As a visiting professor at Northwestern University in 1988–89, I taught an American Studies seminar entitled "Nuclear Weapons in American Culture" and with Carl Smith, director of the American Studies program, organized a conference on that subject. Coming at a moment when Cold War alarms and nuclear fears were rapidly diminishing, these experiences sharply reminded me how quickly the cultural barometer can change, and, more specifically, how rapidly nuclear awareness could fade, especially for the young. This essay, adapted from an article in the June 1989 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, reflects my experiences and impressions of that year. Rereading it in 1997, I am again struck by how much 1988–89 was a moment of transition—in the world situation, in domestic politics, and in the culture. While I and others of my generation vividly recalled the emotional intensity of the freeze campaign and continued to view the nuclear threat (however defined) as a matter of urgent and continuing concern, college students, already on the other side of an invisible fissure in the culture, were looking forward to the 1990s, a decade of different concerns and different issues, in which warnings of nuclear dangers would seem anachronistic and irrelevant. In some respects, this essay seems the most dated of any in the book. Yet it captures the moment of transition from one era to the next.
WHERE HAVE ALL the nuclear activists gone? The contrast between 1981–83 and 1988–89, in terms of nuclear awareness in the United States, could not be more striking. Then, massive Pentagon budget increases, “crisis relocation” plans, musings by a gung-ho secretary of state, Alexander Haig, about “nuclear warning shots,” and belligerent presidential speeches lambasting the Soviet “evil empire” raised public attention to the nuclear threat to feverish levels. Nuclear-freeze activists rang doorbells, television programs like The Day After (1984) captured national attention, church groups issued manifestos and pronouncements, and thousands of protesters rallied in Central Park and across the country. Time featured a mushroom cloud on its cover for the first time in years. Since I was then working on a book on nuclear weapons in American thought and culture, invitations to speak or to participate in conferences and symposia on the subject poured in.

Six years later, public attention has faded. The restless media spotlight has moved on. The rallies and the referenda seem far in the past. Conferences and speaking invitations—somewhat to my relief—are less frequent. While a few books, films, and television productions conceived during the earlier period of nuclear awareness continue to appear, they seem misplaced in time, and stir little public response.

When public television announced a program in May 1988 in which a number of experts would discuss issues of nuclear strategy and nuclear disarmament, the Los Angeles Times television critic began his preview, “It sounds like an hour in PBS hell.” When the strategists of Governor Michael Dukakis’s presidential bid fought off efforts to add a no-first-use pledge to the 1988 Democratic platform (that is, a pledge that the United States would never again initiate use of nuclear weapons), and Dukakis refused to embrace the pledge himself, few protests were heard. W. Joseph Campbell of the Hartford Courant wrote in the summer of 1987: “The dramatic moments of the early 1980s, when arguments over freezing production and deployment of nuclear weapons could propel people into the streets by the thousands, nowadays are taunting memories. . . . Instead of gathering momentum . . . popular anti-nuclear activism has faltered, and the promise borne by the grassroots freeze movement has dissipated.”

The reasons are not hard to find. Chief among them are President
Reagan’s “Star Wars” proposal, with its technological quick-fix response to the nation’s nuclear fears; the easing of U.S.-Soviet relations after Mikhail Gorbachev’s rise to power in Moscow; and the 1989 INF Treaty, eliminating intermediate-range nuclear weapons from Europe. Amid all these developments, the nuclear-freeze movement in the United States went into hibernation, and an entire congeries of issues related to nuclear weaponry, nuclear power, and the nation’s nuclear history seemed to vanish from the national consciousness.

This is strikingly reminiscent of the period after 1963, when a similar bout of nuclear amnesia gripped the American people following the signing of the test ban treaty. The columnist Stewart Alsop, describing the political climate in 1967—four years after the treaty—used phrases that seem strikingly apropos in 1989: “Writers rarely write about this subject anymore, and people hardly ever talk about it. In recent years there has been something like a conspiracy of silence about the threat of nuclear holocaust.”

Despite jitters and protests over the prospect of “antimissile missiles” ringing America’s cities that preceded the signing of the 1972 ABM (antiballistic missile) treaty, activists’ energies did not fully revive until the late 1970s. During Jimmy Carter’s presidency, a combination of events—including a campus-based campaign against nuclear power plants that culminated in 1979 with the Jane Fonda film China Syndrome and the near-disaster at Pennsylvania’s Three Mile Island nuclear power plant—reawakened the public to the broader nuclear threat, leading to a wave of antinuclear protest in the early Reagan years.

The current decline in nuclear activism and cultural attention, and the parallels to earlier periods of apathy, have been sharply underscored for me while teaching at Northwestern University this year. My undergraduate students are bright, articulate, socially engaged, and concerned about public issues. They are a joy to teach. They are also very young. I am constantly made aware of the chasm that exists between us in terms of our nuclear memories and perspective. The college juniors of 1989 were most likely born in 1968 or 1969. Hiroshima, Bikini, civil defense, fallout shelters, the Cuban missile crisis, the test ban treaty, the ABM controversy—all this is ancient history to them, something known only secondhand. Even more recent events are part of the half-remembered
world of childhood and adolescence. My students were about ten years old at the time of Three Mile Island, twelve when Ronald Reagan took office. Some remember seeing *The Day After* as teenagers. When I asked the undergraduates in my “Nuclear Weapons in American Culture” seminar about their earliest nuclear memory, a surprising number mentioned an episode on the early-1980s television series *Happy Days*, set in the 1950s, in which the central character (nicknamed “the Fonz”) and his teenaged friends decide whether or not to build a family fallout shelter. (Producer Garry Marshall graciously supplied a video cassette of this episode, enabling the class to share a collective moment of nostalgia for its lost youth.)

My students’ recollections of the freeze movement are hazy at best. One young woman remembers going to the 1982 antinuclear rally in Central Park with her mother. She recalls that the rally attracted “50,000 participants” (in fact, the total was over 500,000). My students’ most vivid political memories are extremely recent: Reagan’s Moscow trip, Soviet-American good fellowship, the INF Treaty, and the 1988 presidential campaign, in which nuclear issues barely surfaced.

With the activism of the early 1980s a thing of the past, today’s college students typically encounter the nuclear reality in indirect ways, often through mass-culture channels. Rock lyrics occasionally have nuclear themes. Examples are “Guns in the Sky” (1987) an anti-Star Wars song by INXS; “Put Down That Weapon,” by Midnight Oil; Sting’s “Walking in Your Footsteps” (1983) and “Russians” (1984)—“How can I save my little boy, from Oppenheimer’s deadly toy?”; and U2’s “Seconds” (1981) and “Bullet the Blue Sky” (1987), in which droning guitars frighteningly simulate the sound of incoming missiles. One should note, however (as my students are quick to point out) that such songs represent only a tiny fraction of the total rock output. Their lyrics are often difficult to follow, and with rare exceptions they are not the most popular or frequently aired album tracks.

Movies like *Dr. Strangelove* keep nuclear memories alive, as do more recent films like *The Road Warriors* (1982), set in a brutal post-nuclear war future. Such role-playing games as *Gamma World* and *Twilight 2000* simply posit a world after nuclear war as a device for getting the action under way. As for coverage of the theme in lectures and textbooks, I sus-
pect that the medium is the message: America's nuclear history tends to exist for most students at about the same affective level as Valley Forge, the Reconstruction era, Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, and the New Deal.

As in the late 1970s, recent controversies about nuclear power plants—the battle over the Shoreham plant on Long Island, problems at the Department of Energy's Savannah River nuclear weapons plant in South Carolina, and the issue of nuclear waste disposal—seem more vivid in students' consciousness than the world's largely invisible nuclear-weapons arsenals, the seemingly remote and abstract threat of nuclear war, or the complex issue of nuclear proliferation among smaller nations.

For my students, the nuclear issue is subsumed into a larger set of environmental and ecological preoccupations. They are deeply and often passionately concerned about the fragile global habitat. Insofar as nuclear power or nuclear weapons contribute to this problem, they become the foci of attention. For example, in the current debate over the proposed nuclear waste dump site in Nevada (a state appropriately accustomed to high-stakes gambling), experts readily concede that the containment systems will probably not survive for more than a thousand years. From then on, our distant descendants will have to depend on the vagaries of a changing natural environment to protect them from the still lethal poisons we are burying today. This may speak to today's environmental consciousness more vividly than issues of missile deployment or details of arms-control proposals. As was true after 1963, most students readily confess that nuclear war per se does not loom large in their consciousness, and they express confidence that the easing of Cold War tensions has made a global nuclear conflict far less likely.

Ironically, the treatment of the nuclear issue by activists and the mass media in the early 1980s may be partially responsible for the decline of nuclear awareness in the current college generation. For understandable reasons, freeze activists and the media focused almost exclusively on the most terrifying of nuclear possibilities: global thermonuclear war and the related ecological horror of a worldwide "nuclear winter." Much less attention was devoted to the long-range and technically complex issue of radioactive waste disposal or to the possible use of nuclear weapons in regional conflicts. Amid widespread and legitimate terror over the pros-
pect of worldwide nuclear holocaust, other lesser but still gravely important nuclear dangers tended to be left on the sidelines. As fears of a full-scale nuclear conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union faded, other urgent and menacing nuclear issues slipped down the memory hole as well.

Robert Jay Lifton recounts, in his 1982 book *Indefensible Weapons*, Michael Carey's mid-1970s interviews with some forty men and women who as schoolchildren had experienced the school drills and fallout-shelter controversies of the 1950s. Lifton comments on "the ubiquitous presence of the bomb" in the subjects' memories and consciousness. The same cannot, I think, be said of college students today. When my students recently read Tim O'Brien's novel *The Nuclear Age*, they found it largely unsatisfactory and expressed little but impatience for its nuclear war-obsessed hero. John Hersey's *Hiroshima* retains its power, but as an account of a remote, almost mythic event. Even such a major document as the 1983 pastoral letter of the American Catholic bishops, *The Challenge of Peace*, with its devastating ethical critique of the nuclear arms race and its profound skepticism about deterrence theory, stimulated little detailed discussion. It did, however, provoke considerable hostility for its theological framework—a framework hardly surprising considering the source.

In the spring of 1989, as part of the conference related to the seminar, Jonathan Schell visited the Northwestern campus. Schell's 1983 book *The Fate of the Earth* (which, like Hersey's *Hiroshima*, began as a *New Yorker* series) had become a best-seller for its reflections on the consequences of a global thermonuclear war that could not only extinguish all human life but even all memory that human beings had ever inhabited the planet. Schell received a respectful hearing from the large audience, but when he asked the students to articulate their own thoughts about such a prospect, he was greeted by a long and embarrassing silence. Nuclear war and its consequences, it seemed, simply did not figure very prominently, if at all, in their thoughts.

Since colleges and universities have historically functioned as seedbeds of political and social movements, my reading of the current campus mood not only suggests something about our situation at the moment, but also implies a discouraging prognosis for the renewal of
antinuclear activism, at least in the short run. The collapse of the activist surge of the early 1980s reveals once again how susceptible the antinuclear movement is to shifts in the political winds, and how it collapses each time there is a small step toward ameliorating the threat.

Each generation must define its causes on the basis of its experience. On college and university campuses, where successive waves of students seem to come and go like fruit flies, a “generation” is not twenty or twenty-five years, but more like four. Just as the young scorn the styles, tastes, and slang not only of their parents but of their older siblings, as a way of asserting their own distinctive identity, they often cast a jaundiced eye on the issues deemed important by their elders. Even a cause as potent and seemingly timeless as preventing nuclear war, which loomed so large only yesterday, does not automatically speak with the same force to those who are products of a different cultural and political moment.

Today’s students recognize intellectually how vulnerable we continue to be in the face of long-term nuclear menace, and how overwhelming is the work that remains if we are ever to be truly free of that menace. We need a comprehensive test ban, movement on the currently stalled negotiations for strategic arms reductions, progress on a wide range of confidence-building measures, and a serious global effort to grapple with the terrible risks inherent in nuclear proliferation. Students at the end of the 1980s understand all this in a cerebral way, but for most it is not emotionally vivid. As one woman student recently told me rather plaintively: “Those of you who lived through all those scary events have to keep reminding us that nuclear weapons really exist.”