

I.F. Stone, *The Haunted Fifties*

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ALMOST AS SAFE AS IVORY SOAP IS PURE?

Crisis is piling on crisis, instabilities mount in an unstable world, frustration is added to frustration. At such a time it is dangerous to spread the illusion that thermonuclear war may be a way out, a cleansing thunderstorm in the planet's humid summer, or a cathartic that would magically purge our ills, if only we are ready to spend a cramped week or two in underground shelters, emerging on a world from which communism had happily disappeared but where free enterprise was all set to go again. As if orchestrated out of Washington, mass circulation media are beginning to condition the public mind for nuclear war. The *Saturday Evening Post* inaugurates a new department, "The Voice of Dissent," with a piece by that favorite iconoclast of the Air Force, Herman Kahn. The Associated Press sends out a series of interviews with Dr. Edward Teller on how exaggerated are fears of thermonuclear war. *U.S. News & World Report* runs a cheerful cover piece, "If Bombs Do Fall," *

* "What about money? asks *U.S. News & World Report*. Instead of destroying all old bills that are taken out of circulation, the Government is storing money away in strongboxes around the country. Enough \$1 bills have been saved to last 8 months. . . . Bank accounts safe? Plans are being worked

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with a side story from Japan on how well the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are doing. *Life* magazine puts a civilian in a reddish fallout suit looking like a partially boiled lobster on its cover, with the glad tidings, "How You Can Survive Fallout. 97 Out of 100 People Can Be Saved. . . ."

No doubt the purpose is to make our threat of going to war over Berlin credible to Khrushchev, as indeed it should. Our ultimate weapon, Madison Avenue, may be able to sell anything to the American people, even the notion—why fool around with aspirin?—that one little bullet through the head and that headache will disappear. Some years back, the Pentagon and popular magazines were advertising how many Russian cities we could "take out" if necessary. Now the same moral imbecility is being applied to our own cities. "About five million people," *Life* says lightly, "less than 3% of the population, would die." It adds hastily, to anticipate any vestigial humane twinges, "This in itself is a ghastly number. But you have to look at it coldly. . . ." *Life* has been telling us righteously that the godless Chinese Reds put little value on human life. Mao is willing to see millions die to wipe out capitalism but Henry Luce is willing to see millions die to wipe out communism. Kennedy, like Khrushchev, prepares the public mind to gamble all, if necessary, on Berlin. This is the real mobilization. Our moral scruples and our good sense must first be conscripted.

Worse than the horror is the levity, the transparent mendacity and the eager commercialism. A happy family with three children is shown by *Life* in their well-stocked, assemble-it-yourself, prefabricated steel shelter, only seven hundred dollars from the Kelsey-Hayes Company (and soon to be marketed by Sears, Roebuck). A picture shows a girl laughingly talking on the phone from an underground shelter, as if to her beau, who is presumably in his own shelter and ready to take her to the latest movie as soon as the all clear sounds. Grandmother's old-fashioned remedies turn out to be best after all even in thermonuclear war. "The best first aid for radiation sickness," *Life* advises, "is to take hot tea or a solution of baking soda." Suddenly thermonuclear war is made to seem familiar, almost cozy. All you need is a shelter, a well-stocked pantry, some new gadgets like Geiger counters. The budding boom in these

out to enable you to write checks on your bank account—even if the bank itself were destroyed."

products promises to stimulate badly lagging magazine lineage. *Life's* editorial hopes Khrushchev notices "our spontaneous boom in shelter-building" and concludes euphorically, "He cannot doubt our ability to wage nuclear war, or to erase his cities." Aren't we getting our people ready to accept the erasure of ours? We used to think thermonuclear war likely only if lunatics came to power. Well, here they are.

I am not arguing for surrender, a runout on Berlin, dishonor, national cowardice, appeasement or better-red-than-dead. I am trying to say that when a nation faces problems as complex as those which now face ours in Germany, the United Nations, the Congo, Laos and the resumption of nuclear testing, there is a duty on every publisher and every writer to help inculcate sobriety and the need for reflection. The President's power to maneuver and negotiate is not helped by piling delusion upon hysteria, by making people feel not only that we face a simple choice of death-or-surrender but that most of us won't die anyway—so why bother to negotiate?

Why should President Kennedy lend his name to *Life's* wicked stunt? Nowhere does *Life* tell us what level and kind of attack it assumes which need kill only 3 percent of our people. The latest Rand study in the new Holifield committee hearings shows 3 percent dead as the result of "a very small attack delivering 300 megatons" on military targets exclusively. Even this small attack, if aimed at our cities, would put inescapable death (with everyone in some shelter) up to 35 percent. The same study (p. 216, House Government Operations, Civil Defense, August, 1961) shows a 3,000-megaton attack on cities would put inescapable deaths up to 80 percent. The new Holifield report on these hearings says that an attack half this size, as assumed by Secretary McNamara, would kill fifty million Americans and seriously injure twenty million more. The report warns that the existing basement space on which the Secretary relies to save ten to fifteen million lives won't do. "All deaths from fallout can be prevented," the report says, "but not in existing buildings, even when improved. Nation-wide, the largest number of structures do not afford even the bare minimum factor considered necessary to bring the radiation hazard down to tolerable levels."

Stewart Alsop's "Report Card" on Kennedy in the *Saturday Evening Post* September 16 disclosed that the President told congressional leaders a new war would cost 70,000,000 dead Ameri-

cans. Even Dr. Teller did not go beyond saying that 90 percent of our population could be saved. Where did *Life* get that 97 percent? Was it a copywriter's bright flash? Just as Ivory Soap is sold as 99 percent pure, is thermonuclear war to be sold as 97 percent safe?

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