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THE AIR WE BREATHE

Remarks of Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, (D., Minn.) Democratic Luncheon Meeting, San Francisco, California, Thursday, April 23, 1959.

All of us nowadays are more conscious of the air we breathe than we used to be.

In Los Angeles they have smog.

In San Francisco, you often enjoy -- so I hear -- salubrious fog.

All of which makes me wonder whether it was the smog or the fog or the grog that caused our Republican friends to manhandle their colleague Joe Smith out here in 1956.

At any rate, you must have had mighty clear skies on election day last November when all the Republicans got manhandled.

Today it isn't fog or smog that concerns people most -- it is the radioactive dust that is in the air and settles on the water we drink and the food we eat -- particularly

strontium-90.

This strontium-90 is one of the radioactive products of atomic reaction. It has a natural affinity for calcium, and builds up in our bones -- where it can cause bone cancer as well as leukemia.

People have to be pretty upset about something to sit down and write their Senators and Congressmen. And they are thoroughly upset by the latest news about strontium-90. Every one of us in Washington has stacks of mail about it. I quote just one letter:

"We have asked ourselves time and time again,
how could the Atomic Energy Commission keep
saying that there is no danger?"

Now the Atomic Energy Commission belongs to all of us -- to the people of the United States. One of its prime duties is -- within the limits of security -- to inform the people about

matters of grave concern to themselves, and to their children's children.

Of course, that was not Admiral Strauss' idea, when he was head of AEC. To him the AEC was a ship, he was captain, and any difference of opinion was mutiny. Also, he kept the key to the radio room in his pocket, so that no one else could let people know where the ship was going -- or even where it was.

At the AEC, the Strauss song has ended, but the malady lingers on. The AEC is still doing its best to keep the American people in darkness -- and radioactive darkness at that.

In December, AEC Commissioner Libby was faced with new data from the Defense Department which indicated that half the strontium-90 released in an atomic explosion falls to the earth within two years -- instead of taking seven years to filter down from the stratosphere, as it was hitherto believed.

The same data indicated that, instead of the strontium-90 being evenly distributed throughout the world, as previously assumed, its fallout was heavier right here in the United States than anywhere else in the world.

The evidence against the AEC's old seven-year theory was so strong the AEC could not even begin to defend it. Instead, Dr. Libby sought to fall back to a new line at four years.

On February 20 the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy received the Defense Department data. It took Senator Clinton Anderson, my good friend and fellow Democrat, a solid month of hard fighting to clear the way for putting this information before the public.

Meanwhile, Dr. Libby seems to have looked for a way to air his new four-year theory -- a way that would look almost casual, as if it were just a minor afterthought.

He was scheduled to speak at the University of Washington March 13, as one of the events of its annual lecture-and-concert series.

Everyone in that audience -- except possibly the physics majors -- must have come out pretty baffled and bewildered. It was more like a scientific monograph than a lecture. Believe it or not, there were 24 -- yes, 24 -- pages of tables and charts appended to the prepared text of the speech.

Everything was in it but the kitchen sink -- and the Defense Department findings, which Dr. Libby coyly kept to himself. By so doing, he apparently sought to take the edge off their release by Senator Anderson eight days later.

I will say two things about this sorry record of evasiveness on a matter of the most urgent public concern:

First, if it took as long for strontium-90 to fall out

of the stratosphere as it does for information to fall out of the AEC, we could all feel a lot safer.

Second, the AEC is still -- after having been caught time and time again misleading the public -- trying to play down the dangers of radioactive fallout.

Much of what we know about this subject we know in spite of -- not because of -- the AEC; and particularly from the hearings which Congressman Chet Holifield conducted in 1957, and which I am pleased to say he will re-open next month.

What are the dangers of fallout?

As you know, I don't believe in "states' rights" being used as an argument against the federal government doing something the states can not or will not do. But I do believe a state has the right to protect the health of its citizens -- particularly when our Federal Government defaults in its plain duty.

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It is for this reason that Governor Orville Freeman of my own state of Minnesota set up a special committee on atomic problems. At the request of that committee, the AEC tested samples of wheat from Minnesota and neighboring states.

In samples from 1956, 1957, and 1958, strontium-90 content, in micro-micro curies per gram of calcium, ran 107, 152, and 155 -- and the so-called "permissible" level is 100.

There was one sample which tested out at 606. This sample, the report notes, was "excluded from the averages".

I wish it were that easy to exclude this and like samples from people's stomachs.

In communicating these facts to me, Dr. Maurice B. Visscher of the University of Minnesota Medical School wrote:

"The really shocking thing to me is that

the AEC itself has no other significant

number of analyses of wheat."

The point is that we just don't know enough about the degree to which strontium-90 gets into our food and drink.

Some work has been done on milk and water, and a smattering on a variety of other foods -- but none on a regular and continuous basis. Apparently nothing would have been done about wheat if our Minnesota people had not insisted.

We are equally in need of more knowledge about the so-called "permissible levels" of radioactivity. These figures were first worked out many years ago for radium workers and X-ray technicians -- that is, for adults. Now it seems, however, that the greatest danger is to children under ten.

As our knowledge has grown, these figures have been revised downward again and again. Many scientists believe that there is no such thing as a "permissible level" -- that each increase of radioactivity increases the risk of disease and of damage to future generations.

Not only are we walking in the dark -- we don't even know where the precipice is!

There is another tragic aspect to the AEC's blackout on fallout data. It leaves us tongue-tied about the shocking extent to which the Russians have been polluting the stratosphere.

We talk of "dirty" bombs -- and, although not so much lately, of "clean" bombs. The ones the Soviets exploded last October can only be described as filthy. Dr. Libby estimates that this series of massive Soviet explosions increased the pollution of the stratosphere by a full 50%.

Had we been on our toes -- and not so guilt-ridden about our own fallout showing -- we would have gone straight to the United Nations, and laid these terrifying facts on the line.

The Soviets, we should have charged, are poisoning the whole world -- not with their worn-out dogmas but with the deadliest dose of radioactivity that has ever been inflicted upon the world.

But the AEC's dirty hands prevented us from exposing Russia's dirty bombs before the United Nations.

It was just over a year ago that the Soviets first announced their suspension of nuclear tests -- as usual, catching us flat-footed.

Their timing of the announcement was the rankest hypocrisy. They had just completed a series of extremely "dirty" tests. Those were the tests which caused radioactivity in the rainfall right here in San Francisco to increase by 200%.

I said in the Senate at that time:

"I feel we should have exposed this information, rather than guarding it as though it were a top state secret. It is these facts relating to the Soviet tests that the world should know, back into the smallest village in the far-away

corners of Asia and Africa."

I was trying, as best I could, to get our Government out of the corner into which the Russians had backed us. But all I got from the AEC and its friends was a barrage of criticism.

We are not going to get anywhere in stopping excessive fall-out, if we leave it up to the AEC. They are in the business of conducting tests, and also of assessing how dangerous their tests really are. No man -- or government agency -- should be the judge in his own case.

For a considerable time, a number of us in the Senate have demanded that the Administration put primary responsibility for research on radioactivity where it belongs -- with the Public Health Service. And I welcomed the introduction of a bill by my good friend, Senator Lister Hill, to do just that. The Public Health Service will draw, of course, upon the expert knowledge of

the AEC and of other agencies, state and Federal, public and private. It will be the responsibility of the Surgeon-General, as the head of this Service, to present to Congress a comprehensive program for the control of radiation hazards.

I heartily support Senator Hill's proposal -- it is high time we get some honest figures on radioactivity.

But further measures are also worth considering.

It might be well to require that one of the AEC Commissioners be a biological scientist -- just as one is now a physical scientist.

We should give to the UN Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation full information on the results of our recent studies.

We should, at the next session of the World Health Organization, urge that it concern itself with the effects of radioactive fallout, as it already does with radiation from the

peaceful uses of atomic energy.

We should do all this, and more.

For out of this great evil there may yet emerge some good. Fallout is no respecter of persons or doctrines. It settles upon the caviar the Soviets serve at their whingdings, just as it does upon the food we are eating now.

Indeed, if Mr. Khrushchev succeeds in swearing off vodka -- as he urges upon the Russian people constantly, and also on himself -- it may simply put him in all the greater peril. On the basis of present tests, there seems to be much less strontium-90 in hard liquor than in tea or milk.

The more the danger from strontium-90 becomes known on both sides of the Iron Curtain, the more pressure there will be for an end to atomic explosions.

My Democratic colleagues, Senators Gore and Church, have suggested that tests be, at the very least, limited to under-

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ground caverns and outer space. This would greatly reduce radioactive fallout.

Last week the Administration caught up with the Gore-Church proposal.

But I hope that we can achieve the ending of all tests -- with adequate safeguards for inspection and detection -- not only because of the fallout danger, but because it would be a great step forward to wider measures of disarmament.

We are concerned, and rightly concerned, about present levels of radioactivity. But they are nothing compared to the seething wilderness a third World War would make of our planet.

We must give fresh impetus to the Geneva negotiations looking toward the suspension of tests. To this end, I have introduced a Resolution to put the Senate on record in support of the efforts of the United States to achieve an agreed suspension of

tests, and endorsing the principle that an adequate inspection and control system must be part of any such agreement.

We are entirely willing to open our doors -- to let the Russians send technicians to check on our compliance with a test ban -- but we want to be able to do likewise. They say they will permit inspection -- but, only by the native citizens of each country, and not by an international team.

This is errant nonsense. Still, our aim must be to continue to achieve agreement -- not merely to prove that failure to agree is their fault.

My friends, it is no accident that the Senators and Congressmen who have been foremost in the fight to disclose these atomic facts are Democrats. We in this Party are steeped in the belief that, if you give the people the facts, they will make the right choices.

That can be -- in the short run -- politically dangerous.

Do you recall what happened in 1956, when Adlai Stevenson called for the suspension of hydrogen bomb tests?

The Secretary of State said Mr. Stevenson was "not fully conversant with the details of the problem".

Thomas E. Dewey called it "an invitation to suicide."

Vice President Nixon denounced him for "playing dangerous politics with American security."

Yes, it can be politically perilous to be too right,
too soon.

But it can be national suicide to be right too late.

There may still be some of our fellow-citizens who doubt that there is "one world". But no one can deny that we have only one stratosphere -- that that we must somehow stop using it as a rubbish dump for radioactive debris.

After all -- unless we all decamp to another planet -- it is the only stratosphere we have!

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