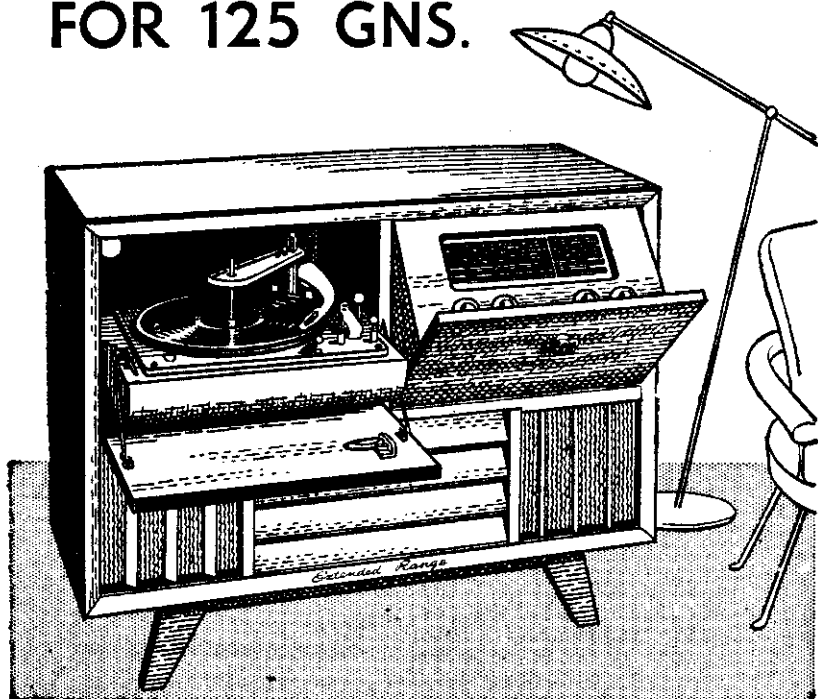


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## The Great Deterrent

ORDINARY people, trying to understand the world situation, must sometimes be puzzled about the Bomb. Nuclear weapons, they are told in the cable messages, are now so powerful that total war has become impossible. It is impossible, the argument runs, because everybody knows that the use of hydrogen bombs would bring universal destruction. This is true of weapons already in existence. Yet the nations which possess these weapons are continuing their experiments, apparently with the intention of making them even more powerful, or improving the methods by which they can be brought into action. There will soon, for instance, be no more bombers: they will be replaced by long-range rockets with atomic warheads. Similarly, the United States Secretary of the Navy has said that nuclear-powered submarines, firing ballistic missiles, "would be able to hit practically any target in the world from unknown and unpredictable positions." And the hydrogen bomb tests are continuing.

These activities provoke a question: how great must a deterrent become? If nuclear weapons will prevent war, simply because nobody would dare to use them, why must the means of using them be steadily improved? The answer, no doubt, will be that the "atomic" nations must try to be better armed than their potential enemies. As one nation makes an advance, the others attempt to overtake it. In the nature of things, the deterrent becomes an end in itself, and gathers around it a network of interests, scientific and military, which demand an onward movement. Thus, although there are to be no atomic wars, enormous sums are being spent, and great efforts are being made, to ensure full preparedness. The assumption is that preparedness makes war impossible. And if it is pointed out that there is nothing in history to support this assumption, the answer is given that the H-bomb is a new fact in history, and that men who have not been

afraid of extermination by other weapons will certainly be afraid of the fallout. The argument would be less confusing if it could be shown that some fundamental change in human nature has occurred since 1945.

Meanwhile the experts, adapting themselves to new circumstances, are making their plans in the belief that there will still be "limited" wars. The Bomb is in the background, a warning that the limits must not be overstepped. But within those limits there will, it is thought, be ample scope for military effort. Any reference to disarmament is therefore not taken seriously. Yet it is not long since disarmament seemed to have become an absolute necessity. Hiroshima was lying heavily on the conscience of the West; thinkers of all kinds explained the danger, and called for an act of sanity. But the postwar years were troubled. The rivalry between East and West flared up disastrously in Korea, and preparedness was again the watchword. It does not take long for the human race to adapt itself to a new situation and to rationalise its dangers. The Korean war was hard, but it was successfully contained, and the atom bomb was not used. Therefore it became axiomatic that the bomb would not be used at any future time. And since then there has grown up the curious notion that nuclear weapons are expected to stop big wars, but not little ones. Nobody has explained so far what guarantee there can be that a limited war will not at some stage become unlimited. While it remains possible that fighting can spread, it is possible that more massive forces will be engaged, until the next logical step is the use of nuclear weapons. At that point, presumably, the deterrent function of the bomb will begin to operate. Or will it? Perhaps it will, if the nations able to use nuclear weapons retain their present balance of power and interest. But who can say what sort of future is being prepared for our children?

—M.H.H.

N.Z. LISTENER, MARCH 29, 1957.