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How the AEC Got Itself Whitewashed

I

Before we set up a system to monitor the Russians, we had better devise one to monitor the Atomic Energy Commission. The swift way in which the AEC got itself absolved by the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy last week shows that Admiral Strauss and his colleagues could probably evade detection even by Congressional inspection posts spread at 250 foot intervals straight across the red carpeting of the AEC. The Joint Committee, in the process of hastily clearing the AEC, even stumbled across a second misleading official report on the now notorious Nevada underground test without realizing its significance. Here is a new chapter in *The Case of the False Press Release* which the AEC now admits (as the reader will see) was uncovered by "a news correspondent," meaning yours truly.

This new episode begins late the evening of Wednesday, March 12, when Congressman Chet Holifield, a ranking member of the Joint Committee, issued a statement. This revealed for the first time that at an executive session of the Joint Committee on January 21 "a responsible scientist connected with the Nevada atom bomb tests" had declared "in the presence of high officials of the AEC" that the underground explosion had been detected as far away as Alaska. Since high AEC officials were thus informed of it in January, Mr. Holifield wanted Chairman Durham to ask the AEC how it could possibly have issued a press release two months later saying that the blast had not been recorded more than 250 miles away.

Rump Session and Packed Jury

Two days later, Friday, March 14, Holifield, Mel Price of Illinois and Senator Clinton Anderson flew to New Mexico for the funeral of Congressman Dempsey. This took the three most militant members of the Joint Committee out of Washington. That same day Chairman Durham suddenly called a public hearing of the Joint Committee for the next morning, Saturday, to investigate the false AEC press release of March 6. The timing and the short notice were well calculated to bring out as few members as possible. Of the 18 members of the Joint Committee, only four turned up, and those were among the least independent. The only Senator at this rump session was Hickenlooper of Iowa, long the AEC's most faithful echo in the Senate. Two Republican Congressmen, Van Zandt and Jenkins, appeared. The only Democrat was the easy-going Durham, of North Carolina. The AEC couldn't have hoped for a better packed jury.

The hearing lasted less than an hour, and ended with headlines about the AEC being absolved. Actually, in the course of offering new explanations, the AEC had involved

A Bulletin of Warning

Under the guise of sharing scientific information, the Administration is set to push through Congress before the Easter recess a bill to amend the Atomic Energy Act which would authorize the President as he saw fit to give out "make-it-yourself-kits" for atomic weapons to allied countries. He could give out fissionable materials, atomic casings, electro-mechanical firing devices, atomic cannon and the information required to assemble them as nuclear weapons. This bill would implement the policy unveiled by Secretary Dulles last fall to place small nuclear tactical weapons in the hands of all the countries around the Sino-Soviet perimeter. This would include Syngman Rhee and Chiang Kai-shek and is a better clue to Administration thinking than inspired stories out of State Dept. on how moderate Mr. Dulles is becoming on disarmament. Thanks to a battle within the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, a plan to report this legislation out without public hearings was defeated. But hearings have been set for 2 p. m. next Wednesday and unless interested organizations are alerted the bills (S 3165 and HR 10348) will be railroaded through. Senator Pastore is chairman of the subcommittee in charge.

itself in new contradictions and had revealed another misleading report on the Nevada test, a scientific report by the University of California's Livermore Laboratory which had been in charge of the explosion. The AEC stressed the fact that this report was unclassified. Copies of it were made available to the Joint Committee Chairman on the eve of the hearing and placed on sale at the Office of Technical Services in the Department of Commerce. This correspondent—morbidly curious as ever—went and bought a copy for himself last Monday morning for a dollar. There, on page 25, was a reference to the Nevada explosion. It said "The U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey also studied Rainer [the code name for the underground shot] records from permanently located Wood-Anderson seismographs. . . . Records were available from seven of these stations located 110 to 350 miles from the test detonation." Where the original press release stated falsely that 250 miles was the limit of detection, this upped it by 100 miles and implied—as falsely—that 350 miles was the limit.

II

Of course the Livermore Laboratory report does not say that these seven stations were the only ones which recorded the underground shot, nor that 350 miles was the limit at which it was detected. But that is certainly the impression it created. Even Chairman Durham of the Joint Committee noticed this at Saturday's hearing and asked, "Why did they not have the results of Alaska here? They speak of 110 to

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Was the Information on Seismic Detection Originally Classified?

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350 miles? Why did they not have that? They had all those other reports from the other stations. . . . I believe we were told in January by Dr. [Herbert] York [who was in charge of the underground shot for Livermore] that it was picked up in Alaska. That was January 21 of this year. So I do not see why these people in making the official report did not have the same information."

Chairman Durham wanted to know whether Dr. W. F. Libby, acting chairman of the AEC, had "anything to say on this point." What Dr. Libby had to say—and get away with—was a model of rambling evasion, which finished quite off the point.

Not Interested in Seismic Effects?

His reply gave the impression that the scientists who ran the Nevada test were primarily responsible for "effects within the test area" but that scientists elsewhere and indeed "the world over" were responsible for studying the seismic effects. When Chairman Durham brought this matter up again the AEC representatives again tried to create the impression that the AEC itself was not interested in the seismic effects.

Chairman DURHAM: After the test shot when the AEC and the test officials advised that the Alaska station over 2,000 miles away had detected the shot, when was that received by the Commission?

Dr. LIBBY: I believe our first information was on March 4, but I must check with the general manager.

Mr. [K. E.] FIELDS [general manager, AEC]: I believe it was the fourth of March.

A. D. Starbird, director of the AEC's division of military application, broke in.

Gen. STARBIRD: The first time I heard it, sir, was in testimony before the Joint Committee given in executive session. The date, as I remember, was about January 21.

Chairman DURHAM: What action did you take, General, after the statement by Dr. York, being the first time you were aware of this greater distance? Did you contact anyone?

Gen. STARBIRD: I did not, sir. . . . We were interested in focussing on damage that might occur from the shock. . . . I did not take this to be of any great significance to what I was trying to achieve.

But Dr. Libby's statement that the men in charge of the underground test were interested only in effects "within the test area" and General Starbird's that they were concerned only with "damage that might occur from the shock" are belied by the Livermore Laboratory report. For there, on pages 9 and 10, one may find set forth "the technical objectives of the test" and among these was, "6. To measure and evaluate seismic signals and effects at distances extending from the point of detonation out to all distances where the signals could be detected." Neither Dr. Libby nor Gen. Starbird was candid with the Joint Committee.

III

At that same Saturday morning's hearing the AEC presented a new explanation of how on March 6 it happened to issue a false background report on the underground shot. The new AEC statement said this press release was originally

Questions

If the AEC was as uninterested in seismic effects as its officials now claim, why were the reporters present at the Sept. 19 test told in the briefing on the spot that AEC scientists predicted it could not be detected more than a few hundred miles away and—triumphantly—that the first results bore out that prediction? (See New York Times, Sept. 20, 1957.)

Could it be that the AEC made no effort to check for itself the disappointing reports which came in next morning from Toronto, Rome and Japan saying that seismologists in those countries claimed to have recorded the underground shot?

Did these first predictions not reflect the hope that the underground test would prove that testing could be carried on in secrecy and that therefore an agreement to suspend tests was hopeless?

drafted by the Public Information Officer in the Albuquerque explosion site. "That background statement for newsmen," the AEC said in its new explanation to the Joint Committee, "was transmitted by him to the San Francisco Operations Office to be checked by the Livermore Laboratory which conducted the underground shot. It was also transmitted to Washington for review."

The statement said that "After consultation in Livermore, the San Francisco Operations Office Public Information Officer telephoned to Albuquerque recommending to a member of the Information Staff there the deletion of two sentences which read, 'The earth waves were recorded at seismological stations at Los Angeles, about 250 miles, air line, from the shot mesa. This was the maximum distance at which the shock was recorded.' Shortly thereafter the member of the Information Staff concerned at Albuquerque became ill and did not return to work until after the statement had been prepared in final form. Others in the Albuquerque office, in his absence, made the final draft and arranged publication. Issuance was also made by the Washington office of the AEC. Neither of the issuing parties had knowledge of the deletion suggested by Livermore and the San Francisco Operations Office."

The new statement also says that on the day of the tour by press men of the underground shot "a representative of the Livermore Laboratory was present. A question arose as to whether the release was factual. It concerned the exactness of the 250 miles. Orally the Livermore representative explained that some signals had been received as far away as the Denver region some 600 miles from the site. This information was considered on site not to be of sufficient significance to be transmitted to Washington."

It is a pity no one on the Joint Committee was wide awake enough Saturday morning to ask about that one. Here was a press tour of the underground shot. The newspapermen were given the March 6 release saying that there were no seismic signals beyond 250 miles. A representative of the scientific laboratory in charge said it had been recorded 600 miles away and yet no one "on site" thought that important enough to inform Washington and suggest a correction!

Let us add up some facts for ourselves. The testimony shows that as early as January 21 the head of the Livermore Laboratory told the Joint Committee in executive session in

Drs. Teller and Grigg Were the Main Architects of the Underground Shot

General Starbird's presence that seismic signals had been registered in Berkeley, in Alaska and in other places. The new explanatory statement shows that Denver was one of those other places known to have received the seismic signals. *Why then does the unclassified report prepared by the Livermore Laboratory and now released by the AEC fail to mention Alaska or Denver? Why does it only speak of certain stations from 110 to 350 miles distant, giving the impression that this was the farthest away the signals were received?*

Why Merely A Deletion?

Now let us go back and ask a related question. The new AEC explanatory statement says that when the original draft of the release containing the false 250-mile claim was checked with Livermore, the laboratory suggested the deletion of that reference. Why did it merely suggest a deletion? Why didn't it suggest that the release be revised to say that seismic signals were received as far north as Alaska? If the AEC was so unconcerned with distant signals, why this curious reluctance all up and down the line to admit the Alaska recording? Why was this crucial fact to be withheld? Is it, perhaps, that the information was originally classified in order to keep the public from becoming aware of how easily underground tests could be detected?

IV

The new AEC statement of explanation verifies the story told in last week's issue that it was a phone call by this correspondent to the AEC the morning of Friday, March 7, which forced out the news of the Alaska recording. "Following the tour and briefing," the AEC statement says, "a news correspondent on 7 March called the AEC Division of Information Services in Washington asking whether the information as to distance at which the shot was detected was correct. That Division checked and found that information received in the AEC March 4 indicated that a signal had been detected on the seismograph of a station in Alaska."

This March 4 date is peculiar and deserves inquiry. The statement says the press release was reviewed in Washing-

ton "by the AEC Divisions of Information Services and Military Application. Neither caught the error in the statements. It was approved by the general manager for issuance on 2 March and circulated to the Commissioners for their information on 4 March." But it was on the 4th of March that General Starbird received a communication from Coast and Geodetic Survey giving the names of 31 stations which recorded the underground test in Nevada. How did he happen to get it that particular day? And why was no attention paid to it?

General Starbird's division is in charge of testing new atomic weapons and of testing means to detect them. If an agreement is reached on inspection, his tests will be suspended. Could he have been as unconscious as he claims of the implications of the seismic records?

I also find it impossible to believe that the men who originally advanced the idea for the underground test were unaware of these broader implications for national policy. The two men were Dr. Edward Teller and Dr. David T. Griggs. The unclassified Livermore report says it was they who first proposed the underground test, and the March 6 release says they devised the particular method used in it. Dr. Griggs is less well known than Dr. Teller but is of similar mind. His mentality is displayed in his testimony against Dr. Oppenheimer as recorded in the AEC transcript of the latter's hearing. According to Dr. Griggs, Dr. Oppenheimer called him "a paranoid." Dr. Griggs was certainly, like Dr. Teller, wrought up to a pitch where he began to suspect anyone who thought along lines other than the continued fabrication of new and more efficient weapons of destruction.

Senator Kefauver summed the matter up very well when he told the Senate on March 13:

"What has aroused suspicion about this matter is the minds of many people, is that the Chairman of the AEC, Admiral Lewis Strauss, and his principal scientific collaborator, Dr. Edward Teller, are vigorously opposed to any ban on testing atomic and hydrogen weapons. In part their opposition, at least publicly, has been based on their opinion

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Dr. Libby Admits We're Ahead of the Russians But Still Wants Testing To Go On

Senator Pastore. If we were ahead in our arsenal of bombs, nuclear and thermonuclear, as against the Russians, if you stalemated it now, wouldn't we be in a better position than they would?

Dr. Libby. Our armament is stronger and more varied and it is more developed than theirs, by a large factor.

Senator Pastore. Therefore, if you could stop this thing cold as of now, wouldn't we be in a better position than the Russians? I mean let's assume that you could.

Dr. Libby. Our armament would be better. One of the questions is whether they would abide by it.

Senator Pastore. I am not getting into that at all. We are discussing the point here whether it would be advisable to stop. Our question is, Can you stop?

Dr. Libby. I think there may be an intermediate point. . . . you know we have developed bombs with intrinsically

—Dr. W. F. Libby, acting chairman, Atomic Energy Commission, executive session, Humphrey disarmament subcommittee, March 6, transcript released for publication, March 13.

less radio-activity, the so-called clean bombs . . . and one of our purposes in continuing tests is to develop this further, especially to extend it to smaller yields. It is therefore conceivable that one could think about a type of test limitation rather than a test ban. . . .

"We have reasons for developing this small bomb armament in our normal military police operations, and we have a long way to go in cleaning up this part of our armament. So this is a pretty commanding reason for further testing.

"But fundamentally it is this point. That we cannot make the improvements in our military machinery which has come to depend in large part for explosive power on atomic and nuclear weapons, we cannot make these improvements without testing.

"And so if you stop testing, you are stuck with and you have the present arsenal and that is just about it."

Radioactive Fallout Was Another "Inadvertent Omission" by the AEC

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that tests could be undetected.

"The question arises as to whether it was a coincidence that the misinformation given out by the AEC in this case strongly bolstered the opinions of Admiral Strauss and Dr. Teller. If we are, in fact, dealing with a mistake through inadvertence, it is a very peculiar kind of inadvertence indeed."

V

A psychoanalyst might say that the AEC was "inadvertent omission" prone. "This 250 mile statement," Dr. Libby told Chairman Durham, "was a complete inadvertence. There was never any basis for it." I should now like to call attention to another of Dr. Libby's famous "inadvertences."

As readers of Dr. Ralph E. Lapp's brilliant and moving "The Voyage of the Lucky Dragon" know, it was only through the mysterious accident to the Japanese fishermen on that unlucky ship in March, 1954, that the world first became aware of the terrible new danger let loose in the world by the first H-bomb explosion. That incident happened in March, 1954, but it was not until February, 1955, almost a full year later, that the danger was acknowledged by the AEC.

Strauss Blamed It on The Coral

Until that time the AEC rested on the misleading statement issued by Admiral Strauss (March 31, 1954) which attributed the "skin lesions" suffered by the Japanese fishermen "to the chemical activity in the converted material in the coral rather than to radioactivity." Even when the following February the AEC finally admitted the radioactive danger, its press release was so framed as to give the impression that the radioactivity dissipated after 36 hours.

As the Holifield subcommittee on civil defense of House Government Operations expressed it in a report on July 27, 1956, "The information released on that date by the AEC might easily convey to the lay reader a misleading impression of the extent and duration of the radioactivity hazard. While explaining that fallout is due to surface nuclear explosions which draw up large amounts of materials into the

On Earlier "Inadvertencies"

"The subcommittee sees no excuse for inadvertencies or casual treatment of atomic energy when life and death matters such as this are involved. The AEC displays a kind of easy optimism about nuclear explosion effects. The AEC spokesmen dwell upon the effects of 'nominal' bombs rather than on those of the high yield megaton weapons. Data presented to the subcommittee on the intensity of local radiation hazards are diluted by resort to global averages and other minimizing assumptions. The genetic effects of radioactivity are passed by with the comment that 'there is a wide range of admissible opinion on this subject.' Important information on atomic energy often is released in dribbles, through speeches of AEC Commissioners, and couched in highly technical and hypothetical terms rather than in concise, plain-spoken facts."

—Civil Defense for National Survival, House Rpt. 2946, Holifield subcommittee, July 27, 1956.

bomb cloud, the first paragraph of the statement also observes that the 'main radioactivity' is dissipated within a few hours and concludes with a sentence that air explosions do not produce any serious radiological hazard. The AEC release referred to radioactivity within the first 36 hours. The persistent or lingering radioactivity received practically no attention."

Dr. Libby had been questioned about this press release by Congressman Holifield when he appeared before the latter's subcommittee on January 31, 1956, at the very beginning of its hearings. This colloquy, which now deserves to be recalled, took place:

Mr. HOLIFIELD. Was there any reason why the February 15, 1955, release mentioned the radioactivity only for the first 36 hour period? Was there any reason why this should have been confined to the 36-hour period?

Dr. LIBBY. No.

Mr. HOLIFIELD. Do you feel that this type of a release would have a tendency to confuse the layman in that he might think that the 36 hours was the duration of that radioactivity?

Dr. LIBBY. I am afraid this was an inadvertent omission.

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