POINT OF VIEW

AFTER NUCLEAR WAR, WHAT AMERICA?

BY AMITAI ETZIONI

Like a ghost returned from a grave, a debate which ran high in the Fifties and early Sixties returns to haunt American policymakers, intellectuals and concerned citizens: Could we ever be the first to strike the enemy with nuclear weapons? Would we blast enemy cities or military targets (which might be difficult to reach in their ocean hiding places or cement silos)? Above all, would any of us survive a nuclear war? These issues were recently re-raised on three different occasions. First, the National Academy of Sciences released a study which concluded that the human species could survive a nuclear exchange equivalent to 10 billion tons of TNT, a study which triggered much controversy (SN: 10/11/75, p. 230). Second, a recent issue of the BULLETIN OF THE ATOMIC SCIENTISTS contained an article by a professor of radiation physics, H.C. Dudley, which discusses how nuclear explosions could trigger a "vast nuclear accident," in which a chemical reaction would ignite the world's atmosphere. And most recently, Fred Iklé, director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, said the United States should declare it would never be the first to strike cities.

Central to the debate is the so-called "damage assessment." Ever since Herman Kahn broke the taboo on discussing the nuclear option in public, the question has been raised: Would any American or any person survive? The pessimists hold none would. Optimists refer to the death of 20 million or more Americans. They argue that the nation could survive, and various "regeneration" scenarios and rates have been projected. Cynics inject another consideration into the debate by saying that such nuclear blows are the only quick way to reduce population and bring people and resources into balance.

As these macabre estimates are now resurrected, it is unfortunately not sufficient to simply declare one's horror at the cold-blooded calculation of such a massive loss of life. As the just released Academy report clearly illustrates, such expressions of moral outrage and condemnation have not stopped the nuclear war calculators dead in their tracks. It seems necessary to meet "damage assessment" on its own ground.

First, one must emphasize that, aside from ethical considerations, for any policymaker to put his trust in such calculations in forming decisions on matters of life and death of millions, if not nations and the world, requires disregarding the far-reaching miscalculations of the past. I refer not to our general poor ability to forecast future developments, but to our poor record on the particular subject at hand. For example, the former Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Strategic Air Command, Thomas S. Power, suggested in his book *Design for Survival* that if the United States would just bomb North Vietnam for several days, the enemy would sue for peace. Several years of bombing did not have the predicted effect. And Power ignored the Air Force's own studies which showed that the assumptions made during World War II about the effect of bombing German and Japanese cities proved false.

Projections from the anti-war camp have not proven any better. After examining various possible routes leading to nuclear war, the eminent British scientist and author C.P. Snow stated on Dec. 27, 1960, that as the nuclear race continues, "within, at the most, ten years, some of these bombs are going off. I am saying this as responsibly as I can. *That* is [a] certainty. . . ."

A second issue which must be considered in assessing the potential damage of a nuclear war is the question: *What* America will survive? Numbers alone are not an accurate indication and social scientists have pointed out that the body-count of 20, 30 or 80 million deaths completely ignores the fact that while morally all people are equal, their contribution to the nation is not.

For instance, Robert Dentler and Phillip Cartwright studied the effects of a comparatively small (2,000 megaton) nuclear attack on 70 urban areas. These were the areas defined by the office of Civil and Defense Mobilization in 1959 as the most likely targets in a nuclear war. Dentler and Cartwright pointed out that in such a strike 46 percent of the population would be lost (a long way from 20 million) *and* a high proportion of the targets would be America's scientific, professional, industrial, commercial, cultural, intellectual and political centers. The picture of the America which might survive seems much more akin to stretches of Appalachia, Nevada and Montana, than a cross section of contemporary U.S.A. Imagine an America without Broadway, Wall Street or Chicago, New Orleans or San Francisco, without Harvard, Columbia, MIT, Caltech, Berkeley and most other main universities, without Washington, D.C., the Supreme Court, leading American newspapers, critics, hospitals and centers of medical research, and so on.

One may characterize such a view as snobbish or elitist, and maintain that the "real America" lies in the hinterlands of Iowa, Idaho, and West Virginia, that the "real" Americans live in small and far-away towns and villages, that they are more likely to adapt to the harshness of a "post-strike" environment than the urban people. On the other hand, one must ask survival of *what* America? The optimistic strategists refer to the survival of "*an* America,' but this may well be one which is tied to the United States as we know it largely by name and flag. So those who would consider the nuclear option must not only question whether America will survive as a physical entity, but also what attributes of America will survive, from its economic well-being to its democratic way of life. □

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