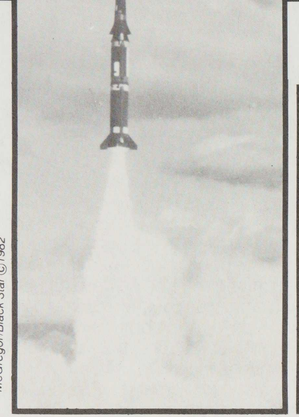

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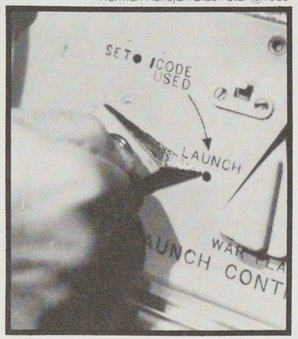

The Human Equation

More than 100,000 American military personnel have some form of access or responsibility for nuclear weapons. The Department of Defense operates a Personnel Reliability Program to prevent assignments to "unreliable" persons. But no initial screening process can *guarantee* future behavior. A House subcommittee has reported that in 1977—a typical year—1219 nuclear personnel had to be removed from duty because of mental disorders, 1365 for abuse of drugs such as heroin and LSD and 256 for alcoholism.

For example, in March of 1971, three American servicemen with top security clearance working at a secret nuclear war plans bureau were arrested for the possession and sale of LSD and marijuana. In West Germany, an army code specialist stationed on a missile base claimed that "missile soldiers sometimes were high when they attached nuclear warheads to missiles and connected the pieces which made them operational." We can only speculate on the extent of such problems within the Soviet military, but there is no reason to believe that it is any less.

Furthermore, the boredom, stress and isolation of working for the nuclear military may be sufficient to press even healthy people beyond their limits. Spending long hours interacting with electronic consoles in cramped quarters deep underground, repeating the same detailed routines day in and day out, is bound to have an effect. A former missile silo officer wrote in *Air Force* magazine: "There is no entertainment to pass the time and relieve monotony. A crew member tries not to think about his ultimate responsibility which could lead to the killing of millions of people...He learns to contrast his personal feelings and the role he's expected to play unquestioningly and automatically. He tends to see his personal life and official life as totally separate. The launch officer becomes schizoid." Such psychosis threatens us all. The designer of the Air Force Human Reliability Program, which monitors such behavior, tells of a psychotically depressed maintenance sergeant who rigged a pistol to fire a nuclear warhead as part of a suicide plan. Although he failed in his attempt, it is clear that nuclear weapons systems are only as secure as the people who operate them.

Human failure can also play a major role in precipitating an *accidental* nuclear exchange. Aside from the Strangelovian scenario of a war triggered by a mentally unbalanced high ranking officer, false warnings of attack or even improperly authorized but properly coded messages ordering the launch of weapons could accidentally generate a holocaust. Many frightening examples can be cited. On November 9, 1979, a Pentagon technician fed a war games tape which simulated a Soviet attack into the NORAD computer. Because the computer perceived it as a real attack, fighter planes were scrambled, missile crews inserted launch keys, and, in the *seventh minute* of the alert, the Presidential command plane was readied for take off. Finally, the false alarm was discovered. *Twenty minutes* is currently the time needed to elapse before a retaliatory attack is initiated. Had our bombers taken off. (the next programmed step), the Soviets would have concluded that we were mounting an attack and responded in kind.

It is a testimony to the carefulness of those who design our fail-safe systems that the final mistake has not yet occurred. But given the odds and the fallibility of man and machine, it is only a matter of time.

Proliferation

As the number of countries with nuclear weapons increases so does the likelihood of nuclear war. The competition of smaller, less stable nations to join the nuclear club poses the greatest threat. Nations with age-old hatreds—North and South Korea, Israel and the Arab states, Iran and Iraq, Pakistan and India—have already engaged in full-scale conventional wars. They remain embittered enemies. Many political scientists believe that these rivalries can draw the United States and the Soviet Union into a conflict in which tactical nuclear devices are already in use—the first step toward escalation.

No nation has overtly joined the nuclear club since 1974, when India detonated what it called a "peaceful nuclear device." A sizeable number are pursuing the acquisition of nuclear weapons technology secretly, stopping short of testing them for fear of political repercussions. Israel appears to possess enough fissionable material for twenty nuclear weapons which can be assembled within hours. Pakistan could be within a year of obtaining its long-sought "Islamic bomb." South Africa may already have nuclear weapons, while Argentina, Brazil, South Korea and Taiwan possess the scientific potential to develop the nuclear weapons capability in the near future. Even Libya's Kaddafi, the world's major sponsor of terriorism who has publicly lusted for the bomb, has contracted to buy Soviet nuclear technology.

Diplomatic efforts to halt the spread of nuclear weapons have been frustrated by the fact that the technology used for nuclear power can also be used to build nuclear bombs. 114 nations have signed the 1968 Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons which calls on non-nuclear nations to forswear weapons development. But almost 50 nations have not—those poised to join the nuclear club. In addition, international monitoring of weapons development has failed to discourage either development or acquisition by the have-not nations.

Meanwhile, eager to boost foreign exports in a lagging world economy, the nuclear powers compete fiercely to sell nuclear know-how and materials. The Reagan Administration has markedly increased U.S. nuclear exports which traditionally *have exceeded those of any other nation.* Hopefully, citizen pressure will persuade Congress to restrict such trade in the months ahead. But still more important if the superpowers were to reduce their arsenals, it would demonstrate to the nuclear "have not" nations that we are serious about reducing the threat of nuclear war. According to current figures, the world is now spending $500 billion a year, almost $1 million every minute, on arms and war-making capabilities.

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Terrorism

The suicide attack on less than a thousand American marines in Lebanon shocked us all. But in the 1980's "nuclear" terrorism is capable of threatening the safety of civilization as we know it.

Today a nuclear bomb can be built from instructions that are now readily available. Fissionable material can be stolen from one of the many plants or storage depots where it is kept in large quantities. Bomb-usable materials can be intercepted in transit. Bombs large enough to kill tens of thousands of people can be made small enough to fit into a suitcase or placed in the trunk of a car.

Nuclear weapons would be the ultimate form of blackmail for terrorist groups which have already shown a penchant for indiscriminate, often suicidal, violence. And there is always the possibility that a small-scale act of nuclear terrorism could precipitate the last act of terror—thermonuclear war between the superpowers.

Escalated Conventional War

If a conventional war erupts between the superpowers, the temptation to use nuclear weapons may prove irresistible. A "limited" and tactical nuclear war is now a key war-fighting strategy for both sides. Battlefield training routine, involves the mixed use of *both* conventional and tactical nuclear weapons. This is the danger—the distinction between conventional and nuclear weaponry has increasingly become blurred, making it much easier to escalate the level of arms.

War has its own momentum; once begun it is hard to stop. Either side can resort to nuclear weapons to ensure victory or to avoid defeat. In the summer of 1914, the nations of Europe slipped into World War I after a relatively minor incident. In this prophetic year, 1984, can we risk the chance it might happen again?