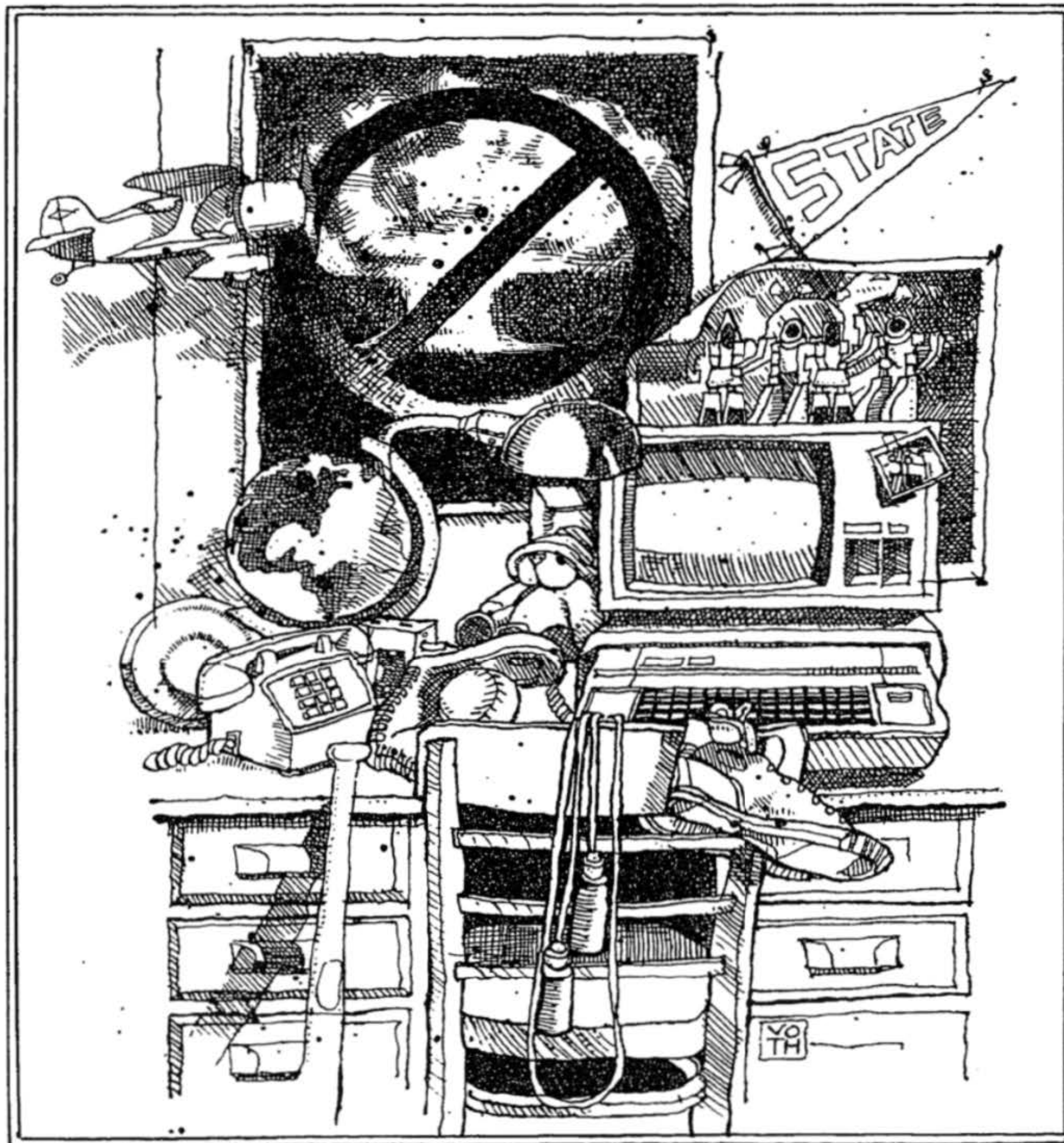


Children's Nuclear-War Fears in Dispute



Greg Voth

By D. J. R. BRUCKNER

Are children preoccupied with fears of nuclear war? Yes, according to several well-publicized studies. But lately, questions have been raised about some of those studies, and a dispute is brewing among social scientists, psychiatrists and psychologists over the methods of research behind the reports and the political uses to which they have been put.

Among the best-known studies is that of Dr. John Mack, a psychiatrist at the Harvard Medical School, and some colleagues, who began surveying youngsters in Boston, Baltimore and Los Angeles in 1978. Their initial

findings were that a large percentage of children were painfully aware of the danger of nuclear war. In 1983 Dr. Mack and Dr. Eric Chivian, another psychiatrist, interviewed students in the Soviet Union and reported the level of concern was at least as high as in this country. Their surveys and a few others like them have been much quoted by such organizations as Physicians for Social Responsibility and Educators for Social Responsibility.

Since 1975 Dr. Jerald G. Bachman and Dr. Lloyd D. Johnston of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan have surveyed thousands of high school seniors for their annual "Monitoring the Future" reports. The percentage of students who said they worried often about nuclear war rose from 7 percent in 1975

to 30 percent in 1980 and has remained at about that level. Dr. Johnston says the biggest jump came from 1979 to 1980 and was related to the debate over the control of nuclear weapons in the 1980 Presidential campaign. Dr. Bachman raises a problem of methodology when he says, "The fact that the danger of nuclear war is at the top of our list on the questionnaire may have something to do with the figures."

Other researchers have come to very different conclusions. Dr. Jerome Kagan, a noted developmental psychologist at Harvard University, said recently that in his current studies of 6-year-old children he has not found one who volunteers nuclear war as something to fear. He thinks parents project their concerns onto the children.

Dr. Robert Coles, a Harvard child psychiatrist, calls many of the reports "sentimental balderdash." He makes two serious charges: Much research into the question ignores the context in which children are questioned and the larger context of their overall concerns, and many reports reflect a class bias, since researchers tend not to survey the children of working class or poor families.

In a book that Dr. Coles has just sent to his publisher, he tells of questioning many children in depth about nuclear war. He found little concern among children of the poor, little long-term concern among any children and deep-seated concern only where the children's families were professionals, many of them active in antinuclear movements.

Dr. Chivian, who is now associated with both Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Harvard Medical School, insists that class bias is not reflected in his surveys. He has completed a monograph to be presented at the world congress of the International Physicians to Prevent Nuclear War that will begin next week in Budapest. He says it shows that nuclear war ranks near the top of children's concerns no matter what their economic class. He rejects the notion that parents are the primary sources of the fears of the young about nuclear war. "It is more likely to come from the media," he says.

The Media's Influence

The first in-depth study of that assumption has just been completed. In November 1983, ABC television showed a movie about the effects of a nuclear strike on the Middle West, "The Day After." At the annual meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development a few weeks ago, Dr. Margaret Schadler reported that her study of more than 400 5th, 9th and 12th-graders indicated that even those students most concerned about nuclear war showed little sign of being thrown off balance by the telecast.

Dr. Schadler, a psychologist at the University of Kansas, did her study in Lawrence, Kansas, where the movie was made, and the youngsters answered questionnaires about their feelings several times, from the day after the broadcast to six or eight weeks later. She recorded a marked decrease in interest between the earliest and final surveys.

Dr. Lawrence Steinberg, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and author of a leading text on adolescent development, says the Schadler study tends to support the suspicions of many professionals about the scientific validity of reports that "suggest kids are scared to death."

Dr. Steinberg said careful studies of student attitudes tend to show that youngsters are much more concerned about such things as their school work, their appearance and the opinion other students have of them than about anything as cosmic as nuclear destruction. "The awareness no doubt is there, but you have to be awfully cautious about evaluating its importance," he said. "As the evidence comes in, and it is only just beginning, it's likely to be much less glamorous to the media or to political debates than it has been."