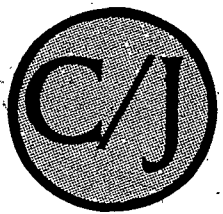


Has SALT Lost Its Savor?

As President Carter works to persuade the Senate to ratify the SALT II agreement with the Soviet Union, he is finding segments of the religious community that have traditionally favored disarmament expressing only qualified support for the treaty.



Special

Unlike conservative groups that fear the consequences for national security in such treaties, the disarmament advocates who are opposing SALT II feel that it does not go far enough towards reducing armaments and in fact represents an equalization, rather than a lessening, of weapons stockpiles on both sides.

At the same time, a Religious Committee on SALT has been formed to mobilize the Churches in supporting the treaty as a practical, though imperfect, move toward disarmament. And some traditionally conservative or nonpartisan elements of the religious community, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, have joined in the effort.

The SALT II accords include three basic components — a basic agreement lasting through 1985 limiting all strategic launchers on each side to 2,250 and further limiting the total of multiple independently targeted launchers (MIRVs) to 1,210; a protocol limiting the development of new weapons systems such as cruise and mobile missiles; and a set of principles for a new round of negotiations to reduce the limits set in SALT II.

Father J. Bryan Hehir, associate secretary of the Office of International Justice and Peace of the U.S. Catholic Conference and a supporter of the SALT agreement, highlighted its major strengths and weakness in an article in *Commonweal* magazine.

On the one hand, he noted that "in terms of the numerical limits on missiles and warheads, the proposed ceilings are most often higher than present levels of development for either superpower. Critics of the treaty who charge that it achieves too little can legitimately indicate that it sanctions increased deployment of nuclear weapons for both sides."

But Father Hehir also pointed out that the treaty "would amount to the first reduction of offensive weapons in the history of the nuclear arms race. The political-psychological significance of such a reduction should not be lightly discarded either as a deception or a giveaway."

One prominent supporter of disarmament who thinks SALT II is deceptive and misleading is Sen. Mark Hatfield (R-Ore.), a Conservative Baptist who has explicitly based his positions on this and other issues on his understanding of Christian teachings.

In an interview in *Sojourners* magazine, Sen. Hatfield said, "I see SALT II as part of a long series of events that has neither stabilized nor leveled off our nuclear arsenals, but has acted to stimulate production in order to reach those new agreed upon levels and ceilings. When we hear all the talk about limitation of armaments, I don't think people are really being honest. I think it's deceptive. I view SALT II with a great deal of suspicion."

Pax Christi USA, a Roman Catholic peace organization, has voiced opposition to the treaty for essentially the same reasons as those stated by Sen. Hatfield. Auxiliary Bishop Thomas J. Gumbleton of Detroit, president of Pax Christi, recently recalled his thinking during a briefing for religious leaders held at the State Department last Fall.

"I began to ponder the fact that SALT II would legitimate the destructive power of 615,000 Hiroshima bombs, the present American arsenal," Bishop Gumbleton recalled. "I began to wonder how I as a religious leader could offer support for an agreement that would sanction that kind of destructive power in the hands of any government."

The Religious Committee on SALT, which was organized last fall, includes both unqualified supporters of the treaty and some who have reservations but feel that an imperfect agreement is better than



An anti-war demonstrator, left, displays his placard against the use of the neutron bomb in Washington, D.C., and a member of the Church of the Brethren prays during an anti-nuclear vigil at the Rocky Flats, Colo., nuclear weapons plant, in the summer of 1978.

As talks aimed at finalizing the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty II (SALT II) between the U.S. and the Soviet Union approach a climax,



Christian groups are expressing reservations about whether the pact will actually lead to disarmament. Church organizations known traditionally for their steadfast support of disarmament proposals are expressing qualified support for SALT II — believing that the treaty does not go far enough in limiting the ability of the superpowers to wage war. (RNS)

none. The three purposes of the ecumenical coalition are "to give visibility to support within the religious community for nuclear arms reduction in general and the ratification of a SALT II treaty as a step in that direction; to engage, where feasible, in common strategies to educate for and advocate ratification and to participate in shaping the debate; and to raise religious and ethical perspectives in the SALT II debate."

Jane C. Leiper, associate director of the Washington Office of the National Council of Churches and one of three persons co-chairing the coalition, said that "it supports the SALT process as the only thing we have. It's the political reality." Explaining that the committee's approach is to "work within the spectrum of what is politically possible," she stressed that "the world without SALT II is a grim possibility."

The other co-chairmen of the committee are David Saperstein of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and Dorothy Kinsella of Network, a lobby supported by several Roman Catholic orders of religious women. In announcing its support for SALT II, Network recently noted in its newsletter that it had "considered opposing the treaty because it is a flawed document."

Explaining its decision to support the treaty, the nuns' group commented that "opposition would place Network in a lobbying posture that would ally us with political groups opposing the treaty for reasons different from our own. Such extremes could converge in the Senate to crush a process that promises continued dialogue between the two nations."

The U.S. Catholic bishops recently announced that they plan to testify before Congress in support of the agreement "if it is understood and functions as a necessary, though admittedly limited, step toward true disarmament."

Bishop Thomas C. Kelly, general secretary of the U.S. Catholic Conference, said that "it would be tragic if an arms 'limitation' treaty became a pretext for further buildup of nuclear weaponry."

Some disarmament advocates who oppose the SALT II agreement do not agree that the alternatives

are either approving the treaty or continuing the arms race. Sidney Lens, a veteran peace activist, has suggested in an article in *The Christian Century* that "we in the peace movement ought to force a redirection of SALT to its original purpose."

According to Lens, "trying to change any specific provision downward, such as the number of launchers or the range of cruise missiles, is a forlorn hope. So is a demand for zero nuclear weapons — for scrapping all existing weapons and launchers. In either case, we would appear to the public to be out in left field — unrealistic. But if we demand that the protocol be modified to embody its original purpose — moratorium — that is something that churchmen and churchwomen as well as others can easily understand."

In an historic gathering in Louisville, some 400 Southern Baptists recently urged other members of the nation's largest Protestant denomination to support the SALT II agreement as a "necessary step towards multilateral nuclear disarmament." By approving that wording, the Southern Baptist Convocation on Peacemaking and the Nuclear Arms Race placed itself in agreement with other disarmament advocates who see the treaty as only one step in an ongoing process.

The Southern Baptist support for the SALT Agreement, including endorsements from such conservatives in the denominations as Dr. W. A. Criswell, has drawn a good deal of attention and surprise. Jane Leiper reported that getting the denomination to join in the Religious Committee on SALT was "a great coup for us." She added, "They're very much involved. It's incredible."

It appears that the position taken by the Southern Baptists and Network represents that of a majority of religious peace activists in regard to SALT II — qualified endorsement, largely because of a fear of the consequences if the treaty is not approved.

America, the Jesuit weekly, commented in an editorial: "It has frequently been observed that the greatest enemy of the good is the perfect. There is no evidence that the rejection of SALT II will help the world move toward nuclear disarmament, and there is much evidence that a rejection will increase tensions and escalate the arms race even faster."