

The Missing H Bomb-IV

Some Experts Fear Strategic Loss If Curbs Are Put on Nuclear Routes

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Last of four articles

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The four unarmed hydrogen bombs that fell from a U.S. Air Force B-52 last Jan. 17 landed on Spanish territory, but they "exploded" in Washington.

Soon after the Palomares incident, Spain asked for and promptly received State Department assurances that American nuclear-armed aircraft would no longer fly over her territory. The Philippines has since sought and received a somewhat similar assurance.

Expert opinion here is divided over just how much the Palomares incident might thus erode America's ability to deploy her nuclear might.

One group says that the effect of Palomares will be minimal. U.S. B-52's can easily be re-routed and refueled over the vast oceans. Moreover, the United States still has a sufficient number of steadfast allies who will continue to permit overflights.

This group cites the British government's rejection of a bid by Labor members of Parliament in the wake of Palomares to ban B-52 re-fueling over Britain.

But a second group holds that any erosion of America's freedom of nuclear move-

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IN SEARCH—This tiny submarine was used to look for the missing H-bomb off Spanish coast.

ment is a significant loss. They note, for one thing that too many overflight restrictions would dangerously limit the number of B-52 corridors an enemy need guard against.

But what this group fears most is that Palomares will start a chain reaction whereby nation after nation will want to ban the bomber. Even worse, it could accentuate the general uneasiness over the stockpiling of American atomic weapons and the berthing of American atomic ships abroad.

A Russian blueprint to set in motion just such a chain reaction exists in the form of a "memorandum" handed to America's Ambassador in Moscow by Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko 30 days after Palomares.

It was below freezing in Moscow that day, and Foy Kohler's reception at the Foreign Ministry wasn't much warmer. In a turgid and technically imprecise indictment, the Russians charged that the United States had violated the 1963 limited test ban treaty at Palomares by contaminating the atmosphere.

The very next day, at the Geneva disarmament talks, Soviet delegate Semyon K. Tsarapkin echoed the Russian indictment. Tsarapkin had already charged that "only a fortunate stroke of luck" had averted an atomic catastrophe at Palomares.

Other Nations Critical

Other nations have since taken America to task for the Palomares incident.

The United States dismisses Russia's charges as "propaganda," as it did in a formal reply to Gromyko's "memorandum" just yesterday.

But for obvious self-serving reasons, the Russians continue to play upon the world's nuclear fears, saying that the next B-52 crash may set off an accidental nuclear war.

(Only the Russians know how many nuclear accidents they have had.)

In effect, Russia's "memorandum" tells Communist parties of the Free World how to bring pressure to bear against American nuclear presence, using Palomares as a cudgel.

"The Palomares incident was ready made for agitation," said one Administration official, adding if "it hadn't been this one it would have been something else."

Surprisingly, the only actual agitation—except for diplomatic thrusts—was a small, anti-American demonstration in front of the U.S. Embassy in Madrid on Feb. 4. "Yankees,

no!" "Bases, no!" shouted the demonstrators.

This was 18 days after the incident. Apparently, it took that long for word of the nuclear accident to seep through an almost impenetrable curtain of silence and travel the some 250 miles from Palomares to Madrid.

On the day of the incident, the Spanish Government "adamantly" requested, and the State Department acquiesced, to a policy of total secrecy. Even today no American or Spanish official will publically admit that a hydrogen bomb has been lost.

Unhappy Over Secrecy

Several American officials, within the State Department and without, are desperately unhappy with the excessive secrecy surrounding Palomares. They attribute the fact that the incident has lingered in the world mind with the tenacity of radioactive plutonium to the excessive secrecy.

Actually, the United States was more than fortunate, in a way. Palomares is remote and not heavily populated. Miraculously, no one was hit by debris.

It could have been much worse.

What would have happened, for example, if Palomares had been a city and were contaminated with radioactive plutonium. We may repatriate the dirt of Palomares? Would we also repatriate the bricks and cobblestones of a contaminated foreign city?

What would have happened if Palomares had been a town in a more unstable nation, perhaps a "developing" nation? Would a more violent reaction to the incident have taken place, possibly toppling the government?

Safeguards Demonstrated

So long as it is necessary for America to maintain a nuclear bomber and missile force there will be other incidents. Hopefully none will result in an atomic explosion.

If there is a plus to Palomares, and if it can be called a plus, the elaborate precautions the United States has taken to safeguard against an accidental atomic catastrophe has once again proved effective. The "what if" safety designers of atomic weapons and the "boards of disbelievers" who must pass on the safety of all American nuclear arms were vindicated at Palomares.

As one scientist remarked: "A million tons of TNT in one place really is hazardous. But the physics of nuclear weapons is remarkable. We

can have the equivalent of a million pounds of TNT in the shape of a small amount of plutonium which, itself, is not particularly hazardous."

In spite of all the comfort in the physics and engineering safety of nuclear weapons, no one can guarantee one won't some day accidentally explode, be it an American, Russian, British, French or Chinese weapon this year and someone else's next.

There is this footnote to the Palomares incident. Until the missing H-bomb is found or given up as irretrievably lost, two giant computers in the American Southwest will continue to "come up coughing," as one wag put it.

One computer is located in Albuquerque, N.M. The other is hidden in the mountains. This job is to keep taps on every American atomic weapon's whereabouts. Because of Palomares, one of their H-bombs is missing.

U.S. Reply to Moscow Charges Propaganda

MOSCOW, Feb. 26 (AP) The United States Embassy announced today it has rejected as "without any foundation" Soviet charges of American violations of the partial nuclear test ban treaty.

The Soviet charges grew out of the crash in Spain last month of an American bomber carrying nuclear weapons, which the Russians said had spread radioactivity in the area.

The American Embassy also rejected a Soviet demand that the United States end flights over foreign territories by bombers carrying nuclear weapons. The Embassy said these flights were made neces-

sary by the Soviet nuclear threat to Western security.

Davis E. Boster, counselor for political affairs, delivered the Embassy reply yesterday to the Soviet Foreign Ministry. The Russians accepted the reply but not its contents.

The Soviet charges were contained in a Feb. 16 memorandum to U.S. Ambassador Foy D. Kohler from Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko. The American reply termed the charges sheer propaganda.