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Peace Through Strength or Strength Through Peace? The Reagan Administration and the Nuclear Freeze Movement in 1982

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Abstract: *Ronald Reagan faced the most volatile domestic challenge to his foreign policy in the grassroots Nuclear Freeze movement. This international peace group came to prominence virtually overnight in early 1982. The President sympathized with their eventual goal of a nuclear free world, but not their immediate goal that both sides in the arms race freeze further nuclear weapons production. The White House, however, was preoccupied with the politics of the Nuclear Freeze rather than debating a potential freeze policy. Reagan's anti-communist ideology informed his administration's pragmatic conservative action to politically cripple the Nuclear Freeze movement. The administration turned to 'wedge issues' such as abortion in an attempt to fracture the broad anti-nuclear coalition supporting the Freeze. The peace activists held sway with many religious groups. The faithful tended to favor the notion of freezing the production of nuclear weapons rather than dramatic defense spending increases. The White House found its ever-increasing defense budget in political peril. Reagan muddled through his defense of administration policy. Only after losses in the 1982 midterm elections did the White House decide upon a frontal assault on the Freeze, which culminated in March 1983 with the Evil Empire speech and the announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative.*