Crunch on Cannikin Decision Near

President Nixon must soon decide whether to sanction the 5-megaton underground nuclear blast that the Atomic Energy Commission plans to set off in the early fall on the Aleutian Island of Amchitka.

Opposition to the Cannikin test has been steadily growing among environmentalists, scientists, and members of Congress, and there is evidence that the Administration itself is far from united.

Public debate over the desirability of the blast, whose purpose is to test a nuclear warhead for the Safeguard System's Spartan antiballistic missile, has been hampered by the Administration's refusal to disclose the contents of a top-secret report, which contains the recommendations of seven government agencies and was compiled by a committee headed by Under Secretary of State John N. Irwin. Although no one from the press has seen the documents, it has been reported that only the Department of Defense and the AEC favor going ahead with the blast. The State Department is said to favor postponement until after the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks to be held with Russia this fall. The Environmental Protection Agency and the Council on Environmental Quality are said to oppose the test because of the danger of earthquakes, tidal waves, and the destruction of wildlife.

The Office of Science and Technology, according to reports, believes the warhead to be of marginal usefulness because it was designed as part of the "heavy" Safeguard system rather than the present modified system, which requires a lower yield warhead for the defense of missile sites. This view has been stated by a number of scientists, including Harold M. Agnew, director of the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory. The Federation of American Scientists, headed by Herbert F. York, flatly claims the weapon is "obsolete."

Forces arrayed against Cannikin suffered two setbacks last month in the District Court of Washington, D.C. One suit, brought by a 33-member congressional delegation headed by Representative Patsy Mink (D–Hawaii), sought to obtain release of the Irwin report but was thwarted by a summary judgment issued by Judge George L. Hart, who explained that "some things have got to be secret."

The second case, decided 5 days later by the same judge, was brought by the Committee for Nuclear Responsibility in conjunction with seven other environmental and antiwar groups. The plaintiffs charged that the AEC's environmental impact statement did not satisfy the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act and that the nuclear test ban treaty of 1962 might be violated if radiation were vented into the atmosphere. Delay or cancellation of the test, ruled the judge, "might cost our entire liberty."

Appeals on both cases were filed last week in the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington, D.C.

A $16.5-million appropriation for the test (almost $200 million has already been expended) appears to be making its way safely through Congress, despite attempts by Cannikin's leading Senate opponent, Mike Gravel (D–Alaska), and Senator Daniel K. Inouye (D–Hawaii) to push amendments that could have delayed or canceled the test. Congress was expected to take final action on the appropriation soon after reconvening this week.

Final approval of the test rests personally with President Nixon. Administration spokesmen say he is reviewing the matter, but they will give no clue as to when he plans to announce his decision. The President is under intense pressure from his weapons men, who maintain the test is vital for the national security. Successful detonation of a 6-megaton device last year by the Russians has increased the air of urgency. On the other hand, proceeding with Cannikin is likely to reap a harvest of ill will, not only from Alaskans and other domestic critics, but from Canada and Japan, which have both sent notes of protest to the President and whose sensibilities have already been bruised by the new U.S. economic policy.—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

delegation arrived in Moscow, their Soviet hosts ushered them aboard a private jet, said to be Premier Alexei Kosygin's own, and whisked them up to Leningrad where the Seaborg party became the first group of Westerners to visit the uranium-graphite reactor under construction there. "It was just fascinating," Seaborg said, as he recalled peering into the gleaming metal innards of the plant—the plumbing, pumps, and heat exchangers. He said the first of two reactors is scheduled for completion in a year or two, although last-minute changes in some of the parts have already delayed the project a bit.

Although the visitors generally found the Soviets willing to answer their questions, some of the delegates described the answers to queries about the Leningrad plant design and the reasons for building the new family of reactors as somewhat circumspect.

However, the Soviets did provide figures showing that the new power plant cost far less than other nuclear installations. Edwin E. Kintner, the AEC's assistant director for reactor engineering, said he was told that the entire 2000-megawatt facility at Leningrad, including two reactors and all the generating equipment, would cost 240 million rubles or about $265 million. The usual way of comparing power plant costs is in dollars per kilowatt, which in this case is $132 per kilowatt. By comparison, figures obtained by the AEC tour group in 1970 showed that a similar but much smaller reactor and the world's largest fast breeder reactor —a 600-megawatt giant under construction near Beloyarsk—each cost about $250 per kilowatt.

Some members of the Seaborg party expressed skepticism at the low cost estimate. When they inquired whether the figure included allowances for inflation, overruns, interest, or other ancillary expenses, Kintner said, Soviet officials seemed to find such questions absurd.

Officials questioned by the U.S. delegation conceded that graphite reactors have the disadvantages of being inherently bulky and riddled with complicated plumbing. But the Soviets indicated that apart from lower cost their design offers other advantages over conventional water-cooled reactors. For one, the Soviets think that the graphite reactor may help conserve scarce supplies of high-grade uranium, which ordinary reactors burn very inefficiently. This would work two ways. Plentiful natural