Fire, fire

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Eric Schlosser

COMMAND AND CONTROL

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HISTORY

In 1958, Fred Iklé, a nuclear weapons analyst and a recurring figure in Eric Schlosser’s Command and Control, looked back over the thirteen years since the Second World War. Although no nuclear weapons had exploded during that period, he insisted that the cold war had been driven by the fact that no unauthorized detonation had occurred to date”. In fact, he proclaimed, that perfect safety record meant nothing for the future, and he cheerlessly calculated that, looking ahead, there might well be twelve crashes of nuclear-armed bombers and seven bomb jettisoning every year.

Iklé was wildly off in his predictions about how many bombs would be crashed in bomb- ers or would be jettisoned from them. However, these scenarios, while obviously undesirable, are substantially irrelevant to concerns about inadvertent nuclear explosions. Nuclear weapons do not detonate simply by crashing to the ground, nor by being subjected to fire or external explosions. For the weapons to explode, not only must their considerable array of safety devices be undermined or switched off, but they must be detonated by mechanical processes, not by impact or by fire. (It is a true nuclear weapon can be “ground burst”. However, this means that the explosion is centered near the surface so that its fireball gouges out a crater in the earth, not that it hits the ground. Both the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, in contrast, were “air bursts”)

Schlosser seems to know this, but apparently he could not bring himself to make it central to his argument perhaps because it would und ercut the easy flow of his determined alarmism. The perfect safety record for unauthorized nuclear explosions has now been extended to nearly seventy years, and it embraces not only the United States but the entire world, which currently harbours nine countries with nuclear weapons. Nonethe less, Schlosser, while noting that achieve ment and reporting Iklé’s prediction without irony, essentially insists that the seventy-year experience, too, means nothing for the future because an unauthorized detonation of a nuclear weapon could still happen. It is not impossible.

His book, some 485 pages of text and ninety-nine pages of notes followed by a twenty-nine-page bibliography, attempts to raise the alarm with a series of rather breathless anecdotes involving accidents when involve nuclear weapons in one way or another. Strung together through the text is a dramatic and extremely detailed account of one that took place in 1980 at an American military base near Damascus, Arkansas. A fire caused a missile to explode and resulted in the death of one person, although the antiquated and very large nuclear weapon on the missile survived intact. It is situations like that one that occupy the great majority of Schlosser’s anecdotes. Scarcely any involve the potential detonation of a nuclear weapon.

Mishaps in which a nuclear weapon crashes to the ground or is involved in a fire or an external explosion are essentially like industrial accidents tragic and costly, but nowhere near as destructive as a nuclear detonation. Working to reduce industrial accidents is certainly a sensible policy goal, and Schlosser’s vivid book does an excellent job of detailing both the human and mechanical complexities of ensuring that nuclear weapons are safe.

A reason Iklé’s prediction continued the thirteen-year period of the atomic age were so extravagant pessimistic is that he didn’t take safety improvements into account. Schlosser’s narrative shows that these have been applied to nuclear weapons as they have to other areas. For example, in the year one man was killed at the Damascus fire and explosion documented by Schlosser, 133 died in coal-mining accidents in the United States. However, that number had been 1,158 in 1947, and by 2012 it had declined to 22.

And there have been other developments favourable to nuclear weapons safety. Since the end of the Cold War the sheer number of nuclear weapons in the world has declined greatly. The United States and Russia have retained some nuclear weapon power, and France has reduced its arsenal by two-thirds unilaterally. Moreover, the average explosive capacity, or “yield”, of a nuclear weapon is far lower than was expected in 1942. The radius of destruction of a Hiroshima size bomb is about 5 kilometers tragic and significant in a city, but far less so in a desert. However, none of this is likely to cheer Schlosser. In the end, he demands “perfect safety and security” from the inadvertent or unauthorized detonation of nuclear weapons. In another book, perhaps, he will apply that exalted and impossible standard to the cosmic dangers presented by ill-directed comets and meteors.

Although the record with nuclear weapons, and with many other arms, has indeed been perfect for over two-thirds of a century now, there is no way, of course, to absolutely guarantee the condition will continue forever. As a practical matter, even a dedicated effort to eliminate the weapons from the face of the earth could not completely assure that none are stashed away somewhere. And nothing can be done to expunge the knowledge of how to make them.

Nor, it appears, can anything be done to ex punge the alarmism they inspire. Schlosser has many distinguished predecessors. For example, around 1950 Albert Einstein fancied with a confidence bordering on intellec tual arrogance that he had managed to disc over the single device that could solve the problem of a nuclear world: “Only the crea tion of a world government can prevent the impending self-destruction of mankind”. And ten years later C. P. Snow, insisting that he was “speaking as responsibly as I can”, proclaimed it to be a “certainty that if the nu clear arms race between the United States and Soviet Union continues to conclude in a war, this war will consume the total war can create (which it definitely did) within, at the most, ten years, some of those bombs are going off”.

At great length, Eric Schlosser continues this grand alarmist tradition. To the degree it further encourages care in the handling of nu clear weapons, it may be desirable. However, when it animates military policy, it can be de cidedly harmful. Disproportionate alarm over the possibility that Saddam Hussein’s pathet ic regime in Iraq might eventually obtain nu clear weapons substantially motivated the war in Iraq, resulting in far more deaths than were suffered at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.

We sometimes forget that Edmund Burke gave his 1790 response to the French Revolution a two-part title: Reflections on the Revolution in France, and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event. The title’s second half refers to Britain’s growing democr acic movement, which would soon be energized by Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man and reform groups like the London Corresponding Soci ety. The pivot in Burke’s title captures the process of national self-inspection prompted by the French Revolution, a process that has a battery of repressive laws and a climate of sus picion and prosecution in Britain across the 1790s. Historians have debated the severity of this repression, some arguing that it was not out of proportion when taken in the longue durée, others referring to it fl atly as William Pitt’s “Reign of Terror”. Kenneth R. Johnston would incline towards the latter view, though he is concerned less with the Prime Minister’s specific measures than with a toxic atmos phere of alarm and paranoia that spread from government enforcement to social intimida tion.

Johnston’s title refers to those who in other times may not have fallen under the surveil lance of government or the suspicion of neigh bours. These “usual suspects”, those who might in previous ages have been suddenly thought inflammatory with the outbreak of the French Revolution: the province of the “suspect” widened to include scientists, educators, poets, travel writers, journalists, lecturers, and just about anyone else willing to voice opposition to the status quo. What happened to these “usual suspects”? To show us, Johnston has written a book that is part in vestigial history and part elegy. How many bright young minds lost careers, suffered char acter attacks, were tracked by Home Office agents, or fled Britain to live in exile? We can never know. But Johnston does begin to trace what he calls “the lost generation of the 1790s”, and in doing so he pieces together a story that has waited a long time to be told. With its interwoven, deeply researched bio graphical sketches of seventeen subjects from