

## [Miller on Knoblauch, 'Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War: The Reagan Administration, Cultural Activism, and the End of the Arms Race'](#)

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**William 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. 168 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-62534-275-1.

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William M. Knoblauch's *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War: The Reagan Administration Cultural Activism, and the End of the Arms* is a study of the Reagan administration's "media war" with activist groups like Ground Zero and well-known scientists like Carl Sagan to shape public opinion concerning nuclear weapons. But as the author makes abundantly clear throughout the text, it is also a very timely study of why "popular culture matters" to presidential administrations and policy debates (p. 109). As Knoblauch decidedly shows, Reagan and his advisers crafted propaganda campaigns designed at once to discredit their critics while also co-opting their ideas and appeal to the US public. Now more than ever historians should try to unlock how presidents artfully deflect media criticism from activists and public intellectuals by diverting these challenges into victories in the court of public perception.

While many scholars have generally dismissed the nuclear freeze movement or congressional efforts in the 1980s for failing to have any real consequence in slowing Reagan's nuclear buildup, Knoblauch's argument is that internally, the Reagan administration was unnerved by the power of cultural pundits and activists to sway the public and mount challenges to their nuclear policies. As proof Knoblauch points to Reagan and his advisers' carefully coordinated campaigns to dissuade the public of the need for a "nuclear freeze," and the change in the president's image and rhetoric from hawkish and cavalier about nuclear war with the Soviets to a conciliatory tone and emphasis on deterrence. To support this claim the book also points to the well-known shift in the Reagan cabinet away from the hawkish neocons associated with the Committee on Present Danger toward pragmatists such as George Schultz, but Knoblauch emphasizes public opinion and activists as a factor in effecting this turnabout.

Each chapter then recounts a challenge posed to the Reagan administration about nuclear weapons by activists working in the mediums of popular books, television dramas, and US news shows. The first chapter, titled "Fear Books," recounts how the popularity of paperbacks and best-sellers from authors Jonathan Schell and Robert Molander revived the specter of nuclear annihilation and caused public alarm at Reagan's rhetoric of a "winnable nuclear war." The second recounts a concerted campaign by Carl Sagan to popularize the concept of "nuclear winter" beyond the scientific community and thus mobilize Americans to call upon Reagan to "freeze" his buildup of the nation's

nuclear arsenal. The last two chapters seriously examine subjects loaded with melodrama, the apocalyptic television movie *The Day After* (1983) and Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars). Overall, Knoblauch paints an interesting portrait of his activists, their intentions, and the ways in which nuclear discussions became spectacle during the Reagan years.

Much more intriguing than his discussion of the film *The Day After*—try as Knoblauch might, director Nicholas Meyer's political message and the film remain incredibly banal—is his recounting of the public showdown that followed its broadcast on the ABC news show *Viewpoint*. With Ted Koppel presiding, the impressive roundtable included conservative iconoclast William F. Buckley Jr., Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, former secretary of defense Robert McNamara, Henry Kissinger, Sagan, and George Schultz. Here, Knoblauch succeeds in showing how in the Reagan years popular culture was saturated with nuclear debates that were both highly entertaining and a magnet for the nation's foremost opinion makers and foreign policy experts. The passage and his analysis allow him to recover the 1980s as time of intense nuclear anxiety and fear in US culture, something that historians often assume reached its apex with the Cuban Missile Crisis and then dissipated after the period of détente.

There are a number of intriguing questions left for readers to ponder further, in part because the manuscript is so brief (135 pages including the index and bibliography.) Knoblauch insightfully mentions that in trying to make scientific theories about nuclear destruction accessible to the masses, figures such as Sagan compromised their “credibility for publicity” (p. 35) and left themselves vulnerable to attacks on their expertise by conservative commentators. One cannot help but wonder what Knoblauch thinks about the connection between the growing distrust of scientists and theories about nuclear winter and today's popular disbelief in global warming and skepticism toward scientific research.

An equally fascinating question posed by his research is how to define activism when analyzing political and social movements. With a sincerity not always exhibited by other academics, Knoblauch treats the authors of paperbacks and made-for-television movies as concerned social activists. He is convincing in arguing that their efforts to shape public opinion were consequential and were more feared by the president and his advisors than those “concerned with sit-ins or protestors” (p. xi). Indeed, one can readily see how this definition of activism resonates with today's socially aware, media-savvy millennials and political leaders fixated on winning the culture wars. But if, as he shows in the book, in the long run most of these challenges posed by freeze activists achieved only modest gains or were eventually co-opted by the president, what does that ultimately say about the potential for activism to create significant change through the mediums of popular culture?

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