

The Impact of New Zealand's Non-Nuclear Policy:  
An American Historian's View

by Jeremy Brecher<sup>1</sup>

As a Fulbright Scholar visiting at the University of Otago, I am often asked my reactions to New Zealand's anti-nuclear policy. I answer that no one should underestimate its impact -- present and future -- on the rest of the world. Here's why.

To start with its impact on the United States: While it is easy to view American opinion as a monolith represented by Ronald Reagan and Time magazine, American popular attitudes have in reality shifted sharply away from Reaganite militarism. A recent Gallup poll, for instance, found that three times as many Americans feel the U.S. is spending too much on the military as feel it is spending too little. Responding to this mood, the House of

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Representatives has recently voted -- over Reagan's opposition -- to adhere strictly to the SALT I and II treaties, prohibit testing of anti-satellite weapons in space, cut Reagan's military budget request by \$23 billion, and cut his star-wars request nearly in half.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, New Zealand policy has had several levels of impact. First, it has given encouragement to the large but enormously frustrated American peace movement, helping preserve an important voice for nuclear sanity. When I left the U.S. in January, peace groups were circulating stickers which read "Buy New Zealand Products."

Second, New Zealand's persistence has split U.S. policymakers. While retiring Navy Secretary John Lehman wants to close the Antarctic support base in Christchurch because the U.S. should not "provide these economic benefits to people who are kicking us in the teeth,"<sup>3</sup> -- Ambassador Paul Cleveland has called for closer relations between the two countries, with less emphasis on the Anzus issue as a barrier to closer ties.<sup>4</sup>

Most important in the long run, the spectacle of the U.S. government trying to intimidate a small, friendly country which only asks to be left free of the nuclear plague has raised questions about the sincerity of U.S. rhetoric. If it really wants peace, why does it campaign against nuclear free zones in New Zealand, the rest of the

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<sup>2</sup> New York Times, 21 May, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Otago Daily Times, 7 March, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> New Zealand Herald, 27 May, 1987.

Pacific, and Southeast Asia? If it really regards its alliances as voluntary partnerships among equals, not just as covers for imperial domination, why can't it accept an ally that chooses to be non-nuclear? Many Americans are made extremely uncomfortable, even ashamed, by seeing their country in such a role -- and that strengthens the forces moving the United States away from hegemonic aspirations and toward serious efforts at arms reduction and detente.

U.S. Navy Secretary John Lehman has said that the U.S. must "isolate the New Zealand disease<sup>5</sup>," and no wonder -- for even though the New Zealand government insists its policy is not meant as a model, its example greatly strengthens those who are trying to create non-nuclear zones elsewhere.

The new constitution of the Philippines declares that country a nuclear-free zone.<sup>6</sup> The members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are actively seeking to make their region a nuclear-free zone. Many European opposition parties and both Canadian opposition parties are pledged to denuclearize their countries.<sup>7</sup>

New Zealand's experience gives an important boost to such efforts. It shows that attempts to influence national policy are not futile, that under favorable conditions a majority can be won for anti-nuclear policies and

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5 Otago Daily Times, 7 March, 1987.

6 New York Times, 8 February, 1987.

7 New York Times, 12 April, 1987.

governments can be made to accept them. It reveals that threats of retribution against countries which withdraw from nuclear alliances are difficult to implement. (It is worth noting that Australia, despite its strong support of U.S. nuclear policy, has had more grief from U.S. trade policy than has New Zealand.) And it demonstrates that dire consequences do not automatically follow when a country steps out from under the "nuclear umbrella." The global impact if even one or two countries join New Zealand will be enormous.

After six months here, I am also impressed with the impact on New Zealand itself. Far from being divisive, the non-nuclear policy -- and the refusal to be bullied away from it by pressure from a country with a hundred times its population -- seems to have contributed to New Zealand's sense of identity and self-esteem. This feeling was summed up in a banner I saw at a rock concert recently: "Proud to be nuclear free." In that regard, the non-nuclear policy is its own reward.

I suspect future historians may also perceive some subtler, longer-term impacts on the character of social action. From Poland to the Philippines, civil disobedience -- the nonviolent withdrawal of cooperation and consent from an unjust system -- has become a widespread means to challenge oppressive and domineering governments. New

Zealand's non-nuclear policy can be seen as a successful experiment in applying this technique to the international arena. It may have many imitators in the future.

One other impact is immeasurable but potent. The process by which the world is moving toward nuclear holocaust often seems so out of human control, so machine-like, that human attempts to stop it seem irrelevant and futile. New Zealand's people, government, and peace movement have shown that, even in the face of a seemingly self-propelled nuclear juggernaut, human action can still be meaningful.