Nixon taking risks with Amchitka nuclear blast

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On Friday, November 5, 1971, pending legal appeals, the largest nuclear blast ever known to mankind may be detonated a mile underground on the remote island of Amchitka, part of the Aleutian chain extending into the northwestern coast of Alaska. The five-megaton blast will be equal in force to five million tons of TNT and will constitute an explosion 250 times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

Where does it all end? Even if this blast is "successful" will it be the last, or will there be further tests until a disaster vividly brings home to us what had best remained in our imagination.

Since the first Atomic Bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6.

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try's Nuclear Superiority.

This long-range plan was briefly interrupted and upset by the election of President Kennedy but proved ultimately more powerful as evidenced by the president's ruthless murder. While the Vietnam war raged and escalated, the different agencies reformed and cornered new powers. The election of Richard Nixon in 1968 marked the confluence of the destinies of all the proponents of a nuclear-based foreign policy and the enshrinement of their chief apologist, Dr. Henry Kissinger, as Chairman of the National Security Council.

The stage was set for Amchitka. Because the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963 banned atmospheric testing, the AEC went underground. Justified as vital to the nation's defense by President, Cabinet and Congress, the AEC began exploding nuclear devices in Nevada and hardly anyone noticed or even cared.

The Nevada tests finally culminated in the explosion of a one-megaton bomb on the island of Amchitka in 1969.

One can almost imagine the ensuing conversation: "Well, since they predicted disaster for a one-megaton test and it went all right, why not go for five?" "O.K. Why not?"

So a five-megaton blast was scheduled for the fall of 1971 on the island that had successfully endured the smaller explosion. But the announcement was followed by an explosion of public protest five times greater than before and the Federal Government found itself with a public relations battle on its hands — on that it could not lose.

The first move was made by the Committee for Nuclear Responsibility, a Washington-headquartered group headed by Nuclear Physicist John Gofman and former US Senator Charles Goodell. They brought suit in Washington's US District Court against the AEC, charging that a 5-megaton blast would do irreparable harm to the environment.

Along with co-plaintiffs including the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth and SANE, they specifically charged that the blast could trigger a succession of earthquakes and tidal waves of unpredictable size and direction and contaminate the surrounding ocean with radioactive materials and leak poisonous debris into the atmosphere.

The details, they said, could travel outside the US, thus violating the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963. Their most serious claim was that the AEC had in fact broken the law by not filing an adequate environmental-impact statement on the test as required by the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act.

This brought to light the fact that of 253 underground nuclear tests held in Nevada, radioactive debris had escaped from 68 but had not crossed international boundaries. This was hardly a consolation to the Environmentalists who pointed out Amchitka Island's proximity to Russia and Japan.

While the suit was being studied in the courts, a change in personnel of the Atomic Energy Commission went almost unnoticed. AEC Chairman Dr. Glenn T. Seaborg resigned after ten years to return to the University of California at Berkeley as a professor of nuclear chemistry. President Nixon named James R. Schlesinger, an assistant director of the White House Office of Management and Budget, to replace Seaborg.

The significance of the shift was the replacement of a distinguished scientist with a full-time manager. TIME magazine called the switch a harbinger of a shift in the AEC's mission.

Nixon followed Schlesinger's appointment immediately with that of William O. Doub to fill another vacancy on the five-man board and the majority of commissioners on the AEC board were Nixon appointees. Moreover, they were men trained in administration rather than research.

The AEC immediately took on all the characteristics of a Nixon rubber stamp.

On August 31, 1971, US District Court Judge George L. Hart, Jr., ruled in favor of the government allowing that the atomic explosion planned for Amchitka Island was in the national defense interest. He said it would comply "with all relevant laws and treaties."

This ruling couldn't have been very pleasing to Alaska's Senator Mike Gravel who just a few days earlier charged that President Nixon was keeping secret a study that showed five of seven federal agencies opposing the planned nuclear test. The agencies opposing the test: the Interior Department, State Department, Office of Science and Technology, Environmental Protection Agency and the Environmental Quality Commission. Only the Defense Department and

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the Atomic Energy Commission favored the blast. Most frustrating to Gravel was the fact that the man in whose hands the final decision on the blast rested was the same man who had first ordered the 7-agency study and was now suppressing it under executive privilege: President Richard M. Nixon.

Gravel saw this imposing use of executive privilege as excluding the people from the decision-making process. In a forceful argument against the national security aspects of the blast he called the professed benefits "minimal" due to the fact that the entire system may be negotiated out in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks between the US and the Soviet Union.

White House officials said they were studying the problem.

One of the most embarrassing aspects of Gravel's charges for the Nixon Administration was the revelation that the Environmental Protection Agency was against the blast. This was disastrous public relations, and had to be handled immediately. So, in a fantastic display of administration double-talk, EPA Chief William C. Ruckelshaus issued a statement saying he was "personally" opposed to the test and cited the potentials of earthquakes and tidal waves but quickly added that "national security arguments could outweigh environmental considerations!" Obviously his conclusion must have been that in the event of earthquakes and tidal waves, there would be no need for national security.

To counter Gravel's charges, the White House quickly underlined the necessity of the blast as being to test a warhead for the Safeguard antiballistic missile. While not quoting President Nixon directly, White House "sources" revealed three reasons why he would not consider canceling the tests. They will probably go down in history along with Vietnamization, Protective Reaction and the Defense of South Vietnam's Democracy as the greatest fallacies of all time.

Because such a devise was scheduled to be the warhead of a Spartan missile, "it must be tested before we can deploy it," argued the White House. In addition, "we must convince the Soviet Union that the United States is serious about developing the ABM" and "a cancellation would set a bad precedent for future testing of large-sized weapons."

It isn't hard to detect the fine hand of Henry Kissinger in such illogical rationalizations. It's the old power play. Set off a big blast and scare the hell out of Russia. No matter we're in the middle of the SALT talks. Hell, that's the best time to let 'er rip! We'll show those Commies we can set off a bigger blast than they can. Betcha Kosygin doesn't worry about the environment.

So we come down to the wire with Congressional charges and Administration counter-charges and neither side knowing for sure just what will happen.

And that's the real tragedy. We're acting like a child whose mother has told him not to touch the stove because it's hot and he'll burn his finger. The child has two alternatives. To believe his mother and his empirical knowledge of testing the warmth of the stove. Or he can take a chance that his more experienced mother has somehow gone crazy and is lying to him. In a fit of megalomania the child touches the stove and — goddamn — it burns!

The Administration is made up of grown men acting like children. We can only hope that their atomic megalomania will not burn up too much of the world before they realize the infancy of their ways. A handy warning is written in the Book of Revelations, Chapter 6, verses 12-17: And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and lo there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair; and the moon became as blood; and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs. when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.

And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb."

For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?

Moral: Don't fuck around with Mother Nature.