

Neighbors Against Nukes

By Emma Sandifer, Nuclear Futures Fellow

I spent one year mapping the footprint of nuclear weapons in our neighborhoods, and I was left surprised...and encouraged.

I have scoured the corners of the internet, from newspaper archives to university library collections, the personal websites of local activists to organizational histories. Through all of this, I've been asking myself: how do I show my neighbors that the footprints of nuclear weapons track across our backyards? And, more importantly, how can I help my neighbors care?

The result of this survey is the [Neighbors Against Nukes map](#). This map is a one stop shop to learn (1) how nuclear weapons have impacted our own communities and (2) how to get involved in the fight against them.

Here's what surprised me while making this map:

No region has been left untouched by nuclear weapons.

Everyone knows the states with the glaring footprint of nuclear weapons. We can easily see the physical scarring of nuclear testing in New Mexico or Alaska; the trails of devastation caused by nuclear weapons production in Washington, South Carolina, Colorado, or Missouri; or the shadow of weapons research in California and Illinois.

These states serve as clear warnings about the legacy of nuclear weapons in the United States and the continued infrastructure around the US arsenal. But they also make it easy for us to believe that the other forty-something states, those without such conspicuous scars, have no attachment to the nuclear weapons industry. This can leave those fighting against nuclear weapons in states like New Mexico or South Carolina feeling as though they are in this battle alone. (Spoiler: this isn't true.)

The footprints of nuclear weapons in other states are indeed less visible. But by looking a little closer, we see a history of underground nuclear testing in Mississippi, intercontinental ballistic missile silos quietly pocking the plains states, contamination from nuclear weapons production in Indiana, and nuclear submarine bases in Georgia.

These cross-country tracks reveal to us a glaring truth: that the United States government has a demonstrated habit of prioritizing nuclear weapons over the health

and security of all its communities. This is an insidious threat that has left no corner of the country untouched.

The impact of the nuclear legacy on the landscape of the United States can never be erased and must be acknowledged. This is the first goal of the Neighbors Against Nukes map.

No region has gone without activism against nuclear weapons.

Just as nuclear weapons leave a mark across the four corners of our country, so too has activism against it. Demonstrating this tradition of activism is the second goal of the Neighbors Against Nukes map.

Using the map, you can see that in Montana, university professors launched a [campaign](#) of civil disobedience. In Tennessee, activists [stood](#) on the railroad tracks to stop a train carrying nuclear warheads. In Massachusetts and Iowa, students struck against nuclear weapons. In Michigan, demonstrators “[exorcised](#)” government buildings involved with contracts for nuclear weapons manufacturing. In Nevada, activists [perform](#) the “14 Nuclear Stations of the Cross” and, in Maryland, nonprofit organizations come together to [hold](#) an annual Hiroshima-Nagasaki Commemoration. Towns and cities across the country have declared themselves nuclear weapons free zones and activists have walked hundreds of miles and sailed boats in protest.

People have shown up in loud ways, like breaking into ICBM silos, spreading ashes and throwing their own blood like the [Plowshares Seven](#) at Kings Bay in Georgia, or by maintaining a 44-year-long demonstration like the [White House Peace Vigil](#) in Washington, D.C. While others have also shown up in quieter ways, like sewing protest quilts with Soviet women like the [Boise Peace Quilt Project](#) in Idaho or holding a [24-hour reading marathon](#) for disarmament as was done in Massachusetts.

Regardless of how people have shown up, the point is that they did. And they did everywhere – not just in the traditional areas around nuclear weapons infrastructure. They showed up in the schools and the city halls, by the military bases and the local parks. People of all walks of life have added their voices.

And these are just the instances that were documented, moments that showed up in newspapers, court transcripts, or oral histories. There are countless other moments that happen at kitchen tables, in classrooms, and casual conversation that...

Protesting is in our DNA as a country and, for over 80 years, activism against nuclear weapons has been an important part of this tradition – drawing some of the biggest protest crowds ever seen in our history (See the [1982 Rally for Nuclear Disarmament](#) and its crowd of one million protesters in Central Park).

The tradition of activism provides lessons for us today.

The threat of nuclear weapons remains as heightened today as it's ever been. The fight against demands to be continued. So, after a year of collecting information about activism from the past, what lessons can we draw that might help us in 2026?

1. Start from where you are.

Activism against nuclear weapons has never looked one certain way. Some people might be ready to protest outside of a military base or national laboratory while others choose to read a book about the legacy of nuclear weapons and share it with a friend. Neither way is right nor wrong.

What *is* wrong is thinking that just because you aren't the type of person to sail a boat in front of an incoming nuclear submarine (see: [the Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor Peace Blockade](#)), that means you don't have an important role to play.

There are an endless number of ways to protest the U.S. nuclear weapons complex: you can write to your representatives, educate yourself on the issues with books and podcasts, join or support local and national nonprofit organizations, protest in your community, or start discussion groups. You can make art and music. You can give a speech at school or invite an expert to come speak to your community.

Use your skills and talents and find the best fit for you.

2. Activism against nuclear weapons has historically been connected to other fights, and the same is true today.

There is a reasonable concern that nuclear activism suffers from an overcrowded crisis landscape. Today, there are so many issues calling for people's attention – climate change, global health crises, efforts to undermine our democracy, just to name a few. Because of this, many fear that nuclear weapons will fall off the end of the list deemed less critical.

Many cite the SANE/FREEZE Movement of the 1970s and 80s as the glory days of nuclear activism – a time when nuclear weapons didn't have to share the stage to get people to turn out in droves. But, in reality, many of the nuclear activism movements of this period *were successful because they were seen as* intersectional.

Some campaigns tied nuclear issues to broader anti-war protests against militarism and military interventions, like that in Vietnam. Some strains of activism blended protest against nuclear weapons with protests against racism and imperialism in the United

States. Activist leaders in the black community like Martin Luther King, Jr., Bayard Rustin, and Lorraine Hansberry all acknowledged the interconnected nature of these issues.

American feminists linked nuclear weapons with issues of sexism in the United States. This is seen at the [Seneca Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice](#) or the [Women Strike for Peace](#) campaign led by Dagmar Wilson and Bella Abzug.

As nuclear scholar Dr. Vincent Intondi [writes](#), “These were not separate issues. Jobs, racial equality, climate change, war, class, gender, and nuclear weapons were all connected and part of the same fight: universal human rights, with the most important human right being the freedom to live...live free from the fear of nuclear war.”

The same is true today. None of these issues can be separated from the rest, and this isn't a bad thing. We should promote an intersectional understanding of the threats we face for two reasons. First, it's the true nature of our increasingly interconnected world. Second, it makes it easier for folks to engage with nuclear activism if its connections to climate change, wasteful government spending, and American imperialism are widely understood.

We shouldn't underestimate the American people and our capacity to maintain a nuanced understanding of the threats we face especially now when attacks on our health and safety are more and more common. We must help draw the line between funding cuts to SNAP benefits, affordable housing and green energy, and funding increases for nuclear weapons.

3. There have been successes before and there will be again.

Nuclear weapons may be built and controlled by governments, but the power to end their spread has always depended on the people. Throughout history, public protest and grassroots movements have played a decisive role in challenging nuclear proliferation and changing government policy by forcing the dangers of nuclear weapons into the open, leading to essential policy change.

The Women Strike for Peace campaign provided the necessary pressure for the signing of the Limited Test Ban Treaty by the United States and the U.S.S.R. [Activism across the Plains states](#) cut the number of deployed MX missiles to a quarter of what was originally planned. [Protests at Rocky Flats](#) drew the necessary attention for the facility to finally be shut down.

These successes were hard-won but possible. And it will be possible again but only if we can help our neighbors care again. This is the third goal of the Neighbors Against Nukes map.

Check out the [Neighbors Against Nukes map](#) to explore the ways that your community is impacted by our country's nuclear identity, the ways your own neighbors have fought back, and pathways for you to start your journey today.

I hope you leave as surprised and encouraged as I did.