionally, we have a few more, say 100 instead of 1000; it’s impossible for them to have much more and not to have us know. The whole issue of verification is a red herring. The idea that they can cheat significantly is ridiculous.”

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