

An essay review of "Men Who Play God: The Story of the H-Bomb and How the World Came to Live with It," by Norman Moss (Harper & Row, 352 pp., \$6.95)



## Absurdity and Common Sense: Coping with Nuclear Weapons

by ROBERT JAY LIFTON

There are two constructive approaches to the bomb—that of nuclear common sense, and that of what I would call nuclear absurdity. Nuclear common sense insists that we start from where we are now, with the bomb inhabiting our world, and then, on the basis of careful political and technical calculations, take small, prudent steps toward controlling the weapon and preventing its use, always with an eye toward what is possible. Nuclear absurdity, in contrast, involves an image of our weaponry as preposterous and grotesque in its capacity to extinguish our species many times over, and leads to such iconoclastic stances as nuclear abolitionism, social and political revolution, and an over-all world view dominated by mockery.

The two approaches co-exist, often even in the same mind, and each needs the other. Nuclear common sense alone can too easily lead to settling for much less than is needed, to the illusion of security through deterrence, and to other dubious expressions of "nuclear realism." Nuclear absurdity alone can move toward empty moralism, or even toward various forms of holocaust in the name of preventing same. Most people are able to accept a version of nuclear common sense, but few have recognized the necessity for what I would view as the more fundamental image of nuclear absurdity as the means for providing the only kind of feeling-tone around which adequate nuclear common sense can be mobilized.

A true sense of nuclear absurdity, then, requires one to keep asking, how

do we go on making, living with, generally accepting weapons whose only effect, if used, could be genocide? The question plunges us into the most intractable of our psychological and historical dilemmas. At issue is man's perverse capacity for the kind of pseudo-adaptation that can lead to his self-annihilation. Yet we have been shockingly lax in examining the strange new phenomenon of co-existing with the instruments that might put an end to that segment of human evolution we call history.

Norman Moss thus directs his inquiry about the hydrogen bomb to such questions as "how and why it was created, the way people learned to use it and not to use it, and how a place was found for it in the world." Significantly, he prefaces *Men Who Play God* with Winston Churchill's observation that "The atomic bomb, with all its terrors, did not carry us outside the scope of human control or manageable events, in thought or action, in peace or war. But . . . [with] the hydrogen bomb, the entire foundation of human affairs was revolutionized, and mankind placed in a situation both measureless and laden with doom." One could of course argue that the hydrogen bomb itself is merely a continuation of the weapons revolution initiated by the atomic bomb, but we in any case do well to note the revolutionary nature of the "measurelessness" Churchill referred to.

Moss narrates skillfully enough the sequence of events leading to the crucial decision, made during the last three months of 1949, to produce the hydrogen bomb. But when we read of the refreshing sense of nuclear absurdity expressed by James Conant (then president of Harvard and a member of the General Advisory Committee of the Atomic Energy Commission), upon re-

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ROBERT JAY LIFTON, author of *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, which won a 1969 National Book Award, is research professor of psychiatry at Yale.

calling his and others' similar involvements with the atomic bomb—"This whole discussion makes me feel I'm seeing the same film, and a punk one, for the second time"—we begin to wonder about the extent to which any descriptive account of events such as these tends to mute or even block out the moments of greatest wisdom. Actually, a nice combination of that absurdity and of nuclear common sense prevailed on the Committee, as particularly revealed in a sentence Moss quotes from its majority report: "In determining not to proceed to develop the super [hydrogen] bomb, we see a unique opportunity of providing by example some limitations on the totality of war, and thus eliminating the fear and rousing the hopes of mankind." Why then could scientists like Ernest Lawrence and Edward Teller, and politician-administrators like Brien McMahon and Lewis L. Strauss have their way and get the bomb built?

Moss cogently puts forth a number of reasons. There was the fascination with technology, which David Lilienthal (then head of the Atomic Energy Commission, and in retrospect an admirable opponent of the hydrogen bomb) characterized as "gadget-mindedness." Robert Oppenheimer later described the same tendency with characteristic eloquence: "It is my judgment in these things that when you see something that is technically sweet, you go ahead and do it, and you argue about what to do about it only after you have had your technical success." There was the sense of American responsibility for world leadership (however corrupting, that sense could

also be genuine) and fear that, as Moss puts it, "to renounce such a weapon might mean giving the power to the most unscrupulous." There was the news (in September) of "Joe One," that is, of Russia's own atomic bomb (named with the usual combination of breeziness and domestication); and a little later (early February 1950), of Klaus Fuchs's espionage activities on behalf of the Soviet Union, after having had a prominent part in the making of the atomic bomb as a member of the British Los Alamos contingent. There was the belief that an American decision to produce the "super" would coerce Russia into international agreement. This was the position of Defense Secretary Louis Johnson who, with Lilienthal and Secretary of State Dean Acheson, served on a three-man Special Committee appointed by President Truman to advise him on the hydrogen-bomb question. With Johnson and Lilienthal directly opposed to one another, Acheson eventually shaped a "compromise" recommendation that America go ahead with the bomb program but only to determine its technical feasibility and not to produce it as a weapon, a distinction that never meant much and that was soon swept away in favor of the Defense Department's request for "all-out delivery of hydrogen bombs."

And, finally, there was the impulse to harness the bomb's power in the name of absolute American purity or, as McMahon put it, to possess the bomb's "total power" in order to confront Russia's "total evil." Here possession of the bomb becomes linked with patterns of what I have elsewhere

called "ideological totalitarian," stemming from chauvinistic forces throughout the American body politic; not only did President Truman feel these pressures keenly in making his decision, but one suspects that he himself was not entirely immune from such totalitarianism.

What Moss does not say is that all of these "reasons" for making the hydrogen bomb were manifestations of a malignant twentieth-century aberration best termed "nuclearism." Nuclearism involves the passionate embrace of these weapons as a solution to our anxieties, a quest for ultimate power, and especially power over the nuclear death that haunts us, through possession of the agent of that death. Nuclearism is perhaps the ultimate expression of psychological distortion in our relationship to technology. It is not so much the question of man playing God, as Moss's title suggests, as of man creating a thing he then worships as God.

Reading through Moss's fair-minded account, one is appalled by the primitive level of thought about the hydrogen bomb in official American circles. There were notable exceptions: the views of Lilienthal mentioned earlier; Oppenheimer's worry "that this thing appears to have caught the imagination of both the congressional and the military people as *the* answer to the problem posed by the Russian advance" (Oppenheimer was here struggling to move away from whatever nuclearism was contained in his earlier position concerning the atomic bomb, and the shift was a very important factor in his later personal inquisition); and George Kennan's wise plea that we direct our attention to America's staggering international problems rather than seek escape from these problems through new instruments of destruction. Would that Kennan had similar wisdom in his more recent exchanges with student rebels. But in general one is struck by the terrible gap between technology and moral imagination, prevailing then as now, together with the paucity of effort—other than that of the people mentioned and of a few other nuclear scientists—in the direction of moral suasion and national education concerning a problem unprecedented not only in its dimensions but in its complexities.

At the beginning of his book Moss quotes a conversational exchange from C. P. Snow's novel *The New Men*: "Sometimes, events get too big for people." "But we've got to act as if they are not." One can hardly question the first part of the quotation. As for the second, men would do better to

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Conducted by David M. Glixon

### TITLES IN DISGUISE

Richard E. Turner of Glassboro, N.J., has paraphrased the titles of works by fifteen authors. Can you restore the former and assign the right one to each of the latter? Answers on page 32.

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|----------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------------|---------------|
| 1. <i>No Hope of Eden</i> ( )    | a. Austen   | 10. <i>The Unlit Core</i> ( )        | j. Galsworthy |
| 2. <i>Gramineous Blades</i> ( )  | b. Bennett  | 11. <i>The Desolate Dwelling</i> ( ) | k. Golding    |
| 3. <i>Verdant Villas</i> ( )     | c. Buck     | 12. <i>Summer's Brightness</i> ( )   | l. Hemingway  |
| 4. <i>The Soil Is Barren</i> ( ) | d. Conrad   | 13. <i>Jack Untamed</i> ( )          | m. Hudson     |
| 5. <i>The Soil Behaves</i> ( )   | e. Darwin   | 14. <i>Of Human Lineage</i> ( )      | n. Mann       |
| 6. <i>Master of Diptera</i> ( )  | f. Dickens  | 15. <i>The Crones' Narrative</i> ( ) | o. Milton     |
| 7. <i>So Long, Limbs</i> ( )     | g. Eliot    | 16. <i>Real-Estate Chap</i> ( )      | p. Whitman    |
| 8. <i>Conjuror's Peak</i> ( )    | h. Faulkner |                                      |               |
| 9. <i>Hubris and Bigotry</i> ( ) | i. Fielding |                                      |               |