

# H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

## Review Essay 72

Vincent Intondi, *Saving the World from Nuclear War: The June 12, 1982 Disarmament Rally and Beyond* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023 ISBN: 1421446405 (paperback \$44.95), (kindle \$42.70).

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Vincent J. Intondi's *Saving the World from Nuclear War* offers a compelling history of the planning, execution, and legacy of the fabled June 12, 1982 nuclear disarmament rally in New York City. Accompanied by musicians like Bruce Springsteen, Jackson Browne, and others, an enormous crowd of people gathered in Central Park to resist the arms race and enthrone the UN General Assembly's second "special session" on disarmament, a major multilateral conference taking place in Turtle Bay that summer. Drawing up to a million people, the June 12 disarmament rally is commonly regarded as the largest political demonstration in American history up until the 2017 "Women's March on Washington" fostered by the election of Donald J. Trump as president of the United States.

While the June 12 disarmament rally hardly achieved its headline purpose of spurring a successful UN disarmament conference—the session fizzled out with little to show for it—Intondi argues convincingly that the rally and everything that went into it helped fuel a broader movement that remains relevant today. "The one million people who gathered in Central Park proved that the antinuclear movement was more intersectional and diverse than previously thought, contributed to the Reagan administration changing course on nuclear weapons, and paved the way for a new generation of activists committed to saving the world from nuclear annihilation" (4). Reading the 1982 rally as a totem in a longer history of resistance to nuclear weapons, Intondi draws connections to more recent diplomatic initiatives such as the 2017 adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition on Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the international agreement banning the development, possession, and use of nuclear arms.<sup>1</sup>

Intondi is careful not to overstate his case, however. The author is clear-eyed about the difficulties and obstacles in the way of the movement for nuclear abolition; antinuclear campaigners have plenty of reasons for pessimism. But Intondi encourages the reader to consider the multitude of smaller victories that have helped push back against the nuclear war machine: there are far fewer nuclear weapons in the world today than there were in the 1980s, the tradition of non-use of nuclear weapons has kept on, and several important

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Kmentt, *The Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons: How It Was Achieved and Why It Matters* (London: Routledge, 2021); Rebecca Davis Gibbons, "The Humanitarian Turn in Nuclear Disarmament and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons," *The Nonproliferation Review* 25, no. 1–2 (2018): 11–36.

treaties restricting the use of nuclear technology have been adopted.<sup>2</sup> Nuclear arms races are not inevitable, though neither is human civilization.

It is fairly short and sweet for an academic book. Running to just over 100 lucid pages, the book should be accessible to a wide audience. The broader topic of nuclear danger, of course, is as relevant today as it was when the disarmament community mobilized in 1982. As it happens, there are several similarities between today's geopolitical situation and the one that prevailed in the early 1980s. Then, as now, arms control was proclaimed dead on the scene as a general spirit of détente gave way to renewed great-power competition between the United States and a major power on the Eurasian landmass. Then, as now, global arms spending soared and the nuclear-armed states set aside enormous resources to upgrade or “modernize” their nuclear capabilities.<sup>3</sup> Then, as now, a militarily overconfident Kremlin was engaged in a devastating imperial war in its supposed sphere of influence. Then, as now, the specter of thermonuclear war haunted public consciousness. The way in which people engage politically and in relation to nuclear weapons, however, appears to have changed. The peace movement is thus obliged to “evolve” and “be much more imaginative,” the author concludes via the voice of one of the 1982 rally's key organizers (105).

Debunking the common view that the peace movement was dominated by well-to-do white people<sup>4</sup>—a trope that arguably serves to diminish and dismiss disarmament advocacy as a trivial pastime for liberal virtue-signalers with nothing better to do—Intondi highlights the diversity of both organizers and participants. As one demonstrator put it at the time, “It's not just hippies and crazies anymore. It's everyone” (77). While this “everyone” certainly included white, middle-class Americans, it also comprised individuals from the Black and Latinx communities, queer people, trade union folk, and working class citizens of various creeds and backgrounds. In sharp contrast to the middle-class-white-people trope, more than half of the 1982 rally's official leadership committee was made up of African Americans. For politically and economically marginalized groups, the arms race represented not only a direct security threat but also a huge waste of resources that could have been put to better use funding schools, health care, and decently paying jobs. In 2023, climate change mitigation looms as another urgent imperative.

The book's weakness, to the extent that it has one, is directly related to one of its strengths and is thus easy to forgive. The text's relative brevity and lack of adornment means that many interesting questions are not systematically analyzed, such as the relevant actors' underlying theories of change,<sup>5</sup> the relationship between structure and agency in the struggle for disarmament,<sup>6</sup> and the deeper connections between the nuclear past and imagined futures.<sup>7</sup> As suggested, however, pursuing comprehensive answers to these questions would have made for a very different book, and it is not clear that such a book would have been better than the one

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<sup>2</sup> See also, e.g., William Walker, *A Perpetual Menace: Nuclear Weapons and International Order* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Federation of American Scientists, “Status of World Nuclear Forces” (March 2023), <https://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/>. On the collapse of détente and so-called Second Cold War, see, e.g., 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); Olav Njølstad, “The Collapse of Superpower Détente, 1975–1980,” in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Endings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 135–155.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Nina Wallace, “In the Belly of the Monster,” *Densho* (November 15, 2017), <https://densho.org/catalyst/asian-american-opposition-vietnam-war/#>.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Seva Gunitsky, “Complexity and Theories of Change in International Politics,” *International Theory* 5, no. 1 (2013): 35–63.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Richard Price, “Transnational Civil Society and Advocacy in World Politics,” *World Politics* 55, no. 4 (2003): 579–606; Dimitriy Karasev, “The Problem of Structure of Agency and the Contemporary Sociology of Revolutions and Social Movements,” in Jack A. Goldstone, Leonid Grinin, and Andrey Korotayev, eds., *Handbook of Revolutions in the 21st Century* (Berlin: Springer, 2022), 201–217.

<sup>7</sup> Benoît Pelopidas, “Power, Luck, and Scholarly Responsibility at the End of the World(s),” *International Theory* 12, no. 3 (2020): 459–470.

that Indondi has in fact written. *Saving the World from Nuclear War* is and should be read on its own terms—and hopefully by a large audience.

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