

Extinction: new twist to horrors of nuclear war

One of the byproducts of living in an age capable of devising weapons as fearsome as the atomic bomb is the apocalyptic quality of journalistic rhetoric on the subject. It seems to be a law of nature, or at any rate of journalism, that any major scientific development will be seized on by imaginative writers and quickly pushed through, past all sorts of intervening obstacles, to what they fondly

Thanks to increases in the total number of atomic weapons, and "improvements" in their performance, Schell calculates that a nuclear war would, or at any rate might, result not only in the immediate deaths of hundreds of millions of people but, thanks to the consequent poisoning of the environment by radiation, etc., in the subsequent extinction of all human life: i.e., of the species itself.

Having constructed that mighty gong, Schell banged it three times in the *New Yorker*, then published the articles as a book. It is being hailed by Americans numerous phonophiles (a word I have just invented, meaning "people who love to be frightened") as the best high since cocaine.

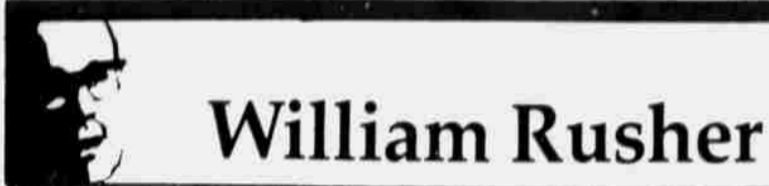
Where all this is supposed to leave the world's policy-makers Schell doesn't say; apparently inventing his grisly scenario exhausted his creativity. For what it's worth, however, it bears noting that the vast majority of serious thinkers on both sides of the Iron Curtain reject Schell's conclusion. Any nuclear war would be ghastly, even "unthinkable" if you wish; but extinction of the human species is not in fact a technically plausible consequence

of one.

The political effect of this Schell game, therefore, is simply to further mobilize (on this side of the Iron Curtain only) those individuals and institutions for whom hysterical collapse — a pure blue funk — is the unstated objective. Day by day they are edging closer to the moment when they will say, in one vast exhalation, what they are really thinking: "Yes — give up! Let the Russians have it all. Better — far better — Red than dead, because the dead can never again stand for anything at all."

The sooner they say it, the better, as far as I'm concerned. For then the rest of the free world, that far larger part of it that keeps a grip on reality and has noticed that the sheer existence of these awesome weapons has kept pace between the superpowers ever since they were invented, can begin to be heard from. Is it, after all, so utterly impossible that if major governments have developed the ability to make such weapons, they may simultaneously have developed the sense not to let matters get to a point where they must use them?

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William Rusher

regard as its logical conclusion, for good or ill.

In the case of the atom bomb, extinction was from the very start the name of the game, and it has had a perverse fascination for many intellectuals. About 20 years ago, the description of the horrors of nuclear war became a cottage industry, but recently that industry has been in a recession. To the rescue comes Jonathan Schell, who has a new twist.

Reagan's nuclear scare backfires to own nation

In the car the other day, my son started to talk about nuclear war. He thinks it's a possibility, and because he is young and does not want to die young he considers nuclear war "unfair." It's his favorite word, but there is, for the moment, none better.

He is not the only one talking about nuclear warfare these days. The *New Yorker*, which can usually guarantee an article obscurity simply by publishing it, in February



Richard Cohen

ran a three-part series on nuclear war by Jonathon Schell, and people are still talking about it. *Esquire* did one on civil defense and *Time* had the bomb on its cover.

Those of us with a memory have been through this before. The late 1940s were rough and the '50s were no fun either. We learned how to take cover under the school-room desks. We were marched into the hallway and told which way to face. We were told never to look into the blast and to cover the backs of our necks and to listen to

our teachers. It was silly, but after a while it all went away.

Now it is back and the reason is that the Cold War is back too. Ronald Reagan and Alexander Haig and Caspar Weinberger, with their talk of limited nuclear war and firing nuclear warning shots, their tough rhetoric and their incessant military posturing, have given the whole country the willies. They want us to face facts, but the facts they want us to face are truly horrible.

There are about 50,000 nuclear warheads in the world — Hiroshima and Hiroshima and Hiroshima over and over again until you get to 50,000. The Hiroshima bomb, 12.5 kilotons, was a puny affair. Still, it leveled the city and killed half the people in it. Nowadays, Jonathon Schell writes, "It would be classed among the merely tactical weapons."

For most of us, nuclear war, like one's own death, is unthinkable, and so we have left the thinking of it to others. But what is refreshing about what is happening now is the apparent refusal of lots of people to accept nuclear war as one accepts the inevitability of death itself.

These are people who now are saying that something can be done, that the fate of the world is in the hands of

the people of the world. This was the message of the anti-nuclear rallies of Western Europe. They weren't so much anti-American as pro-life — a statement by the people that they were no longer going to leave nuclear policy to the professionals.

Now the same thing is happening here. Only instead of the administration seeing that we are all on the same side — that when it comes to the nuclear issue there is no other side — it senses a fifth column, a softness, a break in our resolve on which the Russians will capitalize. Reagan's people fear the Russians will sense that we are afraid of nuclear war. The trouble is, this cannot be news to them.

So the drumbeat of belligerence continues. As a nation, we have our dukes up. Our defense budget will grow. We are no longer the 90-pound weakling of the Jimmy Carter era, but a broad-shouldered country, seeking to show that no country can kick sand in our face.

All this has revived and exacerbated the fears about Ronald Reagan that came out during the presidential campaign. He set out to scare the Russians, but he's scared us instead.

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