

On the Line

# Discriminate Slaughter

By Bob Considine



"We must insure that we have the forces and procedures that provide us with the alternatives appropriate to the nature and level of the provocation," Mr. Nixon said, addressing himself to the awesome proposition that the chaos of a nuclear war might be subject to certain disciplines.

"This means having the plans and command-and-control capabilities necessary to enable us to select and carry out the appropriate response without necessarily having to resort to mass destruction," he added, in his State of the World message.

This would seem to be the first effort to reduce the indiscriminate horrors of any such atomic Armageddon to something approaching, say selective slaughter. We must learn how to employ city-cremating H-bombs more fastidiously, the President seemed to be saying, and one hopes the significance of this was not lost on whoever is in charge of the Kremlin's "We Will Bury You" button.

The iron brains that would be called upon to lead our nuketipped ICBMs to Moscow, and theirs to New York, will have

to undergo a serious refresher course if the President's plan wins approval. The rules of, and plans for, World War III, have been stabilized for years. It was to have been a swift, simple conflict, over in a jiffy. We'd kill all the Russians with our bombs and they'd kill all the Americans with theirs. In the course of wiping out each other, there would be enough fizzle-outs, misfires and outshoots on both sides to wipe out everybody else.

But now it will be much more complicated.

"Appropriate response" is the key clause in the President's message. If the Russians lob an SS-9 with a 25-megaton warhead across the North Pole and it clobbers Philadelphia, let's say, will we consider this enough provocation to hurl a Titan II at Moscow? Or will the President opt for Sverdlovsk, to keep the thing from getting out of hand? Sverdlovsk is almost as swinging a town as Philadelphia.

Maybe the SS-9 aimed at Washington will go haywire and

land in Lake Erie and cause no loss of life. Does the CIA have a list of polluted lakes inside the Soviet Union, so that we could hit one?

During Robert McNamara's time as defense secretary, he used to say in his cheerful way that we had enough deliverable nukes to overkill everybody in Russia five times. President Nixon pointed out that their side now has 1,440 ICBMs to our 1,054. What is worrying some people is whether this means the Russians, in any all-out thermonuclear war, would be able to kill every American six times while we were killing every Russian only five times.

Washington experts quickly sensed that they'd have to get busy if the President was to get his "plans and command-and-control capabilities" as soon as he might need them. The main needs are to scale down the slaughter to sensible figures, let's say to a humane 10 million casualties in the first 24 hours of the conflict.

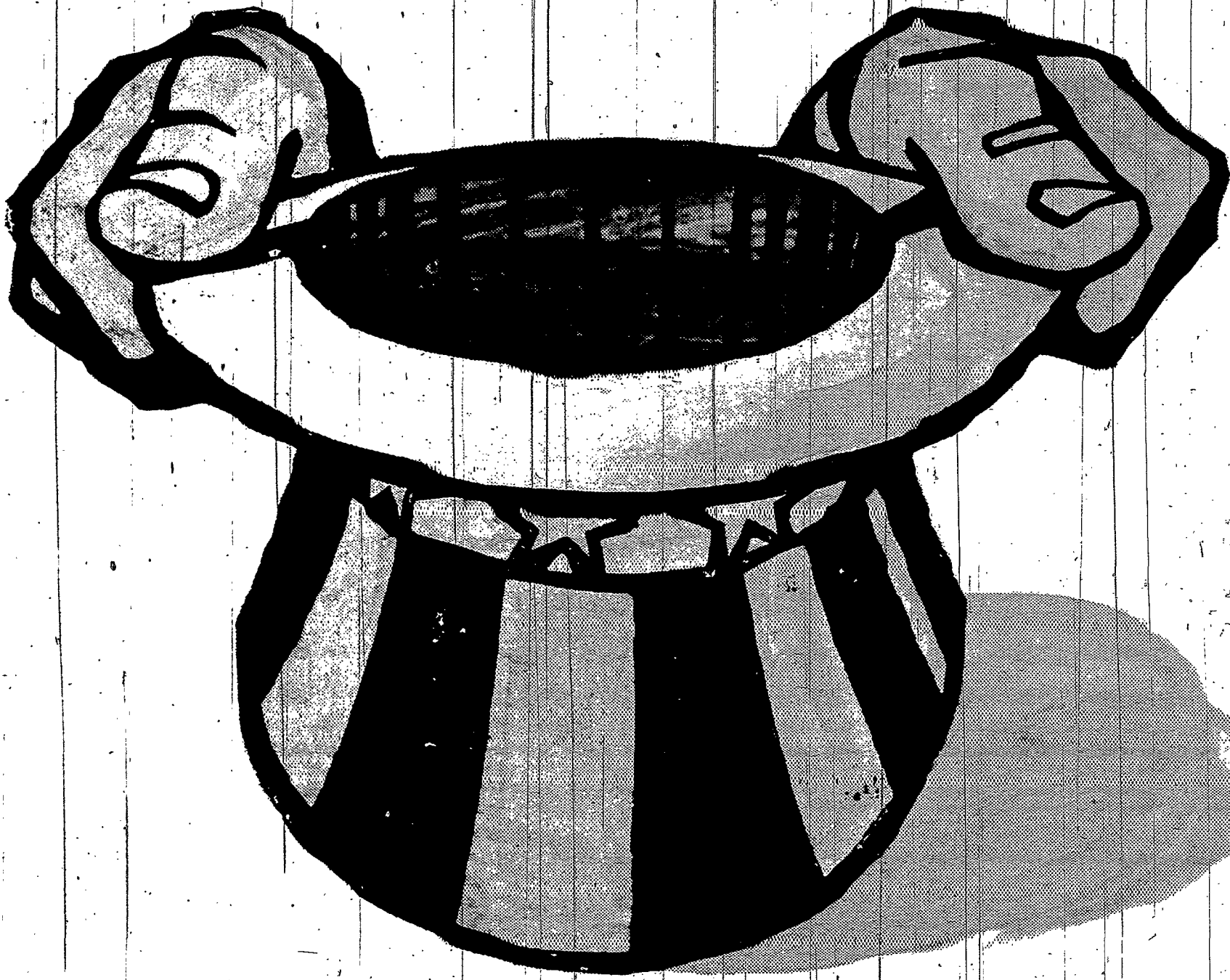
It won't be easy, killing so

few people. Missiles have gotten very sophisticated since the Chinese used to shoot sky-rockets at each other several thousand years ago. But they still lack shooting-gallery accuracy, and such accuracy as they do possess can sometimes be fouled up by devilishly un-sportsmanlike electronic whammies. There is no firm guarantee that an SS-9 ticketed for the NBC-TV studios in beautiful downtown Burbank might not just happen to zap the New York Times. Do we retaliate against the Leningrad Bolshoi or try for Pravda's plant in ugly downtown Moscow? Whatever we aim at, Minsk better watch out. That goes for Maine, too.

Anyway, it's nice to know that a note of discrimination has entered the forbidding confrontation, even if it is at present only unilateral. Perhaps we shall live to laugh derisively at that Pentagon official whose office featured an exhibit labeled, "Principal weapon used in World War IV."

It was a spear.

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