

Forget 'Cannikin'

SEP 13 1971

A bright hope on a foreboding front is the news that President Nixon is considering cancellation of Cannikin, the underground nuclear test planned for this fall on Amchitka Island in the Aleutians.

Weighing against the test are the strenuous objections of Canada, expressions of concern by Japan and opposition from the State Department, the Council on Environmental Quality, the Environmental Protection Administration, top Alaskan political figures and the White House Office of Science and Technology. Still for the test, unfortunately, are the Atomic Energy Commission and the Defense Department.

Some of the elements in the resistance are diplomatic. The State Department is rightly concerned with Japanese-American relations, already strained both by the President's prospective visit to Peking and by his new economic program, with its pressure on the yen and on Japanese trade. Just as understandably, the department fears the negative effect the explosion might have on the SALT talks with the Soviet Union.

Basically, however, the test is objectionable for the danger it poses to the environment. There would be no serious opposition from Canada, Japan or the American environmental agencies if there were not a lively fear that an underground explosion of such awesome magnitude—four times the size of the hydrogen bomb exploded at Amchitka two years ago and 250 times the one that destroyed Hiroshima—might trigger an earthquake or a tsunami. At the very least it could endanger fish and wildlife by contaminating the waters of the region and release radioactive gases, even beyond American borders.

Quite apart from all these hazards, even the indispensability of the test from the standpoint of the country's defense is much in question. There has been revealing testimony that the warhead to be tested was designed for a long-range antimissile that has already been supplanted by smaller, short-range missiles. Almost the only reason left for the explosion is that, of the \$190 million Cannikin was expected to cost, \$160 million has already been spent. Obviously, that is no reason for anything at all—unless it is for demanding more deliberation on launching such enterprises in the future.