

An Intellectual Activist

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VARIOUS REALIST POLITICAL PUNDITS have suggested — only half-jokingly — that the Nobel Peace Prize should be given to the atomic bomb, since in their view it was nuclear deterrence that prevented the Cold War from turning into a world war.[1] But historian Lawrence S. Wittner, in a magisterial and thoroughly-documented three-volume history of the global anti-nuclear movement[2] and a concise one-volume summary,[3] has shown that a lot of the credit for our survival through the nuclear age is precisely due to the activities of the thousands of people worldwide who made up the anti-nuclear peace movement.

In his new memoir, Wittner tells us that the first demonstration he ever attended was in the fall of 1961 when he protested outside the White House hoping to prevent a U.S. resumption of nuclear testing. Wittner assumed that his effort was rather pointless, but years later he came across an oral history by Adrian Fisher, who had been the deputy director of Kennedy's Arms Control and Disarmament Agency in which Fisher recalled that public pressure, including picketers outside the White House, had caused the Kennedy administration to delay the resumption of testing until the following April. Obviously, the peace movement hadn't been able to prevent testing entirely, and Wittner doesn't try to pretend that anti-nuclear activists were determinative. But they were a force to be reckoned with, even then. Usually this meant that policymakers had to take account of them, sometimes developing elaborate public relations campaigns to try to blunt the movement's pressures, and sometimes having to make some concessions. As Wittner notes, deterrence alone certainly can't explain the non-use of nuclear weapons since 1945, given that Washington would have faced no threat of retaliation had it used nukes in Korea or Vietnam. The concern about offending public opinion, which the nuclear disarmament did so much to mobilize, was clearly an independent explanatory variable.

At some points it seems to me that Wittner overstates the successes of the anti-nuke movement. Yes, it was no doubt a wonderful thing that the Cuban Missile crisis was resolved without the resort to war, and there's certainly evidence that policymakers took account of public opinion in their deliberations. Nevertheless, the final terms that were demanded of Moscow were not as conciliatory as Wittner (or many Kennedy administration fans) suggest. Washington offered to later remove its missiles from Turkey, but only if Khrushchev kept the agreement secret. The Soviets knew the Turkish missiles were obsolete, so the reason they had wanted to trade them for their missiles in Cuba was only in order to save face. A private deal, however, couldn't provide any face-saving, and so Kennedy was insisting that Khrushchev accept public humiliation, or risk war. Khrushchev, thankfully, chose the former, but Kennedy's policy was still incredibly reckless.

Overall, however, Wittner's trilogy is an extraordinary contribution to our understanding of and appreciation of the power of social movements. Together with his work on the U.S. peace movement (which overlaps with, but is not the same as, the anti-nuclear movement) and on U.S. policy in Greece in the aftermath of World War II, Wittner is one of the peace movement's most important historians.

What we learn in his memoir, however, is that Wittner combined his significant intellectual and scholarly contributions with a tireless career of political activism. In some cases he held national positions (like the board of Peace Action). But far more importantly, he was involved over many decades in the day-to-day organizing, demonstrating, mobilizing, folk-singing, and myriad other activities on behalf of peace, civil rights, labor rights, opposition to apartheid, and socialism. He was instrumental in setting up local chapters of many political organizations — from the Congress of

Racial Equality (CORE) at Columbia in his undergraduate years to the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC) in Albany in the 1980s.

Some of Wittner's efforts may have had dramatic impact. For example, in 1973-74 he worked with the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars doing antiwar organizing at a GI coffee house in Yokosuka, Japan, where the U.S. carrier Midway was home-ported. A few months later, many U.S. soldiers refused to board the Midway for a mission to South Korea, where popular protests were challenging the U.S.-backed dictatorship. But most of Wittner's activism — like that of most activists — rarely got this sort of affirmation. He just put in, as countless activists did, the long hours, the hard work, and the dogged engagement that is the lifeblood of popular movements.

Wittner's account compellingly shows how precarious academic freedom has been in the United States. He was fired from university teaching positions and mistreated because of his political views, as were many of his progressive colleagues, and it was only tenure and faculty unions, in which he played an active role, that ultimately protected him from political retaliation. But he was no blind supporter of union officialdom, for he was often battling with them to pursue more activist policies.

Wittner's memoir offers many engaging anecdotes. Once, walking in New York City with radical pacifist Dave Dellinger, they were stopped by a panhandler and Dellinger gave him some money.

... I told Dellinger, rather smugly, that I hadn't done the same because I believed in justice rather than in charity. Dellinger replied that over the years he had come around to believing in both. Gradually, so have I.

If Wittner's memoir is an inspirational and entertaining read, it is less satisfying in another respect. Although he often tells us his political views, he doesn't make much of an argument justifying his positions. To be sure, a memoir is not a political tract or a philosophical treatise. But some of his recounting of his positions raises questions that go unanswered.

For example, he tells us that though he worked for and voted for Barry Commoner in 1980, he later decided that the weakness of socialism was its linkage to third parties. Reflecting the DSOC view, he concluded that one had to work through the Democratic Party. One can make an argument for supporting a Democrat where doing so is necessary to defeat a more reactionary Republican (rather than "wasting" one's vote and energy on a doomed third party campaign), but why eschew the educational benefits of a third party effort when the election result is not in doubt? It's not that Wittner ignores the educational benefits of a campaign, as indicated by his enthusiastic efforts on behalf of progressive Democrats running in overwhelmingly Republican districts, where there was no chance of winning. But if educational campaigns with no prospect of electoral victory can sometimes be worthwhile on behalf of Democrats, why not on behalf of Greens or socialists?

Wittner relates that he didn't join Columbia SDS because he went to one meeting where consensus decision-making prevented it from choosing a project. There were many good criticisms one could have made of SDS, but this seems a rather weak one. I'm not criticizing Wittner's decision of four decades ago; I just wish he were a little more self-reflective regarding his decision.

Despite these omissions, there is one question that this memoir answers clearly. Is it possible to be an "activist intellectual"? Indeed it is.