

Background to a report of the trip to the USSR by a delegation of the United Campuses to Prevent Nuclear War (December 1984)

The United Campuses to Prevent Nuclear War (UCAM) was founded in February 1982 to link US students and faculty concerned about the nuclear arms race, to develop [courses](#) on the topic, and to engage colleagues at educational and research institutions in the USSR. Within less than a year of its founding UCAM had sponsored chapters on some [541 US campuses](#).

In 1984, UCAM's president, veteran peace activist [Sanford Gottlieb](#), conducted an essay contest among members of the organization's chapters. Professor and students alike were invited to write about the arms race and possible solutions to it, and the winners would be sent on a trip to the Soviet Union to present their ideas. The winners of the essay contest were: Peter Stein, professor of physics at Cornell University; Valerie Bunce, professor of political science at Northwestern University (and later Cornell); Matthew Evangelista, PhD student in Government at Cornell and doctoral fellow at Stanford University's Center for International Security and Arms Control; and Dina Fane, an undergraduate at Emory University. [Albert Todd](#), an accomplished translator and professor of Russian literature, accompanied the delegation to serve as a guide and interpreter (only Bunce and Evangelista spoke Russian). The report that follows was written by Matthew Evangelista mainly for the other members of the delegation. A brief account of the trip appeared later in the [New York Times](#), as a response to an opinion piece by then Senator Albert Gore.

The timing of the UCAM visit was auspicious. US-Soviet relations had hit a low point, for a number of reasons: the ongoing Soviet war in Afghanistan; Ronald Reagan's March 1983 announcement of a Strategic Defense Initiative (dubbed by its critics "Star Wars") that threatened to violate the Antiballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty; the deployment of new US intermediate-range nuclear Pershing II and cruise missiles to Europe in the face of massive public protests; dangerous military buildups and military exercises in Europe; and the shooting down by Soviet air defense forces of a civilian Korean airliner in September 1983. In the wake of the US missile deployments, the USSR had broken off arms negotiations with the United States. Thus, the UCAM visit took place at a time when there was little official discussion of how to reduce the danger of the nuclear arms race. Of particular relevance was the suggestion presented by the Americans that the Soviet side might initiate gestures of unilateral restraint or disarmament in order to put pressure on the US government to respond in kind. Such ideas—rejected out of hand by their Soviet interlocutors in December 1984—later played a major role in Mikhail Gorbachev's "new thinking" in the second half of the decade and contributed to the end of the Cold War.