

Rutherford H. Platt: A nuclear theater of the absurd

By RUTHERFORD H. PLATT

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NORTHAMPTON — Doctors Andrew Larkin and Ira Helfand in their columns marking the 70th anniversary of the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima (Gazette, Aug. 6) remind us once again that this planet remains on the slippery slope to self-annihilation.

Amid a whirlwind of competing threats — climate change, natural disasters, economic instability, epidemics, racism, and the international immigration crisis — it is so easy to ignore that we remain on the precipice of nuclear catastrophe from accident, miscalculation, or deliberate intent.

The official rationale for our nuclear build-up during the Cold War was “deterrence.” We and the Soviet Union could easily destroy each other in minutes with our vast arsenals of nuclear weapons packed into submarines, bombers and “silos” in the middle of nowhere. The doctrine of “mutually assured destruction” (with the apt acronym MAD) may or may not have “worked” but at least Armageddon was postponed.

But in 2015, the United States continues to wage the Cold War with huge contracts for new generations of missile submarines. Any of the 14 Ohio-class SSBN nuclear submarines now in service, each armed with 24 multiple-warhead Trident missiles, can reduce civilization to ashes.

What is the rationale for maintaining and updating such doomsday machines? Who do they “deter” today when their use would be suicidal?

Much of the nuclear arms race has been a theater of the absurd as parodied in the 1964 movie classic, “Dr. ? Strangelove.” Like Larkin, I vaguely recall those preposterous “drills” in the 1950s when schoolchildren hid under their desks during a hypothetical nuclear attack. The Cuban Missile Crisis perhaps ended the infantile era of “Duck and Cover.”

An even more absurd scam was developed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency starting in 1979. According to consultants at the Battelle Institute, the United States could survive a nuclear war by evacuating all our cities and sending 150 million people to hang out in small towns, supposedly beyond the reach of fallout.

This brilliant idea, solemnly named “Crisis Relocation Planning” (CRP), became gospel for the Reagan administration which wanted to believe that we could launch a pre-emptive strike and “survive” a retaliatory response. The Physicians for Social Responsibility assailed such planning in its book “The Counterfeit Ark: Crisis Relocation for Nuclear War” (1983), edited by Dr. Jennifer Leaning and others.

Political cartoonists had a field day.

But absurdity is no barrier to bureaucratic “groupthink.” FEMA hired contractors to prepare hundreds of “plans” to evacuate cities from New York to San Diego. While these were deliberately concealed in most cases from the general public (to avoid more cartoons perhaps), the program was cited by administration officials as reassurance that nuclear

war was just a little worse than an earthquake or hurricane and FEMA would protect us, or at least 80 percent of us — the planners conceded 40 million might not make it.

Full disclosure: In the 1980s I had extensive contacts with FEMA as a researcher and occasional consultant on the National Flood Insurance Program. I also served on the Board of Visitors for FEMA's Emergency Management Institute in Emmitsburg, Maryland, which I chaired for one year.

While we "visitors" were invited to review FEMA's training program for natural disaster responders, we naturally were curious about the highly secret nuclear war planning literally going on beneath our feet in bunkers below the EMI campus. That and the mysterious "Fifth Floor" at FEMA headquarters were the seedbeds of the CRP obsession.

My mole's eye view (so to speak) aroused me to dig further into this particular form of nuclear lunacy.

Back at UMass, I devoted a semester seminar in 1983 to evaluating CRP in relation to an actual nearby "host community," namely Greenfield.

The federal/state CRP plan for Greenfield (which the town had not seen) allocated 158,000 refugees from eastern Massachusetts to be "hosted" by Greenfield, a town of 18,000. Another 209,000 were assigned to even smaller towns near Greenfield like Shelburne, Buckland, Gill and Northfield. That would be 395,000 people suddenly turning up in Greenfield and its rural neighbors. Add to that thousands more who got stuck there on their way somewhere else.

OK — assume that it works as planned and they actually get to Greenfield somehow before the war starts. Then what?

The students had a field day tracking down data on Greenfield's limited inventories of food, water, fuel, medical supplies and space for sheltering the hordes.

Among the "fall-out shelters" identified in the CRP plan was the hulk of the Millers Falls Tool factory which the experts in Boston had not discovered was lacking in power, water and windows.

The class made a presentation to the town Select Board which was utterly amazed to learn of their responsibilities from my students. (They asked to keep our copy of the plan.) I subsequently wrote up our findings as a commentary in the Journal of the American Planning Association (Summer, 1984).

CRP withered away after the Reagan years and other acronymic panaceas were invented.

But the biggest absurdity of all is why we allow our government to continue waging the Cold War at endless cost to the nation and at the risk of all humankind.

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