

Comment on Brian Martin's "Extinction Politics"

A. Barrie Pittock

[Brian Martin's article "Extinction Politics", appeared in Update No. 16, May 1984.]

It is unfortunate that Brian Martin, in *SANA Update* (May 1984) and elsewhere, uses such emotive terms as "extinction politics" and "doomsday beliefs", which display a lack of respect for, and a tendency to make categorical generalisations about, many and varied statements and positions about the effects of nuclear war held by sincere and thoughtful people.

It is ironic that Brian notes disapprovingly that "By the 1950's, a large number of people had come to believe that the killing of much or all of the world's population would result from global nuclear war", when in point of fact it was in the mid-50's that the combined arsenals of the superpowers probably did reach the level at which they were for the first time capable of causing a global climatic disaster (Sagan, 1983). It is arrogant of scientists to dismiss people's gut feelings when scientists themselves were then, and may well still be, largely ignorant of the effects. In the face of scientific ignorance "common sense" is often a good guide.

Brian quotes Nevil Shute's novel *On The Beach* as if it had no shred of scientific basis, completely ignoring the explicit scenario which Shute drew up in which large numbers of nuclear weapons coated with cobalt were exploded with the deliberate intention of increasing nuclear fallout. Again, it is ironic that a recent study conducted at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (Knox, 1983) shows that fallout estimates for a major nuclear war have been under-estimated by about a factor of five hitherto, and that attacks on nuclear power stations and fuel cycle installations could increase long-term fallout by another factor of ten or so.

Next Brian attacks Jonathan Schell for discussing the implications of human extinction in *The Fate of the Earth*. Brian never acknowledges that Schell quite explicitly said that human extinction is not a certainty (see Schell p. 93), and ignores the powerful arguments which Schell advances for regarding the mere possibility of human extinction as important. These are developed further in Schell's more recent articles in *The New Yorker* (Jan. 2 & 9, 1984).

Brian then claims that the scientific basis of the ozone depletion problem has "almost entirely evaporated". In fact, while we now know that the nuclear winter effect is almost certainly far more serious than ozone depletion, the ozone depletion problem has not been dismissed except in so far as the trend to smaller warheads may limit the quantity of oxides of nitrogen injected into the stratosphere by the nuclear explosions themselves. Ozone depletion could in fact end up being more serious due to injections of combustion products, including smoke, into the stratosphere.

Brian claims that the impact on populations nearer the Equator, such as in India, "does not seem likely to be significant". Quite to the contrary, smoke clouds are likely to spread into the tropics within a matter of weeks and would probably lead to below freezing temperatures for months on end. Populations and the ecology in such regions are the least able to withstand such a climatic onslaught and must be very seriously affected.

Then he says that major ecological destruction "remains speculative at present". Is he suggesting that a sudden and prolonged plunge to below freezing temperatures, with insufficient light for photosynthesis, might have little harmful effect, or is he denying the reality of "nuclear winter"?

There have been a number of specific criticisms of the various published papers on nuclear winter, but after more than two years in print there has been no criticism which has substantially altered the basic conclusions. The most prominent criticism has come from John Maddox, editor of *Nature* (302, 121: 1984), who completely failed to take account of the vital difference in optical properties of soot and volcanic dust (La Marche and Hirschboeck, 1984).

Principal uncertainties exist as to the war scenarios, the fraction of soot in the smoke, the height of injection of the smoke, the amount which would be removed by washout in the initial plumes, and the later rate of removal. In most cases the published papers made assumptions which tended to under-estimate the effects, especially with regard

to the height of injection of the smoke and its lifetime. Two possible exceptions are the war scenarios, in which the so-called "baseline" case may be too large by a factor of 2, and perhaps the particle coagulation rates if the initial plumes are not rapidly dispersed. My judgement now is that the initial effects would be much as described in the published papers, even with a 2,000 megatonne war, except that the lifetime of the effects could well turn out to be years rather than months. I will discuss the technical details elsewhere.

Brian goes on to suggest that the worst effects might be avoided by "migration to coastal areas, away from the freezing continental temperatures", but fails to realise that the huge temperature gradients induced between the continents and oceans will cause violent storms to lash these coastal zones, which in any case are likely to be subject to a strong outflow of cold air from the continental interiors.

Brian then invokes the advantages of turning to grain rather than meat to extend "reserves of food". The fact is of course that in the event of a nuclear winter any human survivors will have little choice but to eat whatever food is available, be it meat or grain. But where are there huge grain reserves sufficient to feed the survivors for one or more years, and will such reserves survive in convenient proximity to the human survivors? Is Brian going to seriously advocate creating grain reserves sufficient to feed a couple of thousand million people for one or two years?

It is difficult to assess the motivation behind Brian's consistent bias towards dismissing the possibility of extinction, but perhaps there is a hint of it in his protest that believing in such a possibility fosters resignation.

In my experience most people already feel rather helpless to influence the political process — what they need in order to act politically is the motivation of feeling personally threatened or outraged to the point of anger, plus a sense of hope which we in the peace movement must provide.

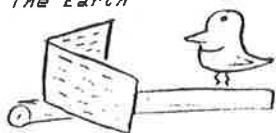
The key political impact of nuclear winter and the possibility of extinction, however, lies in the way it forces proponents of reliance on nuclear weapons back on deterrence as the only possible rationalisation, and at the same time makes the risks inherent in nuclear deterrence unacceptable to rational human beings. There can in my view be no more radicalising realisation than that the logic of reliance on nuclear weapons leads to extinction, if not now, then some time in the foreseeable future. The possibility of extinction makes a qualitative difference to how we view nuclear weapons.

To sum up, I am in broad agreement with most of the positive things Brian advocates here and elsewhere, but I disagree with the way he has, in my opinion, biased the evidence on the effects of nuclear war to fit his psychological theory as to what motivates people. I believe it is time he faced up to the grim realities of nuclear war, worked through psychological denial, and gave other people credit for being able to do likewise.

References:

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 La Marche, V.C.Jr, and K.K. Hirschboeck, 1984: Nuclear war models, *Nature*, 309, 203 (17 May).
 Sagan, Carl, 1983: Nuclear war and climatic catastrophe: some policy implications, *Foreign Affairs*, 62, 257-292.
 Schell, J., 1982: *The Fate Of The Earth* (London).

BOOK REVIEWS



"AUSTRALIA AND NUCLEAR WAR": (Ed. Michael Denborough 270pp. Croom Helm, Australia)

This book consists mainly of the addresses given at a symposium at the Australian National University on 30 and 31 May 1983.

As Emeritus Professor Peter Karmel puts it in his Preface: "This book examines the possibility of nuclear war, its implications in human terms, and strategies for avoiding it. It reflects the desire of men and women to come to grips with the massive problems involved. We are considering the very survival of the human race."

There are three parts: the first covers the details of the nuclear arms race; the second, the consequences (medical, socio-economic, atmospheric); the third, possible steps towards preventing nuclear war.

Frank Barnaby gives disturbing details of the escalating arms race. Desmond Ball and R.H. Mathams discuss the nuclear threat to Australia in terms of possible attacks on US bases and our metropolitan cities; as is well known, assessments here vary considerably; however what is virtually certain is that some significant risk is entailed.

John Langmore provides an informative account of the economic and related consequences of preparing for nuclear war, especially for Australia. "More arms make humankind poorer, not safer", he concludes.

Michael Denborough gives a lucid account of the medical consequences of nuclear war, and mentions the view that medical practitioners who advocate the building of nuclear shelters are guilty of gross medical negligence. J.A. Ward writes: "It is therefore inevitable that a nuclear attack upon Australia involving the major port areas will result in at least one million deaths, regardless of civil defence planning, and the politicians and public alike must be made aware of this fact".

Dr H.C. Coombs, extrapolating from World War II experience, outlines the likely economic and social impact of nuclear war for Australia and its neighbourhood. (The collapse of the economic and financial system after such a disaster is frequently overlooked or not grasped.)

Barrie Pittock and other scientists discuss the atmospheric effects of nuclear war.

The roles of the scientist and of the medico in averting the nuclear catastrophe are outlined by Bernard Feld and Oleg Gavrilov. Feld reminds us of the disturbing possibilities of terrorists acquiring nuclear weapons, and Gavrilov cites some of those horrifying statistics of the waste of resources in the arms race in comparison with human needs, such as health and education.

A most interesting chapter comes from David Hackworth, the most decorated soldier in US military history. He is very familiar with the military mind and the outlook

of certain leading Americans. Some of these attitudes are most disturbing, indeed alarming. For example, in Geneva the man leading the US disarmament delegation is Edward Rowny, a top military man. He once wrote that it was impossible to negotiate with the Russians because of the 'Mongol influence'. The Russians, he

were descended from the Mongols and respected only brute force. Hackworth makes the attractive suggestion that Pine Gap and other facilities could become "the eyes of the world", i.e., that they could become joint American/Russian verification centres operating for peace under US auspices.

Roland Vogt, of the German Green Party, provides a helpful reminder that the nuclear issue should be understood in relation to other contemporary issues such as ecology.

Nancy Shelley, a Canberra peace activist, presents a cogent feminist perspective. She quotes wryly the remarks of Nobel (of Peace Prize fame): "When the day arrives that two armed nations can destroy each other within minutes, then all nations will shrink back and will dismiss their troops". Regarding terrorism, she asks: "Is it not terrorism when 12 million babies die before their first birthday?"; and she gives an impressive array of effective non-violent action by women.

Patrick White, with disarming modesty, outlines the role of the ordinary citizen. He reminds us of the Russian responses to President Kennedy's initiatives in 1963 (good material for confronting those who tell us that we can't trust the Russians). This contribution makes a fitting conclusion to the book.

Overall, a broad range of aspects on this vital topic is covered within the book; as well as hard, factual data, there is stirring emotional, even inspirational material. Appropriately, the book is dedicated to the children of the world. Even if some areas seem unevenly treated, the book not only provides indispensable information about the current and prospective nuclear situation, but also must stir readers towards greater active involvement. It is strongly recommended.

Geoff Forster

SANA Social Event

Sunday 16 September Music Afternoon and Social Gathering
 at 2pm Gregory Martin, Baritone, will sing songs and lieder; Norma Williams and John Elliott will play four hand piano compositions by Mozart, Schubert, Dvorak and others.

PLACE: The home of Mr and Mrs Max Aronsten, 118 Sydney Road, Willoughby. Further information: Hans Bandler 44-1873 Robert Horn 427-4426

Subscription: Adults \$6.00; Students/children \$4.00 includes refreshments

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Contributions from members are welcome and should be received at PO Box 370 Lane Cove NSW 2066 by the 15th of the month, for publication in the next month's issue.