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SCIENCE, now combined with THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY, is published each Friday by the American Association for the Advancement of Science at National Publishing Company, Washington, D.C. SCIENCE is indexed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*.

Editorial correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C. Manuscripts should be typed with double spacing and submitted in duplicate. The AAAS assumes no responsibility for the safety of manuscripts. Opinions expressed by authors are their own and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the AAAS or the institutions with which the authors are affiliated. For detailed suggestions on the preparation of manuscripts, see *Science* 125, 16 (4 Jan. 1957).

Advertising correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, Room 1740, 11 West 42 St., New York 36, N.Y.

Change of address notification should be sent to 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C., 4 weeks in advance. Furnish an address label from a recent issue. Give both old and new addresses, including zone numbers.

Annual subscriptions: \$8.50; foreign postage, \$1.50; Canadian postage, 75¢. Single copies, 35¢. Cable address: Advancesci, Washington.

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"A Mere Bagatelle"

A melancholy commentary on our times is that it seems unrealistic and somewhat old-fashioned to discuss international relations on ethical grounds. We have come to take it for granted that the law of the jungle prevails among nations. Nevertheless, nations large and small still attempt to justify their actions on the basis of moral principles: they appeal to the court of world opinion. Acts of national self-interest may be, for example, camouflaged as necessary to "preserve the peace" even though innocent bystanders may be hurt in the process.

Perhaps no course of action in the history of mankind, short of war itself, is more charged with ethical questions than the testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere. For any test of this kind puts radioactive materials into the stratosphere to come down upon earth as fallout over the ensuing months and years all over the world. It is true that the amount of fallout from all tests conducted before the present series was started amounts to only a small fraction of the natural background radiation to which everyone is at all times subjected. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the current series of tests by the Soviet Union will—even if a 100-megaton bomb is set off—produce much more fallout than all previous explosions combined. Although experimental evidence to show that such low levels of radiation are damaging is lacking, it is a sound assumption that some somatic and some genetic harm will result. The risk for any particular individual is small, but for the race as a whole, the probability of damage approaches certainty. As Mr. Tsarapkin has said, according to the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, "The dangers of fallout are a mere bagatelle compared with the dangers of nuclear war." Quite true, but deplorably lacking in feeling. It is as though someone who is amputating your finger against your will should tell you that the loss of a finger is negligible compared with loss of the head.

Considerations of this kind and of world opinion were important factors in leading the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the United States to suspend testing of all kinds nearly three years ago. They led the scientists and diplomats at Geneva to focus on the means of detecting and hence monitoring underground nuclear explosions, which produce no fallout. With the exception of the four small nuclear devices exploded by France, there have been no explosions in the atmosphere since the large series conducted by the Soviet Union in 1958. Fallout reached its peak in the spring of 1959 and steadily declined until the recent series was begun. It seemed not unreasonable to entertain the hope—despite increasing tensions over Berlin—that the voluntary suspensions of testing in the atmosphere by the major nuclear powers might persist indefinitely.

The new series of atmospheric tests by the Soviet Union rudely dashed these hopes. The resumption of atmospheric tests manifests a cynical disregard of world opinion about the undesirability of increasing the exposure of the human race to radiation. Morality aside, it paves the way for the resumption of tests by others anxious to keep their relative positions in the deadly race, and it opens the door to new nuclear powers. We can think of no more urgent matter for the United Nations to consider at its current session. We hope that Premier Khrushchev's blatant threats to annihilate the principal NATO powers in Europe and to vaporize the Acropolis will not deter the U.N. from condemning atmospheric testing. That such condemnation would be effective immediately is perhaps too much to hope for, but that it might have a long-term deterrent effect is a reasonable expectation.—G.DuS.