

Slowing the Arms Race, One Congressman at a Time

A History of the Coalition for Arms Control of the Second Congressional District of Michigan

On a beautiful day in May, 1983, a group of students went from their campus at the University of Michigan to the edge of town where Congressman Carl Pursell had his office. The students carried signs protesting Pursell's recent vote to fund a powerful new intercontinental missile, the MX. This vote had agitated many people in the community. It came at a time when the President and the Department of Defense were speaking of nuclear war as not only "thinkable" but "winnable."

The students had picketed the office for only a short time when a staff person invited two of them inside to discuss a plan. The two emerged shortly. One of them, Will Hathaway, announced to his fellow demonstrators that the Congressman would meet on July 7 to hear their concerns. They should select no more than ten people to attend the meeting, as the office was small.

Nobody imagined that this was the beginning of a sustained effort that would continue as long as Pursell remained in office. It would bring together a large and diverse group of people who would give uncounted hours to strategizing, studying, writing letters, and meeting with their Congressman—all with the intent to reduce the danger of nuclear war.

The students, of course, would soon disperse for the summer. Our son Will had a summer job that took him away from Ann Arbor. So he handed off to his parents the planning of the July 7 meeting. This actually made sense. John and I were well acquainted with many in the "peace community." John had been active in opposition to the Viet Nam war. I had become active in 1981 against the nuclear arms race, working through my church and the Interfaith Council for Peace. John was also prominent in Republican politics and was personally acquainted with Rep. Pursell.

The group that we recruited to persuade our Congressman included, besides John and me:

- another well-known Republican (elected member of City Council),
- a retired U.S. Army Colonel,
- a professor of physics,
- a professor of political science who specialized in causes of war and prevention of war,
- the chair of the recent successful Nuclear Freeze campaign in the Second Congressional District,
- the coordinator of that campaign in Pursell's hometown, Plymouth,
- a churchwoman who was the founder and leader of the Interfaith Council for Peace.
- three additional observers who did not enter the discussion.

We were confident that Pursell could not ignore these people and that each of them would have something important to say to him.

We were right. He listened. At the end of the meeting he invited the group to a second meeting at his home two weeks later, where he would also invite three people who supported his vote for the MX. These people were:

- Presidential Advisor Ron Lehman,
- a retired Rear Admiral,
- a vice-president of Bendix Corporation.

Not all of our original group could attend, but a new participant was Dr. Arthur Vander, who had observed the earlier meeting. He represented the local chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility.

After both meetings I later reconstructed the discussion from my notes and from memory and shared this compressed record with all participants. Copies are preserved. The dialogue was intelligent and spirited and makes good reading today.

But it did not end the controversy.

Early in 1984 our son Will called us from Washington D.C. where he was employed by the Federation of American Scientists. Part of his job was to meet with a "Monday Lobby Group" devoted to stopping the MX. His assignment was to work with people in our district to persuade Carl Pursell to change his vote. Would we assemble a group of activists to do this?

We called together the group from the previous July, asking them to invite others. Each was already a member of at least one peace group, so we were an instant coalition. From Washington Will sent names of additional organizations and their membership lists for us to contact. We appealed to every member of every organization to write a letter to Pursell. Through letters to the editor we urged the public to write. Although Pursell's office did not respond to our request for a meeting, we knew he was getting a lot of mail on the issue.

When the House authorized the MX in May, Carl voted for a cap on the number of missiles and an understanding that the appropriation would be dependent on resumption of arms negotiations with the Soviets. It wasn't the "No" vote we had wanted, but we were learning that Congress uses a palette with many shades of gray, and this vote was better than many of the possible alternatives. We thanked Mr. Pursell.

We were also learning that in Congress an issue is almost never settled. It comes back twice a year, first for authorization, then for appropriation. Our coalition could not disband.

Our son Will returned to Ann Arbor from 1985 to 1988 and took an active role in our planning meetings, often presiding. I continued to write the minutes. I began my notes each time with "Stop-MX meeting", but our lobbying efforts encompassed much more. By October of 1985 we were writing to Pursell about the Comprehensive Test Ban (CTB), the Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM), Star Wars (SDI), Anti-satellite weapons (ASATS) nerve gas, and US policy in Central America.

We had called ourselves at various times the Coalition Against the MX and the Coalition Against SDI. In 1986 we held a "summit meeting" of our member groups to consider the path ahead and decided to call ourselves the Coalition for Arms Control (CAC).

That year Pursell agreed to meet with us twice yearly. This pattern was kept in 1987 also. We prepared for each meeting by sending to him, in advance, a list of the questions we wanted to ask him, a list of our members who would participate, and a packet of materials that would illuminate each subject. (Arthur Vander was a copious reader and selected the strongest articles for this purpose.) At the meeting, after greetings and introductions, each topic would be presented by a member who had studied it, leading to a question for Carl. Often a discussion would follow. Then the next topic and question. We hoped we were educating Carl. He was also educating us. We learned how complicated and nuanced were the choices a Congressman had to make.

We felt that our work might be nudging Pursell to make better choices than he might otherwise make. But his votes often fell short of what we wanted. So when the election campaign of 1988 began, most of our members wanted to help his opponent. We considered carefully what was appropriate for the CAC to do as an organization, and we decided it should remain neutral. We reasoned that there was use for an organization devoted to dialogue with whoever was the elected representative; we did not want to abandon that role. If individual members wished to campaign for one side or the other, that was ok, but they would have to withdraw from leadership in the CAC until the election was over.

(The district had been redrawn in 1982 to be a safe Republican district; thus Pursell won re-election every time.)

In 1989 Pursell avoided scheduling any meetings with us. We kept up our contact through the mail, commending some votes, taking issue with others. At our monthly planning meetings we added a new function. We had decided to become an arm of a national lobbying organization called "20/20 Vision." Individuals paid \$20 yearly to receive a monthly postcard informing them about an urgent issue and asking them to spend 20 minutes writing a letter to an appropriate official. As a "core group," our job was to choose among several issues presented by the national office, tailor a postcard to our members, print it and mail it. We started doing this in 1989 and continued for about ten years. It was a good stimulus. Nowadays e-mail brings the same sort of prod on almost a daily basis.

By the end of 1989 the Berlin wall had fallen; the Soviet Union was crumbling. "Economic Conversion" became a topic at our meetings. We actually hoped to lobby for the transition from a military economy to a peaceful one.

But no. In 1990 the MX was back. The Administration wanted to mount the missiles on rail cars and shuttle them around Michigan and several other states. They would go through our town. We mobilized a strong effort to defeat this, including a successful campaign to persuade City Council to pass a resolution opposed to the plan.

The other urgent issue in 1990 was the looming Gulf War. Iraq invaded Kuwait in August. We had been preparing for a meeting with Pursell on August 28. The list of topics to be covered included the MX, the B2 bomber, SDI and ASATS, chemical weapons, the CTB, the Plutonium Control Act, clean-up of contaminated sites, and economic conversion. To this list we added Iraq. Pursell sparred with us on all topics except clean-up of contaminated sites. When we told him that 2 sites on the government's list were in his district, he demanded to know where they were and immediately instructed his aide to find out more about them and report to him.

Preventing war in the Persian Gulf was the overriding concern of the peace community through the rest of 1990 and into 1991. All peace groups and coalitions were subsumed in a new Coalition Against War in the Gulf whose core members met practically every day, sometimes twice a day, planning letter campaigns, flyers, teach-ins, buttons, buses to Washington, arm bands, rallies, demonstrations. When our efforts failed, we were devastated. During the period of celebration following the war, confronted with yellow plastic ribbons everywhere, we felt like aliens in our own country.

For my family, the year took another very dark turn in April when my husband, John, suffered a stroke which paralyzed his left side. I dropped out of peace activities altogether for several months, and would return at a much lowered level of involvement. While I was out of action, the CAC held a meeting with Carl Pursell on August 6, which I did not attend. The meeting went badly. From the notes that were given to me, it appears that Carl was hostile, scolding our members for focussing only on armaments, asking which of them had voted for his opponent, shaming them for driving foreign cars.

Perhaps Carl was just having a bad day. Or perhaps he had already decided that he would not run for re-election in 1992. So there was no longer a reason to be nice to these constituents who—most of them—were not Republicans. I think our relationship with him did not ever regain the respectful and even friendly tone it once had had. My files relating to Carl Pursell peter out at this point, partly because I was less active than before, but mainly because our work with Carl was over.

The Coalition for Arms Control continued to be active for ten more years. We met once with our next Congressman, Bill Ford, in the newly re-drawn Congressional District. We had occasional contacts with Lynn Rivers when she succeeded Ford. However, because she voted so reliably for the positions we favored, we never asked for a meeting to "lobby" her. In 1998 the coalition changed its name to "Peace and Environmental Coalition Against Nuclear Weapons," or PECANW.

I do hope that these files may be useful to a future historian who wants to know how citizens responded to the danger of nuclear annihilation at the height of the Cold War. Some of us lobbied our government. We did it the old-fashioned way with countless meetings around a table; letters written by typewriter—on paper; mass mailings folded, addressed, and stamped by volunteer work parties. Computers were just coming in. We spent a lot of time raising money to own a computer, then drawing up rules for accessing the mailing lists it would contain. But we never envisioned using it for anything but cranking out address labels that we would stick on paper envelopes.

What we accomplished with our primitive tools is hard to measure. But the fact that we tried so hard is significant. Our coalition was a certain kind of community, and as such may be interesting from various angles to students of human behavior. In 1990 our son Will wrote about the CAC as part of his masters' thesis in Public Policy at Tufts. He addressed questions such as what motivated us to begin? How did we share tasks? Why did our group survive so long when others faded away? I'll include a portion of his paper in this box of files. (A complete copy of his thesis can be found among his papers which are donated separately to the Bentley Library.)

This box also includes a packet for each year from 1983 to 1992, containing minutes of our planning meetings, "transcripts" of our meetings with Pursell, letters, clippings, background information sent to us by my son in Washington or gathered from other sources. In other boxes there are packets about activities of CAC / PECANW after Pursell's retirement, and packets about actions in which the CAC was not the main or only engine. These include:

- Plans for a conference on economic conversion in 1985 to be sponsored jointly by peace groups, University researchers, and local high tech industrialists. It was an unusual coming-together and remains memorable although the conference was aborted.
- The campaign against the rail-based MX in 1990.
- The campaign for a City-Council resolution against the MX.
- Records of the actions taken by the local members of 20/20 Vision.
- The Economic Conversion Task Force which met during the 1990's.
- My years in the steering committee of the Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice.
- Local efforts to address children's anxieties about nuclear war.
- Efforts to connect with people in other countries.
- Chernobyl 1986: meetings and letters responding to disaster.
- Delivery Day 1983, to inform local people about the shortcomings of Civil Defense.
- Protests and Civil Disobedience at the Walled Lake Cruise Missile Plant, 1983-1986.
- Disarmament Working Group of Interfaith Council for Peace, 1984-1986.
- ICP newsletters.

Soon to be added are packets about the following subjects. I am still assembling and sorting these materials:

- My activities in the Peace Task Force of the First Presbyterian Church.
- The Coalition Against War in the Gulf (1990-1991).
- Forum: What is National Security? (1981).

Mary Hathaway
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