
H-Bombs And Cities

Some readers have objected to the statement in our editorial of yesterday that "defense against the H-bomb is not only possible but practicable." The assertion was, we agree, an oversimplification. Two great dangers confront public policy in the hydrogen-bomb age—especially in light of Malenkov's announcement of a Soviet H-bomb explosion. One is to underestimate the devastation that would be caused by an H-bomb attack. The other is to assume that the problem is so immense that nothing whatever can be done about it except wring one's hands and shrug it off.

As respects the impact of an H-bomb attack, it is only necessary to recall the words of Project East River that "100 aircraft can now carry a total destructive potential equivalent to the total bombing effort of the British and United States air forces throughout all of World War II." That statement is, if anything, conservative. Moreover, as Dr. Ralph Lapp has pointed out, half the American people live in the 100 metropolitan areas that would be the most likely targets for H-bomb or atom-bomb attack.

Even under optimum conditions, short-run defense against this kind of attack would be precarious. For example, civil defense authorities are now debating the alternative between the construction of bomb shelters and complete evacuation of cities. Shelters are convenient, but they are costly, and whether they would be real protection would depend upon where the bombs hit as well as whether an all-suffocating fire-storm followed a nuclear weapon attack. Evacuation of cities, of course, would cause industrial paralysis, not to mention the greatest traffic jam in history.

On the other hand, it is possible, through a combination of an improved early warning system and orderly civil defense planning and training, to save millions of lives that might otherwise be sacrificed in an attack. It is possible to build a better air defense, though at great cost and with no assurance that it would be foolproof. It also is possible, over a period of years, to disperse new industrial plants and lessen the density of cities so as to make them less attractive targets.

Obviously the only really satisfactory solution to the problem raised by the H-bomb lies in the realm of international policy—that is, international control with rigid inspection and, if possible, some measure of disarmament. That ought to be the objective of a major and continuing effort by the Administration. Until such a solution is possible, however, it is urgent to accelerate air defense and civil defense precautions. It is essential in this connection to avoid what Project East River calls the universal and typical reaction—"a feeling of being overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of a problem so large, so complex and so seemingly impossible of adequate and practical solution."

The point is, however, that as of now the Administration is doing nothing on any of these fronts—to pose the international problem, to improve air defense or to grapple realistically with civil defense. That is why it is so crucially important for the public to have full and frank information to evaluate the alternatives that lie ahead. For this is one genie that cannot be put back in the bottle and that continues to grow while it is ignored.