

'Wildfire' shows parishioners warfare from a different angle

By Teresa A. Parsons

Thanks to a last-minute diplomatic initiative negotiated by parishioners at St. Paul's in Webster, the United States managed to avert a nuclear strike by the government of Pakistan on its neighbor, India. The crisis was avoided after a U.S. delegation, supported by delegations from the Soviet Union and China, proposed a multinational peace-keeping force to man a buffer zone on the borders of the two countries, where continuing skirmishes had set off a chain of threats and counterthreats.

Fortunately, it was all a game — sort of. Participants were role playing a crisis called Wildfire, but at times they seemed to think it was real.

"The game and life are much closer than you might imagine," said coordinator Jim Walsh. "Even though you had a three-day crisis and were risking planetary catastrophe, everyone was working out of their own national interest. Everyone wanted to get a little piece of whatever the crisis was going to bring them, on the assumption it was going to be resolved," he said. "The Soviet Union didn't want to deal with the United States, (Pakistan) wanted military aid, the U.S. didn't want to talk to the Soviets until the final day ... Nations were divided within one another as to what policy to take, and so were getting and giving mixed signals to one another. You were all uncertain and didn't trust one another."

"The question is, in the long term, how is it that a workable world in a mature nuclear age will exist? How is it that nations will resolve conflicts and get along with one another if everyone has recourse to the bomb if they're pushed to the edge?" he added.

Thirty nations are now believed capable of building nuclear weapons, although only nine are estimated to have done so. Five nations are known to have nuclear arsenals: the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France and China. Others widely thought to either have nuclear weapons or to have nearly the capacity to build them are Israel, India, South Africa and Pakistan.

According to Central Intelligence Agency estimates, by the year 2000, 50 nations will have the option of developing nuclear weapons. Further speculation indicates that within a generation or two of the year 2000, every nation will have nuclear capability.

Wildfire was developed by the Roosevelt Center for American Policy Studies, a Washington, D.C., think tank, to focus attention and dialogue on the issue of nuclear proliferation. The game is actually a three-year campaign begun by the center last month. Already, more than 100 sessions of Wildfire have been played in 50 cities nationwide. "Our purpose in this effort is to get this issue on the agenda, to get people talking about the need to prepare to face what we're going to do in the long term as a nation. We can't afford to let things get to a crisis stage," Walsh said.

A non-profit, non-partisan public policy institute, the Roosevelt Center is what Walsh calls "a think tank of a different kind."

"We take issues out of Washington to real people in real cities. Most think tanks spend their time writing jargon-filled academic papers for Capitol Hill. Our purpose is to take issues, like the deficit, agriculture policy, the changing nature of work and foreign policy issues ... and put out materials on them in a language that anyone can understand," he said.

Founded in 1982 by Richard Dennis, a Chicago commodities trader and part-owner of the White Sox, the center is named for Franklin, Eleanor and Theodore Roosevelt. Supported by Dennis as well as corporations, foundations and individuals, the center neither advocates particular policy alternatives nor contracts for studies with other agencies or organizations.

Some 25 people played Wildfire at St. Paul's on Wednesday evening, April 30. Organizers of the game are urged to gather as diverse a group as possible. Many of the players were parishioners; some had participated in discussions on the U.S. bishops' peace pastoral. The group included



U.S. "ambassador" Jerry Muto, center, listens as Pakistani "leader" Scott Proctor enumerates his country's demands. Lee Goodridge, left an adviser to Pakistan, looks on.

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

a lawyer, several housewives, engineers from Kodak and Xerox, and two Sisters of St. Joseph, among others.

Their reactions ranged from frustration to surprise. "It gives you a personal insight, having to take the position of another country, of the certain posture they have to maintain or lose the trust of their allies," one man said.

"It was a huge relief when other countries came to talk and had other ideas," another remarked.

Pakistan, the nation believed to have most recently achieved near-nuclear status, and India, which exploded what it called a "peaceful nuclear device" in 1974, were the central characters enacted in the drama. For the fourth time in 40 years, the two were on the brink of war. That much of the story was true — since they became independent countries in 1947, the two have fought three wars. Each time, Pakistan, an Islamic nation, has been defeated by India, a Hindu nation, and they have become bitter enemies.

The fiction begins with the date — 1988. After Pakistan's last defeat in 1971, the nation's leaders vowed never to be humiliated again and embarked on a nuclear weapons campaign as a result. They were also prompted by India's 1974 nuclear detonation.

In the scenario, as border skirmishes become more intense, Pakistan threatens to explode a nuclear bomb over Indian territory or within its own desert to demonstrate its capability to defend itself.

Delegates from five "nations" — the United States, the Soviet Union, China, India and Pakistan — had three 10-minute "days" to resolve the conflict.

Countries each had five stated options: diplomacy; a "carrot" approach implying a veiled threat; a "stick" approach with an overt threat; a military warning; and a military attack.

Although they began slowly and somewhat self-consciously, players quickly became engaged in the scenario. As Walsh announced the passing of each of the three, 10-minute "days", the tension in the room mounted, and voices grew louder and more agitated.

Off to a slow start, the United States became embroiled in deciding whether to choose diplomacy or the "carrot" as a first step. Resolving that took U.S. delegates almost two full "days".

Meanwhile, the Soviet delegates found they were deeply split on ideological grounds and were rendered almost unable to act. Pakistanis felt "backed to a corner", and

Indians were frustrated by a lack of response to their messages.

Finally, well into the third "day", the United States suggested a demilitarized zone guarded by a multinational force. China and the Soviet Union agreed. But India and Pakistan were unable to decide whether the force should exist for 90 days or an indefinite period. The superpowers were also trying to negotiate an agreement whereby none of them would respond if Pakistan actually detonated the bomb — thus preventing the conflict from escalating.

Seconds before the deadline, the U.S. ambassador delivered a written proposal to the Pakistanis, and the final bell rang. After a brief conference, the Pakistan delegation decided to forgo exploding the device for the immediate future. Sighs of relief filled the room.

In nine out of ten cases, Walsh said, players manage to avoid an actual strike. "No two games are alike," he said. "Even if you've played before, it changes as you change countries."

In the end, Wildfire may have a greater impact than just an evening's entertainment. Before they left, participants filled out citizen's ballots, giving their views on the issue. Eventually, after the three-year Wildfire event is completed, the ballots will be tabulated and the results given to President Ronald Reagan, Walsh said.

"It's one small step to bridge the gap between the individual citizen and the government," he said.



Bob Schiesser, a Soviet delegate, concentrates on a quiz designed to gauge Wildfire participants' awareness of nuclear proliferation.

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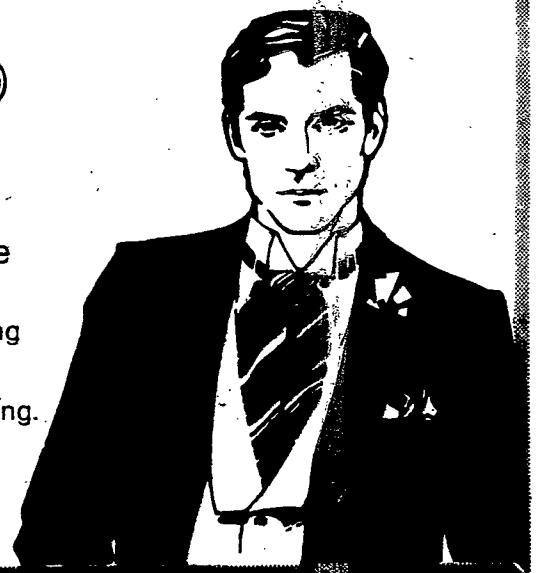


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