This book is an important record of one of the largest antinuclear movements in human history: the June 12, 1982, disarmament rally in New York City. Vincent J. Intondi powerfully argues that civil society is essential in directing our political life. The main message I received from the book is simple: we need to speak up when we need to speak up, and if we do not speak up, nothing will change. The history inscribed in this book teaches us the importance of speaking up and taking action.

When I started reading this book, I wondered why it was published at this moment as it discusses an event that happened forty years ago. However, as I read on, seeing news reports on Ukraine and Gaza, I found this to be a very timely publication. The book is about the antinuclear demonstrations organized during the 1980s in the United States under the Ronald Reagan administration as threats of nuclear weapons were increasing. Toward the middle of the book, a retrospective account by Helen Caldicott, one of the leaders of the June 12, 1982, rally, is presented: “I feel we are closer to nuclear war than we’ve ever been before, that’s for sure” (p. 97). This phrase is equally relevant today.

Employing written materials and conducting a series of interviews with leaders of the rally, this short book fully documents the rally’s background (chapter 2), its preparation stages (chapter 3), the day of the demonstration in Central Park (chapter 4), and its impact on and implications for real-life politics (chapter 5). I have been documenting the antinuclear movements in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear accident of March 2011 for the past ten years. The detailed, insightful discussions in chapter 3 taught me a great deal about how people created a social movement forty years ago. It was rather emotional to learn that the preparation discussions were held at Riverside Church in New York City; I lived in an apartment across the street from this building when I was a student at Columbia. The discussion was a process in which various stakeholders struggled to reach a consensus—stopping the nuclear arms race. This is an important point that cannot be overlooked when
observing any type of social movement. During the rally, it was important to address “how broadly to frame the demonstration’s demands” toward “one principal issue” (pp. 54, 66).

There were two key words shaping the movement: “intersectionality” and “inclusiveness.” The rally for nuclear disarmament shared a desire to include and intersect with diverse sociopolitical issues, such as race, religion, and gender/LGBTQ, and indeed, it did just that. Intondi cites from Coretta Scott King’s beautiful speech at the Central Park rally site: “All of our hopes for equality, for justice, economic security, for a healthy environment, depend on nuclear disarmament. Yes, we have come to protest nuclear weapons. But we have also come to New York because we have a dream. An affirmative vision shared by the great masses of people of every race, religion and nation down through the ages; it is the timeless dream of a world free from fear” (p. 73). Indeed, this speech reminds us of the civil rights movement of 1963. Even then, people did not only discuss civil rights. They were discussing the lives, the work, and the freedom of black people, sharing anger.

I also enjoyed reading chapter 5, “The Legacy of June 12 and Beyond.” Intondi argues—and I agree—that it was too short-sighted a conclusion for many people to think that the disarmament rally failed or had no impact. Instead, because of this event, “there was a growing awareness in the White House of the nuclear issue, particularly the nuclear freeze question” (p. 95). Because of this event, the world watched as two world leaders—Reagan, the US president, and Mikhail Gorbachev, the general secretary of the Soviet Union—met in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 1987 and signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which eliminated land-based ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and some missile launchers in both countries. Intondi also documents a comment by George Shultz, US secretary of state at the time, that “if we had listened to the freeze movement there never would have been an INF treaty” (p. 97).

Further, as Intondi claims, the most significant indicator of success occurred in January 2021, when the Treaty of the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), created by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), officially went into force. This citizens’ group was originally established in Melbourne, Australia, and engaged a broad cross-section of groups and individuals, including the voices of hibakusha (atomic bomb survivors), to build support for a nuclear weapons ban. In 2017, more than 120 nations signed the ban treaty. In the last part of the book, Intondi points out that this treaty provided a tool and pathway to eliminating nuclear weapons. However, these questions remain: Where do we go from here? What lessons can be learned from June 12?

Perhaps the answer is not contained in the pages of this book. The limitation of the book’s argument is that it exclusively looks at nuclear weapons. The book lacks a perspective on nuclear power, although this is mentioned briefly at the beginning. Nuclear weapons and nuclear power are two different products generated by the same kind of technology, and we need to recognize that this technology exists beyond our control and capacity. The next time we use nuclear weapons, humanity will likely be doomed. Meanwhile, although some might justify nuclear power in the face of current global warming, if a nuclear accident occurs (and accidents will happen), the damage will be catastrophic; the accidents at Chernobyl in 1986 and Fukushima in 2011 have made this apparent. To address the above questions raised by Intondi, I suppose we must eventually bring together all of the forces against nuclear—both nuclear weapons and nuclear power—on a global scale.