

# Letters

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## H-Bomb Secrets

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I have been hoping you would send some explanation of your (to me inexplicable) refusal to support *The Progressive* in its First Amendment fight. I find that explanation in your comments in the May issue, but you have some of the facts wrong.

Contrary to your assertion, Howard Morland's article, which we have been enjoined from publishing, is not an article "on how to build an H-bomb." It does not contain, as you allege, "all the scientific information about the H-bomb." As Gerard Piel, the publisher of *Scientific American* recently pointed out, providing that kind of information would require carloads of blueprints and computer printouts. Finally, if you (and the rest of the American people) had been better informed about the nature of the nuclear weapons program, you would understand that H-bombs can not be built by "terrorists." The huge, sophisticated, and enormously expensive industrial complex required is accessible only to a very large government. That is why only five countries have built the H-bomb. The so-called secret is, after all, more than a quarter of a century old and available to any enterprising researcher.

What disturbs me about your comments in the May issue is not that they are factually mistaken, but that you apparently based them on the Government's assertions, and took these assertions at face value. I have come to expect a much more thoughtful and skeptical approach from *The Washington Monthly*.

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*Erwin Knoll is editor of The Progressive.*

### *The editor replies:*

I do not wish to overstate the case against *The Progressive* and am glad to note Erwin Knoll's corrections of what I wrote in "Tilting at Windmills" in May. If, however, the article is not "on how to build an H-bomb," it does seem to be about "How a Hydrogen Bomb Works," or at least that is the title the government alleges was on the manuscript submitted to it.

The government's concern about *The Progressive* article is supported by this affidavit from the head of the Non-Proliferation bureau of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency: "Of all the manuscripts purporting to be unclassified that I have reviewed in my 12 years in this field, this one, if made public, appears to be the most flagrant dissemination of sensitive weapons design information and the most likely

to damage U.S. interests in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons capabilities."

We have learned, alas, that government officials can lie or exaggerate. But, even if Erwin Knoll is right, as indeed I suspect he is, in saying that "the secret is... available to any enterprising researcher," my reaction is let the researcher do the work, don't help him. Even if, as has been revealed, the information was lying around in public files in Los Alamos for four years, why have it lying around in 40,000 copies of *The Progressive* now?

Most of the press seem to feel that the accidental four-year declassification of the H-bomb data somehow destroys the case against *The Progressive*, because the information, once in the public domain, can never be snatched back, no matter what damage it might cause. But does anybody know if anybody actually read the secrets while they were "public" at Los Alamos? What the incident confirms is the validity of the assumption that all governments are inept. It seems perfectly plausible to me that during the crucial four years, foreign spies were busy fruitlessly digging tunnels, planting bugs, seducing secretaries, and bumping their heads on the shelf with the vital material while they stealthily perused some harmless document on the rack below.

My friends in the liberal press apparently are fixated on the idea that an absolute ban on prior restraint of any sort of publication is the heart of the First Amendment. To me, the heart of the First Amendment is absolute freedom of *political* discussion, for as long as we have that freedom we have the means of maintaining and expanding all other liberties. So I would argue that the First Amendment absolutely forbids the prior restraint—or subsequent punishment—of political speech. But technical military secrets do not usually fall into this category, and often there is much to be gained, and little harm, in keeping them secret. Prior restraint should not be the issue in these cases—if the disclosure of a military secret really does damage the national security, does the First Amendment really say the government can punish you for revealing it, but is powerless to stop the damaging revelation in the first place?

On the other hand, we must always maintain the political freedom to argue against government secrecy, and when a political argument cannot be made without revealing a military secret, then, it seems to me, the First Amendment does come into play to support the disclosure. But this does not appear to be the situation with the *Progressive's* material on the bomb. Of all the eloquent restatements of the argument of the *Progressive* article, not one has suffered the least bit from the absence of technical information.

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# Tilting at Windmills



One of the reasons designer and brand names are now on the outside of clothing is that in modern America people tend to define themselves by their taste. This is particularly so in the big cities, where, if you want to impress that interesting-looking man or woman at the crowded party, you have to flash your taste badges fast. Of course, when the flashing is done too aggressively, it turns into a series of put-downs that may intrigue but might alienate the other person. A marvelous example of the latter occurs in Diane Keaton's first scenes in *Manhattan*. She is obviously interested in demonstrating that she is more sophisticated than the people she's talking to, and it's great fun to laugh at her. A more subtle form of self-definition in terms of taste comes near the end of the film when Woody Allen recites the list that identifies him: Groucho Marx, Mozart's "Jupiter Symphony," Louis Armstrong's recording of "Potato Head Blues," Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, Willie Mays, Cezanne's still lifes of fruits. In contrast to Diane Keaton's, Allen's list is charming. You think exactly what you're supposed to think: what a wonderful interesting man this must be to have this delightful mixture of enthusiasms. The problem is that it's still badge-flashing. In the early scenes you thought Woody knew what was wrong with the gang at Elaine's. What develops, however, is

that he simply knows how to play their game better than they do. . . .

Last year my wife and I were entertaining an out-of-town couple who were interested in getting an inside view of our national problems and what the government was planning to do about them. So we invited a mixture of journalists and public officials to dinner. At the end of the evening, the couple said it had all been delightful, but they hadn't heard a word about politics or government—Washington real estate had dominated the discussion all evening. Well, if anything, the situation is worse now. One wonders if anyone is tending to the government as the incessant trading in real estate consumes everyone's attention. Certainly, all those involved in the real estate game have an interest in not doing anything about inflation. Indexed salaries and pensions are what fuel the home-buying boom, because real estate mortgages are one of the best places to shelter ever-growing personal income. . . . Just to give you an idea of what's going on, one out of three houses sold in Washington this year has gone for over \$100,000. One out of ten has sold for over \$200,000. Of course there are always a few losers in any market, but even they tell us something about what is going on. One