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Facts On Defense *25 Aug 53*

The assertion by Air Force Secretary Talbott that Russia could launch an atomic attack on any point in the United States merely emphasizes what has been said unofficially for a long time. This does not mean that an attack is imminent. But Soviet bombers now have the capability of such a blitz on a one-way mission, and Russia is known to be experimenting with planes of longer range. Moreover, the new jet bombers reported in the Moscow air show indicate considerable technical advance.

If the United States is vulnerable, our allies upon whom we depend for bases for effective retaliation are more vulnerable. The fact is that the capability of air offensive seems to be running away from the defensive—at least the present defensive. Nor is there much solace in the statement by Chairman Cole of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy that the United States maintains its lead over Russia in hydrogen weapons. Russia has a formidable atomic stockpile, and the time is approaching when a lead in hydrogen weapons will be a wry consolation, for either side will have it within its power to destroy the other.

But in the absence of effective international control of nuclear weapons, we must consider what is feasible by way of improved air defense and civil defense. It is encouraging in this connection to have Secretary Talbott's reassurance that the cutback in Air Force expansion is not "fixed." As General Bradley noted in his current magazine article, the cutback looked "like coasting before you reach the top of the hill." It is imperative that the new Joint Chiefs of Staff be candid in their resurvey of defense requirements, irrespective of whether their findings please the Administration budgeteers.

Indeed, more information about air defense requirements, as well as about the hydrogen bomb itself, is still the No. 1 necessity. In this connection we inadvertently did a disservice to the Atomic Energy Commission in an editorial last week criticizing the AEC for its delay in disclosing that it had detected a Soviet hydrogen explosion on August 12 and implying that only now had the AEC acknowledged that its weapons tests at Eniwetok in 1951 and 1952 involved thermonuclear (or hydrogen) reaction. The fact is that the AEC announcements in 1951 and 1952 did mention thermonuclear research, albeit about as cryptically as possible. Whether the commission could have speeded its statement on the Soviet hydrogen explosion is a matter of conjecture, though certainly it was better to double-check the findings than to announce the conclusion prematurely.

In any case, the basic problem of secrecy remains. Not yet has anyone said officially in so many words that the United States has the hydrogen bomb. Yet every step toward international control, or toward improved air defense and civil defense, depends upon full public understanding of what this new force means. In the face of impending decisions that not only involve billions of dollars, but also that may shake the very roots of our society, there is now only apathy. The problem goes beyond the Atomic Energy Commission to the President himself. He has a great opportunity, in his forthcoming series of speeches, to give the country the sort of enlightened factual guidance the H-bomb age demands.