III

GOING UNDERGROUND
Nuclear America, 1963–1980
The first of many lectures I gave in the 1980s discussing the impact of nuclear weapons on American culture took place on a warm summer evening in July 1982 before a small audience at the Madison, Wisconsin, public library. It was sponsored by a new organization, Wisconsin Educators for Social Responsibility, founded to support the nuclear-weapons freeze campaign. Titling the lecture "The Big Sleep," I focused on the years from 1963 through the late 1970s, when the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty that had pushed nuclear testing underground also seemed to have buried Americans' awareness of their nuclear history and of the continuing nuclear threat. It is this period to which we now turn.
My 1982 talk at the Madison Public Library laid the groundwork for many other lectures in the months and years that followed, as the “Reagan Round” of antinuclear activism and cultural attention to the bomb gained momentum. Much revised and expanded, this talk also provided the framework of an essay published in the May 1984 *Journal of American History* (with full footnote citations) and then condensed in the August/September 1984 issue of *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. The version reprinted here, adapted from the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* piece, offers an interpretive overview of the years when the nation’s level of nuclear awareness appeared—superficially—to be at a low ebb. The essay focuses especially on the complex and troubled relationship between the test ban and nuclear disarmament movements of the 1950s and early 1960s and the New Left leaders and Vietnam War protesters who moved center stage in the later 1960s.

**WRITING IN 1981,** George F. Kennan described Americans’ response to the threat of nuclear war: “We have gone on piling weapon upon weapon, missile upon missile, new levels of destructiveness upon old ones. We have done this helplessly, almost involuntarily, like the victims of some sort of hypnotism, like men in a dream, like lemmings headed for the sea.”

Kennan’s generalization is not wholly accurate. Americans have not always behaved like lemmings in confronting the nuclear danger. Their
engagement with this threat has gone through several distinct cycles of activism and apparent passivity. When applied to the years from 1963 to the later 1970s, however, his observations seem chillingly accurate. In these years, public concern with the nuclear-weapons issue sank to a very low level indeed.

In exploring this interval, our starting point is September 24, 1963, when the Senate overwhelmingly approved the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty agreed on earlier in Moscow. The treaty won enthusiastic public and journalistic support. David Lawrence of the conservative *U.S. News & World Report* wrote, “There’s a new word in the vocabulary of the day—or at least a more noticeable use of an old word—*euphoria.*” Even I. F. Stone, a skeptical, left-wing Washington journalist not given to flights of easy enthusiasm, wrote, “Peace has broken out, and hope leaps up again.” The agreement did not halt all tests; underground nuclear explosions were still permitted. Nevertheless, it was welcomed as the beginning of a process that would ultimately free the world of the nuclear menace. Summing up the prevailing view, the *New York Times* hailed the agreement in a front-page banner headline as a “Major Step toward Easing Tension.”

Underlying this collective sigh of relief was the fact that for more than a decade the nation had been gripped by profound nuclear fears. America’s atomic monopoly ended in 1949, and in the 1950s the United States and the Soviet Union developed the hydrogen bomb, ICBMs, and sophisticated control systems that raised the specter of a push-button war that could snuff out millions of lives in the blink of an eye.

Feeding the nuclear anxieties of these years was a heavy official emphasis on civil defense. Under the “Operation Alert” program of the Federal Civil Defense Administration, evacuation plans, radio alert systems, warning sirens, school air-raid drills, and films on how to survive a nuclear attack became familiar features of American life.

In May 1961, shortly before the Vienna summit conference, President Kennedy went on television to urge a national shelter program. A few weeks later, during a period of East-West confrontation over Berlin, he delivered an even more alarmist speech on the danger of nuclear war and the urgent necessity for civil-defense preparation. Responding to a deluge of panicky requests, the administration hastily prepared a civil-
defense booklet and distributed 35 million copies through schools, post offices, and newspaper supplements. The Cuban Missile Crisis added a grim immediacy to these fears. For a few days in October 1962, Kennedy's warnings seemed about to become reality.

Further, as we saw in chapter 5, these were years shadowed by fears of radioactive fallout, as U.S. and Soviet atmospheric tests of thermonuclear weapons contaminated the atmosphere. Despite soothing words from Washington, the disturbing facts could not be denied. As in the immediate post-Hiroshima period, the mass media once again both articulated and amplified the public's escalating anxieties.

These fears gave rise to a campaign against nuclear testing led by such groups as Leo Szilard's Council for a Livable World, Dr. Bernard Lown's Physicians for Social Responsibility, and the Student Peace Union. Formed in Chicago in 1959, the Student Peace Union's national conventions attracted hundreds of delegates over the next few years.

Above all, there was SANE, the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, conceived in 1957 by several veteran peace activists who recruited Norman Cousins of the Saturday Review and Clarence Pickett of the American Friends Service Committee as cochairmen. With an imposing list of public figures and celebrities as sponsors, SANE announced itself in November 1957 with a large New York Times advertisement proclaiming, "We Are Facing a Danger Unlike Any Danger That Has Ever Existed."

A high point of this round of activism came in May 1960, when thousands attended a SANE-sponsored rally in New York's Madison Square Garden to hear speakers ranging from the Republican Alfred M. Landon to the socialist Norman Thomas call for an end to the nuclear arms race. After the rally, five thousand people accompanied Thomas on a march to the United Nations. The organized test ban campaign unquestionably intensified public opposition to testing, though the level of opposition was also influenced by shifting U.S.-Soviet relations. By late 1959, 77 percent of Americans favored a continuation of the temporary moratorium on nuclear testing then in effect.

Nuclear fear became a shaping cultural force. Books, essays, symposia, and conferences explored the medical, psychological, and ethical implications of atomic weapons. Novels like On the Beach, Fail-Safe, Dexter
Masters's *The Accident*, and Walter Miller Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* offered visions of nuclear holocaust. The film versions of *On the Beach* and *Fail-Safe*, as well as Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (discussed in chapter 7), attracted large audiences.

The Eisenhower administration was especially concerned about *On the Beach*. In December 1959, civil-defense director Leo Hoegh criticized it at a Cabinet meeting as "very harmful because it produced a feeling of utter hopelessness, thus undermining OCDM's [Office of Civil Defense Management] efforts to encourage preparedness." An analysis of the film by the State Department and the U.S. Information Agency warned that its "strong emotional appeal for banning nuclear weapons could conceivably lead audiences to think in terms of radical solutions . . . rather than . . . practical safeguarded disarmament measures." Insisting that the film's ending, in which many doomed Australians choose suicide over death from radiation poisoning, "grossly misconstrues the basic nature of man," this analysis declared, "It is inconceivable that even in the event of a nuclear war, mankind would not have the strength and ingenuity to take all possible steps toward self-preservation."

The nuclear preoccupation of the years from 1954 through 1963 manifested itself at all cultural levels. Television series like *The Outer Limits* and Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone*, when not dealing explicitly with radioactivity, genetic mutation, and atomic war, conjured up tales of vague, unseen menaces. A spate of mutant movies—*The H-Man, The Incredible Shrinking Man, Attack of the Crab Monsters, The Blob, Is, Them!*—had clear psychological roots in fears of genetic damage from radioactive fallout. In *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, the luckless hero begins to shrink soon after his pleasure boat passes through a glistening radioactive cloud generated by a distant nuclear test. In *Them!* twelve-foot killer ants crawl from the New Mexico A-bomb test site and leave horrifying carnage in their wake as they head unerringly for the storm sewers of Los Angeles. (The producer ran out of money and had to stop filming on location in New Mexico and return to Hollywood.) Small wonder that the 1963 test ban aroused such euphoria.

It is what happened next that is surprising. The sudden fading of the nuclear-weapons issue after September 1963, whether as an activist cause, a cultural motif, or a topic of public discourse, is astonishing. Test
ban and nuclear disarmament organizations either collapsed or vanished from public view. When only twenty-five delegates showed up for the convention of the Student Peace Union in spring 1964, the organization disbanded.

One of the first to notice the shift was Eugene Rabinowitch, editor of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* and a leader of the postwar "scientists' movement" that had campaigned for international atomic control. Writing in the January 1964 *Bulletin*, Rabinowitch observed:

> As the year 1963 drew to its end, it found Americans in a changed mood. A year ago . . . peace movements flourished and disarmament studies proliferated. It looked as if Americans were trying to come to grips with the critical problem of our age.

> The acute concern and frantic search for solutions did not last long. . . . The abatement of the Cuban conflict, the test-ban treaty, and vague signs of rapprochement between the Soviet Union and the United States encouraged the public attention to turn in other directions.

Echoing Rabinowitch, the Catholic journal of opinion *Commonweal* in 1965 deplored the lethargy that had enveloped the nuclear-weapons issue. In succeeding years, this lethargy remained a matter of frustrated comment by a few peace activists and social observers.

Of course, the bomb did not totally vanish from the American consciousness. In 1965, a *Pacem in Terris* conference in New York sponsored by Robert M. Hutchins's Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions attracted more than two thousand people, who heard addresses by Linus Pauling and other veterans of the test ban movement. In the later 1960s, considerable journalistic and public attention focused on the Pentagon's proposal to construct an antiballistic missile system in North Dakota—a proposal narrowly approved by the Senate in August 1969. And scattered evidence suggests that the nuclear threat still remained vividly alive, especially among the young, at the subconscious level of nightmares, fantasies, and inarticulate forebodings. Popularizers of Bible
prophecy continued through the 1960s and 1970s to search the Scriptures for intimations of atomic war.

What one does see, however, is a sharp decline in activism, public discussion, mainstream media attention, and cultural expression focused on the nuclear-weapons issue. Even the ABM debate was confined mainly to strategists, a few columnists, and a small band of arms-control specialists. Jerome Wiesner, provost of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), noted in the June 1967 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, “There seems to be little public concern about the ABM issue, either pro or con.”

This climate of apparent obliviousness and unconcern continued well into the 1970s. In 1975, Samuel H. Day Jr., successor to Eugene Rabinowitch as editor of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, wrote, “Public apathy . . . constitutes perhaps the most ominous of the various forces pulling the world toward a nuclear holocaust.” The chorus of lament is striking in its unanimity. “Unless momentarily roused by crisis or threatening alert,” asked Richard Rhodes in the November 1975 Atlantic, “who among us think of nuclear war anymore?” Reflected Norman Cousins in the Saturday Review (April 17, 1976), “Hardly anyone talks anymore about nuclear stockpiles as the world’s No. 1 problem. . . . The anti-testing clamor of the Sixties now seems far off and almost unreal.” Political journalist Peter Ognibene, in the same issue of the Saturday Review, agreed. “Any politician who would now speak, as President Kennedy once did, about ‘the nuclear sword of Damocles’ poised above our collective head would be dismissed out of hand as an anachronism. The fear of nuclear war, once so great, has steadily receded.”

Why did the era from 1963 through the 1970s see such quiescence on issues related to nuclear war and the nuclear arms race? The most reassuring answer would be that the complacency was justified—that the nuclear threat did diminish in these years. And, indeed, by 1975, 106 nations had signed the test ban treaty; 99 had signed the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty; and the nuclear powers had agreed not to place atomic weapons in space, on the moon, or on the ocean floor. In 1967 a number of Latin American states pledged by treaty to forswear nuclear weapons. In 1972 the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, begun in 1969, produced the SALT I and Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaties, re-
stricting the United States and the Soviet Union to two ABM systems each and pledging each nation to limit for five years its missile capability to launchers already operational or under construction.

But when one turns from the realm of treaty making to the real world of nuclear weaponry, a different and bleaker picture emerges. In both the United States and the Soviet Union, nuclear-weapons research, construction, and deployment went forward rapidly after 1963. Taking advantage of the test ban treaty's gaping loophole, both sides developed sophisticated techniques of underground testing. The United States conducted more tests in the five years after 1963 than in the five years before, some involving weapons fifty times the size of the Hiroshima bomb. The physicist Bernard Feld of MIT concluded in the January 1975 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists that the test ban treaty, while perhaps an "ecological blessing," was "an arms-control disaster." For one thing, the treaty's signatories did not include the nations most likely to develop nuclear weapons. Moreover, as Milton Leitenberg noted in the January 1972 Bulletin, "No one believes it will long remain as a viable treaty unless the two major powers begin substantial disarmament."

As for the SALT I agreement, it sidestepped what had by 1972 emerged as the most volatile feature of the nuclear arms race: missiles' growing destructive power and technical sophistication. While the Soviet Union opted for larger ICBMs and warheads, America moved toward diversification and technical refinements such as MIRV (Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicles), by which each missile could carry up to sixteen highly accurate and separately targeted warheads.

What Robert McNamara in 1967 called the "mad momentum" of the nuclear arms race steadily accelerated in these years. The SALT process had "institutionalized" the competition, observed Swedish arms-control specialist Alva Myrdal in 1976, but "by no stretch of the imagination can this be called arms limitation." In the December 1967 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Milton Leitenberg noted that in the flurry of nuclear treaty making, not a single weapons system had been reduced or dismantled—except to be replaced by a more modern one.

With so little objective basis for this decade and a half of comparative nuclear complacency, why did it occur? Many have attributed it to the influence of the Department of Defense and the major military
contractors. Writing in 1970, one arms-control advocate blamed nuclear passivity on the Pentagon's "in-house steam roller" that "forges ahead over all objections." Few would deny the existence of the military-industrial complex. For the principal military contractors and their hundreds of subsidiaries, as indeed for entire regions of the country, nuclear-weapons research, development, and construction represented economic interests of vast proportions. But simply because the military-industrial complex has powerful economic incentives for shaping public attitudes in certain ways, does this mean it has the power to do so?

Certainly the military services and corporate interests engaged in planning and producing nuclear weapons have their media outlets, and their influence on public perceptions is formidable. But this does not seem a sufficient explanation for the public's unconcern. For one thing, this explanation is not time specific; it cannot account for variations in public responses to the nuclear threat. Nuclear-weapons research and development have constantly loomed large since the early 1950s. Yet there have been dramatic shifts in the level of activism and cultural expression directed to the nuclear issue. The question, then, remains: Why did nuclear awareness and activism decline so precipitously in the period we are examining? Several reasons suggest themselves.

The perception of reduced danger. Although the various treaties of these years failed to slow the nuclear arms race, they did convey the appearance of progress. For those already inclining toward psychic denial, this appearance provided a plausible rationalization. To nuclear activists, this situation was intensely frustrating: "The elaborate staging of arms control negotiations," wrote Samuel H. Day Jr. in the September 1975 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, "doubtless persuaded many that the threat is diminishing."

Nor, perhaps, was this perception entirely illusory. The intensity of nuclear fear at any given moment is presumably influenced by two distinct though connected realities: the quantity and nature of the world's nuclear arsenals, and judgments about the likelihood of their use. In the 1950s and continuing through the Cuban Missile Crisis, the fear that nuclear war might actually break out received periodic reinforcement from political pronouncements and international crises. With the Cold
War thaw that began in 1963 and continued episodically through the détente of the early 1970s, the diminution of nuclear-war fear had a certain rational basis, despite the superpowers’ growing nuclear arsenals.

The growing remoteness of the nuclear reality. Memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were dimming. Civil defense was played down. And with atomic tests and radioactive fallout no longer dominating the media, the world’s nuclear stockpile seemed increasingly unreal.

“Familiarity takes the sting out of practically anything, even Armageddon,” noted the journalist P. E. Schneider in the New York Times Magazine (August 14, 1966). “Nuclear weapons constitute a danger so theoretical, so remote, as to be almost non-existent.” The psychiatrist Jerome Frank made this point in 1967: “Nuclear missiles poised to kill cannot be seen, felt, tasted, or smelled, and so we scarcely think of them.”

With the end of aboveground testing, observed the New York Times in 1969, nuclear fear had become “diffuse and inchoate.” “Our capacity for . . . response is dulled,” agreed the MIT physicist and arms-control advocate Kosta Tsipis in 1972, “because the danger is not present to our daily experience; it is a mental image . . . inconceivable to the large majority.”

The muting of the sense of urgency was furthered by the abstract vocabulary of nuclear strategies and weapons technicians. These years brought an array of acronyms confusing enough to make even a New Dealer blush: ABM, AWACS, ELF, FOBS, MIRV, MARV, SLBM, GLCM, MX, TNW, and so on. Even the names given the various missile systems evoked not their actual doomsday potential but reassuring associations with the heavens, classical mythology, American history, and even popular slang: Polaris, Nike-Zeus, Poseidon, Tomahawk, Minute-man, Pershing, Davy Crockett, Hound Dog.

The sense of the issue’s remoteness was self-reenforcing. As nuclear weapons literally went underground after 1963, the torrent of novels, movies, and television programs that had both fed and reflected nuclear fears slowed to a trickle. This in turn facilitated the numbing process. Remote and largely invisible, nuclear weapons proved particularly ill-suited to the insatiable visual demands of television.

Some tried to restore the lost sense of immediacy. In the 1970s, the
Catholic activists Daniel and Philip Berrigan took hammers to missiles on the production line, as in 1968 they had poured blood on draft records. In 1970, two University of Missouri sociologists showed their students the documentary film *Hiroshima/Nagasaki*, which portrays the victims' sufferings in horrifying detail. Predictably, when tested immediately afterward, students showed a heightened resistance to the idea of nuclear war. But for how long? Was it like the well-known phenomenon of drivers creeping along for a few miles after passing a terrible highway accident—only to speed up again as the memory fades?

*The tranquilizing effect of the “peaceful atom.”* President Eisenhower launched the international “Atoms for Peace” program as early as 1953, and the first domestic nuclear power plant opened in 1957, but in the mid-1960s the program really gained momentum. By 1973, thirty-seven plants were in operation in the United States, with many more planned. Concurrently, the atom’s peacetime potential was given enormous publicity.

The most indefatigable cheerleader after David Lilienthal’s retirement from public life was the chemist and Nobel laureate Glenn T. Seaborg, chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission from 1961 to 1970. In speeches, articles, and interviews, Seaborg described the nuclear utopia ahead: cheap power, medical wonders, agricultural abundance, a “junkless society” through the nuclear processing of waste materials, “international understanding and peace” thanks to nuclear-powered communications satellites. “Designed to blend into the natural landscape, low in profile . . . with all the distribution lines underground,” and nestled in “park-like settings,” Seaborg declared, future nuclear power plants would be “as close to an extension of nature as any human enterprise.” The expansive Texan in the White House echoed Seaborg’s enthusiasm. In 1967, Lyndon Johnson delivered a speech entitled “Nuclear Power: Key to a Golden Age of Mankind.”

In the nation’s collective unconscious (to use that Jungian term loosely), a kind of psychological trade-off seems to have occurred, with glowing images of the benevolent atom obscuring and to a degree neutralizing dark images of the destroying atom. Support nuclear power and other peacetime uses of the atom, the tacit argument went, and the threat
of nuclear war will diminish correspondingly. As *U.S. News & World Report* put it in December 1967, the world had wandered far down the nuclear-weapons path, but was now at least crossing “the threshold into the era of the peaceful atom, with its promise of better things for all mankind.” In reality, of course, there were not two separate worlds of atomic energy but only one, whose various aspects were deeply intertwined. Still, for a time, the allure of the peaceful atom played its part in muting fears of nuclear weapons.

The arcane reassurance of nuclear strategy. From 1945 to 1950, and continuing into John Foster Dulles’s term as secretary of state, atomic strategy as practiced in Washington was a fairly simple (if often unnerving) matter. By the 1960s, however, it had become a highly specialized pursuit dominated by a small group of civilian experts under contract to the military and based at semiautonomous research institutes at larger universities or at such “think tanks” as the Institute for Defense Analysis, the System Development Corporation, the Center for Naval Analysis, the Research Analysis Corporation, and the RAND Corporation.

Using computer simulations, John von Neumann’s game theory, and other analytical tools, these “defense intellectuals” transformed nuclear strategy into a rarefied, quasi-scientific discipline. Conveying “the impression of holding membership in a closed club” (as the *New Yorker* put it in 1971), they increasingly moved in their own intellectual and even social orbit.

The physicist Ralph Lapp, in a 1965 book, called them “the new priesthood,” noting that even in academia, with its tradition of scholarly openness, “they enjoy a privileged area of argument and can always retreat to a sanctuary of secret data land.” Of the key strategists—Herman Kahn, Thomas Schelling, Henry Kissinger, Donald Brennan, Bernard Brodie, William Kintner, Fred Iklé, Oskar Morgenstern, Robert Strausz-Hupé, William Kaufmann, Albert Wohlstetter, Glenn Snyder—the names of only one or two would have been recognizable even to politically attentive citizens.

As for the strategic theories they debated, only the dimmest awareness—alogous, perhaps, to a medieval peasant’s grasp of the theologi-
cal concepts with which monastic scholars like St. Thomas Aquinas wrestled—filtered beyond the walls of the institutes and think tanks. This had a profoundly discouraging effect not only on potential activists, but also on those seeking to remain informed on nuclear issues. As early as 1959, Robert M. Hutchins questioned whether democratic theory retained much relevance in the new era of strategic planning, and similar questions gained force in succeeding years. In the mid-1960s, the political scientist Hans Morgenthau stated: “The great issues of nuclear strategy . . . cannot even be the object of meaningful debate . . . because there can be no competent judgments without meaningful knowledge. Thus the great national decisions of life or death are rendered by technological elites, and both the Congress and the people retain little more than the illusion of making the decisions which the theory of democracy supposes them to make.”

The substance as well as the process of nuclear strategy changed in these years. As the Soviets moved toward parity with the United States in nuclear warheads and ICBMs, American atomic saber-rattling gave way to a new strategic emphasis: deterrence. The essential elements of deterrence theory had been developed by the Yale political scientist Bernard Brodie in a seminal 1946 work *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* and elaborated by Albert Wohlstetter in a 1954 RAND study published as “The Delicate Balance of Terror” in the January 1959 issue of *Foreign Affairs*.

It was in the 1960s, however, particularly toward the end of Robert McNamara’s tenure as secretary of defense, that deterrence theory was officially endorsed and given extensive public visibility as the cornerstone of U.S. nuclear strategy. As elaborated by McNamara in 1967, deterrence theory held that the point of stockpiling nuclear weapons was not the anticipation of ever using them, but of preventing their use by the other side.

Specifically, the Soviets had to be convinced that a nuclear first strike by them would trigger a retaliatory “second strike” that would devastate their country. In McNamara’s memorable phrase (which of course soon gave rise to the acronym MAD), nuclear security lay in “mutual assured destruction,” that is, “the certainty of suicide to the aggressor—not merely to his military forces, but to his society as a whole.” By challeng-
ing the common-sense assumption that the vast buildup of nuclear weapons increased the likelihood of their eventual use, deterrence theory helped dull nuclear fears and activist impulses. To march and demonstrate for nuclear disarmament, deterrence theorists suggested, was to advocate a destabilization of the “balance of terror” that could in fact increase the risk of nuclear war.

Not all Americans found deterrence theory and its seemingly perverse corollaries persuasive. To traditional pacifists, disarmament advocates, and others who believed that the reduction and eventual elimination of nuclear weapons must be a fundamental objective of U.S. policy, the abandonment of this goal, implicit in deterrence theory, was dismaying. In the 1950s and early 1960s, deterrence came under heavy criticism on these grounds. Criticism diminished after 1963, reflecting the larger cultural shift we have been examining, but it never disappeared entirely.

Many who approached the nuclear dilemma from a religious or ethical perspective were appalled by the moral implications of a strategy predicated on threatening to wipe out an entire society. The elaborate edifice of deterrence theory rested on the threat of retaliation, and that threat had to be credible for the theory to make any sense at all. McNamara insisted on the government’s “unwavering will” should the awful moment of decision ever come. In the New York Times Magazine of June 7, 1964, Walt W. Rostow, chairman of the State Department’s policy planning council, assented: “The heart of a credible deterrent in a nuclear age lies in being prepared to face the consequences, should deterrence fail.” American security, Rostow went on, demanded an unflinching readiness to match any Soviet escalation “up to and including all-out nuclear war.”

The moral dilemma lay precisely here, giving rise to considerable soul-searching in religious circles, not only in the historically pacifist denominations—Quaker, Mennonite, Church of the Brethren—but also in the mainstream Protestant denominations and even in the Roman Catholic hierarchy, traditionally a bastion of support for a policy of military strength. In 1965, drawing on the church’s traditional just-war doctrine, Vatican Council II declared: “Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities and of extensive areas along with
their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation."

What, then, was the church to say of a strategy whose avowed aim was to avoid nuclear war, but which depended on an "unwavering will" to destroy an entire people? "Surely there is something obscene," said the Catholic journal *Commonweal* in 1971, about a policy predicated on such a threat. What if human error, technological malfunction, or some unforeseeable combination of circumstances triggered an attack, or led to the mistaken impression that one was under way (the *Dr. Strangelove* scenario)? The consequences if deterrence failed through mischance did not bear contemplating.

At the other end of the spectrum, many strategists, Pentagon planners, and weapons researchers never fully accepted the operational implications of deterrence theory. New weapons proposals continued to proliferate, beyond any rational function. And even after McNamara publicly endorsed deterrence theory, the Pentagon's computerized war plan, SIOP (Single Integrated Operational Plan), continued to give targeting preference to Soviet military sites and missile bases, reflecting not only the deterrence principle but also the desire to maintain an actual nuclear war fighting capability.

Despite these qualifications, deterrence theory, as publicized in the later 1960s, clearly helped calm the nuclear anxieties of many Americans. It offered hope that ultimately the nuclear arms race would reach a point of equilibrium. Once each side had achieved a credible second-strike capability (McNamara's "mutual assured destruction"), the "race" would end in a tie. Nuclear warheads would remain, but they would simply rest in their silos and submarine bays forever, endlessly deterring. Thanks in part to this theory, editorialized *Business Week* on July 13, 1968, "living with the atomic bomb has turned out to be less frightening than it once seemed."

**Other issues and concerns.** The nuclear-weapons issue did not exist in a vacuum in these years; it was but one element of a complex cultural and political reality. Even as Americans hailed the test ban treaty, the war in Vietnam was becoming more threatening. With Lyndon Johnson's postelection escalation of forces in February 1965, the Vietnam conflict
began to rule the media, dominating public discourse and drawing ever
greater waves of protest. From the first tentative campus protests in
March 1965 to the final outburst on campuses and in Washington in the
spring of 1970, the war in Southeast Asia absorbed nearly all the available
protest energy of peace activists, religious leaders, and college students
facing the draft.

Always present on the nation's television screens, the war and the
domestic turmoil it engendered had an immediacy that the more abstract
nuclear-weapons issue could not begin to approximate. Missile tests were
out of sight, deep underground, and the missiles themselves were simi­
larly hidden in subterranean silos, in B-52 bomb bays on remote, heavily
guarded air force bases, or in nuclear submarines patrolling the world's
seas. The war and the protest demonstrations, by contrast, conveyed in
urgent, often shocking visual images, appeared constantly on television
news programs, in radio bulletins, and on the pages of newspapers and
news magazines. In this situation, there was little question which would
dominate public debate and the outlets of cultural expression. A new
cycle of arms-control talks had begun, the Wall Street Journal reported
on January 11, 1973. But, it predicted, few would notice "amid the dis­
tractions of Vietnam hopes and fears."

When a 1969 Gallup poll asked subjects to list the "two or three
most important problems" facing the nation, 63 percent mentioned
Vietnam and only 2 percent the danger of nuclear war. The shift of atten­
tion to Vietnam, according to Roy E. Licklider in his 1971 book, Private
Nuclear Strategists, removed "much of the public pressure on the Ameri­
can government to alter its nuclear policies."

The impact of Vietnam on the nuclear disarmament movement is
vividly illustrated in the history of SANE. While Benjamin Spock and
other SANE leaders turned completely to the Vietnam issue, still others
urged continued attention to nuclear weapons. At a 1966 SANE board
meeting, issues related to the nuclear arms race were relegated to near the
bottom of a long agenda dominated by the Vietnam War.

When Spock and other leaders of SANE increasingly linked the
organization to the most militant wing of the antiwar movement, par­
ticularly at the National Conference for a New Politics held in Chicago
in September 1967, these deepening differences in the organization
exploded openly. The executive director, Donald Keys, and Norman Cousins resigned; Spock himself soon departed. A shadow of its former self, SANE in 1969 eliminated the word nuclear from its name.

Similar seismic shifts were occurring throughout the nuclear disarmament movement. At the University of Wisconsin, Students for Peace and Disarmament, founded in 1962 to oppose nuclear testing and the arms race, dropped the nuclear issue abruptly in the fall of 1963 to organize a rally protesting America’s deepening involvement in Vietnam. Understandable and even inevitable as it seems in retrospect, this process was distressing to the dwindling band of older activists who continued to focus on the nuclear threat. “From the long-range . . . point of view,” wrote the physicist and Manhattan Project veteran David Inglis in the May 1967 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, “the most tragic feature of the war in Vietnam . . . is that preoccupation with this struggle is being allowed to stand in the way of the urgent business of making a far more devastating nuclear war less likely.”

A closely related influence on post-1963 American nuclear attitudes was the emergence of the New Left, particularly the campus-based radical organization Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Founded in 1960 as an offshoot of the socialist League for Industrial Democracy, SDS at its peak in 1968 had some seven thousand members, with upwards of forty thousand more affiliated with local campus branches. It would be foolhardy to treat SDS, or even a more loosely defined “New Left,” as synonymous with the large and diverse 1960s antiwar movement. Even the New Left itself was notoriously amorphous; John Diggins, in The American Left in the Twentieth Century (1973), called it “a mood in search of a movement.” Nevertheless, New Left ideology was one important force shaping 1960s activism. At the rhetorical level, the New Left talked a lot about nuclear weapons. In their 1962 Port Huron statement, SDS founders proclaimed themselves seared by atomic fears “when we were kids” and “guided by the sense that we may be the last generation in the experiment with living.” “Our hopes for the future have been corroded by the Bomb,” added the 1963 SDS manifesto America and the New Era.

Adult sympathizers helped spread the idea that the activists’ lifelong association with nuclear weapons was crucial to their political orienta-
tion and gave them a unique moral sensitivity. "The bomb has had a wide, corrosive, and depressing effect upon the young," wrote the novelist Fletcher Knebel in the December 1968 issue of *Popular Science*. "They sing their sad laments over guitars while the girls' long hair weeps for the coming suicide of humanity."

But when one moves beyond the rhetoric, it is striking both how little serious attention the New Left gave to the nuclear issue and how little effort it made to sustain the momentum of the pre-1963 nuclear disarmament movement. "It's just a cliché," was the succinct comment of one Harvard activist on the claim that the New Left's outlook was profoundly shaped by the bomb.

Nuclear disarmament was doubtless implicit in the New Left's vision, but one finds few specifics in the literature. When nuclear weapons are mentioned, it is usually as part of an exposé of the universities' role in military research, or a more general indictment of capitalist society. In his 1969 book *The Making of a Counter Culture*, Theodore Roszak argued that the central issue was not nuclear weapons but "the total ethos of the bomb"—an ethos that also pervaded "our culture, our public morality, our economic life, our intellectual endeavors." The central significance of "the shadow of thermonuclear annihilation beneath which we cower," said Roszak, was as "the prime symptom" of morbidity in a society that was "fatally and contagiously diseased."

The vague and general talk about "the Bomb" in New Left circles sometimes suggests an effort to establish at least a rhetorical link with the earlier anti–nuclear weapons campaign. What in fact emerges, however, is the sharp discontinuity between the two movements. The explanation suggested above—that the Vietnam War in all its urgent emotional intensity preempted all other concerns—certainly has validity; but the discontinuity is rooted as well in the inner history of the test ban movement in the early 1960s and in the effect of this history on the New Left in its formative stages.

From the first, relations between the test ban and nuclear disarmament organizations, on the one hand, and student activists, on the other, had been strained at best. Organizations like SANE sought to shape public policy through speeches, sober pronouncements and advertisements featuring famous names, and access to sympathetic politicians. SANE's
1960 Madison Square Garden rally notwithstanding, its members were not oriented toward demonstrations, marches, and mass action. SANE’s campus branch, Students for a Sane Nuclear Policy, enjoyed little autonomy. “On arms control, we weren’t looking for help from the youthful polloi,” one SANE leader has candidly acknowledged. The campus-based Student Peace Union emerged in 1959 partially out of frustration with SANE’s rigidity, exclusivity, and general stodginess.

These latent stresses were vastly exacerbated early in 1960 when Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut charged that SANE was infiltrated by Communists. An alarmed Norman Cousins privately assured Dodd that SANE was determined to rid itself of any taint of disloyalty. SANE’s national board excluded Communists from membership, revoked the charter of the Greater New York Committee (a major target of Dodd’s charges), and pointedly announced that SANE was a “deliberately autocratic organization” whose membership could be closely monitored.

All this caused an upheaval in SANE and in the peace movement. Several directors resigned, and SANE’s student branch broke away from the parent organization. Campus groups committed to a test ban and nuclear disarmament, but independent of SANE, proliferated: Tocsin at Harvard, Students for Peace and Disarmament at Wisconsin, and so on. The pace of activism—marches, demonstrations, petitions—quickened markedly: A San Francisco peace march in October 1960 drew two thousand participants. Women’s Strike for Peace, a grassroots movement started in the Washington area in 1961, quickly organized demonstrations in sixty cities, involving fifty thousand women. Discontent with SANE and similar narrowly based, top-down groups intensified. The Nation, in its March 3, 1962, issue, saw in the ferment of 1960–62 not just a new phase of the peace movement, but “the birth of a new” movement.

The volatility of the situation emerged clearly in February 1962 when a coalition of campus peace groups led by Todd Gitlin and Peter Goldmark of Tocsin organized the Washington Project, which drew five thousand students to the nation’s capital. Some, attired in suits and ties, met with senators, congressmen, and State Department officials. But others—the wave of the future—organized a mass meeting and took to the streets, marching, chanting, and waving placards for nuclear disarmament.
By 1962, then, thousands of students had abandoned SANE's approach in favor of direct-action strategies aimed at fomenting a mass movement against nuclear testing and the nuclear arms race. With the test ban treaty of 1963, the urgency drained from the nuclear issue, but the activist zeal and spirit of tactical innovation remained. Waiting in the wings was SDS. For many students, the "new" peace movement of 1960–62 provided a bridge to the New Left.

The early New Left was determined to avoid what it saw as the failings of SANE and the 1950s peace movement. Unlike SANE, SDS adopted a "non-exclusionist" membership policy, prized face-to-face relations and the spirit of community, and was casually organized and decentralized to the point of chaos.

Tactical differences were no less pronounced than were those of structure and style. SANE relied on its access to Washington powerbrokers and its ability to influence the educated middle class through the prestige of its sponsors and the impact of its psychologically manipulative (if factually sound) advertisements. The early SDS, by contrast, focused on the poor, prided itself on its nonmanipulative, nonexploitative approach, and adopted an ideological stance of radical opposition to the "Establishment."

With a grant from the United Auto Workers, the SDS Economic Research and Action Project in 1963–64 sent organizers into ghettos and slums to discuss the residents' grievances, help them plan protest actions, and (so it was hoped) gradually lead them to an awareness of the larger realities and class inequities that shaped their lives. In gradual stages, the poor would be radicalized and become a part of the force contributing to the emergence of a new social order. "Only in this way," wrote SDS president Tom Hayden in *Dissent* (January/February 1966), "can a movement be built which the Establishment can neither buy off nor manage." The group's Port Huron statement gave a name to this strategy: participatory democracy. An article of faith for the early New Left, this concept was both its most significant contribution to the radical tradition and its most explicit repudiation of SANE and much of the 1950s peace movement.

SDS community organizers quickly found that the nuclear arms race ranked well below such matters as garbage collection on the list of slum dwellers' concerns. As one activist later wrote, the poor were often openly
hostile to “large, organization-funded, top-down peace propaganda programs.” This realization made the New Left retreat still further from the issue of nuclear disarmament.

If SANE was the negative role model for the early New Left, the civil-rights movement was the positive one. The tactics of black activist groups like SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee), with its sit-ins and marches, seemed eminently more promising—and exciting—than the staid, desk-bound approach of organizations like SANE. Black activists understandably gave other issues priority over the nuclear arms race, reinforcing the inclination of their white emulators in the New Left to do the same.

Ideological as well as tactical considerations underlay the early New Left’s downgrading of the nuclear-weapons issue. Assuming that the Washington technocrats understood the irrationality of nuclear war and an out-of-control nuclear arms race, SDS further believed that they would devise ways to avoid nuclear catastrophe. This assumption emerges most clearly in the 1963 manifesto America and the New Era, written soon after the test ban treaty was announced. Citing this agreement as well as “other first-step efforts at curtailing the arms race,” this analysis concluded, “A deep desire to avoid general nuclear war is fundamental to the Administration’s ‘rational military policies.’ . . . The Administration recognizes that some forms of agreement with the Soviet Union are necessary if nuclear war is to be prevented.” But while the technocratic managers in Washington could be counted on to avoid nuclear war and a spiraling nuclear arms race, SDS went on, they would not hesitate to engage in subversion, counterinsurgency wars, and other nonnuclear power tactics to protect corporate America’s global political and economic interests.

The radicals’ assumption that the technocrats’ rational calculations and managerial skills would prevent nuclear war despite the continued existence of vast nuclear arsenals (a belief they shared with the deterrence theorists) was a remarkable gesture of faith in human reason and technocratic expertise. As such, it represented a sharp break with the activist perspective and cultural ethos of the 1950s and early 1960s, which viewed the nuclear arms race as a fundamentally irrational, unstable, and highly dangerous process that might at any time escape from control.
through accident, technical breakdown, or some sudden escalation of local conflict. The early New Left, for all its talk of "the looming shadow of the bomb," did not share such fears—or at least did not systematically explore them in its theoretical work or embody them in its operational planning.

The relationship between the radical movement of the 1960s and the nuclear-weapons issue, then, was a complex and subtle one. After 1965, anti-Vietnam War activism played a paramount role in pushing the nuclear issue to the background. But even earlier, the ideological and tactical thrust of the New Left had led it to break decisively with the organized test ban and nuclear disarmament activism of the 1950s. Convinced of the superiority of its tactics and the greater sophistication of its political analysis, the New Left downplayed its roots in the antinuclear and test ban movements. The earlier campaign was significant, New Left ideologues suggested, primarily because its limitations had propelled some of its youthful adherents beyond liberal reformism to a larger radical consciousness.

Even qualified efforts at rapprochement soon faded. In *The Making of a Counter Culture*, Theodore Roszak, himself a veteran of the earlier peace movement, wrote: "Precisely what do groups like SANE . . . tell us about adult America even when we are dealing with politically conscious elements? Looking back, one is struck by their absurd shallowness and conformism, their total unwillingness to raise fundamental issues about the quality of American life, their fastidious anti-communism, and above all their incapacity to sustain any significant initiative on the political landscape." Roszak's analysis is insightful, but its dismissive, contemptuous tone also indicates the depth of the chasm between the radicals of the New Left and the earlier nuclear-weapons protest movement.

The New Left's hostility toward the older generation of nuclear activists was in many instances fully reciprocated. Eugene Rabinowitch, editor of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, was deeply critical of the 1960s activists, expressing his dismay in editorials with titles like "Student Rebellion: The Aimless Revolution?" (September 1968) and "The Stoning of America" (November 1971), a bitter attack on Charles Reich's *The Greening of America* (1970), a paean to the political potential of the counterculture.
One of the bitterest denunciations came from Donald Keys, SANE's executive director. The differences between the New Left and older organizations like SANE, he said, were fundamental. SANE believed in democracy and in the "common sense and goodwill" of the American people, and placed "communication and dialogue with the public and the power structure at the center of its approach." SANE believed in working through the system for its broad-ranging, though limited, goals. New Left radicals, by contrast, "reject the democratic process, encourage violence, and offer only protest and opposition." Young people, "becoming conscious of social issues for the first time," Keys went on, had reacted "in a total way against the hypocrisy, gross materialism, and dehumanization of their society." They seemed unable or unwilling to "compartmentalize or fragment their response." Two such dissimilar approaches, concluded Keys, shared no common ground. As he put it in a November 13, 1967, memorandum to SANE, "The two major trends in the peace movement are by their nature incompatible and mutually divergent." The breakdown of communication and even civility between the New Left and the activists who for years had worked against the menace of nuclear war could hardly have been more complete.

As the 1970s ended, with the Vietnam War over at last and the Watergate crisis resolved, the combination of circumstances that for more than a decade had mired the American public in nuclear apathy was rapidly breaking up, giving way to the early stirrings of renewed political activism and cultural attention. The issue of nuclear proliferation, highlighted by India's test of a nuclear device in 1974, demonstrations in Europe against NATO's deployment of Pershing and cruise missiles, and a grassroots campaign against nuclear power plants all helped revive activist energies.

But much time had been lost. From the early 1960s to the late 1970s, most Americans had seemed oblivious to a danger that many in earlier years, and many others in the years to follow, considered the most urgent ever to confront the nation, and indeed the entire human race.