How Many Mistakes Have You Made Today?

Nuclear Weapons Accidents and U.S. Responsibility

In the early morning of September 19, 1980, a nuclear missile silo in Damascus, Arkansas exploded, blowing the missile 600 feet away, killing an Air Force officer and leading to the temporary evacuation of a thousand people in the area. The accident came about when a single wrench dropped by a mechanic struck the missile's fuel tank.[1] Fortunately, this was a 'conventonal' explosion: the warhead itself was not armed; if *it* had exploded, many thousands would have died from the blast and resultant firestorm and radiation release, even in such a rural area. This was not the first fire and explosion associated with nuclear missile sites, nor the most serious. At Arkansas missile sites alone, eight fuel leakage accidents occurred in 1979 and 1980. And in August, 1965, 53 men died in a fuel accident when Titan I missiles were being converted into Titan II's in Arkansas.[2]

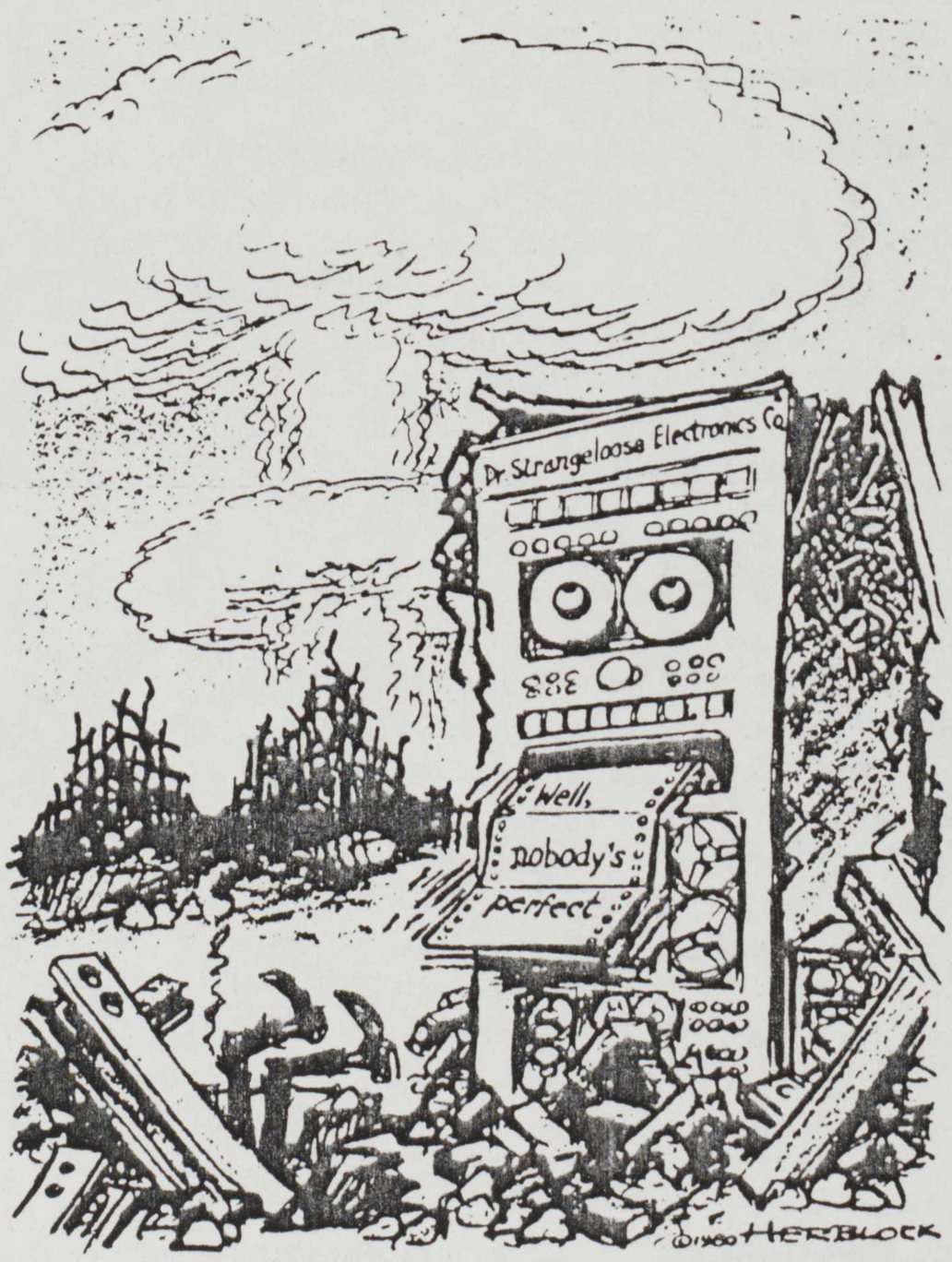
More threatening nuclear weapons accidents have occurred in New Jersey, Maryland, Ohio, California, Texas, Kentucky, Georgia and Washington, as well as Morocco, Greenland and Spain—between 37 and 52 publicly known in all, not including accidents involving weapons of the other nuclear nations.[3] (Because by policy the Pentagon says as little as possible about accidents, their number and seriousness are often hard to determine.)

Several accidents, called 'Broken Arrows' by the Pentagon, came about when Strategic Air Command bombers, usually B-52's, carried nuclear weapons strapped to their bellies during periods of acute international tension, and crashed or had to jettison their weapons. In one instance, on January 23, 1961, two 24-megaton hydrogen bombs were dropped over Goldsboro, North Carolina; of six interlocking safety catches keeping each bomb from exploding, five failed on one of them.[4] A 24-megaton bomb has the explosive power of 24 million tons of TNT. This is equivalent to 1800 Hiroshima bombs, or more than three times all the bombs dropped on Viet Nam. The other bomb was never recovered.[5]

Another hydrogen bomb was dropped on March 11, 1958 in the back yard of a South Carolina farming family, setting off a one ton TNT conventional explosion thast demolished the farmhouse, for which the family was two years later awarded $43,000 to rebuild their lives.[6] On June 7, 1960, a Bomarc missile at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey had somehow been propped up for launch and was on fire.[7] On other shores, on January 17, 1966, a B-52 crash in Palomares, Spain scattered four hydrogen bombs across the countryside, releasing radioactive plutonium as well.[8] Soviet Premier Kruschev once reportedly said that a Soviet missile had to be destroyed in flight on its way to Alaska.[9]

"This will continue to happen in all parts of the world as these weapons are dispersed," according to Daniel Ellsberg. "The other countries are likely to have much worse safety devices—which are expensive and complicated—than we have."[10] And yet U.S. corporations such as Westinghouse, boosted by the Export-Import Bank, continue to sell nuclear technology to developing countries, including South Korea, the Phillipines and Brazil, despite the known dangers of accident.[11]

As our nuclear arsenal grows in both size and complexity, the chance for human error also increases. The U.S. has more than 30,000 nuclear warheads. About 120,000 people have access to nuclear weapons or weapons material.[12] Congressperson Les Aspin revealed that "in 1976 alone the Pentagon had to transfer almost 5,000 personnel who had access to nuclear weapons because their chronic use of drugs and alchohol made them unreliable."[13] It is no wonder, though, that personnel guarding nuclear weapons experience extreme pressure. Is it fair to any of us in the world to force upon one person, or two people, the responsibility-the power-over a million lives? As long as nuclear weapons exist this power will exist also. And shouldn't we be worried about the judgement of those not disqualified for duty when a primary basis used by the military for determining reliability is a "positive attitude toward nuclear weapon duty"?[14]



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