

FAS HISTORY, 1961-1963

Freeman Dyson



Freeman Dyson, APS Meeting (1963).

I was chairman of FAS from 1962-63. Fifty-year-old memories are hopelessly unreliable and historically worthless. Fortunately, my mother preserved the letters that I wrote to her describing events as they happened. The letters are reliable and give glimpses of history undistorted by hindsight. Instead of trying to recall fading memories, I decided to quote directly from the letters. Here are two extracts. The first describes an FAS Council meeting in 1961 before I became chairman. The second describes conversations in 1962 after I became chairman.

[Letter from Princeton, February 12, 1961]. The exciting day was Saturday February 4 when we had our big blizzard. I had two meetings in New York that day. In the morning I was chairman of a session of the American Physical Society. And in the afternoon we had a Council meeting of FAS, the political organization which tries to push the government into doing reasonable things where nuclear weapons are concerned... I came full of curiosity and determined to make my voice heard.

The meeting started predictably with a discussion of the Test Ban. Many of them spoke suggesting ways and means of getting the public more enthusiastic about the Test Ban... At this point I decided to speak up. I said they could do whatever they liked about the Test Ban but that I considered they were wasting a completely disproportionate amount of effort on it. I said that to me the general problems of disarmament and the use of the existing weapons seemed hundreds of times more important than any...test-ban. So they did then move on to talk about disarmament. They talked a long time and in the end agreed to pass a long resolution pointing out the desirability of general disarmament... At this point I again made a speech saying that I was quite unsatisfied with vague generalities, and that I considered FAS ought to be discussing some real proposal to change drastically the existing international dangers. They replied, "Well, what do you have in mind for us to do?" And I said, rather on the spur of the moment, not having anything prepared, "Let us see first of all whether this council can agree or disagree with the following statement: We urge the

government to decide and publicly declare as its permanent policy that the USA shall not use nuclear weapons of any kind under any circumstances except in response to the use of nuclear weapons by others. We urge that the military plans and deployments of the USA and its allies be brought as rapidly as possible into a condition consistent with the over-all policy of not using nuclear weapons first.”

I was rather taken aback by the response to this. It was overwhelming. I had myself been feeling for some time that our greatest danger at present comes not from having nuclear weapons but from being committed to using them in stupid and disastrous ways. To most of the council this seemed to be quite a new idea. Not one of them spoke seriously against my proposal. In the end it was voted on and carried unanimously... It remains to be seen what impression this action of FAS will make upon the public. It could conceivably be important. Of course FAS is not as influential as it would wish to be. But we do have good connections with people in high places.

[Excerpt from public announcement of FAS council resolution]

“We are aware that weighty arguments can and will be brought against our position. The present policy of deploying troops and ships armed with tactical nuclear weapons, without any publicly announced doctrine to govern the use of these weapons, has much to be said for it. Above all, the present policy has worked. It has preserved some kind of peace, and it has successfully defended Western Europe and Formosa, for the last ten years. We are proposing to abandon what has in the past been our chief shield against aggression in these areas. We are proposing to destroy the beneficent power which nuclear weapons have had to prevent non-nuclear wars from starting. Opponents of our resolution can rightly say that we advocate moving from a situation of proved short-term stability into a new region of precarious equilibrium and unknown risk. Our answer to these arguments cannot be brief or simple. Basically, we believe that our nuclear shield in Europe will become ineffective, that our nuclear deterrence of non-nuclear war will become illusory, as the next few years go by. In these circumstances the most dangerous policy will be to continue to behave as if the shield and the deterrent were still adequate. Purely from the military point of view, we shall be in a far stronger position in five years’ time if we now publicly admit our need for a non-nuclear fighting power. If we officially abandon the crumbling shield of nuclear defense in Europe, there is a reasonable chance that we shall have the courage and the will to create an effective non-nuclear shield in its place. This is the meaning of the second sentence in the FAS resolution.”

I struggled back to Princeton through massive snow-drifts and arrived home at 3 a.m. For several days after the council meeting, the New York newspapers were filled with stories and pictures of the record-breaking blizzard. Not a word about FAS or about No First Use. We never succeeded in igniting a serious national debate about No First Use. Fifty years later, I still see a commitment to a No First Use policy as a crucial first step toward a saner world.

[Letter from Princeton, April 26, 1962]. It has been a remarkable experience to be chairman of FAS. We are such a small group of people (2000 members altogether) and we are mostly concerned with FAS only in our spare moments. So it is astonishing to discover how seriously the people high in the government take our opinions. My chairmanship seems to be a key to open all doors. In three days I have been in turn to talk with the second-in-command of the Space

Agency, the second-in-command of the Disarmament Agency, and Mr. Reuther the boss of the United Automobile Workers. All three interviews were arranged by our man in Washington, Mr. Daniel Singer, who is the organizer of our activities. Chairmen come and go but Mr. Singer remains. The reason why we have such an influence is mainly that we have used our influence wisely in the past. For example, last year FAS put effective pressure on Congress by convincing a number of Congressmen to establish the Disarmament Agency. Naturally the people who are now running the Disarmament Agency are grateful to us.

I saw the Space Agency people mainly to appeal to them to put more money and effort into University research and student fellowships... With the Disarmament Agency man (Frank Long) I talked mainly to arrange to work in his organization during the summer in the most effective way... The most impressive by far of these gentlemen is Walter Reuther... He is a phenomenally successful union leader with 1250000 men in his union, and at the same time an intellectual and a social philosopher with all kinds of ideas for the reform of society... He had a very big part in getting Kennedy elected president (the UAW put all its muscle behind Kennedy's campaign) and he now is able to talk to Kennedy with great freedom. He also spent two years in his youth building a car factory in Russia. The Russians bought the tools from the Ford Company and Reuther went over to teach the Russians how to operate them. He has strong views about Russia and gave Khrushchev a bad time when Khrushchev was invited to supper with the union leaders in 1960.

Reuther is now deeply concerned about disarmament, understands that disarmament is essential, and is trying to get the government to make plans ready so that disarmament can be done without throwing half his men out of work. Reuther is convinced that this can be done if only the government is not afraid to face up to the size of the problem. We agreed on certain measures of collaboration so that his union can act as a channel for some of our information. Altogether, very encouraging.

After my term as FAS chairman ended in 1963, I spent another summer at the Disarmament Agency and took part in two historic events, testifying for FAS at the Senate hearings in favor of ratification of the Test-Ban Treaty, and marching with Martin Luther King to the Lincoln Memorial to hear him tell us of his dream for the future. I left the office of chairman in the capable hands of my friend Robert Wilson, with feelings of pride for my modest contribution to its message. I was lucky to be chairman at one of the high points of American history, with no premonition of the disasters soon to come in Dallas, Memphis, and Vietnam.