TRAILERS

The French Tests Were Set in Concrete

In France, a popular rejection of nuclear testing sits uneasily with general acceptance of the Bomb. **Alain Lipietz** examines this tension.

AMIDST THE INTERNATIONAL furore over the current French nuclear tests, we need go back a few steps in order to understand how the resumption occurred. It is important to acknowledge that these particular tests have little directly to do with French popular nationalism. They were hardly raised as an issue during the recent presidential campaign. Everybody in France was surprised when Chirac declared that he would resume the testing. This was a little strange because during a televised debate late in the election he had said in response to a question on nuclear testing: 'I will follow what the experts say'. This was implicitly to say 'yes'. It is obvious that experts in bomb-testing live only by bomb-testing. They are paid by the government to conduct tests, so they are not going to say 'well, we had better stop such an environmentally unsound practice. You should fire us'.

In hindsight we can see that Chirac was declaring 'yes', but he was also explaining why. Part of the debate centred directly on this question of the basis for such a decision. From Chirac's perspective it was no embarrassment to declare obeisance to the powerful military-nuclear lobby.

There may also have been in the announcement a desire on Chirac's part to show that he was the one true descendant of Charles de Gaulle and his policy of an independent nuclear deterrent, *Force de Frappe*. However, we need to make a distinction between the principle of having the bomb and the decision to test it. It seems to be no coincidence that Chirac announced the decision to resume the tests just before his journey to the United States. If the first underpinning of the announcement was submission to the military-nuclear lobby, then the second was an assertion of the independence of France.

The former president Mitterrand had no such Gaullist hang-ups. He stopped the tests on the advice of the Greens. In 1992 the Mitterrand government invited us to come and talk to them, and I presented five conditions including the ending of the tests. Given that the Right do not have this 'problem' of feeling the need to take advice from ecologists, and given that Chirac is weak in relation to the nuclear lobby

groups, he slipped easily into making such a terrible political mistake.

With prescience about the political fallout he may have not gone ahead, but the military prepared the conditions for the irreversibility of the tests. Four bombs were concreted in place under Mururoa Atoll. They could not be removed. Chirac had to carry through with the tests even when mounting domestic and international pressure suggested that it was politically stupid to do so.

The tests were defended as preparatory to setting up the analogical-mathematical parameters needed for later computer-simulated tests, thus reducing the danger of continuing 'actual' tests. However, these later 'virtual tests' are obviously aimed at perfecting and enhancing the bombs. That is, they are clearly aimed at continuing the nuclear armaments race. So, even if all the protest in the world was not going to make any difference to the first four Mururoa tests, from a symbolic point of view it was, and continues to be, important that the French government realises that their bypassing of the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty is a crime against humankind.

CHIRAC'S FURTHER line of defence was that the international community was hypocritical in not criticising China in the same way as it did France. Like China, Chirac claimed to be conducting the tests 'at home' on France's sovereign soil. However, this defence does not carry much weight either. If they were really at home in the Pacific, as a 'fifth continent' they would surely join the Pacific nuclear-free treaty. The fact that they test in Polynesia suggests that they are not at home. The French government treats Tahiti as an empty island. And this is absolutely clear from the response of the Tahitian population. The Tahitians are shocked, not primarily because they think it is dangerous for them, but because in the context of increasing inequality, exploitation and over-industrialisation they no longer believe in French proclamations of magnanimity.

Returning to our question about the underpinnings to the resumption of the tests, we can add a third factor: the weakness of an *active* opposition in France. The most dramatic responses have been voiced through passive routes, that is, through opinion polls. When Chirac was first elected he was received favourably with a 65 per cent public approval rating. Now he has only 30 per cent approval, the fastest fall in French history. There was a drop of 20 percentage points before any of the major international demonstrations. He immediately lost all of the youth vote, as well as many people from the middle class. Ironically, to the many people who had voted against the Socialists because they were so conservative, Chirac appeared to be a 'new man'.

There are many reasons for the difficulty in mobilising large demonstrations despite a general hostility towards the tests. First, the French people face many other problems: an avoidance of racism, Islamic terrorism in the streets connected with the Algerian war and so on. The bombs exploding and killing people in the street may be contributing to a fear of going to such demonstrations. Secondly, the 'great troops' of active politics, the university students, are on holidays. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, there is the ambiguity of large sections of the French Left: they are against the testing but in favour of a nuclear defence force. Sixty per cent of people in France may be angry about the tests, but sixty per cent continue to be for the bomb. This is their solution to the problem of defence. Today only the Greens and the Communist Party are really against the bomb.

To understand why there is such quasi-unanimity among French people in favour of the bomb we have to go back into history. The Left is in favour of national defence and criticises the Right for their capitulation and collaboration with the Prussian and later the German invaders. In general, it was the Left who formed the basis of the Second World War resistance. The only period in which the Left was in favour of pacifism was after the First World War, but Hitler threw non-violent resistance into disrepute.

Up until recently, with the end of the Cold War, the Communists were in favour of the Bomb because it was a way to be independent from the United States, and after the 1970s the Socialists took this line also, partly because they wanted to form a political alliance with the Communists. The Right consider that a defence based on nuclear deterrence is a way to defend the nation without mobilising the people. The classical Right argue for the Bomb on patriotic grounds. For the Gaullists — that is the modernist Right — it is also a way of reducing the pressure of the professional land army. De Gaulle had fought off two military coups from the army, and wanted to reduce their power. The Bomb thus became a way of solving all their respective problems. Even now the Socialists who are against these tests are no different from the Right in being in favour of computer-simulated testing.

Nuclear power, both military and civil has become a way of life. Civil nuclear energy was accepted alongside military nuclear deterrence. Up until the mid-1970s, and beyond, there was general acceptance of nuclear electricity as a good thing — good for the economy, good for the flow-on for military needs. Now it simply seems irreversible. Nuclear energy and nuclear armaments production are conducted under the auspices of a single, incredibly powerful bureaucracy, a state within a state. In the 1980s the cycle of construction of nuclear power plants was concluded. Not until the beginning of the next century, when the plants will progressively come to the end of their working lives, will the question be raised again: should France embark upon another cycle of construction? The environmental problems and economic costs involved in decommissioning the old plants has barely been broached, let alone fully calculated and thought through. It is a sleeping question at the moment. However, over the next decade or so, both the civil and military implications of being nuclear will rise to haunt the French people. The current debates are only a beginning.

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This article is based on an interview with Alain Lipietz by Peter Christoff and Paul James during his recent visit to Australia.