

Centerpiece

Searching the human mind for way out of nuclear dilemma

By Robert Levey
Globe Staff

Are nuclear weapons hazardous to the health even if they're never used?

A growing number of researchers now think so. A project is just getting off the ground in Cambridge to more clearly define the psychological impacts of living in a world where tens of thousands of nuclear warheads are poised for use at any moment. The larger goal of the program is to develop "new thinking" that could help lead civilization away from what many believe is an inevitable nuclear holocaust.

And though that might seem impossibly ambitious, Dr. John E. Mack of Harvard Medical School, a founder of the program, sees no alternative. He is persuaded that the only way out of the nuclear dilemma is to cultivate a radical shift in the way both national leaders and the public think about the danger posed by weapons of mass destruction.

"The constant threat of nuclear annihilation," he has written, "creates a terror that is unfathomable and overwhelming, a fear that will not yield to any form of aggression or ordinary self-assertion, or to belligerent attitudes of winning and victory."

Mack and Dr. Robert J. Lifton of Yale Medical School, both prominent psychiatrists and authors, will be codirectors of a set of unusual scientific inquiries to be called the "Research Program in the Study of Human Continuity." It will be conducted under the joint auspices of Harvard Medical School and the Cambridge Hospital.

Six years ago, Mack won the Pulitzer Prize for "The Prince of Our Disorder," his biography of T.E. Lawrence. Since then he has become an activist in that growing band of physicians and scientists who are devoting more and more of their time to thinking, writing and speaking about the nuclear future.

"I don't think these weapons are healthy," he said in an interview in his Brookline home. "As a physician, I think that they have a very high risk. The fact that we haven't had a nuclear war in 37 years is just lucky. Sooner or later some mistake is going to be made. We can offer no medical care. We can offer nothing but prevention. And I think as a psychiatrist and a physician that prevention involves calling attention to the impact the weapons are having on young people and society. Secondly, prevention involves diagnosing the patterns of thought that gave rise to the arms race, that keep it going and seem to be in the way of our gaining control of it."

Last year, he and Lifton helped edit the book, "Last Aid," a disturbing volume that outlines the medical dimensions of nuclear war.

In drawing up the prospectus for this new research program, Mack and Lifton wrote: "We believe that the cause of our perils lies not in the technology of nuclear weaponry alone, but in the human mind, in our inadequate patterns of behavior and social interaction in relation to this destructive technology. Old views of fighting and winning wars, even aspects of notions of deterrence, are to a large degree irrational, or at best untested, when it comes to nuclear weaponry."

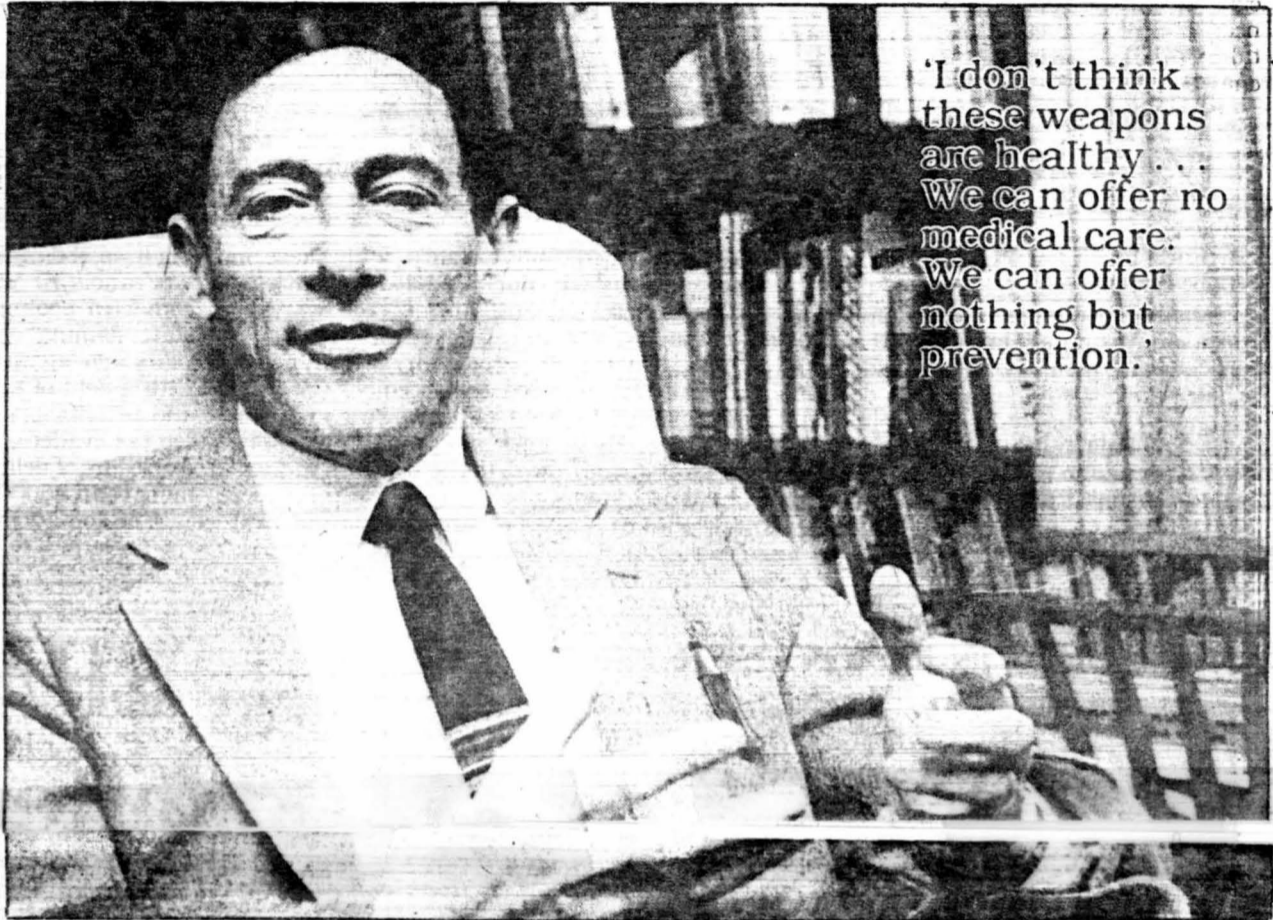
They maintain that much systematic research is necessary "if we are to determine what it is in our thinking that remains dangerously outmoded and nonresponsive to the risk of self-inflicted human extinction."

The overall project will include a sub-study by researcher Dorothy Austin on "religious imagination in the nuclear age." Austin says she will "look at the way religious myths, rites and practices serve as a sacred canopy for preserving human continuity, and conversely, we'll study the way in which religious imagery tends to legitimate and perpetuate those apocalyptic visions which are being rendered into nuclear scenarios."

Theories are under development

For several years, Mack has been developing theories about the way the shadow of nuclear doom is altering human attitudes, particularly among young people.

Last month, delivering the Oliver Cope Lecture at Massachusetts General Hospital, Mack said that "there is increasing evidence that the nuclear-arms race, and the experience of living constantly with the threat of imminent annihilation, is having a destructive impact on the emotional well-being, and possibly



DR. JOHN E. MACK ... psychiatrist and author

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GLOBE PHOTO BY JACK O'CONNELL

Selected reading

A varied and rapidly growing body of literature is being produced examining the issue of nuclear arms, their history and effects. Here is a selected listing of some recent books.

Common Sense and Nuclear Peace. Newton, Mass.: Education Development Center.

The Fate of the Earth. By Jonathan Schell. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. paperback: Avon Books.

The Final Epidemic: Physicians and Scientists on Nuclear War. Chicago: Education Foundation for Nuclear Science.

Last Aid: The Medical Dimensions of Nuclear War. Edited by Eric and Susanna Chivian, Robert J. Lifton and John E. Mack. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Co.

No First Use. Cambridge, Mass.: The Union of Concerned Scientists.

The Nuclear Delusion. By George F. Kennan. New York: Pantheon Books.

Nuclear War: What's in It for You? By the Ground Zero organization. New York: Pocket Books.

Nuclear Nightmares: An Investigation into Possible Wars. By Nigel Calder. New York: Penguin Books.

Sanity or Survival in the Nuclear Age. Second edition. By Jerome D. Frank. New York: Random House.

upon the personality development, of children and adolescents.

"It is common now," he said, "to receive calls from parents of 7- to 9-year-olds who are expressing fear that they will not grow up. Concerns about dying in a nuclear war are now increasingly being expressed as a clinical complaint among child and adult psychiatric patients as well.

"I was consulted recently," Mack said, "by the parents of a 11-year-old girl who said that their daughter asked if there would be enough time to com-

mit suicide in the interval between the warning that nuclear bombs were coming and the actual explosion of the bombs."

Mack often cites the wisdom of great thinkers to place the current nuclear crisis in somber perspective.

For instance, he repeats philosopher Bertrand Russell's warning: "Our world has sprouted a weird conception of security and a warped sense of morality. Weapons are sheltered like treasures, while children are exposed to incineration."

He also likes to quote Sigmund Freud's comment in a letter to Albert Einstein: "It is a general principle that conflicts of interest between men are settled by the use of violence."

And Einstein's now prophetic aphorism that "the unleashed power of the atom has changed everything, save our mode of thinking."

Mack thinks that one of the most powerful statements on the psychological impact of the nuclear age was delivered by retired diplomat George Kennan in a widely publicized speech he gave 15 months ago in Hanover, N.H.

Kennan warned that "the entire preoccupation with nuclear war - a preoccupation that appears to hold most of our government in its grip - is a form of illness. It is morbid in the extreme. There is no hope in it - only horror. It can be understood only as some form of subconscious despair on the part of its devotees - a readiness to commit suicide for fear of death - a state of mind explicable only by some inability to face the normal hazards and vicissitudes of the human predicament - a lack of faith where countless generations of our ancestors found it possible to have it."

Effective use of knowledge is next step

Of course, if the various research projects in the study strongly support Mack's and Lifton's theories about the way the nuclear age is altering the human spirit, the next step will be to discover how to use the new knowledge effectively.

"It is critical," they propose, "that new knowledge about the way human beings think and act in the context of the nuclear arms race be made publicly. The program will reach out to American and Soviet military, medical and scientific leaders to the extent possible. But the sharing of knowledge is not enough. It is imperative that we bring together individuals in positions of power who can contribute to the end of nuclearism."