

MOBILISING AGAINST NUCLEAR WAR:



The Insufficiency of Knowledge and Logic

By Brian Martin

The problem of nuclear war is a daunting one. It is horrifying and demoralising to read the continuing saga of the nuclear arms race, technological breakthroughs in methods for mass annihilation, and the cancerous growth of the military—industrial—bureaucratic—national security organisations in both West and East. The problem of nuclear war is simple at its core. Present stockpiles of nuclear weapons, if used in a major nuclear war, are capable of killing several hundred million people and causing ecological havoc over large areas of the earth's surface (see appendix).

A major war could start at any time due to accident, a planned first strike, or the escalation of any of a number of political and military crises and confrontations. This latter possibility is becoming ever more likely with the proliferation of nuclear technology to more and more countries. As long as major stockpiles of nuclear weapons exist, probabilities dictate that they will eventually be used. The only alternative is getting rid of the stockpiles.

Nuclear war is also an especially daunting problem because no one seems to have a promising plan for bringing about nuclear disarmament. This seems to be one of the main reasons why so many people just try to forget about the problem. Not only is the danger almost too overwhelming to dwell upon for long, but proposed efforts to change the situation seem futile. This sense of futility is reinforced by the irrationality of the nuclear arms race from the point of view of the welfare of humanity as a whole. It has often been remarked that the nuclear arms race has meant a decrease rather

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than an increase in physical security for civilian populations, and that the massive investment in arms could be redirected towards many other more worthy ends. If arguments based on a logic grounded centrally on a concern for human welfare had had any significant effect at all, the nuclear arms race would have been abandoned long ago.

The official logic used to justify this race centres around military stability based on mutually assured destruction. This logic appears to be based on an assumption of the inevitable aggressiveness of the enemy unless restrained by the threat of overwhelming destruction, on confidence that assessments of options during superpower confrontations will be made rationally according to the calculus of megadeaths, and on a belief that nuclear deterrence is not itself a serious obstacle to other approaches to stability or peace. Each of these tenets can be found to be dubious under historical or political analysis. Furthermore, nuclear deterrence policies seem to have had little effect in inhibiting conventional wars, massacres of genocidal proportions and the establishment of ever more brutal dictatorships, all of which are characteristic of the historical period since 1945.¹ Even the stability promised by mutually assured destruction is under increasing threat due to technological developments leading to a greater emphasis on counterforce or nuclear first strike strategies.²

The logic used in justifying the nuclear arms race arguably has more to do with serving the continuing interests of military and political bureaucracies than the interests of humanity as a whole. Henceforth when mentioning logic I will refer only to logic rooted in a central concern for human welfare, logic which leads to the rejection of any policy based on the threat of nuclear destruction.

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My aim here is to analyse some of the approaches to the problem of nuclear war, with a view to pointing out some of their strengths and weaknesses. But first a few preliminaries. I believe that nuclear war is a sufficiently serious problem to warrant the highest priority in terms of social action. But not all people agree with this. In some circles the dangers of capitalism or communism are considered great enough to warrant the risk of nuclear war to protect against their ex-

pansion. There is certainly a degree of truth in this: there is enormous human suffering caused by the economic and military policies of 'imperial democracy', and the social costs of communist regimes are well known. However, the suffering caused in a major nuclear war promises to be much greater.

There are also some revolutionary groups which consider that nuclear disarmament will be something that happens after the revolution, and that until then a high priority on disarmament is diversionary. There is also a degree of truth in this: certainly some of those working for disarmament are not as greatly concerned about economic or political inequalities and would be happy to postpone efforts to overcome these problems until after nuclear disarmament. Among those individuals and groups primarily concerned about nuclear war, I will focus on three existing approaches. (Naturally this is a simplification of the actual diversity of thought and action on the issue.) The three approaches are (1) convincing decision-makers of the absolute imperative to take measures towards nuclear disarmament; (2) mobilising public opinion to influence decision-makers to take measures towards nuclear disarmament; and (3) taking direct action, such as demonstrations and civil disobedience, to mobilise public support for measures towards nuclear disarmament.

Each of these approaches relies on what I call the power of knowledge and logic: a belief that once certain people realise the immense danger and irrationality of nuclear war, then measures will be taken to avoid it. Where the approaches differ is in their focuses for the convincing effort, which are respectively (1) decision-makers directly, (2) decision-makers via the public, and (3) the public.

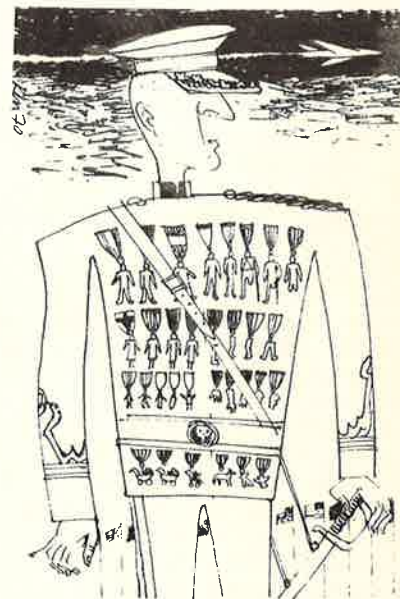
My purpose is first to illustrate some of the limitations of these approaches. Their basic problem is their ultimate reliance on the power of knowledge and logic separated from action. The actual forces promoting the basis for nuclear war however seem impervious to this knowledge and logic. These forces are rooted in institutions based on vested political and economic interest, and hence prefer to use a 'logic' which justifies their power and privilege. Hence I will suggest that more attention needs to be given to approaches which can mobilise people in their daily lives to actions which challenge the justifications and institutional bases for nuclear war.

Influencing decision-makers

William Epstein in *The Last Chance*³ gives a comprehensive account of the various treaties, conferences and other official steps towards nuclear disarma-

ment. Given the actual course of the continuing nuclear arms race, such an account cannot provide much cause for optimism, and Epstein is indeed rather pessimistic. His only hope, the 'last chance' out of the predicament of the nuclear peril, lies along two priorities: improving and strengthening the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), and creating a moral and political climate in the world which would eliminate the need for nuclear weapons.

The point of strengthening the NPT is to gain some time to cope with the problem of nuclear proliferation. The trouble



is that there is little hope that the NPT as a legal document will stop proliferation without a concomitant change in the institutional pressures promoting proliferation, such as profits to be made in exporting nuclear power technology. Even if horizontal proliferation could be slowed or halted, the arms race between the superpowers would need to be challenged. This takes us to Epstein's second priority, creating a world climate removing the need for nuclear weapons. This would take place, according to Epstein, on three fronts: arms control and disarmament, a more equitable distribution of the world's wealth and a strengthened world organisation. These are admirable goals, but Epstein does not outline how they will come about, except to imply that decision-makers will pursue them because of the urgent necessity of avoiding nuclear war. But the history of the nuclear arms race already tells us about its imperviousness to arguments based solely on welfare, and Epstein's own account illustrates the virtual futility of achieving fundamental changes through negotiation. Epstein says of

disarmament, 'The two superpowers must, of course, lead the way.' But, it may be asked, what will make them do this? Epstein relies on the power of knowledge and logic to convince decision-makers of the folly of their countries' policies. But this does not come to grips with the institutional forces promoting the nuclear arms race. As Richard Barnet says,

'Unfortunately, however, it is too late in the day for knowledge and truth alone to rescue the nation from twenty-five years of militarism. Truth can liberate only if people are prepared to act on it.'⁴

It is apparent that national leaders are not prepared to act on the truths about nuclear war. Hence the approach of influencing decision-makers through the power of knowledge and logic by itself seems quite insufficient to the challenge of the nuclear age.⁵

Influencing decision-makers via the public

Some of the best analyses of the arms race and its institutional aspects are by Richard Barnet.⁶ He presents a masterly explanation of the irrationality of massive spending on war preparations, of the operations of the military-industrial complex and of the psychology and bureaucratic dynamics of the national security managers. But when he comes at last to what to do about the situation he has so brilliantly explained, his proposals are somewhat disappointing.

In *The Roots of War*, Barnet lists three main roots for the case of the U.S., and suggests how they may be eliminated. The first root is the military bureaucracy, which is to be shrunk in size and re-oriented towards healing rather than killing, controlled much more by Congress, and structurally changed to introduce the principle of personal responsibility for official acts. These are all worthy goals, but how are they to be achieved? Barnet gives no hint, and implies that the logic of the case along with knowledge will be the basis for change.

The second main root of war is the state capitalist economy, and its dependence for profits and growth, especially overseas. Barnet notes the need for a shift in government expenditure from the military and from private goods to health, education, transportation and the environment. He suggests that such changes might be possible under some modified form of private ownership or mixed economy, but gives no idea of how this will come about.

The third main root of war according to Barnet is the ease with which the public is manipulated on national security issues. Barnet sees a need to awaken and

express 'the deep but inarticulate aspirations for peace of the American people', which if achieved will lead to support for a political party with a foreign policy of peace. Once again, Barnet presents no plan for how this will come about. The implication is that with knowledge, the people will become aware of the necessity for change, which will provide support for the political victory of a party with a peace platform.

In his earlier book *The Economy of Death*, Barnet spells out in more detail what he sees as the role of various groups in the community in promoting peace. Here are some of his suggestions:

- *students: do research on the military-industrial complex, present seminars.*
- *leading scientists and technologists: undertake a critical education campaign about national security.*
- *business leaders: look for profits in nonmilitary production.*
- *members of Congress: promote moves away from militarism.*
- *clergy: explore the psychology of violence with congregations.*
- *labour unions: undertake an educational campaign about war spending and personal security.*
- *citizens: become personally educated on military spending and the military-industrial complex; hound Congress; work to establish anti-war stands by local political organisations; undertake door-to-door educational campaigns; write to the Pentagon demanding the truth.*

These suggestions are valuable and not to be laughed at or dismissed. But they are based almost entirely on the power of knowledge and logic to catalyse institutional change through mostly normal



channels, especially the Congress. Yet by Barnet's own analysis, these approaches seem to be inadequate. In the face of massive bureaucratic control over information and over creation of perceptions about public policy, in the face of a captive media and in the face of massive handouts to military contractors, the

changing of public opinion about the arms race would be most difficult. And even if a political party with a serious peace platform were elected, does Barnet seriously believe that the dismantlement of the war system could begin to take place in the face of the power of the war bureaucracies he has so well documented?⁷

Even at the level of convincing individuals, Barnet's prescriptions do not seem too promising. In a way, the convincing job about the dangers of nuclear war is already complete — most people would agree that the continued nuclear threat should be eliminated. But going from there to doing something about it is a big step. First there are those people who would agree generally with Barnet that the war bureaucracies must be brought under control and that economic imperatives promoting war must be changed. But the argument that the path to take is writing to Congress is not very convincing. When in the past has this approach brought results? The problem for those sympathetic with Barnet's prescriptions is the perception of powerlessness and lack of any convincing strategy for citizen influence. Even in 1946 the 'average citizen' in the U.S. was saying, 'Why should I trouble myself over something I can't possibly control?'⁸

Then there are the people who would agree that peace is best, but feel that foreign military or other threats make armaments for defence necessary. They might agree that militarism is bad in principle, but see it as the lesser of evils, the alternative being foreign domination, communism, anarchy or some other bogey. Barnet's arguments are doubly inadequate, but the prescriptions themselves seem misguided. Barnet presents no picture of the evolution of events after reform of the war bureaucracy and disarmament. What is to stop a communist attack? It is easy but insufficient to answer that the threat of communist attack has been exaggerated to justify the war machine. For Barnet has not explained how international politics and economics would operate in a denuclearised world, nor even how such a world would be achieved.

In addition, Barnet is not explicit about the extent of the disarmament he is advocating, in particular whether it is partial or total. Even if partial disarmament were attained, it would be difficult politically to restrain the war bureaucracies which would still remain. Furthermore, the threat of widespread nuclear destruction would not be removed. It would seem that both political realities and human well-being dictate that total disarmament must be aimed at from the outset. But if the proposed disarmament is total, then some alternative to military

defence is required, and Barnett does not present any.

So here we see the problems of convincing most people through the knowledge and logic approach. Barnett seems aware of this when he states, 'Truth can liberate only if people are prepared to act on it'. But it appears that the action he envisages is mainly in the line of research, education and lobbying.⁹

Influencing the public

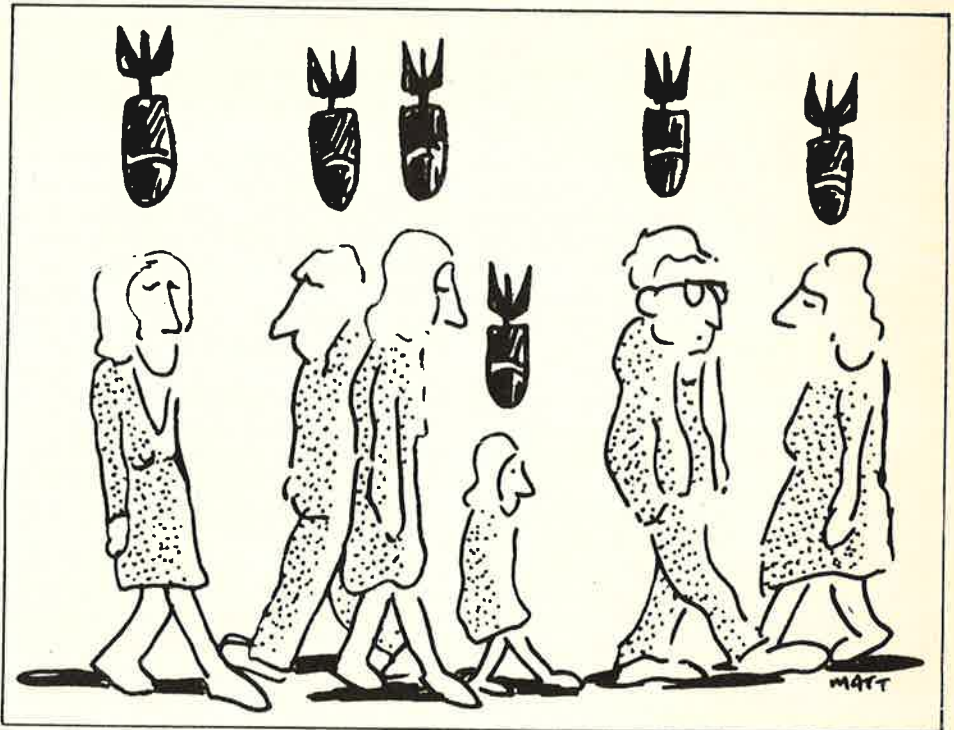
The Power of the People¹⁰ is an inspiring account of nonviolent action in U.S. history, ranging from abolitionism to women's suffrage to grape boycotts. Not least among nonviolent campaigns have been those focussed against war, including anti-conscription campaigns. Although **The Power of the People** does not explicitly pronounce on strategies for facing the problem of nuclear war, a clear picture of the advantages of nonviolent action is transmitted. Nonviolent campaigns expressing opposition to war have included meetings, talks and other educational efforts, demonstrations and protests, anti-war marches (of up to continent length) incorporating educational activities, refusal to be conscripted and support for this refusal, hunger strikes, entering nuclear test zones and blocking nuclear vessels, and drenching military files with blood.

The problem with these campaigns is not their value, which cannot be doubted, but their apparent ineffectiveness in fundamentally altering the institutional forces which promote war. Reading **The Power of the People** can be a troubling experience, for while feeling inspired and proud over the deep concern shown by many social activists over the years, and by the appropriateness of the nonviolent means used to the ends desired, there is one's concurrent knowledge that these efforts have been far too few and weak to stop the headlong rush towards nuclear war.

Perhaps one shortcoming is that ultimately these campaigns depend on the power of knowledge and logic, like the approaches which involve convincing decision-makers. Demonstrations, symbolic vigils and acts of civil disobedience are in one central way aimed at the public¹¹: they bring the issues to the attention of the public, they demonstrate that a deep moral concern is felt by at least some people, and show that public opposition is an available strategy. But these techniques do not, or at least have not yet, infiltrated the lives of the bulk of the populace. The act of protesting is something that may happen today, but if not institutionally anchored it may well be gone tomorrow. Furthermore, as in the case of Barnett's suggestions, protest

and civil disobedience do not in themselves overcome the powerlessness felt by many individuals nor allay the fears of foreign attack felt by many others.

tied to, if not actual products of, the very institutions which promote war: military and national security bureaucracies and economic interests with vested interests in military spending and national growth.



Another problem with many nonviolent action campaigns is that there is no clear underlying conception of how disarmament will be achieved through convincing the public of the necessity to act against nuclear war. Will the public swamp the government with letters opposing nuclear war and elect anti-war candidates? Or will professional soldiers and workers in arms factories go on strike for peace? To bring about permanent disarmament it will be necessary to dismantle military and military-related establishments and to create new social and political institutions which make impossible the regrowth of similar establishments. Nonviolent action campaigns seldom present a clear and unified picture of how this will come about. To be fair, there is currently perhaps not enough public support for moving in such directions to warrant mapping out blueprints for disarmament and institutional reconstruction. But without some fairly clear and generally understood picture of how such changes can take place, it is unlikely that anti-war nonviolent actions can achieve anything like their full potential.

What to do?

My own view, at least in its negative aspects, should be clear by now. An approach based on directly influencing decision-makers is pretty hopeless, because most decision-makers are closely

An approach based on influencing decision-makers via the public is more promising because it addresses an audience less tied to the military view of the world. But this approach still does not provide a basis for attaining mobilisation of the public except through persuasion based on knowledge and logic, and also depends ultimately on the implausible task of changing institutions via influencing decision-makers. An approach based on a primary focus on the public is yet more promising because it is based on methods which do not depend on influencing decision-makers, and which involve people in direct action themselves. But this approach still seems limited by the problem of mobilising people out of feelings of powerlessness and of overcoming security fears and beliefs.

I should emphasise again that all these approaches are needed, and especially more of the third. But what seems to be needed in addition is some demand or focus which can involve people in their daily lives, which provides education and positive stimulation in terms of doing something and which at the same time challenges in a fundamental way one or more of the underpinnings of the military state and its justifications.

Before discussing one such focus, it is worth referring to the importance of other social problems besides nuclear war. It is easy to become so conscious of

the paramount importance of the threat of nuclear war that other fundamental social problems, such as sexual and racial discrimination, exploitation of workers and degradation of the environment, seem less pressing. But these problems are all interlinked. In the opening paragraph of *One Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse highlights the connection:

'Does not the threat of an atomic catastrophe which could wipe out the human race also serve to protect the very forces which perpetuate this danger? The efforts to prevent such a catastrophe overshadow the search for its potential causes in contemporary industrial society. These causes remain unidentified, unexposed, unattacked by the public because they recede before the all too obvious threat from without — to the West from the East, to the East from the West.'¹²

The relation between repression and destruction is certainly no accident, and incidentally helps to explain why influencing decision-makers has been so uniformly unsuccessful. Nuclear war is a threat to humanity, and hence requires the continued existence of the protective and well-rewarded guardians of the danger.

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Due to this link, it can be argued that efforts in social movements which challenge repression and which empower the people are contributing indirectly to the struggle against nuclear war. And, of course, the contribution works in the other direction as well. One implication of this is the importance of close links between opponents of nuclear war and people working in other social movements, in terms of both formulation of issues and planning of campaigns. For the purposes here, the relevant point is that a demand which will involve people in their daily lives in efforts hindering nuclear war will be much more powerful if it also has close links with other social struggles.

Nonviolent community defence

One such example of such a demand is coordinated political and economic non-cooperation as a means for defence against military attack and takeover. This

example is not a final solution, but usefully illustrates the sorts of possibilities that might be investigated and tried out. On the other hand, there is considerable literature on nonviolent community defence¹³, so here I will only spell out its features as relevant to serving as a demand which encourages widespread community participation in actions which pose a fundamental threat to the militarised state.

The main idea of nonviolent community defence is that armaments are dispensed with, and opposition to organised aggression is based on organised noncooperation with the aggressor. In response to enemy invasion, resistance would take the form of strikes, refusal to obey orders, going slow on the job, attempts to convert individual invaders and mass civil disobedience. The actual tactics would depend on the nature of the aggression and the response of the invaders, but would be generally planned, agreed upon and rehearsed in advance of any potential attack.

The promise of this method as an actual means of defence is suggested by its success when used spontaneously in quite a number of historical examples¹⁴. With advance planning, serious study of tactics and wide community involvement, there is every reason to be optimistic about the success of nonviolent defence. On the other hand, quick and universal success could hardly be expected — but neither is this expected with violent defence, which has received immeasurably greater attention.¹⁵

In terms of mobilising public involvement in anti-war efforts, nonviolent defence has strong advantages. Because it involves people in directly doing something to replace violent methods, it can help overcome feelings of powerlessness. And it provides a direct answer to those who fear invasion, though it may not convince or involve many of these people initially.

Nonviolent defence obviously provides a direct threat to the groups with a vested interest in war preparations. It dispenses with the military machine as presently constituted. Furthermore, it depends more on decentralised cooperation for success than on centralised planning by elites and experts, and thus challenges the rationale for the existence of leading military decision-makers. On the other hand, nonviolent defence can be posed as a serious alternative to conventional violent military defence even in purely technical terms of effectiveness, especially in its usual formulations as nonviolent national defence. Therefore, nonviolent defence has the potential for appeal to a wide sector of the population and thus could serve as a transitional demand or nonreformist reform.¹⁶

Nonviolent defence also provides a direct threat to centralised political power. Once a community is organised to resist a foreign invader, the same techniques can be used against repressive governments. Governments have traditionally been eager to disarm their populations of weapons of violence, at least those weapons controlled by groups possibly a challenge to the supremacy of the government. But consider how much more difficult it would be to disarm populations experienced in techniques of nonviolent resistance.

In terms of links with other social movements, nonviolent defence has some strong points. In order to effectively resist control of production by an aggressor, it is necessary for workers to understand how to run factories and manage purchases and sales. This means they must have the capacity for workers' control. Members of the community would need to know how to run transport systems, grow crops, administer urgent medical treatment, and in general handle different jobs and tasks normally left to experts or specialists. This would have a restraining influence on discrimination and inequality. There thus exists a strong potential for linkage between movements for nonviolent defence, for workers' control and for community self-management.

Nonviolent defence does have some disadvantages. It tends to focus on preparation against attack rather than on peaceful living. It is usually considered as national defence and thus does little to challenge the threats posed by nationalism. And it does not provide any direct attack on existing institutions built around violent defence. There is also the question of the tactics used in a campaign to transarm from violent military defence to nonviolent defence. The tactics could be aimed at mobilising people by building new defence organisations parallel to the military, exchanging information and skills about production and vital services, and learning methods of nonviolent action. On the other hand, they could reduce mainly to lobbying decision-makers for implementation from above of nonviolent national defence, with arguments depending on the power of knowledge and logic. There is no guarantee inherent in the idea of nonviolent defence that its most challenging implications will be the focus of action.

Nevertheless, nonviolent defence seems to be a promising candidate as a demand fundamentally challenging to the military way of life and which involves people in their everyday life in actions creating this challenge. Many of its potential disadvantages might be overcome if it is promoted in conjunction with campaigns for world-wide human welfare and justice as a means for reducing between nations

and groups and making conflict less likely.

One last point, perhaps somewhat pessimistic, should be mentioned. It seems quite likely that a nuclear war will be fought in the next 10 to 20 years; certainly there is little evidence that any of the efforts discussed here will eradicate the roots of war within that length of time. Therefore, strategies and demands should be considered in the light of their relevance after such a war and also during it, since it is not guaranteed to be short. Surely, though, would not even military decision-makers recognise the folly of nuclear armament after the disaster of a nuclear war? On the record of past wars, the answer must be no. The more important question is, how much destruction will the earth suffer before people decide they must take their lives into their own hands?



APPENDIX

The Likely Consequences of a Nuclear War

Many people believe a major nuclear war would exterminate human life on earth, perhaps in the style of 'On the beach'. Opponents of nuclear war sometimes say that there are enough nuclear weapons in the world to kill everyone 24 times over (or whatever is the current figure). The reference to 'overkill 24' is based on a faulty extrapolation from the number killed at Hiroshima per unit of nuclear explosive power. Available studies¹⁷ suggest that a major nuclear war might kill 'only' several hundred million people, mostly in the United States, the Soviet Union and Europe, around a tenth of the world's population. The numbers killed depend on the nuclear targeting strategies adopted and of course on the firepower used. They could be smaller in a limited nuclear war or larger if war were followed by epidemic infectious disease or social breakdown.

Nuclear war in the northern hemisphere would directly affect the health of Australians mainly through a long term increase in cancers and genetic defects due to increased radioactive fallout. Indirect effects could include a collapse in imports and an influx of refugees from Europe and North America. However, nuclear strikes at Australia itself might well be expected due to the presence of U.S. bases.

Even if it does not wipe out the human species, nuclear war is so horrific that it would seem that there is no need to exaggerate its consequences. And presumably, opponents of nuclear war can be more effective if they are accurate and realistic in their assessments of the likely course of a possible nuclear war.

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