

HELEN CALDICOTT, "STOP THE NUCLEAR MADNESS" (17 APRIL 1986)¹

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Abstract: Helen Caldicott was the most popular anti-nuclear activist of the early 1980s. This essay examines her trademark stump speech, dubbed "the bombing run" speech, assessing both its media appeal and its ultimate failure. Highlighting the passion, the shock value, and the visual imagery of her speech, the analysis also reveals Caldicott's carelessness with facts, her disdain for American politics and culture, and her lack of specific and practical solutions to the nuclear arms race.

Keywords: Helen Caldicott, nuclear freeze, apocalyptic rhetoric, anti-nuclear movement, peace movement, Ronald Reagan

Helen Caldicott was the most visible anti-nuclear activist of the 1980s. During the debate over a proposed "freeze" on nuclear weapons in 1980-1984, she simply dominated the news, appearing on television nearly as much as the president of the United States, Ronald Reagan. During Reagan's first term, she was one of the two anti-nuclear activists quoted most frequently in the media.² She appeared regularly on the network evening news, morning news programs, television newsmagazines, talk shows, and special reports. She even starred in an Academy-Award-winning documentary, *If You Love This Planet*.³ She was profiled in *People*, *Life*, *Family Circle*, and a host of other magazines. Her two books, *Nuclear Madness* and *Missile Envy*, became best-selling Bantam paperbacks.⁴ Her traveling symposium on the "Medical Consequences of Nuclear War" generated "thousands of newspaper stories and TV spots in local and national outlets."⁵ By virtue of her visibility in the media alone, she earned her popular nickname, "The Mother of the Nuclear Freeze Movement."

As a pediatrician, of course, Caldicott was no more an expert on nuclear weapons than Robert Oppenheimer was an expert on childhood illnesses. Yet constantly reminding her audiences of her medical credentials, she practiced what she called "political medicine,"⁶ speaking metaphorically of the "final epidemic" and gravely warning that the "prognosis" was "guarded."⁷ Her second book, *Missile Envy*, was billed on the cover as "an expert's account of the frightening facts behind our blind rush toward atomic disaster." Yet more a reflection of her personal journey from pediatrician to anti-nuclear activist, the book is perhaps best described as political autobiography. Addressing everything from the Vietnam War to video games, it offered a wide-ranging critique of American politics and culture that reduced the nuclear threat to but a symptom of a deeper cultural malaise.

Few would dispute Caldicott's claim that she recruited the majority of all people who responded to the appeals of peace organizations in the early 1980s.⁸ Many of those recruits themselves became influential activists, imitating both Caldicott's persona and her rhetorical style. Her trademark stump speech, dubbed the "bombing run" speech by movement insiders,⁹ became a popular attraction, particularly on college campuses. Meanwhile, her books served as briefing papers for scores of other activists, providing argumentative themes, facts and figures, testimony, and anecdotes. Videos featuring Caldicott provided the focal point for many a freeze meeting.

Caldicott was the archetypal, even stereotypical freeze activist: well-educated, professionally successful, and economically secure. She epitomized the sort of activist that led Robert Coles to dub the freeze movement "the crusade of the leisure class."¹⁰ She also symbolized the special role of highly visible professionals—not only physicians but lawyers, teachers, musicians, and others—in the nuclear freeze campaign. Her personal crusade most directly inspired the resurrection of Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR)—an organization of medical professionals dormant since the 1960s—and its sister group, the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW).¹¹ Yet PSR in turn inspired a number of copy-cat groups, including Educators for Social Responsibility and even Architects, Designers, and Planners for Social Responsibility.

Caldicott's rhetoric—and her style of rhetoric—received much of the credit for the early successes of the freeze campaign. When the movement began to falter in 1983-1984, it was only natural that she also got some of the blame, with critics questioning both the ethics and the effectiveness of her personal, highly emotional style of public advocacy. Like apocalyptic speakers throughout history, Caldicott tried to scare people into action with gruesome scenes of atomic death and destruction, yet she did little to channel that fear into support for the freeze or any other arms control policy. By the middle 1980s, even many anti-nuclear activists began to conclude that shock therapy may not be the best therapy, as it only seemed to promote "psychic numbing" and political "paralysis."¹² Indeed, some worried that such rhetoric might only increase support for building more bombs. As Paul Boyer concluded in his historical study of the anti-nuclear movement, "Once fear is unleashed, the direction of its political expression is wholly unpredictable. . . . [I]t is easier to terrify the public than it is to channel that terror into sustained and constructive political action."¹³

Yet the roots of Caldicott's rhetorical failure reach deeper than this. Unlike earlier anti-nuclear advocates, Caldicott did not ground her apocalyptic rhetoric in religious imagery, but in a secular, progressivist philosophy embraced by but a small minority of the American people.¹⁴ Grounding her ethical judgments in humanistic principles, Caldicott rejected the cultural myth of America as God's chosen people, replacing it with a revisionist interpretation of history that cast America as the global villain of the modern era. Borrowing from New Left revisionist historians, Caldicott blamed all violence and suffering in the world on the greed of America's ruling class, while completely absolving the Soviet Union of any responsibility. To some within the peace movement, Caldicott preached a fundamental faith. But to the vast majority of Americans, Caldicott not only seemed naïve about the Soviet threat but hateful and

insulting toward the American people. Criticizing virtually every aspect of American politics and culture, she came across as radical, irrational, and condescending.

This essay takes a close look at Caldicott's "bombing run" speech, focusing on a long version of that speech delivered at Northern Michigan University in 1986. Caldicott delivered the rambling, hour-and-a-half speech more than a year after the freeze debate ended, but as an example of her classic stump speech, it illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of her rhetorical style. On the one hand, the speech displayed the passion, the shocking and dramatic "news," and the powerful visual imagery that made Caldicott a media star. Along with her trademark depiction of a nuclear attack on the hometown of her audience, the speech echoed many of Caldicott's usual themes, including her medical "diagnosis" of the arms race and her passionate calls to action. On the other hand, the speech reflected Caldicott's recklessness with facts, her dubious interpretations of American politics and history, and her disdain for all things American. It also shows how she vacillated between practical calls to action and vague, utopian visions of revolutionary change. In short, Caldicott's speech at Northern Michigan sheds light on both her early appeal and her ultimate failure. It also illustrates some of the more troubling trends in our public discourse, most notably the substitution of passion and ideological cant for reasoned deliberation.

The Nuclear Freeze Campaign and the Rhetoric of Televisual Politics

In March 1980, a young arms control activist name Randall Forsberg first proposed a bilateral freeze on the testing, production, and deployment of new nuclear weapons.¹⁵ Conceived as a mechanism for reuniting and reinvigorating the peace movement,¹⁶ the freeze quickly attracted support from a broad array of mainstream politicians and political groups as well.¹⁷ By January 1982, more than two dozen city councils, 300 towns, and six New England state legislatures had endorsed the freeze, and by November the list of freeze resolutions had grown to include 275 city governments, 12 state legislatures, and 446 New England town meetings. In the fall of 1982, freeze referenda won in eight states, the District of Columbia, and over two dozen cities. Meanwhile, Congress began a two-year debate over various versions of a nuclear freeze resolution.¹⁸

The freeze campaign drew its political momentum, in large measure, from news media depictions of public support for the initiative. Describing support for the freeze as broad-based and rapidly growing, news commentators spoke about public opinion rising up with "with a singular message, as if a great revelation had come to the common imagination."¹⁹ In 1982, *Newsweek* reported that "a cross section" of Americans, including "homemakers and businessmen, clerks and doctors, clergymen, teachers, scientists and even military men," had "suddenly enlisted" in this "loosely linked, burgeoning campaign to end the nuclear arms race." Their numbers were "mushrooming," the newsmagazine reported, growing faster than "even their own leaders ever expected."²⁰ Similarly, *Time* reported that the freeze had attracted "broad-based support" from "across the socioeconomic spectrum."²¹ In March 1982, the newsmagazine declared the freeze movement "far more broadly based" than the anti-

war movement of the 1960s and began a cover story on the phenomenon under the Victor Hugo quotation, "No army can stop an idea whose time has come":

An idea whose moment may have arrived is sweeping the U.S.—for better or for worse. From the halls of Congress to Vermont hamlets to the posh living rooms of Beverly Hills, Americans are not only thinking about the unthinkable, they are opening a national dialogue on ways to control and reduce the awesome and frightening arsenals of the superpowers.²²

The polling industry provided empirical support for such stories. Between 1980 and 1984, pollsters asked hundreds of questions about nuclear weapons and strategic arms policy, marveling at the strong, often overwhelming support for the freeze. Some polls showed upwards of 90 percent of the public supporting the initiative,²³ creating the curious spectacle of a "radical" idea that almost everybody supported. For years, the pollsters had reported that Americans did not pay much attention to the nuclear threat. Now, according to pollster Lou Harris, the public was not only "genuinely frightened" but "frightened in an activated as opposed to a passive way."²⁴

All this was not lost on the politicians. In Congress, supporters of a freeze resolution echoed the journalist and the pollsters, warning their colleagues that they could ignore the freeze movement "only at political peril for themselves and for their political parties."²⁵ Convinced that millions of Americans had sent them a powerful message,²⁶ the House of Representatives twice debated the issue, finally passing a freeze resolution in the spring of 1983 by nearly a two-to-one margin.²⁷

The freeze assumed even great political prominence on the presidential campaign trail. In February 1984, the *CBS Evening News* reported that Democratic presidential hopefuls were "falling all over each other, trying to court the freeze movement," because polls had identified nuclear war as "the number one concern on the minds of the voters."²⁸ Right up through the fall, the news media continued to insist that nuclear war was "high on the list" of voter concerns, with polls showing that most Americans wanted more action on arms control than they had seen from Ronald Reagan.²⁹ With freeze activists threatening to "organize millions upon millions of freeze voters" in 1984,³⁰ even seasoned political observers predicted that the freeze just might "do to Ronald Reagan what Vietnam did to Lyndon Johnson."³¹

Reagan's landslide reelection, of course, put an end to such talk. In 1984, the movement that promised to revolutionize American politics "not only failed to defeat the President," it failed even to make "the peace issue a major campaign topic." For freeze activists, the 1984 elections proved a "demoralizing flop."³² Nor did the nuclear freeze campaign leave a legacy of new strategic arms policies. Even supporters admitted that the House freeze resolution was more symbolic than substantive; in any case the Senate refused to go along. Shortly after the resolution passed, it was back to business as usual, with the House voting to fund the MX missile just 20 days after the freeze vote.³³ As Caldicott herself conceded in retrospect: "In terms of pragmatic results, we haven't gotten rid of one weapon. . . . We haven't had any impact on Congress."³⁴

The nuclear freeze campaign thus remains a political paradox. How does one account for such a powerful, grass-roots movement having so little impact? How could it have disappeared so suddenly without a trace? And *why* did it have so little impact on electoral politics and strategic arms policy? One answer might lie in the rhetoric of the freeze activists themselves. The very rhetorical strategies that won them abundant and sympathetic news coverage doomed them to failure in institutional political contexts and generated only superficial and transitory public support. By pandering to journalistic conventions, freeze activists attracted headlines and managed to create the illusion of a powerful grass-roots movement. But that movement proved a political mirage, as fleeting as the images and sound bites of TV news.

Helen Caldicott and the Rhetoric of Political Medicine

Questions about nuclear weapons and strategic policy historically have posed significant obstacles to public deliberation. Citizens attending to the nuclear debate must grapple with complex issues, made all the more difficult by technical jargon and a "jungle of mysterious acronyms."³⁵ Talk of "telemetry encryption" or "throw weight" hardly invites public participation. Even the best informed citizen may retreat from discussions of ICBMs, IRBMs, SLBMs, MIRVs, and MARVs. No wonder polls have shown that most Americans consider nuclear issues too complicated for the public to decide.

Rhetorical scholars have long sensed an Orwellian conspiracy behind the nuclear debate. Treating nuclear jargon as some sort of anti-democratic plot to obfuscate the issues, Edward Schiappa, among others, has argued that the "rhetoric of nukespeak" allows politicians "to avoid and to constrain" public deliberation over nuclear defense strategy.³⁶ Similarly, Walter R. Fisher has suggested that the powers-that-be discredit popular discourse about nuclear issues with a "subversive pattern of ideological, bureaucratic, and technical arguments." In the nuclear debate, Fisher concludes, public argument is "overwhelmed by privileged argument," reducing the public to spectators rather than participants in the democratic process.³⁷

Helen Caldicott presumably changed all that. Speaking in a passionate, anecdotal style, Caldicott supposedly "democratized" the nuclear debate by talking about nuclear weapons in "human" rather than technical terms. Calling it "therapeutic" to induce intense fear and feelings of severe discomfort in people, Caldicott aimed to break through the "psychic numbing" that, according to psychologist Robert Jay Lifton, buffered the American people from the reality of the nuclear threat.³⁸ Focusing on what she characterized as the "medical effects" of nuclear war, she set out to shock people into political action to prevent the "final epidemic"—her metaphor for nuclear war.³⁹

Caldicott's speech at Northern Michigan University in 1986 was a classic example of her "bombing run" speech, as well as an unusually detailed and revealing reflection of her views on American politics and culture. Delivered shortly before she announced her retirement as an anti-nuclear activist, the speech included arguments and anecdotes that she had repeated many times before. At one point in the speech, she even joked about skipping over her usual "bombing run" scenario, since everybody in the audience had heard it so many times before. In the end, however, she not only consented to do

her usual *schtick*—which she acknowledged had become "quite controversial"—but even explained the rationale behind it: "Well, this is called the bombing run, and it is to *shock* you into reality . . ." (39).⁴⁰

Caldicott typically set up her "bombing run" with a return to Hiroshima, where thousands were "vaporized" by the first atomic bomb ever dropped on a civilian population. Describing the scene in what Caldicott called "clinical" terms, she told of how victims simply "disappeared" or left behind nothing but their "shadows on the pavement." In an anecdote repeated many times over the years, Caldicott told of one woman "running, holding her baby," only to be "charcoalized, like on a broiler, turned into a charcoal statue" (26). Even far away from the blast, people's "eyes were melted as they watched the bomb explode; they just ran down their cheeks" (27). Today, people were still dying in Hiroshima, Caldicott noted, due to their "exposure to massive doses of radiation" after the blast (27).

Given that the bombs dropped on Japan were small and relatively crude by today's standards, Caldicott conceded that the effects of a nuclear war today were hardly imaginable. But imagine them she did, using the example of Hiroshima as a springboard for predicting the effects of just a single nuclear bomb dropped on the hometown of her audience—the trademark of the "bombing run" speech. At Northern Michigan, she first asked her listeners to "shut your eyes for a minute" and imagine that "you've got ten minutes left" (45) before the bomb hit their hometown of Marquette, Michigan. She then described the same sequence of events that she had described in hundreds of "bombing run" speeches in cities and towns across the nation:

Now it's going to come in twenty times the speed of the sound, and land here and explode in the fraction of the millionth of a second, with the heat of the sun. And it's gonna dig a hole three-quarters-of-a-mile wide and eight hundred feet deep right here, turning all of us, and the buildings, and millions of tons of earth below to pulverized radioactive fallout shot up in a mushroom cloud. Six miles from here in all directions—think of where you live—every building destroyed, concrete and steel melt, every person killed, most vaporized. Twenty miles from here in all directions people killed or lethally injured, so they'll soon die shortly. Winds of five hundred miles an hour from the shock effect turn people into missiles traveling at a hundred miles an hour. And then of course you're traveling at a hundred miles an hour and you hit a solid object and you're dead from compound fractures, internal organ injuries, you can imagine, pulverized. The shock wave enters the nose and mouth producing acute pneumothoractic, an instant death, ruptures the lungs, it ruptures the tympanic membranes, the windows popcorn and shards of glass flying at a hundred miles an hour decapitate people and enter the human flesh. (46)

Given all this, of course, there could be little hope of survival: "Everyone will be burnt, some vaporized, some charcoalized, some just third degree burns. And everyone will die." Most would die "immediately," Caldicott assured her listeners in perversely

optimistic fashion, but others would die slowly over the next few days, "in the most extraordinary agony" (47).

Next imagining the effects of a nuclear war on a larger scale, Caldicott claimed that even a limited nuclear exchange would destroy all life on the planet. Citing a World Health Organization study, Caldicott predicted that a nuclear war involving just half of the world's arsenals would kill something on the order of a billion people in "the first hour alone," with another billion dying over the next two weeks from the bomb's delayed effects. That's "half of the world population," Caldicott exclaimed, and that told only part of the story (50). Citing other effects that had only "recently been discovered," Caldicott added the effects of "nuclear winter" to her doomsday scenario, predicting that all who did not die from the initial blasts would soon "freeze to death in the dark" (51). With cities and forests in flames, a "huge cloud of toxic black radioactive smoke" would rise up and "envelope the earth," shutting out the sun "for up to a year" and rendering it "dark in the middle of the day" (51). Once again, Caldicott imagined the results in frightening detail: "Well, all the plants will die 'cause they have to have the sun for photosynthesis and glucose production and oxygen. The temperatures will fall to minus forty degrees centigrade, maybe in the middle of the summer. With snow storms, blinding snow storms, and hurricanes across the face of the earth, in the dark" (51). According to Caldicott, only a thousand of the thirty thousand nuclear bombs in the superpower arsenals would be enough to trigger a nuclear winter, and the result would be the end of "all life on earth" (37). And "it could happen tomorrow" (49), Caldicott added.

Caldicott's "bombing run" speech rested on a host of technical assumptions, and even her supporters acknowledged that she was "a little casual with the facts." As Harvard physicist Richard Wilson commented: "The people that I trust think she's exaggerating [the effects of nuclear war] by about a factor of five or ten. . . . She's completely stopped a lot of technical people from being able to support her."⁴¹ Yet Caldicott worried little about the "facts" or "technical people." Calling technical questions trivial and irrelevant,⁴² she explained: "I'm a teacher, and you can't give the public a lecture in physics . . . because they'd go to sleep."⁴³ On other occasions, she invoked medical metaphors, comparing her approach to how a doctor might explain a disease to a patient—as if doctors routinely lied to patients about the severity of their illnesses.⁴⁴ Liberally sprinkling her speeches with medical jargon, she metaphorically sustained an aura of expertise by describing nuclear war as "the final epidemic" and presenting her "bombing run" as a discussion of the "medical consequences" of nuclear war. The planet is "terminally ill," Caldicott declared; the entire human race was faced with an "acute clinical emergency" (44).

Caldicott frequently told the story of her face-to-face meeting with Ronald Reagan in 1982, arranged by the president's own daughter Patti. Disguising a bizarre *ad hominem* attack on Reagan as some sort of medical or psychiatric diagnosis, Caldicott recalled the president referring to the Russians "evil godless communists," even as he admitted that he had never met a Russian—a sure "sign of clinical paranoia," according to Caldicott (18). In *Missile Envy*, Caldicott speculated that Reagan might have been suffering from "obstruction of cerebral vessels by atheromatous plaques," which

produced "small strokes" that cause no obvious damage but "may affect the thinking process."⁴⁵ In her speech at Northern Michigan, Caldicott also repeated an accusation, first made in *Missile Envy*, that Reagan confused facts from an article in *Reader's Digest* with information from his "intelligence files" (21). When Reagan's own daughter produced a Pentagon document supposedly supporting Caldicott's views, Reagan allegedly dismissed it as a "forgery" (21). Leaving the meeting in "a state of deep shock," Caldicott summarized Reagan's apparent mental problems by comparing him to a cancer victim in denial:

He's ignorant. He's obstinate. He won't read his briefing papers. He sees his presidency as acting, so he'll read a little bit before his press conference, period. He makes decisions off the top of the head with no background knowledge at all, like Star Wars and everything else; that he has no friends, his only real friend is Nancy—he's even ostracized from his kids. And it was like you know, you have a lump in your neck and you think, "Oh, it's a bit scary, I won't go and see the doctor." And after six months you do and they take a biopsy and they ring you up and say, "Well, it's Hogkin's disease—which is cancer." It was the same sort of feeling, of deep and profound shock to've [sic] actually seen it (22).

As commentator Richard Grenier observed, "Caldicott tried to assure us *as a doctor* that it was "medically contra-indicated to do anything that might alarm those poor, fearful, old men in the Kremlin."⁴⁶ Yet rarely did she offer a specific prescription or hope for a cure. Occasionally she paid lip service to the freeze, but only as a first step in "rapid bilateral disarmament."⁴⁷ More commonly, she soared untethered into political weightlessness, advocating immediate and unilateral disarmament by the United States and a wholesale reconstitution of the human spirit. If the United States were simply to dismantle its nuclear arsenal tomorrow, Caldicott assured readers of *Nuclear Madness*, the Russians would "heave a momentous sigh of relief" and somehow compel their own leaders to "follow America's moral initiative toward nuclear disarmament."⁴⁸ Eventually such an initiative would lead to a world free of national distinctions and based on fundamental changes in the whole psychology of the human race. "Humankind" must learn that "they can't fight anymore," Caldicott declared in articulating her solution to the nuclear arms race.⁴⁹

As Taylor Branch observed in the *New York Times Book Review*, Caldicott fluctuated between such utopian and desperate cries for "a wholesale transformation of human nature" and a "politician's call" for the nation to elect more women and Democrats.⁵⁰ Yet while she occasionally urged audiences to vote or run for political office, she almost never argued for a specific arms control measure like the nuclear freeze. Moreover, her conspiratorial view of history and her disdain for American politics and culture undermined whatever credibility she might have had as an advocate of specific candidates or policies. Grounding her critique of American politics in New Left revisionist history and barely able to restrain her hostility toward the American public, Caldicott limited her appeal to only to the most cynical and alienated of Americans.

In many of her speeches and published works, Caldicott invoked a respectable albeit controversial school of New Left revisionist history—the so-called Wisconsin School of diplomatic history. Specifically, she took as a matter of faith historian Gar Alperovitz's controversial thesis that the atomic bombing of Japan was unnecessary to end the war, and she especially questioned the need for the second bomb on the "Christian city, Nagasaki"—an act she labeled "genocide" in her speech at Northern Michigan (28). More generally, the Wisconsin revisionists informed Caldicott's portrait of the United States as a "big global bully," driven to a belligerent foreign policy by the pursuit of open markets. Blaming the Cold War and the arms race entirely on the United States, Caldicott outdid even *Pravda* in rewriting history to render Soviet actions legitimate and defensive. In her revisionist portrait of history, the Soviet Union was simply "the victim of America's craziness."⁵¹

Before her sympathetic audience at Northern Michigan, Caldicott abandoned all pretense of scholarly respectability and became lost in a world of simplistic historical analogies and bizarre conspiracy theories. The speech was dominated by analogies to Hitler and Nazi Germany, and the economic determinism of the Wisconsin School gave way to unrestrained paranoia over the political influence of the Radical Right. Caldicott's analogies to Nazi Germany began early in the speech, when she explained how a sort of "Rambo mentality" accounted for the success of both Hitler and Reagan. It was the "same dynamic" that drove both the German and the American people to accept leaders and policies that threatened the lives of millions: the attitude that "We're the greatest! We're the best!" (8). The German people "totally stood behind" Hitler and believed him "like a father," Caldicott noted (8), and the same phenomenon supposedly accounted for the American people's support for Ronald Reagan: "And what they're looking for is a Daddy to comfort them and make them feel better" (10). A bit later in the speech, Caldicott returned to the analogy, labeling Reagan a "hypnotist" who, like Hitler, had duped the public with flattery and fear appeals. The Germans "felt insecure" after World War I, Caldicott explained, and "here this man rose up and said, 'You're the greatest, they're the evil ones, and we got to kill all of them, but you're the greatest.' And they all said yes to him and off they went" (23). "The same thing's happening now," Caldicott declared, only now—in the nuclear age—it was "much more dangerous" (23).

Caldicott returned again and again to her Hitler analogies, presumably quoting from Der Fuehrer's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, on the need to keep the people "frightened" so they wouldn't ask too many questions (72). She even implied that Reagan and the Religious Right took their appeals to "family values" straight out of Hitler's political play book. Hitler was for "family values" too, she declared: "Kirch, Küchen and Kinder. Church—Kirch, Church, kitchen and children. Keep the women in the home, anti-ERA, anti-equal rights, because when women get out, they ask too many embarrassing questions . . . So keep the women locked up in the home" (85).

Caldicott's references to Hitler framed her portrait of a post-war America that had displaced Nazi Germany as the preeminent threat to world peace. Beginning with the observation that Hitler killed "only" about fifty million people, Caldicott claimed that, in the 1960s, the Kennedy administration planned on killing 100 million Russians—one third of the entire country—in a retaliatory nuclear strike. "Now I want you to

ponder that, briefly," Caldicott interjected. America was "prepared if necessary to kill a hundred million people. Twenty years after Hitler died. A country with a Judeo-Christian Constitution: 'Thou Shalt Not Kill!' (34). That was when "America lost her soul" (34), and right wing propaganda subsequently fueled an even more insane nuclear build-up. "So now we've got thirty thousand bombs," Caldicott observed, "when two hundred was enough to kill a hundred million sons and daughters of God. And Reagan says he is not strong enough!" (36) Returning once again to the Hitler analogy, Caldicott declared that one simply could not believe Ronald Reagan when he said he wanted to eliminate nuclear weapons. "That's called the 'big lie,'" she exclaimed, adding that big lies were harder to "see through" than "little lies" (36). She concluded by quoting from Der Fuehrer himself: "Do you know what Hitler said? I read it the other day: 'It's a very fortunate thing for leaders that people don't think.' Isn't that so true?" (36).

Caldicott's history lessons complemented her theories about American politics and culture. Barely able to restrain her disdain for the American people and their leaders, she resorted to a theory of "psychic numbing" to account for why most Americans rejected her views, and she justified her apocalyptic and emotional rhetoric as necessary to break through the public's psychological denial. "Diagnosing" the public's support for a strong nuclear deterrent as the product of both propaganda and ignorance, Caldicott not only justified her disturbing and exaggerated scenarios of nuclear Armageddon but also insulated herself against ordinary standards of reasoning and evidence.

Caldicott's explanation for the American public's apathy toward the nuclear threat was simple: "I think it's hard to invoke an active democracy when people's tummies are full and when they feel comfortable and they're warm and not cold, et cetera. And when there are so many things on television you can buy and there are so many choices that you don't have time to think about anything else" (11). The American people's support for Reagan, she insisted, was equally lazy and illogical, for "even though people don't agree with his policies, they all follow him" (23). In an interesting twist on her "diagnosis" of the public's denial of the nuclear threat, she also pointed the finger at religion, asserting that fully half of the American people had fallen under the spell of right-wing televangelists. Speculating that people had turned to the "aberrant" religion of the "fundamentalists" to escape their nuclear fears (77), Caldicott accused TV evangelists Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggert, and Pat Robertson of preaching that nuclear war was a "good thing" and labeled Christianity a religion of "hatred, not love" (78). Accusing the TV preachers of promoting "right-wing politics disguised behind the cross and the flag" (78), she blamed them for virtually every form of bigotry and backwards thinking: "They're talking about Nicaragua, and the Contras. They're talking about capital punishment. They're talking about abortion. About homosexuality. About blacks. And about nuclear war and the evil empire. . . . And up to a hundred million Americans watch them or listen to them every single week, which is about half of the population" (79).

So "this is the culture of this country now," Caldicott said in summarizing her critique of American society; "I kid you not" (80). Exempting her immediate audience from criticism, she assured them that they were all intelligent enough to "see through"

the lies and deceptions, "but a hundred million don't" (80). In effect, Caldicott labeled the very people she hoped to persuade—the American people—too gullible, materialistic, and/or brainwashed by political and religious propaganda to govern themselves democratically. Caldicott's attack on American politics and culture led, in turn, to a contradiction, even a sort of fatalism, which ultimately undermined her appeal.

What could her listeners do to help prevent nuclear war? And why bother if, as Caldicott suggested, the political system was corrupt and nuclear war had become inevitable? These questions undoubtedly troubled at least some of Caldicott's listeners, as she conceded that the freeze movement hadn't accomplished "a *damn* thing" (92). She also fantasized about a "revolution" (93) in which 5 million anti-nuclear activists marched on Washington and simply took over Congress: "Just take it over. Move in, it's ours. We pay for it. It's our House of Congress. We take it over, there aren't enough lavatories for five million people, it'll be a big mess" (94). If all that were not enough to raise doubts about the practicality of her "solutions," Caldicott called upon her listeners to drop everything, quit their jobs, and devote themselves full-time to political activism. Why worry about jobs and money, she asked? "The money's going to be vaporized!" (95). And why worry about your health? "It's manic denial," she insisted. "Jogging? Oh, jogging! Getting our bodies fit, what for? To get vaporized!" (98). For Caldicott, *nothing* mattered except the nuclear threat, and anybody who thought otherwise was in denial: "Psychic numbing! Don't want to think about it, it's too scary" (98).

Caldicott's mixed messages about the American people and democratic politics were not lost on her listeners. Some reacted not with the indifference, but with resentment, even hostility toward Caldicott's whole crusade. After witnessing Caldicott speak at his son's graduation at Salem State College, for example, one working-class Bostonian interviewed by Robert Coles released this telling "torrent of outrage" against Caldicott:

We come to see our son get a college degree—the first person in our family to get one—and she's telling us the world is sick, sick. She said it's "terminal," I remember. And she said we're sticking our heads in the sand—she didn't say that, she said something that meant that, that we're all numbed out, I remember. Everyone but her and her friends! How does she know? What gives her the right to think every single person in the hall isn't as worried as she is about a nuclear war? She talks down to you! She's telling us we should be like her in our ideas and what we do, or she'll call us "sick," and the whole earth dying. Then she talked about these kids who think the world is coming to an end soon, because of a nuclear war, and how that's might good and smart of them, and if we aren't thinking the same way, we're a bunch of saps! And if we had the god-damned gall to want some other kind of message on the day our kid was getting his diploma, and getting ready to have the first office job of anyone in this family, I'll tell you, then tough luck for us—and aren't we the dopes and the blind fools to expect that, when any day now the nukes will go off and that'll be

the end, and here we are, whistling Dixie! . . . Will you tell me who in hell is in favor of those goddamned bombs?⁵²

As Coles observed, "this man's rage was not that of someone whose complacency had been abruptly undermined." To the contrary, this was a man who "knew quite well what was happening in the world. He prided himself always on the careful attention he gave to the daily newspaper and to the *CBS Evening News*."⁵³ He resented being called "sick" because he blocked the nuclear threat out of his mind and tried to lead a normal life. He suspected that it was Caldicott and her followers—those obsessed with the remote possibility of nuclear annihilation—who had mental problems. Above all, he sensed Caldicott's disdain for American culture and her attitude of self-righteous superiority. Helen Caldicott did not address a public whose "consent is requested," providing "knowledge sufficient for informed decisions by those urged to act or suffer the consequences of choices."⁵⁴ Rather, she lectured the American people as if they were children, denying their capacity for "knowledgeable choice and active participation."⁵⁵

Helen Caldicott's rhetoric was not a public but an anti-public rhetoric. It was the rhetoric of a privileged elite with serious doubts about the ordinary citizen's capacity for intelligent choice and democratic self-governance. Assaulting the emotions, Caldicott tried to rhetorically bully Americans into agreeing with her political views, and when that did not work, she dismissed them as ignorant, deluded, or "numb." Americans may not have understood all the technical issues involved in the nuclear debate. But most could tell the difference between an argument and an insult.

The Legacy of Helen Caldicott

In a rambling, bitter speech to a women's group six months after her speech at Northern Michigan University, Helen Caldicott announced her retirement from the anti-nuclear movement, declaring—startlingly—that "we've achieved nothing." Blaming her own demise on "a male coup, a palace overthrow" at Physicians for Social Responsibility, she offered an even more surprising explanation for the failure of the freeze movement. "It failed because the media killed it," declared the media darling of the early 1980s.⁵⁶ Depressed over the failure of her crusade, Caldicott returned to her native Australia for a time, claiming that she was "emotionally depleted" and "lacked the strength to effectively fight back."⁵⁷

Many freeze activists shared Caldicott's frustrations. Angered by the failure of their initiative, some turned to "direct action," employing "clandestine" or even "mildly destructive" tactics in their efforts to disrupt the military-industrial complex.⁵⁸ In just the first eleven months of 1987, for example, some 3,000 protesters were arrested for anti-nuclear civil disobedience at weapons facilities or military bases, compared to only 1,056 in all of 1984. Most of these protests involved pouring blood on missile silos or using hammers and other tools to damage aircraft and other equipment.⁵⁹

While some freeze activists turned to direct action, others simply claimed victory and moved on to other issues. Insisting that they had "won" the freeze debate, some

even took credit for Reagan's subsequent willingness to negotiate a new arms control treaty with the Soviets. According to Douglas C. Waller, a legislative assistant to congressional freeze supporter Edward J. Markey, for example, Reagan finally agreed to negotiate with the Soviets only because of the public pressure created by the freeze campaign. In other words, Reagan moved "in the direction in which the movement had been pushing him."⁶⁰

Why would Reagan bow to public pressure *after* his landslide reelection? And did the public really support the freeze, as Waller suggests? A close analysis of the polling data casts doubt upon Waller's argument, for while many Americans apparently embraced the *concept* or *metaphor* of a freeze, few took it seriously as an arms control policy. Most Americans doubted that the Soviets would abide by a freeze agreement, nor did they have faith that such an agreement could be verified. Indeed, most did not trust the Soviet Union to "uphold the spirit and letter" of any sort of "arms limitation agreement."⁶¹ In other words, support for a nuclear freeze was superficial and came "heavily qualified," with only a small minority of Americans endorsing the freeze in all its details.⁶²

Reagan's embrace of arms control is better explained by changes in the broader political climate. On March 11, 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev took office as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, pledging to open channels of communication between the Soviets and the United States. At age fifty-four, Gorbachev represented a new generation of Soviet leaders—less ideological, less driven by Cold War doctrine, and less suspicious of the West. In his first official reception as General Secretary, Gorbachev welcomed Vice President George Bush and declared that the Soviet Union was no longer "interested in confrontations."⁶³ As historian John Lewis Gaddis has explained, "For the first time since the Cold War began, the U.S.S.R. had a ruler who did not seem sinister, boorish, unresponsive, senile—or dangerous."⁶⁴

With this change in Soviet leadership, arms control talks resumed in 1985-1986, with Reagan and Gorbachev first meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, then in Reykjavik, Iceland. Deadlocked over Soviet opposition to the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), or "Star Wars,"⁶⁵ the initial meetings ended in anger and frustration. In December of 1987, however, Reagan and Gorbachev signed an agreement on short- and intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe. Ratified by the U.S. Senate in 1988, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) provided for the elimination of ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles within the range of 300 to 3,400 miles. By 1991, more than 2,600 of these weapons had been dismantled under this unprecedented arms control agreement.⁶⁶

Gorbachev's reforms, of course, extended well beyond his willingness to negotiate with Reagan. Ushering in a new era of social and economic reform, he also fundamentally changed the character of the Soviet state and ended its political and military dominance of Eastern Europe.⁶⁷ In 1989, the Berlin Wall—one of the great symbols of the Cold War—came down, and the communist governments of Eastern Europe gradually began to lift travel restrictions. That same year, the "Velvet Revolution" in Czechoslovakia overthrew that nation's Communist regime, and a non-communist government was freely elected in Poland.⁶⁸ All across Europe, communism

was in retreat. Freeze activists may have claimed credit for Reagan's new attitude toward the Soviets, but Reagan himself got the credit for ending the Cold War.

Not surprisingly, Helen Caldicott refused to join in the celebration of Reagan's victory over communism. Crediting Gorbachev with dissolving the "ever-present tension" between the nuclear superpowers,⁶⁹ she continued to denounce Reagan and American foreign policy, even as the membership of the two groups she led, WAND and PSR, dramatically declined.⁷⁰ By the end of Reagan's presidency, the anti-nuclear movement had shrunk to a politically insignificant group of hard-core activists, and the freeze debate had become a historical memory. Other issues—welfare reform, the AIDS epidemic, and the emerging threat of Islamic terrorism, among others—would soon displace the threat of nuclear war at the top of the nation's political agenda.

In the early 1990s, Helen Caldicott returned to the United States in a new incarnation—as an "eco-feminist." Promoting her 1992 book, *If You Love This Planet: A Plan to Heal the Earth*, Caldicott began addressing a wide range of environmental issues, ranging from ozone depletion and the greenhouse effect to disappearing forests, species extinction, and overpopulation. Describing the earth as a "dying planet," she "diagnosed" the "signs and symptoms" of the earth's "illness" in typically apocalyptic terms and offered her "prescription for a cure."⁷¹ On the practical side, she joined with other reformers in calling for legislation that would prohibit the "funding of political campaigns by special-interest groups and corporations." Yet she also championed a variety of utopian schemes, including the elimination of all political advertising, compulsory voting, and even a constitutional amendment "mandating that half the members of Congress be women."⁷²

In just the past five years, Caldicott has tried to revive the nuclear debate. In a new book attacking President George W. Bush, *The New Nuclear Danger: George W. Bush's Military-Industrial Complex*, Caldicott argues that "unreconstructed, Reagan-era cold warriors" have taken over the Defense Department,⁷³ and that these government officials—or "death merchants," as she prefers to call them—take their orders directly from military contractors. Decisions about U.S. foreign policy are thus no longer made by the "administration in power and Congress," according to Caldicott, but instead are "orchestrated by the weapons industry."⁷⁴ The book has largely been "ignored by the *New York Times' Book Review* and other major publications."⁷⁵ Yet Oprah featured it on an episode of her popular talk show,⁷⁶ and in November of 2002, Caldicott was a special guest on the *Cambridge Forum*, one of the oldest public affairs radio programs on NPR.⁷⁷ Caldicott also has traveled to a number of college campuses promoting the book, including UC-Berkeley, the University of Oregon, and Rutgers University, to name just a few.

Today, Caldicott heads the Washington, D.C.-based anti-nuclear think tank, the Nuclear Policy Research Institute.⁷⁸ She also has published two more books: *Nuclear Power is Not the Answer* (focusing on the environmental and health dangers of nuclear power),⁷⁹ and *War in Heaven*, which accuses the Bush administration of planning to fight a nuclear war in outer space.⁸⁰ Neither has revived Caldicott's stature as a media celebrity, yet she remains a popular speaker on college campuses and before groups like the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW).⁸¹ In 2003, the

Lannan Foundation, a family foundation devoted to "cultural freedom, diversity and creativity," awarded Caldicott their Prize for Cultural Freedom in recognition of her "extraordinary and courageous work" celebrating "the human right to freedom of imagination, inquiry, and expression."⁸² For some, Caldicott thus remains an inspirational voice of prophetic wisdom. For others, however, she symbolizes all that is wrong with politics and public deliberation in the modern age.

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Notes

1 This essay is based, in large part, on the first author's book, *The Nuclear Freeze Campaign: Rhetoric and Foreign Policy in the Telepolitical Age* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994).

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3 *If You Love This Planet* (National Film Board of Canada, 1982) was one of three films distributed by the National Film Board of Canada labeled "political propaganda" by the U.S. Department of Justice in February 1983. See Robert D. McFadden, "3 Canadian Films Called 'Propaganda' by the U.S.," *New York Times*, February 25, 1983, C4.

4 Helen Caldicott, *Nuclear Madness: What You Can Do!* (New York: Bantam, 1980); Helen Caldicott, *Missile Envy: The Arms Race and Nuclear War* (New York: Bantam, 1985).

5 Tom Ricks, "Dr. Caldicott Goes to War," *Washington Journalism Review* (October 1982): 36.

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8 "Helen Caldicott on Tactics," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 42 (May 1986): 45.

9 Peter M. Sandman and JoAnn M. Valenti, "Scared Stiff—Or Scared Into Action," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 42 (January 1986): 12.

10 Robert Coles, "The Freeze: Crusade of the Leisure Class," *Harper's*, March 1985, 21-23. For analyses of other New Class peace campaigns, see Elizabeth Walker Mechling and Jay Mechling, "Hot Pacifism and Cold War: The American Friends Service Committee's Witness for Peace in 1950s America," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (May

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12 Sandman and Valenti, "Scared Stiff—or Scared into Action," 12-13.

13 Paul Boyer, "A Historical View of Scare Tactics," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (January 1986): 19.

14 As James Davison Hunter has observed, the secularist community in America has grown rather dramatically since the 1950s and 1960s, but by 1990 it still constituted only about 11 percent of the population. And not all of that 11 percent shared the "progressivist" views of people like Helen Caldicott. While most secularists are drawn to the "progressive impulse" in American culture, a few (neo-conservative intellectuals, for example) are drawn toward the "orthodox impulse." See James David Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 45-46, 75-76.

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21 "Freeze March," *Time*, June 14, 1982, 24.

22 James Kelly, "Thinking about the Unthinkable," *Time*, March 29, 1982, 10.

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24 Jamie Kalven, "A Talk with Louis Harris," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 38 (August/September 1982): 3-4.

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29 CBS News, *CBS Evening News*, July 2, 1984, microfiche transcript, 1.

30 CBS News, *CBS Evening News*, December 3, 1984, microfiche transcript, 5.

31 Midge Costanza quoted in Alpern, et al. "A Matter of Life and Death," 21.

32 Steve L. Hawkins and John W. Mashek, "Anti-nuclear Campaign Reawakens," *U.S. News and World Report*, January 27, 1986, 22.

33 Waller, *Congress and the Nuclear Freeze*, 290.

34 Quoted in "Disarmament Groups Seek Rallying Point After Faltering on Atom Freeze," *New York Times*, August 18, 1985, 22.

35 Albert Carnesale, et al., *Living with Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Bantam, 1983), 11.

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39 Caldicott, *Missile Envy*, 291.

40 All of the passages from Caldicott's April 17, 1986, speech are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the text of the speech that accompanies this essay.

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42 "Helen Caldicott on Tactics," 45.

43 Ricks, "Dr. Caldicott Goes to War," 38.

44 Ricks, "Dr. Caldicott Goes to War," 38.

45 Caldicott, *Missile Envy*, 15-22.

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