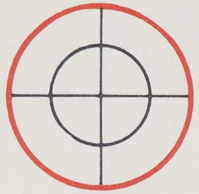


MAHA, Nebraska, is a typical midwestern town—typical except that it is less than 15 miles away from the Strategic Air Command, the control center for all of America's strategic nuclear forces. What would happen if a 15 megaton nuclear weapon exploded over SAC headquarters?

In a 1981 broadcast of *CBS Reports: The Defense of the United States—Ground Zero,* Dr. H. Jack Geiger, Logan Professor of Community Medicine at the City College of New York and a prominent spokesman for Physicians for Social Responsibility, described the physical and medical effects of such an attack on the people of Omaha.

"15 megatons is 1,200 Hiroshima explosions at the same moment in the same place, and there is simply nothing in human experience that serves as a precedent for such immense destruction.

"In the seconds following detonation, the bomb would create a huge fireball with temperatures of twenty to thirty million degrees Fahrenheit. Anyone even glancing at the fireball—from as far away as 35 miles—would be blinded by retinal burning. Tens of thousands of people on the side of Omaha closest to the SAC base would suffer third degree burns.

"The shock wave created by the explosion would cause skull fractures, ruptured lungs, and crushing injuries to the chest. There would be broken backs, deep lacerations from flying debris, and massive hemorrhaging. Even at 11 or 12 miles from ground zero, the overpressure would be great enough to turn an ordinary window into a lethal weapon as thousands of pieces of glass exploded at one hundred miles per hour.

"These injuries do not include the many who would be killed by random spontaneous fires fueled by gasoline stations, natural gas lines, and oil storage tanks. These fires could coalesce into a firestorm burning Omaha and its surroundings for 6 to 8 hours. With temperatures as great as 1,600 degrees Fahrenheit, anyone in a shelter would be dry roasted, as in a crematorium. Others would be asphyxiated as the fire sucked the oxygen out of their shelters. In our limited experience of firestorms, as in Hamburg and Dresden during World War II, the only people who survived were those who were able to flee.

"In an attack on Omaha, or any other city, the injured could expect little by way of medical care. The number of burn victims in just one city would exceed by many times the number of intensive care beds in all of the United States. Many of the area's doctors and nurses would be among the dead and injured, and most of the hospitals would be destroyed or extensively damaged. An attack on SAC headquarters would imply a general war with hundreds of nuclear detonations elsewhere. No help would be coming in from outside.

"We could withstand the rupture of the social fabric in Omaha alone. But at some point between a single 15 megaton explosion over Omaha and a thousand-weapon attack on our land-based missiles, the social fabric of the United States would be so badly ruptured that recovery would be extremely difficult if not impossible."

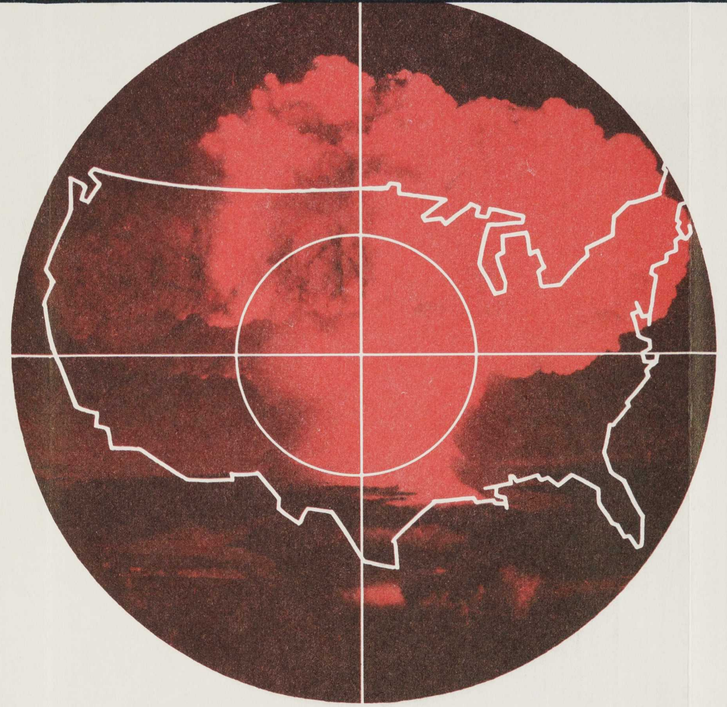
(Between the United States and the Soviet Union, we now have nearly 50,000 nuclear warheads. 16,000 of these are strategic intercontinental bombs and missiles—just one of which could kill 2 million people.)

"Nuclear war would be the last epidemic our civilization would ever know."

Howard Hiatt, MD., Dean
Harvard School of Public Health

Physicians Speak Out

Physicians for Social Responsibility was formed in 1961 by a group of physicians who were troubled by the health implications of nuclear weapons testing in the atmosphere and by the lack of data on the medical consequences of nuclear war. PSR played a major role in developing public understanding of the devastating capabilities of thermonuclear weapons and contributed to the signing of the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963.



Many hoped that the Treaty would be a major step to control the nuclear arms race. Instead, the threat has steadily intensified.

A series of symposia on The Medical Consequences of Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear War have been organized by PSR over the past four years, many of them in conjunction with the Council for a Livable World Education Fund. These programs are alerting the medical community as well as the general public to the threat posed by nuclear war. In 30 cities, such as Boston, New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, and Albuquerque thousands have been stunned by the facts presented and spurred to action. In these forums, co-sponsored by leading medical schools, the participation of distinguished physicians, scientists, and statesmen has given our work national attention. PSR President Emeritus, Dr. Helen Caldicott; Dr. Paul Beeson, co-author of the leading internal medicine text; former presidential science advisor George Kistiakowsky; former Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance; and former Chief SALT negotiator, Paul Warnke have been among the prominent national figures taking part in these programs. Major media outlets regularly carry the PSR message to the public.

Physicians for Social Responsibility is a national, non-profit organization of physicians, osteopaths, dentists and medical students dedicated to professional and public education on the medical hazards of nuclear weapons and nuclear war.

PSR's growth has been rapid and substantial. It now has more than 30,000 members and 154 chapters throughout the country.

Each month hundreds of physicians around the country are educating other physicians, the general public, and the media on the medical consequences of nuclear war.

The medical community is responding. There are now courses in medical schools on the medical effects of nuclear war. There are articles in medical and scientific journals. State and national societies have passed resolutions condemning nuclear weapons and nuclear war. And in 1981 the American Medical Association passed a resolution calling on its member organizations to educate physicians and the public on the medical consequences of nuclear weapons and nuclear war. In just a few short years Physicians for Social Responsibility has demonstrated the tremendous impact physicians can have when they address the health issue of nuclear technology.

"PSR may be the most effective group in the antinuclear movement."

TIME, March 29, 1982

You can make a difference

Nuclear catastrophe can be averted. The power of an aroused and informed public is great. Each of us must accept responsibility for the earth's survival. In the face of nuclear technology concern for human survival surpasses all social, political and economic divisions. Your efforts can make a difference. You can invite a PSR physician to talk to your local organization, church, or congregation. You can begin mobilizing public concern in other ways as well. And you can contribute financially to PSR so that we can expand our educational efforts. Ending the nuclear arms race is our most urgent task.