

Sweeping it under the carpet

Just before the first atomic bomb was set off in New Mexico in 1945, one of Robert Oppenheimer's physicists mused that the explosion might ignite all the hydrogen on earth. Oppenheimer went ahead anyway. The human race is still breathing.

The British, who set off a series of nuclear explosions in Australia in 1952-56, were not so lucky. They didn't blow up the world, but they did spoil a chunk of Australia and exposed a lot of people to radiation. They have now been found out. A report by a royal commission, published on December 5th, says that British disregard for the safety of the aborigines who lived near the test sites amounted in some cases to "ignorance, incompetence and cynicism".

The commission says that Britain should pay for two aboriginal territories in South Australia to be cleaned up, and that Australia, whose government at the time took a complacent attitude towards the tests, should compensate the aborigines for not being able to live in the territories for the past 30 years. Paying off the aborigines would be straightforward (though expensive). Cleaning up the test site would not. In 1967 the British tried a bit of hasty cleaning up at Maralinga, one of the sites, by ploughing the plutonium fallout into the soil. This nuclear equivalent of sweeping the dust under the carpet is clearly not what the commission has in mind.

The most celebrated clean-up of nuclear-contaminated ground took place in 1966 after a mid-air collision caused an American bomber to jettison four hydrogen bombs over southern Spain. Three of the bombs fell on farmland, and the conventional explosives in two of them went off, scattering plutonium and uranium over several hundred acres. The Americans dug up all the contaminated topsoil—about 1,500 tons—and took it away to the United States.

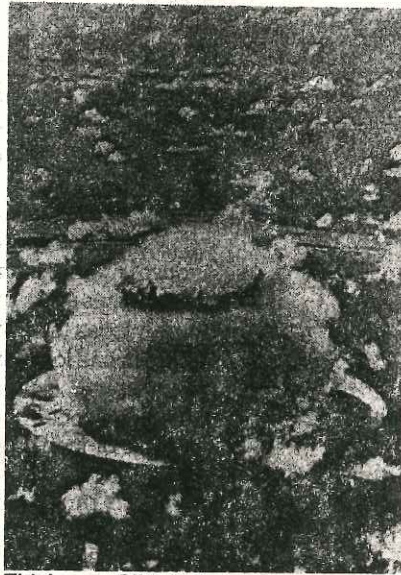
The Americans have not been able to do the same immaculate job of cleaning up the huge contaminated area around Bikini and other Pacific islands where they tested their nuclear weapons in 1946-58. In April this year the United States agreed, after years of pressure from exiled Bikini islanders, to replace the island's topsoil and plant some new palm trees and other vegetation. But radioactivity from the 26 nuclear tests may have penetrated deep into the coral, making fish caught there slightly

radioactive.

Governments seem to have a worrying faith in the cleansing power of water. Japan dumps its nuclear waste into the Pacific, to the annoyance of other Pacific states. There are 20 kilograms of plutonium in the Mururoa lagoon as a result of French nuclear tests in the atmosphere over the atoll. But the French say it is safe to eat fish caught in the lagoon.

There have been 1,547 nuclear explosions, known or presumed. Because they have been the most secret of state secrets, relatively little has been made public about what damage they have done to the earth. Nuclear tests are now held underground—the last known atmospheric test was by China in 1980—and the official view is that these are not contaminating. But nobody can be sure of the long-term effects of blowing holes deep in the earth, as the Americans and the British now do in Nevada. Parts of Mururoa occasionally subside.

There has been no international agreement on a state's liability for nuclear damage. The Americans were sufficiently embarrassed in Spain to spend many millions of dollars cleaning up the mess. The British government, cautious in money matters if not in nuclear tests, persuaded the Australian government to sign two agreements relieving Britain of liability for the tests there. The royal commission says Britain has a moral obligation to pay for the clean-up.



Tidying up Bikini takes longer

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