

# Life after nuclear death



## STANDOFF

W P  
Reeves

ONE OF President Reagan's advisers brought a mixed response of incredulity, mockery and dismay when he once suggested Americans could dig their way to safety in a nuclear war.

"Everybody," T K Jones, an undersecretary of defence, declared, trying to abate the alarms of those distressed by the commitment to nuclear arms, "is going to make it if there are enough shovels to go around." I wonder whether we are not in danger of deluding ourselves that we can be saved to carry on the good life by putting up metal umbrellas to ward off the fall-out.

The broad assumption in the Planning Council's report on the nuclear threat to New Zealand is that there will be life after nuclear death after all; that our little far-flung antipodean outpost can survive, albeit with some discommoding, a nuclear exchange between the warring superpowers. God's chosen few, if you like, a sentiment which reinforces our own pious view of ourselves.

"There are ways to avoid the holocaust and we must never cease to search for them," the eminent physicist, V F Weisskopf, has written. "If we don't succeed our century will be remembered by the unfortunate survivors as the time of preparation for the great catastrophe..."

We, hopefully or not, depending upon one's contemplation of life on a planet at once frozen and burnt out, could make up the remnants of the race. The living, Nikita Khrushchev, soberly cautioned, will envy the dead.

The council draws a happier, or at least more tolerable future; not a life of peaches and cream to be sure, but one which, given the proper organisational groundwork and preparation, will allow New Zealanders to carry on, to hold the torch, to rekindle the candle of life snuffed out by the furious blast of 10,000 megatons of nuclear firepower as the two giant warlords unleash their frustrations across Earth's battleground.

Survivors? The optimism usually originates in the minds of the

partisan champions of the terror. After all, the motive force of the authors of nuclear strategy is, negatively, to deny the perceived enemy the victory he supposedly seeks, or, more positively, to suppress him by imposing own's one ideology on him. If there is to be nobody left to enjoy the fruits of this devilishness, persisted with in the cause of preserving someone's freedom at the sacrifice of somebody else's, there is not much point or moral purpose to the enterprise.

At his congressional inauguration inquiry, the future director of the United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Eugene Rostow, was asked about survival after a full nuclear exchange between the Soviet Union and the United States. Mr Rostow responded: "So far as the risk of survival is concerned, I suppose the answer to your question is, it depends on how extensive the nuclear exchange is. Japan, after all, not only survived but flourished after the nuclear attack... the human race is very resilient."

The tenor of the reply was bravely cheerful about man's future but of course Mr Rostow wasn't directly answering the question. It is misleading to draw a parallel between what happened in Japan in 1945 and what could, if we lose our sense, occur tomorrow. Compared with the power of the weapons in the bristling armouries of East and West today, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were November 5 crackers.

The United States and the Soviet Union respectively possess 9000 and 8000 strategic nuclear weapons. These warheads are mounted in intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched missiles and in bombs to be released from aircraft. Additionally they have between them 35,000 tactical warheads of low yield. Britain, France and China add to the critical pile. Altogether, then, there exist 50,000 nuclear weapons capable of yielding 12,000 megatons, or the equivalent of one million Hiroshima bombs.

If they all go, what's left? Ah,

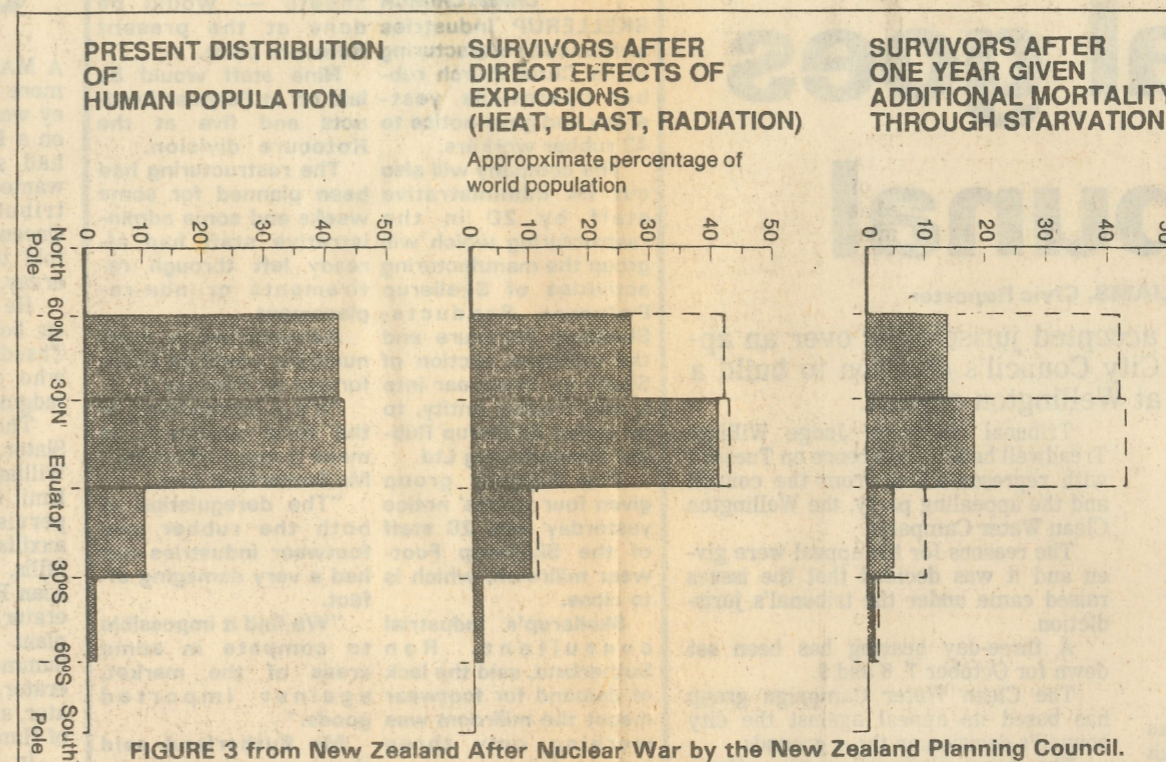


FIGURE 3 from *New Zealand After Nuclear War* by the New Zealand Planning Council.

but they won't all go, surely? Won't sense temper the madness of MAD, the acronym for mutually assured destruction, the threat from which peace, and I put it to you, the future of mankind, dangles? Wouldn't the two sides have brains enough to limit the carnage?

I'm afraid I have little confidence in the general at the losing end of a pitched battle giving in while he has one last nuclear button to press. And by this time, of course, political control over the situation would have long disappeared in the flash of an enemy-induced electromagnetic pulse which would have knocked out communication facilities in an instant. In much the same way, the Planning Council tells us a similar wave created by an explosion over Australia would destroy this country's telecommunication and radio operations.

By any assessment the immediate casualty figures would be horrendous. The World Health Organisation has put together a scenario in which 10,000 megatons of nuclear warheads were used over Europe, the Soviet Union and North America. Its conclusion: 1000 million people dead and an equal number injured.

And this graphic picture tells only part of the story. Many imperious remain regarding the earth's balance, the disturbance of the ozone layer, long-life radiation,

the poisoning of the soil, the nuclear winter, the ravaged psyche of the few survivors and the collapse of civilised standards as the organisational props needed to sustain modern and complex societies gave way. We can be sure that what human life remained amid the debris of a devastated northern hemisphere, supposing the principal physical damage were restricted to that zone, would revert to a primitive savagery.

Meanwhile, we are encouraged to believe that something could still be made of life in New Zealand. I don't know on what scale of war the council bases its conclusions, but we are not, presumably, to be exposed to too much harmful radiation. Even if Australia, with its nuclear targets, were to fall within the enemy's sights, radioactive fall-out here would be minimal — a predicted 1 per cent rise in cancer deaths over several decades: "not a large number", we are assured, "and they would not all be fatal". The Chernobyl experience, it appears, can be lightly dismissed.

Similarly, the effect of a nuclear winter, the enduring product of a smoke pall arising from the thousands of fires to be started by a nuclear exchange and blotting out the sun, might seem understated. A report by Dr R P Turco in *Science* in 1983 foresees temperatures dropping in the southern hemi-

sphere by a ruinous 8 degrees celsius within a matter of weeks if 5000 megatons of warheads exploded in the northern hemisphere were supplemented by only 300 in the southern. New Zealand might experience a little less disturbance because of its oceanic position, but the damage to crops in particular would remain severe.

It hardly needs saying, though the Planning Council makes a point of it, that external trade, on which our economy is built, would be ruined. If we were to live through the holocaust, our way of life would undergo almost inconceivable change. We should have to return to a kind of mixed self-sufficient pioneer economy.

There would be inadequate fuel oil and no replacement machine stock. With the breakdown of the interactive society as we know it, the cities would become deserted and derelict as urban dwellers invaded the countryside to extract a subsistence living from the soil. How would farmers respond to such hordes determined to lay claim to their land and produce? How indeed would elements within a disoriented society react to desperate arrivals fleeing greater horrors abroad?

Above all, how would we cope mentally with the disruption in our lives and expectations, the sight of ill and despairing loved ones and the evidence of a community with

its morale snapped surrendering to aggressive survival instincts? And how could we continue to dwell in the bleak knowledge that nothing is left of vast tracks of earth which man, in his assumption of the powers of God, has finally himself destroyed? Where would hope lie then?

The Planning Council is brusquely practical and tells us to stockpile medicines and think about manufacturing our own pharmaceuticals to prepare for the sickness and disease which it foresees as probably the greatest dangers confronting post-nuclear war New Zealanders. It invites us to address the consequences of massive unemployment, the snap end to trade, the surge in disease, the increased pollution and depletion of natural resources. It highlights the absence of contingency plans and urges the formulation of a comprehensive bureaucratic and civil defence response.

It would be remiss of a government not to address the possibility — probability as the council sees it — of survival. So far this Government sits on its hands, and this is not withstanding that the main thrust of the council's case is not new, borrowing extensively from a frank and comprehensive report compiled two years ago by the Royal Society of New Zealand. How much prodding do the authorities need?

If New Zealand is to lead a fight for the rehabilitation of humankind in a broken and inhospitable world, more than shovels and shelters will be needed. In an organisational sense, the Government can immediately get on with the job, accepting the council's analyses and recommendations.

But survival, offering no more than a prolongation of agony, may be more horrific than instant death. On this I am inclined to agree with Mr Khrushchev, certainly for those trapped directly in the theatre of war. Will we fare much better? We really don't know.

Yet even the worst portrayal — that humans will be totally lost — should not, as the council might imply, make it easier to do nothing. On the contrary, the spectre of nuclear war should be the challenge that compels us to act not only for our own protection, supposing that is at all possible, but more importantly for the elimination of weapons of mass destruction which whether or not New Zealanders are to become a select but perhaps not an enviable band of survivors, evilly corrupts and destroys humanity's achievements and probably all its tomorrows.