

# I N Q U I R I E S

## **The no-nukes syndrome**

### *The new Luddites*

**A**MERICANS OF ALL POLITICAL PERSUASIONS are beginning to realize that the best way to deal with any industry is to free it from all subsidies and controls and to subject it to the bracing discipline of the free market. We are already beginning to enjoy the benefits of deregulation of the airlines, and can anticipate similar easing of controls on the trucking industry and even, perhaps, on the railroads. One would think that the trend of opinion is to widen this spirit of decontrol to encompass all industries.

Yet one area of industrial activity seems consistently exempt from this trend. In the area of nuclear-generated power, opinion over the last few years has tended not toward deregulation and the elimination of subsidies, not toward abolishing or weakening the crippling regulations of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, not toward turning nuclear power over to the forces of the marketplace, but instead toward ever more extensive government regulation, to the point where the industry itself is in danger of being destroyed.

Government regulation has created grave problems in every industry it has touched, but only in the field of nuclear energy has the fashionable solution been to destroy the field itself. On its face, the cry of "no nukes" makes about as much sense as a call to shut down electricity to cure the regulatory ills of our public utilities. Yet demands to stop expansion of nuclear power or to shut down currently existing nuclear generators altogether have been the major political issue on college campuses for the last several years.

What is offered to justify such demands? Probably the weakest argument is that nuclear energy is a spinoff of wartime government activity and that for pacifist reasons the entire industry is irretrievably tainted and must be destroyed. But it would then follow that we would also have to abandon radar because it originated as a military device in World War II. It is an unfortunate fact of life that some—admittedly not many, but certainly some—products of continuing value that make life more tolerable are spawned by ill-willed men for the most pernicious motives. But it is as absurd to argue that the power of the atom should not be used for peaceful purposes because of its destructive origins as it would be to claim that we should stop any advances in rocketry and the use of rockets because the primary impetus to developments in the area came from Hitler's original desire to flatten London.

A more respectable argument against nukes is that they are particularly risky, and that therefore they must be banned. But the implications of this view are, at best, shaky. After all, everything in life is risky. Many thousands of people—including a high percentage of those not guilty of careless driving—

are killed in automobile accidents each year. Yet no one has suggested that we outlaw cars. Risk cannot be abolished by government fiat, and any attempt to do so would put us all in cages, spoon-fed by our masters. Certain dams in the United States could conceivably kill up to 200,000 people if they were to burst, yet no one has yet suggested the absurd notion of dismantling the hydroelectric power industry. More apposite to nuclear energy, all innovations tend to be risky; dealing with these risks and developing ways to minimize them is a learning process. In the early days of the Industrial Revolution, steam engines often blew up. If some Ralph Nader of the eighteenth century had succeeded in having steam engines banned, there might have been no Industrial Revolution and millions of people now prospering would have starved.

There is no evidence that nuclear energy is any riskier than anything else; in fact, the risk of a serious nuclear accident is far less than the risk of any given dam collapsing—and the number of injuries would be far higher should a dam collapse. The one legitimate complaint that opponents of nuclear power have is that the federal government, by means of the Price-Anderson Act, limits and underwrites the liability of nuclear power plants, so that it is possible that more nuclear power plants exist than would have been the case without this assumption of risk by the taxpayer. But surely the remedy here is obvious: It is not to destroy the nuclear industry but to repeal the Price-Anderson Act, and then see whether the industry will be economically viable without it. Indeed, only the test of the market, and not the endless palaver of protectors, writers, or even economists, can decide whether an unsubsidized nuclear industry would be economically viable.

There is another side to federal intervention, however. For while the Nuclear Regulatory Commission subsidizes the nuclear power industry, the commission—like all regulatory agencies—restricts and hobbles everything within its jurisdiction, raises costs, and renders the industry's firms inefficient. The construction of nuclear power plants is artificially delayed for years by NRC controls and red tape. Like all government agencies the NRC is sensitive to its public image and has paid increasingly close attention to "all sides" before making a decision to grant a power plant a license to operate. The hearing process now consumes more than ten years and requires the submission of millions of pages of documentation from those seeking permission to build and operate a nuclear plant. This has caused a massive escalation in capital costs so that it currently takes anywhere from \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion to bring a nuclear plant on line. It is anyone's guess, if both the NRC and the Price-Anderson Act were abolished, whether the private nuclear power industry would flourish in the absence of controls or wither from lack of subsidy. Again, the way to find out is by deregulation.

A third antinuclear argument holds that, in contrast to all other industries, nuclear energy is not simply risky but, by emitting low-level radiation, imposes unique damage on the population. In the scare phrase of the antinuclear forces, nuclear power plants impose "random" cancers on the populace. But, in fact, almost everything gives off the same low-level radiation as do nuclear plants. Every year, for example,

the stones of New York City's Grand Central Station give off more low-level radiation than is emitted by any single nuclear plant. The risks of acquiring cancer from low-level radiation are no higher from living near a nuclear power plant than they are from taking a plane trip from New York to Los Angeles. Are we to abolish airplanes, buildings, stones?

The average resident of the United States receives about 250 millirems annually from natural and man-made sources, outside of nuclear power plants. The additional dose imposed on the average American by the existence of the seventy-one nuclear power plants currently operating adds no more than .003 millirems. The NRC has determined that an annual dose of radiation of 500 millirems is well within any conceivable safety tolerances. And studies of the effects of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs have indicated no detectable cancers at any dose lower than 100,000 millirems/year. In other parts of the world, people have lived quite well for centuries around background radiation that sometimes reaches 88,000 millirems/year. In contrast, the total radiation released by nuclear power plants in the United States averages no more than 10,000 millirems per plant. Such a dose could be received only if one were to stand touching the plant wall without moving for one full year.

The antinuke propagandists have tried to counter these facts by claiming that the kind of radiation emitted by nuclear energy is qualitatively different from that given off by stones or buildings. But this argument is based on simple ignorance of what the unit of radiation—a rem—means. The measurement is based on the effect of radiation on human tissue, so that one rem of radiation emitted by one source has the same effects on the human body as one rem from any other source.

Beyond this, even though scientists and regulatory bodies all use a methodology known as the "linear hypothesis" to set tolerable radiation exposures, many scientists believe that this approach overstates the health hazards of radiation. There is no proof that very low levels of radiation absorbed over long periods of time have effects identical to those of large doses over a short period. But even if low-level radiation is harmful in proportionately small doses, banning nuclear power would eliminate only a very small fraction of this radiation.

The nineteenth-century economist Thomas Malthus theorized an ongoing poverty-ridden society constantly fighting for meager subsistence as the size of the population outraced the food supply. Many of the better-known antinuclear protesters—Barry Commoner, Ralph Nader, Paul Ehrlich, Tom Hayden, and Jane Fonda among them—jumped on a neo-Malthusian "population explosion" platform some years back. From this perspective they channeled their protest activities into an ecological crusade to "democratize" American industry, based on the notion that industrialization itself was both dangerous and ugly. In so doing, they have become the twentieth century's Luddites, opposed in principle to the only salvation from the poverty and sickness that they profess to seek to minimize. Malthus's theoretical system was invalidated by his failure to allow for technical change. The modern neo-Malthusian Luddites have improved on his vision by simply condemning technical change as evil, thereby creating an upside-down world where progress itself is constantly on trial. No industry can prove a negative: that is, that its techniques and output are safe. Under our system of law, it is up to those who feel they are injured to show such injury. To operate a nation on any other assumption is to invite a retrograde move to the caves where, like it or not, those individuals remaining would bombard themselves with the low-level radiation from the potassium in their blood streams. ■

## The new flying Führerbunker

# Last call, Holocaust Airlines

**L**ET US CONSIDER PRESIDENTIAL Directive 58. Number 59 (see p. 10) discusses Mr. Carter's plans for a more precise holocaust. Number 58 is the getaway plan by which the President and his gang will blow Washington for safer climes before Washington itself blows. In the more sober words of Richard Burt, the Defense Department press agent at the *New York Times*, Number 58 was issued to achieve "more effective procedures for protecting civilian and military leaders in event of nuclear war." Civilian leaders such as the President and his cabinet, for example.

These are not altogether new plans. Just as pyromaniacs always lay out their own escape routes, so all nuclear-age American presidents have taken care to provide for their own postholocaust survival. During Eisenhower's tenure, bunkers were provided for the President and Congress. Though not especially effective (need we recall the final hours of Adolf and Eva in the Führerbunker?), they were reassuring to Americans who still remembered the courage of Churchill during the blitz. With the sixties and the seventies, however, there came progress: And the presidents turned to the heavens. No bunker could be completely bombproof, the Pentagon pointed out. But if the best and the brightest were airborne, skittering hither and thither, dodging mushroom clouds, surely then they would be safe. For born-again Christians it would be proof positive of life after death. So it was that the Holocaust Command went airborne, with the code name, Kneecap.

This has been the plan, more or less, for almost twenty years. The planes and the presidents have changed. Directive 58 is merely the latest refinement. Now the President and his cabinet and his computers (which talk to each other in a private language called JOVIAL) will be able to buzz around for up to seventy-two hours in a specially equipped jumbo jet that is kept ever ready somewhere outside Washington.

Directive 58 is meant to assure all Americans that through the preservation of our leader, we shall all earn eternal life—a kind of reverse Eucharist, as if by breaking the bodies of the multitudes Jesus would have survived the Crucifixion. Despite the new assurances, however, some problems have arisen, and we can only hope that they are corrected.

First, of course, is the matter of the roll call, or, as it is often called, the "Survivors List" of Americans who will provide "essential and noninterruptible services." Sometimes the select are simply called "the noninterruptibles." Cabinet members are all noninterruptible, as are the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon. Some members of Congress are.

Periodic holocaust drills have revealed other disturbing problems. Heretofore, the arrangement has been for a helicopter to swoop onto the Washington Mall as soon as the alert is sounded. Instantly each cabinet officer—or more frequently, his immediate subordinate, for the purposes of the drill—summons his personal chauffeur and the two race down to the mall. The ever faithful servant then whisks his boss from the limousine, helps him hobble across the grass to the hovering

chopper, and waves loyally as the load of noninterruptibles soars to safety. All went well until a drill in November 1978 had to be cancelled because of slippery streets.

Some skeptics have also asked whether the chauffeurs might not reassess their priorities should the real thing happen, since they have not been assigned seats on the helicopter. The chauffeurs might of course petition for bunker status as the price of ultimate loyalty, but if they do so they will have to compete with at least four thousand others who already hold such reservations. According to one detailed report, the vast Mt. Weather facility in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia holds priority space for selected construction workers who own their own bulldozers. Their services have been deemed vital, civil defense analysts explain, because of the pressing need for mass graves following any thermonuclear war.

Once airborne, the noninterruptibles may also face their own special dilemmas. Work is continuing on how to overcome the aggravating radio static resulting from 80-megaton blasts, and it has been proposed that windows be omitted from the command plane so that the President could more easily avoid glancing at the unsightly nuclear eczema down below.

Still there remains the troubling matter of intense radiation, against which the aluminum and magnesium skins of most airplanes provide inadequate protection. Imagine how distressed the citizenry might become if in their last heaves of radiation sickness they were to look up into the night and see their President's plane glowing like a giant radium dial.

Therefore, as a final gesture of loyalty to the survival of the noninterruptibles, we the interruptibles propose a national citizens' drive for the collection of unused bullets. Once gathered they can be melted down and transformed into a giant lead-plated DC-10 into which all current noninterruptibles and all declared candidates for the post of top noninterruptible will be given a test flight into the eye of a nuclear firestorm, thereby opening the way to a new millennium of genuinely uninterrupted peace. □

## ***Deregulating cable***

# *Clear the airwaves*

**T**HE FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSIONS's recent repeal of two of its most significant restraints against cable television represents a triumph for the American consumer. In the wake of decisions by the Civil Aeronautics Board and the Interstate Commerce Commission to free their respective industries from stultifying regulation, the FCC's action marks a major step forward in letting the marketplace, not government bureaucrats, discover and serve consumer needs.

The decision, adopted by a 4-to-3 vote of the commissioners, frees cable systems from previous limits on the number of distant signals they may carry, and lifts restrictions on their right to carry syndicated programs that duplicate the fare shown by local stations.

Naturally, broadcasters and other protected groups in the broadcasting industry are howling bitterly against the "dangers" of competition. Several TV station owners have filed legal appeals in the federal courts to block the FCC decision,

arguing that it threatens to snuff out local independent stations. The National Association of Broadcasters, the Motion Picture Association, and the Association of Independent Television Stations are taking up arms to stuff the cable genie back into its bottle. After all, they have never before had to work for their profits; government franchises did the trick. But now the value of those franchises is in doubt.

These industry associations, of course, assure us that they have only the best interests of the consumer at heart. A National Association of Broadcasters' report warned a couple of years ago that cable would "transmit borderline pornography, deceptive and irresponsible advertising, subversive propaganda, the outpourings of the lunatic fringe and the appeals of countless others whose appearances have thus far been minimized by broadcasters' responsibility to program in the public interest." Since the FCC adopted its new ruling, NBC has attacked cable as a threat to broadcasters who serve their local communities (since when was NBC concerned with the quality of local programming?), and ABC has called for Congress to "rectify the unfair competition" posed by deregulated cable.

Judging by the number of investors rushing to get into the highly profitable cable business, it would appear that consumers have long been thirsting for a little of that "unfair competition" as an alternative to the cozy, uncompetitive world of network TV. Since cable systems offer a nearly unlimited number of channels and cover much larger markets than do individual broadcast stations, they can profitably afford to supply programming to minority markets that the networks ignore. Consumers are happy to pay for this service, and cable firms are happy to make a profit by satisfying these needs.

If the broadcasters would now play the role of spoilers, they are not solely to blame. After all, for more than thirty years the FCC has thrown up spurious "public interest" doctrines to shackle competitive forces in the television business. This anticompetitive thrust was embodied in the FCC's allocation doctrine, which limited the number and range of stations in each community, and in the policy of "localism," which forced stations to adopt unprofitable (because often unwanted) locally oriented programming.

Because cable is inherently nonlocal, the FCC has long tried to hamper and constrict the new technology. In 1965, as cable companies were beginning to sprout up all over the United States, the FCC began throwing roadblocks in the way of further expansion. It prohibited pay-TV from competing for programming with broadcast stations, limited cable companies' access to microwave facilities, and froze any further importation of distant signals. Finally, the FCC demanded that new cable networks provide as many as four public access channels, at virtually no charge to users, under the doctrine of "localism." Fortunately, a federal appeals court ruled two years ago that the FCC had exceeded its mandate, and had probably violated the first and fifth amendments of the Constitution to boot.

Now, at last, a bare majority of the commission has acknowledged the value of consumer choice and the benefits of competition. Unfortunately, the FCC defends its decision with the assertion that broadcasters will lose neither audiences nor profits to cable. But should that empirical claim be proven false, will the FCC then reverse its course? If broadcasters fail the stiff test of the market, will government regulators once again rush to the aid of their client industry? Will technological progress be subverted by the political demands of a declining industry? As long as the industry remains subject to the whims of a government regulatory apparatus, these scenarios must be taken seriously. The fight is not yet over. □

# LETTERS

**Letters to the editor should be addressed to INQUIRY Magazine, 747 Front St., San Francisco, California 94111. The editors reserve the right to edit letters for length when necessary.**

## **The good, the bad, and Darth Vader**

**A**RE YOU FOLKS AT INQUIRY running some sort of good-bad review contest? One issue your readers are treated to cogent and thought-provoking film reviews by Diane Jacobs; the next there is gibberish from Elliott Stein. Mr. Stein's review of *The Empire Strikes Back* [July 7 & 21] is a classic example of how not to review a film. I can accept that he did not like the movie (although I don't understand why); however, what I can't forgive is his wholesale stupidity in giving the plot surprises away. It may shock Mr. Stein to know that there are some people who may want to defy his edicts and discover a film's nuances for themselves. I can just imagine the first line of an Elliott Stein review of *Citizen Kane*: "Rosebud is a sled."

TERRY JACKSON  
Sacramento, Calif.

With the September 1 issue, Stephen Harvey returned as INQUIRY's regular film critic.

—THE EDITORS

## **Symbols of abuse**

**I**N ANSWER TO THE LETTER in your Aug. 4 & 18 issue in which Richard Fuerle stated, "A picture of a woman being abused . . . is only a piece of paper with ink on it," let me say that the statement astounded me. Mr. Fuerle seems not to realize that the printing press altered civilization. The *Communist Manifesto*, just marks on paper, sparked a revolution. Hitler's *Mein Kampf* expressed ideas that underlay a program of genocide. The "word" in the Bible has converted the souls of thousands of people. Picasso's splashes of paint on canvas touch deep aesthetic sensibilities.

Women Against Pornography members are sophisticated enough to know that there is a distinction between symbols and acts but they also know that our minds create, communicate, and react to symbols. There is an intimate interrela-

tionship among thoughts, words/pictures, and deeds. It is simple-minded to believe otherwise. Pornographic stories and pictures nourish a male mentality that gets turned on by the abuse of women.

JOANNE R. BRONARS  
Elmont, N.Y.



## **Teen-age heartbreak**

**T**HERE IS A MORE REALISTIC and down-to-earth perspective on the Stein sisters case than that which Nat Hentoff offers [July 7 & 21].

Granted, a thoughtful and generous-spirited school board might have chosen a commencement date when all graduating seniors could attend. One wishes they had had the decency to do so. But bureaucrats aren't noted for decency or thoughtfulness, and they chose otherwise.

This presented Susan and Lynn Stein with a scheduling conflict and a disappointment—something that occurs in every life more or less often. There is certainly no interference with their free exercise of religion, since they are free to choose their Sabbath observance over the commencement exercise. Nor do they suffer any terrible, warping deprivation if they miss the commencement. For despite the overblown legal rhetoric about a once-in-a-lifetime event that one remembers forever, we can be sure that most adults retain only the dimmest recollection of this briefly important event. The real concerns of living quickly overtake our memories of that hour or two in an overheated gym. Kept in its proper perspective, it is a big teen-age disappointment, little more, that confronts Susan and Lynn.

What's notable about this case, and characteristic of our time, is that the sisters (or their parents) find this inconvenience and disappointment so intolerable that they are willing to invoke the power of the court to force thousands of other students to accommodate the scheduling problems of these two. This

readiness to dictate to the rest of the community is undoubtedly what the other students reacted against, recognizing the girls' behavior as self-centered, unattractive, and overbearing. The students' lack of sympathy need not be characterized as "celebrating the sisters' pain" or as anti-Semitic in origin. It is

just a normal, healthy reaction against aggressive me-firstism.

Of course, the Steins' litigiousness is hardly unique. The inclination to seek courtroom remedies for life's every little inconvenience (often with tortuously contrived constitutional arguments) is a thriving and destructive trend in our society. So is the courts' frequent readiness to take these frivolous actions seriously and grant relief.

In denying the sisters' claim, Judge Middleton showed uncommon good sense for our times. And the usually astute Nat Hentoff has been amazingly suckered by the rhetoric of lawyers who cynically invoke constitutional protection in a trivial cause. If that cause should succeed on appeal, it will only cheapen—not vitalize—the First Amendment.

WILLIAM EWINGSON  
Evanston, Ill.

## **Subsidized veterans**

**R**E. THE VIOLATION OF THE autonomy of the individual in VA hospitals [July 7 & 21] by physicians (which you people describe as "doctors" as if there were somehow a relationship between the status of possessing an earned doctoral degree and that of working in a medical vocation), the real underlying crime is the system of emoluments and supports, such as the VA hospitals, which provides medical care irrelevant to and unconnected with any service time injury.

TOMMY W. ROGERS  
Jackson, Miss.