

THE 'NUCLEAR WINTER'

An Open Letter to Dr. Carl Sagan



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The following open letter, published in the November 26, 1983, issue of *The People*,¹ was addressed to Dr. Carl Sagan (1934–1996) soon after the appearance of his article on “The Nuclear Winter” in October 1983.

Sagan’s article, which appeared in a Sunday supplement carried by many newspapers, provided a convincing description of the effects a nuclear war would have on the earth. This graphic depiction of “the nuclear winter” undoubtedly had a disturbing effect on the many thousands of working people who read it. More so, perhaps, because Dr. Sagan’s suggestions on what might be done to prevent such a nuclear cataclysm were less than convincing.

The open letter to Dr. Sagan was written precisely to address this overriding question. It is reprinted here in the hope that those who read it will be convinced that “the nuclear winter” so vividly described by Dr. Sagan can be averted.

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Dear Dr. Sagan:

We were deeply impressed by your article on “The Nuclear Winter” that appeared in the October 30 issue of *Parade* magazine—as, no doubt, were many thousands of other people throughout the nation. While it has long been common knowledge that a nuclear war would have dreadful effects, these latest findings by you and your colleagues should do much to dispel the illusions, still held by some, regarding the survivability or “winnability” of a nuclear war, even a “limited” one. We were also heartened by your call for “the ingenuity and dedication that went into developing strategic weapons systems in the first place” to now “be devoted to finding a way out of the deadly trap we have set for ourselves.” We concur, and it is to contribute toward this effort to “finding a way out” that we have addressed this letter to you.

Quite frankly, however, we are troubled by the fact that to date the scientific community does not seem to have investigated the *social causes* of the arms race and the threat of nuclear war with the same rigor as it has investigated the effects of nuclear war. For without a thorough understanding of the social and political factors underlying the arms-race and the threat of nuclear war, all the efforts now being made toward “finding a way out” may be made in vain.

In the section of your *Parade* article entitled “Something You Can Do,” you recommend writing letters to the executive authorities of both superpowers. It

¹ [[“An Open Letter to Dr. Carl Sagan: More Than Warnings of Danger Needed to Prevent Nuclear War.”](#)]

appears that you share the premise of the current disarmament movement, namely, that the arms race can be ended by building a mass movement that, through protests, appeals and other forms of mass pressure, can persuade or otherwise prevail upon these two governments to adopt a rational course, come to terms, abandon the arms race, and eventually destroy their nuclear stockpiles.

However, as you well know, in the scientific pursuit of truth, everything accepted as a given truth must always be subject to question, doubt, and critical reevaluation in the face of observable facts that contradict the assumed truth. And when the issue is survival, it is especially imperative that every premise remain open to such critical reevaluation.

In this spirit of constructive criticism, we ask you and others who read this open letter to consider these propositions:

- That the premise that the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union can be persuaded or otherwise prevailed upon by mass public pressure to abandon the nuclear arms race and the threat of nuclear war is incorrect.

- That both governments by their very nature are committed to maintaining the arms race and the nuclear war threat.

- That the arms race and threat of nuclear war, therefore, cannot be halted by any means short of a fundamental social change to an entirely new governmental and social system that would be free of the compulsions that have created and sustained the arms race and threat of nuclear war.

The 'Mass Pressure' Hypothesis

We submit that the hypothesis that “mass pressure” can cause the existing governments to abandon the arms race has been disproved by experience. For one thing, it has been disproved by the experience of the efforts at mass pressure for disarmament that already have been made. The refrain “Ban the Bomb” has been sounded before. Peace movements have come and gone, but militarism in general and the nuclear arms race in particular have continued.

Polls, massive demonstrations, and referendum votes indicate that a sizable majority of the people in this nation today favor moving toward nuclear disarmament. Most observers believe that is the prevailing sentiment among the Soviet people as well.

Yet that majority sentiment hasn't deterred government policymakers. As European disarmament leader E.P. Thompson put it recently, the “arguments are being won, yet none of the structures of power have been shifted an inch by argument.”

Indeed, on the eve of last year's enormous June 12 demonstrations, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger bluntly asserted: “As far as whether or not a rally of that kind will make everybody change policies or not, I think clearly the answer is

no. The policies have to be constructed and conducted in the way that seems best to the people who are the temporary guardians or trustees of those positions.”

Unfortunately, the solution does not lie in simply electing new “temporary guardians or trustees.” The buildup of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and the arms race have continued apace for almost four decades under Democrats and Republicans alike. Our last Democratic president, for example, spoke boldly about eliminating nuclear weapons from the face of the earth but acted to build more of them, including the current generation of first-strike weapons.

The experience of nuclear “arms control” negotiations between the superpowers further illustrates the futility of attempting to effect disarmament and peace through the existing governments. In 37 years of such negotiations, in which the representatives of the two governments have met literally thousands of times, there has yet to be any agreement that has resulted in the dismantling of a single weapon.

All that has been accomplished is the setting of limits on certain categories of weapons and launchers, bans on certain kinds of tests—and the raising of false hopes among millions yearning for an end to the nuclear menace. Indeed, the effectiveness of arms control talks may be gauged by the fact that, since 1971, the number of strategic nuclear weapons of each superpower has more than doubled—despite SALT I and SALT II.

Finally, the premise that mass public pressure can persuade the two governments to end the arms race and the nuclear war threat also overlooks another point. The leaders of both governments don’t need to be persuaded that nuclear war is undesirable or even that—at least in the abstract—the continued production of nuclear weapons is undesirable. They have proclaimed so repeatedly; they don’t need to be persuaded in principle.

But the stubborn fact remains that there is a fundamental antagonism between the two superpowers that constrains them from acting on their professed beliefs. Neither side wants nuclear war, but both wish to sustain the *threat* of nuclear war against the other as a consequence of this antagonism.

Material Causes

If the movement is to look beyond the symptoms of the arms race and come to understand how the disease itself is generated, it must investigate and determine the cause of this antagonism. After all, nuclear weapons did not just suddenly appear. They were consciously created by the very governments that the disarmament movement is trying to pressure.

The general justification offered by both superpowers’ governments is that nuclear arms are necessary to check the aggression and expansionism of the other side. Each side claims that the actions of the other side around the world threaten

its “national interests” or “national security.”

But the truth is that *both sides are* expansionist, i.e., both have dominated other nations, politically and economically, in varying degrees, while proclaiming that domination to be in its “national interest.”

These “national interests” that the superpowers’ leaders so often invoke but rarely define are material and economic interests that reflect the inherent drives of their respective economic systems.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union are class-ruled systems. A small class of capitalists owns the means of production and controls the economy in the U.S., and a small class of party bureaucrats controls the state-owned means of production and the economy in the U.S.S.R.

While the two economic systems are different, both are based on exploitation—on the appropriation and accumulation of social wealth produced by the working class. By nature, such systems exhibit predatory tendencies as they develop. Their economic laws drive them to seek out new sources of exploitable labor, natural resources and other sources of economic gain. For example, the capitalist system is driven to seek out new markets and opportunities for investment abroad. It is this inherent and insatiable drive for wealth and material gain that impels the superpowers and other developed nations to dominate the rest and seek to constantly expand that domination. Historically, it is this drive that has been the cause of war in the modern world.

This drive to dominate other nations is also the main cause of rampant militarism generally and of its most dangerous outgrowth—the nuclear arms race. For each superpower seeks to protect its sphere of influence not only from indigenous rebellion but also from the competing superpower.

For that reason, each superpower strives to sustain and extend its capacity to devastate the other even as it proclaims its opposition to nuclear war. Each wants to improve its capacity to threaten the other with a nuclear strike in order to coerce the other to steer clear of its own sphere of influence. ,

Occasionally, government officials actually admit that this is the principle purpose for which nuclear weapons are built. For example, Eugene Rostow, when head of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, stated, “Our nuclear forces . . . must also provide a nuclear guarantee for our interests in many parts of the world and make it possible for us to- defend those interests.”

Systems of Class Rule

Class rule is the root cause of this imperialist expansionism we have described, of militarism, and consequently, of the nuclear arms race. And since class rule is the generator of the problem, appeals to the governments of the two superpowers cannot solve the problem. For the governments themselves are the instruments of

their respective ruling classes.

This is self-evident in the Soviet Union, where the policymaking echelons of the party and state bureaucracy *constitute* the ruling class. But it is no less true in the U.S., despite its democratic pretenses, as the government's lack of concrete response to the majority support for nuclear disarmament testifies.

The capitalist owners of industry control the major media and the machines of the two major parties. Their influence is directly felt through the campaign process, various forms of lobbying, and plain old corruption. And, by their control over the economy, they exert a less direct but pervasive control over the affairs of state.

We are convinced that any serious study of how the American political system really works could only reach the same conclusion that Woodrow Wilson reached years ago: "The masters of the government of the United States are the combined capitalists and manufacturers of the United States."

This is why "liberal" politicians proclaiming peace end up serving the same "business as usual" of the arms race once in office. That is why, even though government rulers oppose nuclear war, their desire to end the arms race is superseded by the demands of their class to maintain and build on their nuclear threat to facilitate further expansionism. That is why arms control efforts are consistently thwarted. And this is why letters, appeals, and mass protests don't bring substantive results—and *cannot*.

A New Social System

We believe that the conclusion is inescapable that the only way to end the arms race and threat of nuclear war is a fundamental change to an entirely new social system. The Socialist Labor Party has long advanced a program for such an alternative to class rule—a new social system called socialism based on an industrial form of government.

Socialism is the collective ownership by all the people of the means of production and distribution. Socialism means direct control and management of all industries and social services by the workers through a democratic government based on their nationwide economic organization.

Unlike the fraudulent "socialism" now said to exist in the Soviet Union, this system would provide for real social control of economic and social policy, and unlike the system now in place in the United States, it would be truly democratic. For, in a socialist society, all authority will originate from the workers, integrally united in socialist industrial unions.

In each workplace, workers will participate directly in formulating and implementing all plans necessary for efficient operations, and they will elect whatever committees or representatives that are needed to administer and supervise production.

To administer production at higher levels, the workers will also elect representatives to local and national councils of their respective industry and to a central congress representing all industries and services. This all-industry congress will plan and coordinate production in all areas of the economy.

All persons elected to any post in the socialist government, from the lowest to the highest level, will be directly accountable to the rank and file. They will be subject to removal at any time that a majority of those who elected them decide it is necessary.

Instead of economic despotism, socialism means economic democracy. Instead of production for sale and the profit of a few, socialism means production to satisfy human needs and the wants of all. Instead of the form of government we have today—a political state controlled by the ruling class—socialism means a self-government of the organized workers themselves.

By establishing such a social system, society would be free of the ruling-class motives and economic drives that impel the existing social systems to dominate other nations and expand that domination. We would have instead a rational, democratically planned economic system that could function harmoniously on a worldwide scale, eliminating the need for militarism generally, including nuclear arms, and creating a stable, secure, and lasting world peace.

Searching for Answers

Obviously, we have reproduced here only a general outline of our program for socialism, and we have not presented those aspects of our program regarding how socialism is to be established in the first place. We will, of course, provide such additional information to you, or anyone else reading this letter, upon request.

But what we are most interested in at this point is resolving the question of whether or not a fundamental change to a new social system is a *necessity* for ending the arms race and the threat of nuclear war. If our case that it is a necessity is correct, then it is imperative that the disarmament movement act accordingly, and the question of what program for change should be adopted would then move to the top of its agenda.

We realize that, in asking you and others to consider adopting a socialist perspective and program as the solution to the nuclear arms menace, we are calling for a very bold step given the political climate in this country. But humanity cannot afford to allow any such pressures or prejudices to impede the search for truth and for a realistic solution to this menace.

In this regard, we would like to call attention to the example set by Albert Einstein. In his investigations into social questions, his spirit and method of unhindered scientific inquiry led him eventually to socialist conclusions that he was unafraid to make known despite the repressive climate of McCarthyism that was

then in sway. And it is especially relevant to note his understanding that “the real purpose of socialism is precisely to overcome and advance beyond the predatory phase of human development.”

Dr. Sagan, you and your colleagues are potentially a tremendous force for the preservation of humanity. But we suggest that that potentiality can be realized only if you investigate the social causes of humanity’s current critical dilemma with the same scientific integrity and rigorous investigative efforts that mark your work in your own field—reviewing and evaluating all proposals for creating a peaceful world—and then place the weight of your unique and influential position in our society behind a program of collective action that aims at the total and permanent removal of the cause of international conflict.

We of the Socialist Labor Party are convinced we have such a program. However, we do not expect—or ask—anyone to take that program on faith. What we do ask is that you review it, consider it, question us on it, challenge it, compare it with other proposals—and then either reject it, citing your reasons for doing so, so that we may take them into account and re-evaluate our own position, or accept it and join us in our effort to implement it.

Valuable as is your warning of “The Nuclear Winter,” it will prove valueless—go for naught—unless we can rally human intelligence in behalf of a viable program to reorganize our society and restructure our values. Few have the potential to make as great a contribution toward that goal as the scientific community, if it but will.

Sincerely yours,
The Editorial Staff of *The People*