

Meanwhile, in Arkansas

Fifth Estate Collective

Unlike the computer failures mentioned in the article above, they couldn't hide this one on the back page of the newspapers. When a fuel explosion rocked the underground Titan II nuclear missile silo sending flaming debris 500 feet in the air, everyone for a hundred miles around knew something had blown. The accident that occurred September 19 near Damascus, Arkansas destroyed the missile and left one dead and 21 injured (all Air Force officers) and was only one of hundreds of mishaps involving the missiles since the 54 ICBMs were first deployed in 1963. Since that time 55 persons have died and scores have been injured in the numerous incidents.

Although SAC officials refused repeatedly to comment on the fate of the nuclear warhead contained in the demolished projectile, Arkansas officials and local residents reported that the unexploded device was lying in the woods close to the silo site. Air Force officials persistently assured residents that an elaborate system of fail-safe devices makes detonation near to impossible and that no radiation leakage had been detected. However, in another incident, radioactive debris was dispersed near Palomares, Spain in 1966 when a B-52 collided with another plane and dropped two nuclear devices to earth.

Arkansas residents remained unconvinced of Air Force assurances that all was safe. One farmer told the *New York Times*, "We've got a government not telling you everything you need to know to survive." Bob Collar, the local school teacher added, "But really, we're in the same boat now as those Three Mile Island people."

The force of the explosion, which was ignited when a workman's wrench pierced the side of the rocket's fuel tank, burst with such intensity that the silo's 760-ton doors were "pulverized," as one observer put it, and left a 350-foot crater where the 50-foot entrance had been. Lt. Gen. Lloyd R. Leavitt, commander of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), said he found only "bits and pieces" left of the missile when he inspected the site the following day.

Although the Titan II system represents only 54 of the 1,054 land-base nuclear warheads the U.S. possesses, each missile carries a 24 megaton payload, thus the 54 actually constitute one-third of this country's total megatonage in land-based missiles. The 103-foot Titan II uses a liquid fuel which is highly flammable and toxic, and when fully loaded weighs 330,000 pounds. It can deliver its warhead accurately within one nautical mile of its target traveling at a speed of 6,000 mph. All 54 missiles, in sites spread out over three states, are aimed directly at Soviet population and industrial centers.

The accident-prone weapons (in 1965, 53 civilians were killed in a Titan II mishap) have come under constant criticism due to their volatility, but rather than being a powerful argument for disarmament, government officials are using this latest mishap as another rationalization for installation of the MX system which has a solid fuel propellant.

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"Yes, We Have no Mañanas: U.S. and USSR Prepare for Doomsday," FE #303, October 20, 1980.

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