

*Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War: The Reagan Administration, Cultural Activism, and the End of the Arms Race.* By William M. Knoblauch (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2017). Pp. 135. Paper, \$26.00.

Tightly-written and well-argued, *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War* stands out as an important first step in the reconceptualization of how public antinuclear sentiment shaped the behavior of the Reagan administration. In contrast to many accounts, Knoblauch does not explain how large-scale grassroots protests or the widespread appeal of the nuclear freeze campaign in effect forced Ronald Reagan to pursue arms control against his will. He also does not judge US antinuclear activism as ineffective because activists failed to accomplish many of their goals such as stopping the deployment of the MX (i.e., Experimental) missile. Instead, drawing on his deep knowledge of 1980s pop culture, Knoblauch asserts that “antinuclear cultural activists” like the author Jonathan Schell played a critical role in convincing Reagan administration officials to curb their provocative rhetoric about nuclear weapons and begin winding down the arms race.<sup>1</sup>

Utilizing his extensive archival research and numerous personal interviews, Knoblauch demonstrates how Reagan officials and antinuclear cultural activists engaged in a spirited battle to shape how the American public perceived the nuclear threat during the early 1980s. He defines these activists as the “authors, publishers, directors, musicians, and celebrities” who used “their privileged access to print and digital media” to turn public opinion against “Reagan’s arms race.”<sup>2</sup> Knoblauch’s reason for devoting considerable attention to the influence of antinuclear cultural activists is not because they captured the attention of top-level officials like President Reagan or Secretary of State George Shultz. Rather, the behavior of these activists mattered, he argues, because lower level administration officials, especially “those ... in charge of communications and public relations,” viewed their activities as a direct threat to Reagan’s military buildup.<sup>3</sup> Convinced that they were “on the right side of history,” these lower level officials carried out the coordinated campaigns aimed at preventing antinuclear cultural activism from turning US public opinion against the administration.<sup>4</sup>

*Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War* begins with a fascinating account of how Reagan officials responded to the appearance and popularity of antinuclear books such as Tom Engelhardt’s *The Unforgettable Fire* (1981) and Robert Molander’s *Nuclear War: What’s in It for You?* (1982). Many viewed Jonathan Schell’s bestseller *The Fate of the Earth* (1982) as a particularly dangerous threat because of how it inspired “nonactivists” to take a greater interest in nuclear weapons and question Reagan’s military policies.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> William M. Knoblauch, *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War: The Reagan Administration, Cultural Activism, and the End of the Arms Race* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2017), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Knoblauch, *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War*, 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> Knoblauch, *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Knoblauch, *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Knoblauch, *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War*, 19.

To limit the impact of antinuclear literature, officials tempered their rhetoric about surviving nuclear exchanges and highlighted Reagan's pursuit of arms control agreements with the Soviets. They also carried out a "Peace Offensive" calculated to "co-opt freeze rhetoric" and stop "freeze referenda that could impede their arms buildup."<sup>6</sup> This offensive consisted of a systematic media campaign, including television and public appearances across the United States, that allowed a wide variety of officials to showcase the White House's commitment to peace and reducing the threat of nuclear war. In Knoblauch's view, the Peace Offensive's success in complicating the issue of the freeze played an important role in Congress's failure to pass a binding bilateral freeze resolution in 1983.

Besides combatting the influence of antinuclear books, the Reagan administration also worked to discredit the "Nuclear Winter" thesis introduced to the world by the astronomer Carl Sagan on October 30, 1983. The idea of a "Nuclear Winter" came from scientific studies that to Sagan's satisfaction revealed how even a "limited" nuclear exchange would make the world a cold, uninhabitable wasteland. In effect becoming a scientist activist, Sagan spearheaded a vast research and marketing campaign designed to highlight the folly of the administration's nuclear modernization program and Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) – a controversial program aimed at creating a defense against nuclear missiles that Reagan announced during a speech in March 1983. As Knoblauch shows, many lower-level officials feared that the idea of a "Nuclear Winter" would erode public support for the nuclear weapons that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) relied on to deter a Soviet conventional invasion of Western Europe. With the outcome of the Cold War at stake, the National Security Council (NSC) and other officials carried out a concerted campaign designed to co-opt and discredit the idea of a "Nuclear Winter." From one angle, they emphasized how Reagan's military buildup and SDI program represented the most effective means to prevent destructive nuclear wars from ever taking place. At the same time, supporters like the scientist Edward Teller cast doubt on the scientific validity of the "Nuclear Winter" thesis before Congressional Committees. NSC officials even went so far as to cite the arguments of "experts" like Russel Setz to undermine Sagan's arguments against nuclear weapons even though these individuals had no background in science.<sup>7</sup> Such efforts bore fruit, Knoblauch contends, given just how little the idea of "Nuclear Winter" impacted Reagan's nuclear weapons modernization policies and SDI program.

The decision of ABC to air the apocalyptic film "The Day After" (1983) also worried the Reagan administration. Fearful that the depiction of a US-Soviet nuclear war in this film might "galvanize public opinion against the arms race," a wide variety of lower-level officials took steps to highlight Reagan's "new goal of preventing—not prevailing in—a nuclear war."<sup>8</sup> For example, they made radio and television appearances to reinforce the idea that "a nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought" – a phrase that Reagan began to use in speeches in the days leading up to the showing of the film. They also set up phone hot-lines to answer questions from the public, wrote op-ed pieces, and enlisted the support of pro-administration groups to reinforce the message that a possessing unquestioned military strength

---

<sup>6</sup> Knoblauch, *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War*, 3, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Knoblauch, *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War*, 54-57.

<sup>8</sup> Knoblauch, *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War*, 60, 77.

constituted the best defense against a nuclear war.

Knoblauch next turns his attention to how antinuclear cultural activists and executive officials battled over the SDI during the 1980s. The private organization High Frontier played a key role in popularizing the idea of the SDI through the creation of films, television commercials, and promotional gimmicks that painted pictures of spaced-based technologies shooting down nuclear missiles in flight.<sup>9</sup> Reflecting many officials' doubts about the practicality of High Frontier's spaced-based missile defense schemes, the Department of Defense created the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization (SDIO) in 1984. The SDIO did not echo Reagan's call for the creation of technologies that would render nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete." Instead, it worked with a prominent private organization called the American Defense Preparedness Association (ADPA) to frame the SDI as a limited defense system that would better protect US nuclear missiles, satellites, and even troops from a Soviet first strike. By scaling back promises of what the SDI could accomplish and selling it to Congress as practical, affordable way to enhance US nuclear deterrence, the Reagan administration consistently secured more funding for missile defense.<sup>10</sup>

Despite making a strong case that authors need to rethink how they gauge the influence of public antinuclear sentiment on the Reagan administration, *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War* has some limitations. Much like the respected peace historian Lawrence Wittner, Knoblauch overestimates the size and influence of the organization European Nuclear Disarmament (END). In reality, END, which focused on creating a non-aligned peace movement that facilitated contacts across the Iron Curtain, never had a large following. At best, it played a minor role in bringing about the massive public demonstrations against the "dual-track" missile deployment of NATO that took place in Western Europe during the early 1980s. Knoblauch also offers several arguments that are more suggestive than fully illustrated. For example, he does not systematically explain how the responses to antinuclear cultural activism gradually helped "pragmatic" administration officials like Secretary of State George Shultz implement their agenda of engaging the Soviets in productive negotiations. He also only makes passing references to Reagan's beliefs, although he raises the possibility that viewing "The Day After" made the President more sensitive to the threat of nuclear war.<sup>11</sup> This approach opens Knoblauch up to the critique that antinuclear cultural activism only became as influential as it did because Reagan became President with an intense hatred of nuclear weapons and a determination to reduce them after reestablishing US military strength.

These small criticisms aside, *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War* is an important work that breathes new life into debates on how antinuclear activism impacted the behavior of Reagan administration during the 1980s. Knoblauch elucidates the complexities of how pop culture, antinuclear activism, arms control, and public relations concerns intersected during the 1980s. His findings also highlight the need for scholars to be more sensitive to the ways that lower-level executive branch officials can shape US foreign policy instead of just writing about presidents and other high-ranking leaders. *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War* should be of interest to anyone

---

<sup>9</sup> Knoblauch, *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War*, 87-88.

<sup>10</sup> Knoblauch, *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War*, 101.

<sup>11</sup> Knoblauch, *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War*, 10, 105.

who wants to learn more about the Reagan administration's handling of nuclear weapons issues and relationship with the SDI. It should also appeal to anyone interested in the evolution of the Cold War, the subject of peace, and the cultural history of the 1980s.

Christian Peterson

*Ferris State University*