

Protesting a Nuclear Dawn

by Marko Peric

Jacques Chirac is probably not the embodiment of all evil, despite what some environmental protesters might claim. The media and environmental groups have vilified France's recent actions in the South Pacific to the point where it is hard to know who to believe. True, French nuclear testing is not a particularly good thing, but perhaps the issue has been exaggerated. It is hard to envision France as a nuclear aggressor. After all, this is the country which Canada, the United States, Britain, and other allied nations rescued from German invaders earlier in this century -- twice.

Regardless of international protest, the French have pressed ahead with their tests. Several have already been conducted, and more are planned between now and the spring of 1996. It should be pointed out that these are small tests -- nothing like the multi-megaton devices detonated by the US in the South Pacific decades ago. This slate of tests is not likely to fill the upper atmosphere with nuclear fallout and bring death and destruction to the region, although some pollution is probable.

Even though the French have made it clear that they will not budge, Greenpeace and other environmental groups are sticking to their goals of stopping the nuclear tests. This persistence has to be admired, but obviously some of these groups are doing it for television exposure. While the boarding of Greenpeace vessels by French

troops can not be condoned, the environmentalists knew what they were getting into. Greenpeace would never cause a nasty scene to create a media blitz, would they?

Both sides in this issue have faulty positions. The French are doing something that offends most of the civilized world, and when everybody disagrees with your actions, it is usually a good idea to reevaluate your position. The tests so far have been successful, but the French are planning to blow up even more bombs. Why bother? Clearly the things work. What will detonating another half dozen prove -- putting together unstable masses of certain elements causes big explosions, no matter how many times we try. That is more than a little silly, not to mention wasteful, dangerous, and in these days of financial constraint, rather expensive.

On the other hand, the French have signed a treaty stating that once the current slate of tests is over, they will conduct no more tests in the South Pacific. Probably they will not do nuclear testing anywhere, since the French people would hardly tolerate atomic explosions in the outskirts of Paris. Also, the French possessions in the Caribbean are too close to the USA, which has always considered that region to be its own personal backyard.

So the end of French nuclear testing is not far off, but the protests continue. The environmentalists are putting a tremendous amount of energy

into beating a nearly dead horse. Would it not be more productive to protest about the nuclear programs in countries such as China and North Korea? Here are two nations that have - or are developing -- nuclear weapons, have recent histories of territorial aggression, and have human rights records that would make Saddam Hussein proud. Greenpeace and Co. should be much more concerned with these and other totalitarian regimes with atomic capabilities. If someone put together a list of nations likely to start World War III, would China or France be closer to the top?

Of course, most environmentalists know better than to protest in Beijing or P'yongyang -- the local authorities have a nasty way of shooting dissenters.

Although nuclear testing in general is deplorable, all the protests may actually have a negative effect. France told the world when and where it would conduct tests. What did Chirac get for his honesty? Nothing but protest and opposition all the way. With protest for any reason becoming increasingly fashionable, intense outrage in response to new testing is very likely. After seeing this precedent, it is unlikely that any country is going to be eager to tell the world about its atomic program. Nuclear testing will continue, but secretly, far from international supervision. This is a much deadlier threat than any small French test in the South Pacific would ever pose.

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