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Nukes knocked

by Gordon Delaney

If the proper care is taken during a nuclear war "we can keep at least 10 per cent of our population alive." This was the comment of a U.S. senator in a 1969 Senate discussion on nuclear war. Another senator added: "If we have to get back to Adam and Eve, I want them to be American and on this continent."

It was these two remarks of "macho-patriotism" which changed the life of Dr. George Wald, world renowned biologist and Nobel laureate, and convinced him that the world is on a kamikaze course.

"Don't think that this issue of wiping out the entire human race is just a bad dream, nor that it has not been faced by politicians," Wald told an audience at Saint Mary's University.

The present strategic arms stockpile of the two super-powers has the explosive equivalent of 16 billion tons of TNT. The population of the world being 4 billion, this means 4 tons of TNT per person, Wald said.

On top of this there are tens of thousands of tactical weapons and many more in production. The bomb that levelled Hiroshima in the Second World War and killed 140 thousand people is considered a small tactical weapon, much too small for the SALT talks, he said.

The world is now threatened with the possibility of war if Russia decides to expand beyond the borders of Afghanistan, and "there is nothing crazier than the concept of limited nuclear war," he added.

On the subject of nuclear power, Wald drew loud applause when he said "I don't think my opinion is prejudiced; I think it is a sound decision—if it were up to me I would shut down every nuclear power plant tomorrow."

He added that the experts who deny the dangers of nuclear power have been bought. The technicalities they create are just a way of snowing the multitude. "You and I are subjected to continuous propaganda in this field," said Wald.

Besides the threat of nuclear meltdown or radioactive leakage, the question of what to do with the plutonium waste has been an insoluble one. Of the 70 existing plants in the U.S. which store the waste on site, 20 or more have already used up all their possible storage space, he said.

He added that the U.S. is presently considering a process whereby nuclear waste will be embedded in glass and buried in salt mines. Tests in other countries however, have shown that because of the tremendous heat emanating from the waste and the unbearable pressure it will encounter underground, the glass will crack and disintegrate in one to two weeks. It will then "sink through the salt like lead through water," he said.

Wald outlined some of the

other dangers that threaten our future survival, and which he believes are the result of the Industrial Revolution.

This universe is 25 to 40 billion years old and has accommodated human life for over 300,000 years, yet a trivial 200 years of the Industrial Revolution has managed to bring the human race to the very brink of extinction, Wald said.

In 1859 oil was discovered by "a madman named Drake." Since then we have almost finished devouring the world's fossil fuels which took millions of years of evolution to produce, he said.

With the discovery of oil came a new agriculture—the so-called re-revolution—based upon petroleum use. This new agriculture has deprived millions of people of their livelihood by driving them off the land and into the cities. There are an estimated one billion "marginal persons" in the world today, Wald said. Marginal persons are those whose role in the economy has become superfluous, yet they continue to make demands upon it.

Another product of the Industrial Revolution is social disease. For instance, seventy to eighty per cent of all cancers in the U.S. are of environmental origin and are thus preventable, he said. One-third of all cancers originate on the job, such as asbestosis and black lung. He added that there is not one incident of any company in the U.S. that is fighting "tooth and nail" against these problems.

In today's world, governments no longer run countries, but have become the agents of corporate and financial power whose major objective is the maximization of profit (or the maximization of production, for those on the other side of the "Iron and Bamboo Curtain").

A society which places as its highest priority the maximization of either profit or production is doomed, Wald said.

He then displayed a long list of the many corporations in the U.S. which spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year in military arms contracts. "Everybody is into it," he said, because, like the building of nuclear power plants, the production of military arms is a highly profitable venture.

The solutions to many of today's problems are simple, Wald said, but are ignored because they will not produce the profits that the oil companies, nuclear power plants, and military arms industries are now reaping.

He said the only place to turn for solutions is to the young people. "I've had my life, you must do something. Our crisis is not a crisis of information, it is a crisis of decision, of policy."

We must "recognize our real needs and insist upon realizing them" if we are to survive, said Wald.



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