

# Environmental Security

No severely detrimental effects on the environment have yet been reported as a result of the Cannikin underground nuclear test on Amchitka, and for that we Americans, our Canadian neighbors and the citizens of the world at large must be grateful.

But the risks of disaster were there; and so was the characteristic arrogance of the Atomic Energy Commission and Defense authorities in proceeding with the test without waiting briefly to determine whether the provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act had been faithfully carried out. At least three of the seven members of the Supreme Court thought there was enough doubt to warrant a delay for re-examination; but on the familiar if frequently specious grounds of an overriding urgency in the interest of "national security," the Government said "no" and it won its point.

On both of these basic issues—the slighting of the requirements of the law as set forth by Congress and the suggestion that this particular test was so important to the security of the United States that all other considerations had to give way—we think the Government was wrong. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 sets forth very specific procedures for all governmental agencies to follow in describing the effect of their proposed actions on the environment. The A.E.C. has been brought up short before for its cavalier attitude—similar to that of the Corps of Engineers—toward the "environmental impact" of its activities; and it is evident from the various judicial opinions in the Cannikin affair that there is good reason to believe that once again the law has been slighted. It is shocking that it has to be left to the initiative of private citizens, rather than of the Administration itself, to see that the most powerful agencies of Government rigorously observe the law.

In this case the Government maintained, in effect, that the Cannikin test with all its risks was essential to the national security in developing nuclear missile defense. But here again there is evidence to suggest that the state of the art has gone so much further than when Cannikin was first conceived that the weapon and the uses for which it was designed have already become outmoded, superfluous or both.

Furthermore, the test in itself gave another unnecessary boost to the missile race when the real national security interest of the United States lies in the direction of restricting and limiting nuclear armaments, not in developing new ones—as many of the best-informed members of the United States Senate rather belatedly pointed out. And to have proceeded with this nuclear explosion in total disdain of the protests from two of this country's closest and most important allies, Canada and Japan, can hardly be considered a contribution to the national security of the United States.

The only good thing to be said about the whole exercise—apart from the fact that it evidently did not wreak the damage that had been feared—is that so much storm has been aroused that it will probably be a long time before anything like this is attempted again. For this the country owes its thanks largely to the groups of scientists and environmentalists in the Committee for Nuclear Responsibility, the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth and other organizations, who pushed the effort to halt Cannikin all the way to the highest Court. Meanwhile, the nation can now resume its slow and painful advance along the difficult road toward nuclear disarmament.