IV

THE REAGAN ERA
The Freeze Campaign and After
At the time, the wave of nuclear fear that swept America in the early 1980s seemed far from unreasonable. The nuclear arms control process (never especially reassuring) had bogged down during the Carter years, and the Reagan White House showed no haste to resume them. Instead, a series of belligerent pronouncements emanated from Reagan and top administration officials, and Washington once again warned citizens to prepare for nuclear war by cooperating in an elaborate plan of “crisis relocation” from urban centers to small towns, to be implemented in times of international crisis.

In a now familiar pattern, this fear led to a surge of antinuclear activism. Beginning in wintry New England town meetings, the nuclear-weapons freeze campaign peaked in 1982–83. Once again, nuclear themes and images pervaded the media and the culture, from poetry to pop music to television specials. By mid-decade, however, thanks in part to Reagan’s “Strategic Defense Initiative” speech and in part to the general easing of Cold War tensions related to political changes in Russia, nuclear fear was in sharp decline.

As I noted earlier, these developments coincided with my own research on the atomic bomb’s initial cultural impact and with the publication of *By the Bomb’s Early Light*. I followed the nuclear-freeze campaign closely, participated in it, and commented on it. The brief entries in part 4 include reviews and journalistic pieces from this period that offer historical perspective on the freeze campaign, Reagan’s “Star Wars” campaign, and the campus mood as activism faded.
In a curious way, America's nuclear history in the early 1980s recapitulated early postwar patterns of opinion manipulation. While the Truman administration and the media had downplayed the bombs' deadly aftereffects, alarmed atomic scientists and their supporters had campaigned for the Acheson-Lilienthal international-control plan by portraying the horrors of atomic war in the most graphic terms conceivable.

In both cases, the manipulative techniques failed. Despite official censorship, the reality of radiation poisoning quickly became known. As for the fear campaign of the international-control activists, its principal effect, ironically, was probably to stimulate support for the Truman administration's frantic stockpiling of nuclear weapons in a desperate drive to "keep ahead of the Russians."

These parallels struck me as worth noting, and I did so in the two pieces reprinted below. The first, adapted from a brief review in the Fall 1985 issue of *Pacific Affairs*, compares Washington's efforts to manipulate public opinion in 1945 with similar deceptions by the Reagan administration.

The second, adapted from an article in the January 1986 *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, recounts the ironic early history of activists' scare tactics as a way of critiquing the nuclear-freeze advocates who were terrifying audiences with blood-chilling images of global thermonuclear war. The immediate impetus for this essay was a talk given by the Australian pediatrician and nuclear-freeze activist Helen Caldicott.
to a large audience at the University of Wisconsin Medical School. Describing how she had cradled dying children in her arms, she mourned in advance the boys and girls who would die horribly in a nuclear war. Representing the nuclear arms race metaphorically as a deadly global epidemic, she showed slides of the inexorable spread of the “epidemic” that strongly suggested that the “patient” (humanity itself) had scant hope of survival. Though powerful, Caldicott’s presentation left me skeptical, wondering about the utility of terror as a motivator for social action.

My ambivalent reaction to Caldicott’s talk probably also reflected boyhood memories of lurid sermons on the torments of hell. These pious harangues had usually achieved their desired immediate result as tearful sinners rushed forward to seek salvation, but they had also left an aftertaste of cynicism and resentment. The manipulation of nuclear terror, I suspected, could prove similarly counterproductive.

---

A HISTORICAL VIEW OF OFFICIAL DECEPTION

From August 6, 1945, onward, the Truman administration sought to soothe the stomach-churning fear of the atomic future that the president’s announcement had unleashed. In a calculated effort to shape the climate of public opinion, journalists close to the administration, like William L. Laurence of the New York Times, produced stories that dramatized the inspiring story of the Manhattan Project, pictured the shimmering peacetime promise of atomic energy, and portrayed the atomic bomb as the only alternative to a costly land invasion of Japan.

Washington also sought, with initial success, to control and sanitize the information that reached the American people about the effects of the bomb on the men, women, and children of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This effort is illuminated by Wilfred Burchett’s Shadows of Hiroshima (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), the final book of a prolific left-wing Australian journalist who died in 1983. Though heavily propagandistic
in places, *Shadows of Hiroshima* has an important story to tell. Covering the Pacific war in 1945 for the London *Daily Express*, Burchett arrived in Tokyo shortly after the Japanese surrender and at once made his way to Hiroshima, which he reached on September 3, 1945. His arrival coincided with that of the first American reporters, a hand-picked group flown directly from Washington and carefully chaperoned by U.S. Occupation officials. Their leader was William L. Laurence, the Manhattan Project’s official reporter—and unofficial public-relations mouthpiece.

In Hiroshima, Burchett observed the widespread incidence of radiation disease, though he did not know what it was. In a long dispatch published in the *Daily Express* on September 5, he described an “atomic plague” from which thousands of people uninjured in the blast itself were falling sick and dying. Returning to Tokyo on September 7, Burchett discovered that a news briefing had been called by Occupation officials to deny his story. When he reported his direct observations, the briefing officer told him: “I'm afraid you've fallen victim to Japanese propaganda.” Whisked off to a hospital for “observation,” he found on his release that his press credentials had been revoked and that his camera—containing a full roll of film from Hiroshima—and the original draft of his *Daily Express* story were missing. On September 12 and 13, under Laurence's prestigious byline, the *New York Times* carried two long stories reporting the official U.S. government position. The stories of radiation sickness coming out of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Laurence insisted, were nothing but “Jap propaganda.”

The early chapters of *Shadows of Hiroshima*, in which Burchett recounts these events of 1945, should be required reading for anyone seeking to understand the long history of deception and misinformation in Washington's treatment of the issues of radiation disease and radioactive fallout. The official effort to discredit Burchett's Hiroshima report in September 1945 in fact prefigured a pattern that would continue through the Bikini tests of 1946, the Enewetok tests of 1954, a whole series of tests in the American Southwest, and decades of blandly optimistic civil-defense pronouncements ranging from Richard Gerstell’s grotesquely upbeat *How to Survive an Atomic Bomb* of 1950 to the assurances of the Reagan-era Pentagon official T. K. Jones that, “with enough shovels we'll all make it” through a nuclear war.
CHAPTER TEN

A HISTORICAL VIEW OF SCARE TACTICS

To those conversant with the history of America's nuclear culture in the early postwar years, the role of fear in the contemporary antinuclear movement induces a strong sense of déjà vu. In fact, tactics very similar to those of Helen Caldicott and other present-day activists figured prominently in the strategy of their counterparts of forty years ago. These techniques gave rise to the same kinds of doubts and discussions about their efficacy four decades ago that we are witnessing again in the 1980s.

From the earliest moments of the atomic age, a spontaneous and well-justified surge of fear swept over the United States. The atomic scientists and other activists who rallied around the 1946 Acheson-Lilienthal plan for the international control of atomic energy quickly concluded that this gut reaction, rooted in the primal instinct of self-preservation, could be a potent instrument of political action. In 1946 and 1947, the politicization of terror became a major shaping force in American culture. In lectures, radio programs, and articles in such mass magazines as *Life* and *Collier's*, the American people were told of the horrors of atomic war in the most vivid imaginable terms.

"Mist of Death over New York," a 1947 *Reader's Digest* article, graphically portrayed an atomic explosion that spews poisonous radioactivity over New York City and its environs. “Within six weeks,” noted the article, “389,101 New Yorkers were dead or missing,” including looters shot by the National Guard, persons who drowned when they threw themselves into the river, and thousands crushed as they fled the city “in the worst panic known in all human history.” In May 1947, seeking the assistance of J. Robert Oppenheimer on a similar article, a *Reader's Digest* editor wrote: “I think that we are both agreed that a sense of fear is probably necessary to break public apathy. I would therefore like to keep the Radioactive Warfare sequence as dramatic or sensational as I possibly can, to the utmost limit of underlying facts which are true or which could be true.”

As we have seen, another of these fear-inducing imaginings of atomic war, “The 36-Hour War,” was published in *Life* in November 1945, illustrated with forbiddingly realistic drawings, including one of Manhattan Island as a rubble-strewn wasteland.
The public appeals of the organized scientists' movement initially rested almost wholly on fear. In any future international crisis, wrote W. A. Higinbotham of the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) in a 1946 *New York Times Magazine* article, "you will be haunted by the overpowering knowledge that if war is declared, you, your house, or your business may disappear in the next second." A January 1946 *Collier's* article by the chemist Harold C. Urey, a Nobel Prize winner from the University of Chicago, began candidly: "I write this to frighten you. I'm a frightened man, myself. All the scientists I know are frightened—frightened for their lives—and frightened for your life."

In this pre-television era many radio programs, often scripted with the cooperation of such activist groups as the FAS or the Atomic Scientists of Chicago (ASC), presented harrowing accounts of the aftermath of atomic war. One such program aired by a Chicago station early in 1946 described in vivid detail the effects of an atomic attack on Chicago and concluded: "No attempt at identification of bodies or burial ever took place. Chicago was simply closed, and the troops did not allow anyone to return."

This effort to intensify and prolong the spontaneous post-Hiroshima wave of atomic fear did not occur by chance. It arose from a deliberate calculation by advocates of the international control of atomic energy: From mass fear would spring a mass demand for the abolition of atomic weapons. As the Catholic journal *Commonweal* put it, "Fear may do what sheer morality could never do." If mankind survived, this editorial continued, "not conscience but the most basic of instincts will probably get the credit."

Acting on this belief, activists candidly discussed the practicalities of their fear campaign. As one Manhattan Project veteran commented in November 1945, only "the preaching of doom" could rally public opinion behind the outlawing of atomic weapons. The office manager for the Atomic Scientists of Chicago underscored this message in her correspondence with the ASC's public speakers. "Scare them a little, and incidentally give them some scientific background," she told one.

Although the atomic scientists consciously manipulated the public's fears, they—like the activists of the 1980s—did so from the highest motives. The frightening speeches, articles, and radio broadcasts invariably
ended with a call for support for what the activists saw as the sole alternative to ultimate human extinction—the international control of atomic energy. Certain that the remedies they proposed offered the only hope, these activists readily concluded that any measures necessary to rouse public support for those remedies were justified.

Not everyone agreed that terrifying people was the best way to stir them to action. The Danish physicist Niels Bohr criticized the fear campaign and urged a more upbeat emphasis on the potential of human cooperation in the atomic age. The atomic prospect did indeed look dark, observed the New York minister Harry Emerson Fosdick in a post-Hiroshima radio sermon, “but no man or nation was ever yet frightened into real brotherhood or peace.”

Others warned that the ironic ultimate effect of the politically orchestrated campaign of fear might be deadened sensibility and apathy. “The louder they shout to us, the more inaudible their voices become,” observed the historian and cultural critic Lewis Mumford in 1946.

While the Atomic Energy Commission chairman David E. Lilienthal had tactical reasons to dwell on the upbeat side of the atomic prospect, he did offer a telling critique of the fearmongers. For two years, Lilienthal observed in the summer of 1947, U.S. citizens had been “fed a publicity diet of almost nothing else but horror stories.” He went on to caution: “Scaring the daylights out of everyone so no one can think, inducing hysteria and unreasoning fear . . . is not going to get us anywhere. . . . Fear is an unreliable ally; it can never be depended upon to produce good.”

Such apprehensions were abundantly borne out. In January 1950, a few months after the first Russian A-bomb test, President Truman gave a green light to Edward Teller’s hydrogen-bomb project, and the public overwhelmingly rallied behind that decision. As the terrible simplifications of Cold War thinking took hold, most Americans concluded that safety lay in possessing more and bigger nuclear weapons than anyone else.

The rush to embrace the hydrogen bomb was closely linked to the earlier fear campaign of the atomic scientists and the international-control activists. Eugene Rabinowitch recognized this point in a bleak editorial in the January 1951 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. From the
ominous perspective offered by the H-bomb project, “the clamor for the use of atomic weapons in Korea,” and mounting evidence that a full-scale nuclear arms race was under way, Rabinowitch looked back on the scientists’ movement and its important role in shaping public attitudes in the immediate postwar period. He concluded that the fear-based international-control campaign, in which he himself had figured prominently, had been worse than a failure: It had inadvertently encouraged the very reliance on atomic weapons the scientists had hoped to avoid. The scientists’ insistence on the horrifying destructiveness of the atomic bomb had left the American people “half-educated.” They had learned the lesson of the bomb’s terrifying power but not the lesson that diplomacy and negotiations offered the best means of escaping the terror. The net effect was “despair and confusion.” “While trying to frighten men into rationality,” Rabinowitch concluded, “scientists have frightened many into abject fear or blind hatred.”

As early as 1947, exhausted by their endless rounds of speaking and writing and demoralized by the failure of the international-control effort, many activist scientists began drifting away from political engagement. Although the scientists’ movement’s varied institutional expressions—the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, the FAS, and so forth—remained important, the movement’s influence over public opinion and the media was largely gone by 1950.

This loss of influence had external causes, of course, including the policies pursued by the Soviet Union and the anti-Communist hysteria that engulfed the United States in the early Cold War years. But it was also linked to the scientists’ somewhat naive political program and fear-based tactics. The collapse of the scientists’ movement as a political force adds a dimension of irony to the skill and effectiveness with which, for a time, scientists had wielded their most potent and reliable instrument of persuasion: fear.

For years prior to 1945, fear had been a potent rhetorical theme in American political life. Franklin Roosevelt told Americans in 1933 that they had nothing to fear but fear itself, and in January 1941 he listed “freedom from fear” as one of the Four Freedoms for which America stood. Yet within a few years, a new and terrible fear of unfathomable magnitude had insinuated itself into American culture and
consciousness. Activist scientists deliberately intensified this fear in pursuit of goals they wholeheartedly believed in. If only the reality of atomic destruction could be made vivid enough, they reasoned, surely America would rise up and demand that the nation's leaders act to eliminate the danger!

Many thousands of Americans responded in good faith to the scientists' challenge. They debated atomic issues, studied the Acheson-Lilienthal report, and wrote their congressmen and their newspaper editors. What was the result? Except for the Atomic Energy Act of 1946, which created the appearance of civilian control of atomic-energy matters on the domestic front, practically nothing. The international-control movement disintegrated, and the nuclear arms race began.

Looking back, it seems clear that scientists' reliance on rousing the public's fears of atomic war to an ever higher pitch, not the specific policies they advocated, comprises the major long-term significance of their movement. In one of the great ironies of the early atomic age, the spiraling arms race and the hysterical anti-Soviet mood of the early Cold War era—developments that most activist scientists bitterly deplored—were rooted in the very terror that they had themselves so assiduously cultivated.

The fear strategy of early postwar activists, despite its failure, set a precedent for all later antinuclear crusades. As a new generation of activists once again debated these troubling issues, one lesson of the 1945–50 experience seemed clear: Those who deliberately set out to exacerbate nuclear fear should be aware not only of the power but also of the volatility of the emotions they are arousing. Once fear is unleashed, the direction it will take is wholly unpredictable. Certainly the early activists learned—to their regret—that it is easier to terrify the public than it is to channel that terror into sustained, constructive political action.