

The
QUIDDITY
of
Herman Kahn
and his
Thermonuclear
War



Published By

RECIPROCAL DISARMAMENT

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Of all the reviews and analyses of Herman Kahn's **THERMONUCLEAR WAR**, James R. Newman's in the March, 1961, number of the **SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN** gave me the greatest delight—and for several reasons:

- [1] It said just what I had been wanting to say, only so much much better.
- [2] It brings out so clearly the danger to humanity of the application to war of science and mathematics. Man could tolerate non-scientific war when waged with human emotions, even though the emotions had been aroused as a screen to cover the real underlying motives. But now that the scientists have taken charge, Mr. Kahn even denies our stomachs the privilege of exercising emotionally. Neither love nor hate nor compassion enter into the design of of the "Doomsday Machine".
- [3] It renewed my boyhood faith in EDITORS—well, some editors at least. Mr. Newman is an editor of the **SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN**, in whose March number I counted 69 whole pages [fractions not included] of advertising of concerns that subscribe to Mr. Kahn's theories—and incidentally profit thereby in the sacred name of **DEFENSE**. Now it might be supposed that an editor of such a magazine would hesitate to criticize an authority of such magnitude as frankly and forcefully as has Mr. Newman. Would there were more such editors as he!

The **REAL** lesson of Herman Kahn is:
AWAY WITH ALL WAR!

**AWAY WITH THIS MATHEMATICAL
PLANNING OF DEATH AND DESTRUCTION.**

**IF WE MUST KILL OUR NEIGHBORS
LET'S DO IT FACE-TO-FACE WITH CLUBS.**

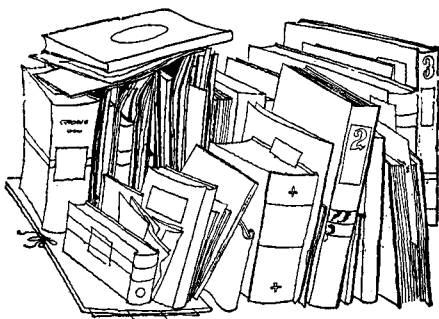
I thank the **SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN**, Mr. Gerard Piel, Publisher, and Editor Newman for permission to reproduce this review.

Reciprocal Disarmament Can Break The Inspection Deadlock

How to conduct inspection has been the stumbling block of disarmament conferences. The Russians are intent on preserving the secrecy of their bases until they are assured that disarmament is under way. Ringed about as they are with nearby American bombers, this precaution is understandable. The U.S. on the other hand fears that all arms will not be destroyed. So we insist on a complete inventory to start with, with detailed area-inspection.

[Continued inside back cover]

BOOKS



by James R. Newman

ON THERMONUCLEAR WAR, by Herman Kahn. Princeton University Press (\$10).

Is there really a Herman Kahn? It is hard to believe. Doubts cross one's mind almost from the first page of this deplorable book: no one could write like this; no one could think like this. Perhaps the whole thing is a staff hoax in bad taste.

The evidence as to Kahn's existence is meager. The biographical note states that he was born in Bayonne, N.J., in 1922, that he studied at the University of California at Los Angeles and the California Institute of Technology, that he has worked for 12 years for the Rand Corporation as a "military planner." An autobiographical footnote states that he was trained as a physicist and a mathematician.

Kahn may be the Rand Corporation's General Bourbaki, the imaginary individual used by a school of French mathematicians to test outrageous ideas. The style of the book certainly suggests teamwork. It is by turns waggish, pompous, chummy, coy, brutal, arch, rude, man-to-man, Air Force crisp, energetic, tongue-tied, pretentious, ingenuous, spastic, ironical, savage, malapropos, square-bashing and moralistic. Solecisms, pleonasms and jargon abound; the

clichés and fused participles are spectacular; there are many sad examples of what Fowler calls cannibalism—words devouring their own kind. How could a single person produce such a caricature?

No less remarkable is the substance of the book. An ecstatic foreword by Klaus Knorr of Princeton University's Center of International Studies states that this is "not a book about the moral aspects of military problems." The disclaimer is much to the point; it is exactly wrong. This is a moral tract on mass murder: how to plan it, how to commit it, how to get away with it, how to justify it.

The argument of "On Thermonuclear War," so far as it attains coherence, runs like this. Kahn says he is concerned with "alternative national postures" to deter war and to survive it if it comes. It is quite possible, he believes, that we shall have another world war; in fact, several. But one war at a time. What should be done to reduce the threat? World government? Disarmament? These, he says, are utopian. Can we rely on the uncertain balance of terror to postpone the date of mankind's final war? In Kahn's view it is dangerous to hold that an all-out war is "rationally infeasible." The "survival-conscious person" has to think more boldly. We must be ready to fight as well as deter. And if we do fight "we have to 'prevail' in some meaningful sense if we cannot win."

We must therefore be equipped to erase cities, especially control centers ("Finite Deterrence"); we must have "Counterforce as Insurance," "Preattack Mobilization Base," "Limited War Capability" and "Long War (2-30 Days) Capability." Kahn defines the last concept elegantly: "Almost no matter how well one does on the first day of the war, if he has no capability on the second day—and the enemy does have some capability on that day—he is going to lose the war."

Do we need civil defense? The im-

portant thing is to fit civil defense into the large strategic program: "Counterforce" and "Credible First Strike Capability," to make sure we gain the most effective "posture" for "Preattack and Postattack Coercion." Three types of deterrence (*i.e.*, I, II and III); all kinds of weapons; readiness for all kinds of wars; a habituation to "tense situations"; "keeping our conceptual doctrinal and linguistic framework up to the moment"—these are some of the elements in the Kahn program of preparation for *Der Tag*.

Kahn summarizes his general notion of the most desirable "posture." We should have, he says, "at least, enough capability to launch a first strike in the kind of tense situation that would result from an outrageous Soviet provocation, so as to induce uncertainty in the enemy as to whether it would not be safer to attack us directly rather than provoke us. The posture should have enough of a retaliatory capacity to make this direct attack unattractive." The Higher Incoherence, otherwise known as the game-theory approach to nuclear-age strategy (which is much admired and fostered by the Rand Corporation) characterizes the argument. There is a Jewish anecdote which runs:

"Where are you going?"

"To Minsk."

"Shame on you! You say this to make me think you are going to Pinsk. But I happen to know you *are* going to Minsk."

What Bertrand Russell's paradox of the class of all classes is to the foundations of mathematics, this anecdote is to the game of international out-think. Kahn is a Minsk-to-Pinsk out-thinker.

When the war is ended (2-30 days), what then? (Do we all join up again?) Some persons have said that after a thermonuclear war the world will be a graveyard and the rats will inherit the earth. Nonsense, says Kahn. This is the "layman's view," although there are many military planners, scientists, "intellectuals" and even generals who hold it. This shows they have not thought

hard enough about the question. The 52 Nobel prize winners who in 1955 issued the Mainau Declaration (“‘All nations must come to the decision to renounce force as a final resort of policy. If they are not prepared to do this they will *cease to exist*’”) are well-meaning chaps but they are guilty of “rhetoric.” The facts, adduced by “homework” and “sober study,” are otherwise. Kahn has “researched” the matter and is in a position to assure us that, while a thermonuclear war “is quite likely to be an *unprecedented catastrophe* for the defender” [his italics], this is “a far cry from an ‘unlimited’ one.” The limits on the magnitude of the catastrophe “seem to be closely dependent on what kinds of preparations have been made, and on how the war is started and fought.”

In Kahn’s view we must distinguish between 100 million dead and 50 million dead. We must face the task in assessing “postwar states . . . of distinguishing among the possible degrees of awfulness.” After all, it would be better to have “a country which survives a war with, say, 150 million people and a gross national product (GNP) of \$300 billion a year, [than] a nation which emerges with only 50 million people and a GNP of \$10 billion. The former would [still] be the richest and the fourth largest nation in the world [while] the latter would be a pitiful remnant. . . .”

To clear the mind “for deliberations in this field” Kahn gives us the table reproduced below. (The cryptic caption is from the book.) “Here,” says Kahn, “I have tried to make the point that if we have a posture which might result in 40 million dead in a general war, and as a result of poor planning, apathy, or other causes, our posture deteriorates and a war occurs with 80 million dead, we have suffered an additional disaster, an *unnecessary* additional disaster that is almost as bad as the original disaster.” Eliminating the *unnecessary* dead is, of course, “something vastly worth doing.” And yet, Kahn complains, “it is very difficult to get this point across to laymen or experts with enough intensity to move them to action. The average

citizen has a dour attitude toward planners who say that if we do thus and so it will not be 40 million dead—it will be 20 million dead.” I suggest the “dour attitude” may be due to the fact that, unlike Kahn, we have not been mathematically trained, and big numbers are apt to be confusing.

Taking 40 million or 80 million dead as a round figure, we might ask whether the postwar “environment” would be so “hostile” that “we or our descendants would prefer being dead than [sic] alive?” Not at all, says Kahn. “Objective studies [made by Kahn and his colleagues] indicate that even though the amount of human tragedy would be greatly increased in the postwar world, the increase would not preclude normal and happy lives for the majority of survivors and their descendants.” “Would the survivors live as Americans are accustomed to living—with automobiles, television, ranch houses, freezers and so on?” Kahn is optimistic. “No one can say, but I believe there is every likelihood that even if we make almost no preparations for recuperation except to buy radiation meters, write and distribute manuals, train some cadres for decontamination and the like, and make some other minimal plans, the country would recover rather rapidly . . . from the small attack.”

Kahn admits it may take a little time to get back to normalcy. A number of cities may have disappeared, and the economic engine would require retuning. The economy is sometimes compared to a living organism, which may die even if 99 per cent of its cells are undamaged, but the analogy “seems to be completely wrong as far as long-term recuperation is concerned.” The economy is “even more flexible than a salamander (which can grow new parts when old ones are destroyed) in that large sections of it can operate independently (with some degradation, of course). In addition, no matter how much destruction is done, if there are survivors, they will put *something* together. The creating (or recreating) of a society is an art rather than a science;

even though empirical and analytic laws' have been worked out, we do not really know how it is done, but almost everybody (Ph.D. or savage) can do it."

Parts of the land may become uninhabitable due to fallout. But in general, according to Kahn, the fallout and contamination danger has been exaggerated. Still, if the Strategic Air Command should follow the suggestion "that some people have made" and move "into the Rocky Mountains or the Great American Desert—then some wars might easily result in the creation of large areas that one would not wish to live in, even by industrial standards. It is very unlikely that areas such as the Rocky Mountains would ever be decontaminated. Some people might be willing to visit and perhaps hunt or fish for a few weeks (the game would be edible) but, unless they had a very good reason to stay, it would be unwise to live there and even more unwise to raise a family there."

Kahn favors us with a lengthy analysis of genetic damage. It is not so easily repaired as a ranch house; on the other hand, the damage is likely to be "spread out," and on the installment plan we could afford it. We might have to pay for a war through "20 or 30 or 40 generations. But even this is a long way from annihilation. It might well turn out, for example, that U. S. decision makers would be willing, among other things, to accept the high risk of an additional 1 per cent of our children being born deformed *if that meant not giving up Europe to Soviet Russia.*" Kahn is of the opinion that if genetic damage is "borne by our descendants and not by our own generation," we must not take it too much to heart. ("While I believe that this statement is a defensible one, it is not one I would care to defend in the give and take of a public debate") Embryonic deaths are "of limited significance.... These are conceptions which would have been successful if it had not been for radiation that damaged the germ cell and thus made the potential conception result in a failure. There will probably be five mil-

lion of these in the first generation, and one hundred million in future generations. I do not think of this last number as too important, except for the small fraction that involves detectable miscarriages or stillbirths. On the whole, the human race is so fecund that a small reduction in fecundity should not be a serious matter even to individuals."

Leaving aside the question of genetic deaths, which lie within a price range Kahn feels we should be prepared to pay, how many of the living—to wit, us—should we be prepared to throw into the pot? Kahn says that 180 million "is too high a price to pay for punishing the Soviets for their aggression." But there remains the "hard and unpleasant question": If not 180 million, then how many? Maybe even 100 million is too high. "Almost nobody," Kahn observes, "wants to go down in history as the first man to kill 100,000,000 people." "I have discussed this question," he says, "with many Americans, and after about fifteen minutes of discussion their estimates of an acceptable price generally fall between 10 and 60 million, clustering toward the upper number.... The way one seems to arrive at the upper limit of 60 million is rather interesting. He takes one-third of a country's population, in other words somewhat less than half." It is gratifying to learn that "no American that I have spoken to who was at all serious about the matter believed that any U S. action, limited or unlimited, would be justified...if more than half of our population would be killed in retaliation."

One small brush stroke may be permitted to fill out this portrait of the mind of Herman Kahn. We are asked to imagine ourselves in the "postwar situation." We will have been exposed to "extremes of anxiety, unfamiliar environment, strange foods, minimum toilet facilities, inadequate shelters, and the like. Under these conditions some high percentage of the population is going to become nauseated, and nausea is very catching. If one man vomits, everybody

vomits. It would not be surprising if almost everybody vomits. Almost everyone is likely to think he has received too much radiation. Morale may be so affected that many survivors may refuse to participate in constructive activities, but would content themselves with sitting down and waiting to die—some may even become violent and destructive. However, the situation would be quite different if radiation meters were distributed. Assume now that a man gets sick from a cause other than radiation. Not believing this, his morale begins to drop. You look at his meter and say, 'You have received only ten roentgens, why are you vomiting? Pull yourself together and get to work.'

Herman Kahn, we are told, is "one of the very few who have managed to avoid the 'mental block' so characteristic of writers on nuclear warfare." The mental block consists, if I am not mistaken, of a scruple for life. This evil and tenebrous book, with its loose-lipped pieties and its hayfoot-strawfoot logic, is permeated with a bloodthirsty irrationality such as I have not seen in my years of reading. We are now in a position to comprehend the noble Houyhnhnm's horror at Gulliver's account of the condition of man:

"He said, whoever understood the Nature of *Yahoos* might easily believe it possible for so vile an Animal, to be capable of every action I had named, if their Strength and Cunning equalled their Malice. . . . That, although he hated the *Yahoos* of this Country, yet he no more blamed them for their odious Qualities, than he did a Gnnayh (A Bird of Prey) for its Cruelty, or a sharp Stone for cutting his Hoof. But, when a Creature pretending to Reason, could be capable of such Enormities, he dreaded lest the Corruption of that Faculty might be worse than Brutality itself."

Somehow these two views must be reconciled or we never will achieve disarmament. The process of Reciprocal Disarmament is a compromise. As the pace-setter, we first destroy 2% of each class of our weapons [by well publicized Presidential order] at all our bases scattered over the world, whose location is already known. Only then do we invite every other nation to follow suit. This will make a spectacle which, if properly presented to the people of the world, will be so tremendous that all nations will be compelled to follow suit.

It is not necessary that the Russians, in their first demolitions, disclose the location of their bases. 2% of each class of their weapons can be destroyed at any convenient spot. Undoubtedly the Pentagon knows their inventory well enough to determine about how many units would represent 2%. This procedure should satisfy us in the early stages.

As soon as this process is well under way and each side can believe the other means business, a World Authority can be organized to which will then be transferred each successive 2%. This Authority then comes to be the only deterrent force, whose strength is growing more than twice as fast as each individual nation's is decreasing. Therefore, if any cache of arms in the depths of Siberia should have been overlooked, it would be of small consequence by the end of the process, as compared with the might of the World Authority—whose sole duty would be preserving the peace of the world.

Until the Authority can assume its duties, the comparative strength of each individual nation remains as it is at present. Thus the balance of terror is preserved. In view of the threatened spread of nuclear ability, it is very likely that the Russians as well as ourselves would welcome a World Authority of preponderating strength. If we don't delay too long, such an Authority solves the nth nation problem. But we can't expect to organize if we fool around another five years with disarmament conferences.

This process departs from age-long precedent. Several experts have lately called attention to the growing difficulty of disarmament by conference. The subject today is too complex to hope for agreement. We must try a new approach if the two conferences now arranged show no more progress than have their predecessors. Such an executive act might make some mistakes, but it won't make the supreme mistake of waiting until too late.

**EXECUTIVE ACTION HAS STARTED MANY
WARS. NOW LET IT START A PEACE!**

Reciprocal Disarmament

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