

The Frisch-Peierls Memorandum

The attached detailed report concerns the possibility of constructing a “super-bomb” which utilises the energy stored in atomic nuclei as a source of energy. The energy liberated in the explosion of such a super-bomb is about the same as that produced by the explosion of 1,000 tons of dynamite. This energy is liberated in a small volume, in which it will, for an instant, produce a temperature comparable to that in the interior of the sun. The blast from such an explosion would destroy life in a wide area. The size of this area is difficult to estimate, but it will probably cover the center of a big city.

In addition, some part of the energy set free by the bomb goes to produce radioactive substances, and these will emit very powerful and dangerous radiations. The effects of these radiations is greatest immediately after the explosion, but it decays only gradually and even for days after the explosion any person entering the affected area will be killed.

Some of this radioactivity will be carried along with the wind and will spread the contamination; several miles downwind this may kill people.

In order to produce such a bomb it is necessary to treat a substantial amount of uranium by a process which will separate from the uranium its light isotope (U_{235}) of which it contains about 0.7 percent. Methods for the separation of such isotopes have recently been developed. They are slow and they have not until now been applied to uranium, whose chemical properties give rise to technical difficulties. But these difficulties are by no means insuperable. We have not sufficient experience with large-scale chemical plant to give a reliable estimate of the cost, but it is certainly not prohibitive.

It is a property of these super-bombs that there exists a “critical size” of about one pound. A quantity of the separated uranium isotope that exceeds the critical amount is explosive; yet a quantity less than the critical amount is absolutely safe. The bomb would therefore be manufactured in two (or more)

parts, each being less than the critical size, and in transport all danger of a premature explosion would be avoided if these parts were kept at a distance of a few inches from each other. The bomb would be provided with a mechanism that brings the two parts together when the bomb is intended to go off. Once the parts are joined to form a block which exceeds the critical amount, the effect of the penetrating radiation always present in the atmosphere will initiate the explosion within a second or so.

The mechanism which brings the parts of the bomb together must be arranged to work fairly rapidly because of the possibility of the bomb exploding when the critical conditions have just only been reached. In this case the explosion will be far less powerful. It is never possible to exclude this altogether, but one can easily ensure that only, say, one bomb out of 100 will fail in this way, and since in any case the explosion is strong enough to destroy the bomb itself, this point is not serious.

We do not feel competent to discuss the strategic value of such a bomb, but the following conclusions seem certain:

1. As a weapon, the super-bomb would be practically irresistible. There is no material or structure that could be expected to resist the force of the explosion. If one thinks of using the bomb for breaking through a line of fortifications, it should be kept in mind that the radioactive radiations will prevent anyone from approaching the affected territory for several days; they will equally prevent defenders from reoccupying the affected positions. The advantage would lie with the side which can determine most accurately just when it is safe to re-enter the area; this is likely to be the aggressor, who knows the location of the bomb in advance.
2. Owing to the spread of radioactive substances with the wind, the bomb could probably not be used without killing large numbers of civilians, and this may make it unsuitable as a weapon for use by this country. (Use as a depth charge near a naval base suggests itself, but even there it is likely that it would cause great loss of civilian life by flooding and by the radioactive radiations.)
3. We have no information that the same idea has also occurred to other scientists but since all the theoretical data bearing on this problem are published, it is quite conceivable that Germany is, in fact, developing this weapon. Whether this is the case is difficult to find out, since the plant for the separation of isotopes need not be of such a size as to attract attention. Information that could be helpful in this respect would be data about the exploitation of the uranium mines under German control (mainly in Czechoslovakia) and about any recent German purchases of uranium abroad. It is likely that the plant would be controlled by Dr. K. Clusius (Professor of Physical Chemistry in Munich University), the inventor of the best method for separating isotopes, and therefore information as to his whereabouts and status might also give an important clue. At the same time it is quite possible that nobody in Germany has yet realized that the separation of the uranium isotones would make the construction of a super-bomb possible. Hence it is of ex-

treme importance to **keep this report secret** since any **rumour** about the connection between uranium separation and a super-bomb may set a German scientist thinking along the right lines.

4. If one works on the assumption that Germany is, or will be, in the possession of this weapon, it must be realized that **no shelters are available** that would be effective and that could be used on a large scale. **The most effective reply would be a counter-threat with a similar bomb.** Therefore it seems to us important to start production as soon and as rapidly as possible, even if it is not intended to use the bomb as a means of attack. Since the separation of the necessary amount of uranium is, in the most favourable circumstances, a matter of several months, it would obviously be too late to start production when such a bomb is known to be in the hands of Germany, and the matter seems, therefore, very urgent.
5. As a measure of precaution, it is important to have detection squads available in order to deal with the radioactive effects of such a bomb. Their task would be to approach the danger zone with measuring instruments, to determine the extent and probable duration of the danger and to prevent people from entering the danger zone. This is vital since the radiations kill instantly only in very strong doses whereas weaker doses produce delayed effects and hence near the edges of the danger zone people would have no warning until it was too late. For their own protection, the detection squads would enter the danger zone in motor-cars or airplanes which would be **armoured** with lead plates, which absorb most of the dangerous radiation. The cabin would have to be hermetically sealed and oxygen carried in cylinders because of the danger from contaminated air. The detection staff would have to know exactly the greatest dose of radiation to which a human being can safely be exposed for a short time. This safety limit is not at present known with sufficient accuracy and further biological research for this purpose is urgently required.

As regards the reliability of the conclusions outlined above, it may be said that they are not based on direct experiments, since nobody has ever built a super-bomb yet, but they are mostly based on facts which, by recent research in nuclear physics, have been very safely established. The only uncertainty concerns the critical size for the bomb. We are fairly confident that the critical size is roughly a pound or so, but for this estimate we have to rely on certain theoretical ideas which have not 'been positively confirmed. If the critical size were appreciably larger than we believe it to be, the technical difficulties in the way of constructing the bomb would be enhanced. The point can be definitely settled as soon as a small amount of uranium has been separated, and we think that in view of the importance of the matter immediate steps should be taken to reach at least this stage; meanwhile it is also possible to carry out certain experiments which, while they cannot settle the question with absolute finality, could, if their result were positive, give strong support to our conclusions.

On the Construction of a “Super-bomb”; Based on a Nuclear Chain Reaction in Uranium

The possible construction of “super-bombs” based on a nuclear chain reaction in uranium has been discussed a great deal and arguments have been brought forward which seemed to exclude this possibility. We wish here to point out and discuss a possibility which seems to have been overlooked in these earlier discussions.

Uranium consists essentially of two isotopes, uranium 238 (99.3 percent) and uranium 235 (0.7 percent). If a uranium nucleus is hit by a neutron, three processes are possible: (1) scattering, whereby the neutron changes direction and, if its energy is above about 0.1 MeV, loses energy; (2) capture, when the neutron is taken up by the nucleus; and (3) fission, i.e., the nucleus breaks up into two nuclei of comparable size, with the liberation of an energy of about 200 MeV.

The possibility of a chain reaction is given by the fact that neutrons are emitted in the fission and that the number of these neutrons per fission is greater than 1. The most probable value for this figure seems to be 2.3, from two independent determinations.

However, it has been shown that even in a large block of ordinary uranium no chain reaction would take place since too many neutrons would be slowed down by inelastic scattering into the energy region where they are strongly absorbed by uranium 238.

Several people have tried to make chain reaction possible by mixing the uranium with water, which reduces the energy of the neutrons still further and thereby increases their efficiency again. It seems fairly certain, however, that even then it is impossible to sustain a chain reaction.

In any case, no arrangement containing hydrogen and based on the action of slow neutrons could act as an effective super-bomb, because the reaction would be too slow. The time required to slow down a neutron is about 10^{-5} sec and the average time lost before a neutron hits a uranium nucleus is even 10^{-4} sec. In the reaction, the number of neutrons would increase exponentially, like $e^{\nu\tau}$ where τ would be at least 10^{10-4} sec. When the temperature reaches several thousand degrees the container of the bomb will break and within 10^{-4} sec the uranium would have expanded sufficiently to let the neutrons escape and so to stop the reaction. The energy liberated would, therefore, be only a few times the energy required to break the container, i.e., of the same order of magnitude as with ordinary high explosives.

Bohr has put forward strong arguments for the suggestion that the fission observed with slow neutrons is to be ascribed to the rare isotope uranium 235, and that this isotope has, on the whole, a much greater fission probab-

ity than the common isotope uranium 238. Effective methods for the separation of isotopes have been developed recently, of which the method of thermal diffusion is simple enough to permit separation on a fairly large scale.

This permits, in principle, the use of nearly pure uranium 235 in such a bomb, a possibility which apparently has not so far been seriously considered. We have discussed this possibility and come to the conclusion that a moderate amount of uranium 235 would indeed constitute an extremely efficient explosive.

The behavior of uranium 235 under bombardment with fast neutrons is not known experimentally, but from rather simple theoretical arguments it can be concluded that almost every collision produces fission and that neutrons of any energy are effective. Therefore it is not necessary to add hydrogen, and the reaction, depending on the action of fast neutrons, develops with very great rapidity so that a considerable part of the total energy is liberated before the reaction gets stopped on account of the expansion of the material.

The critical radius r_0 -i.e., the radius of a sphere in which the surplus of neutrons created by the fission is just equal to the loss of neutrons by escape through the surface-is, for a material with a given composition, in a fixed ratio to the mean free path of the neutrons, and this in turn is inversely proportional to the density. It therefore pays to bring the material into the densest possible form, i.e., the metallic state, probably sintered or hammered. If we assume, for uranium 235, no appreciable scattering, and 2.3 neutrons emitted per fission, then the critical radius is found to be 0.8 times the mean free path. In the metallic state (density 15), and assuming a fission cross-section of 10^{-23} cm²,¹ the mean free path would be 2.6 cm and r_0 would be 2.1 cm, corresponding to a mass of 600 grams. A sphere of metallic uranium 235 of a radius greater than r_0 would be explosive, and one might think of about 1 kg as a suitable size for the bomb.

The speed of the reaction is easy to estimate. The neutrons emitted in the fission have velocities of about 10^9 cm/sec and they have to travel 2.6 cm before hitting a uranium nucleus. For a sphere well above the critical size the loss through neutron escape would be small, so we may assume that each neutron, after a life of 2.6×10^{-9} sec, produces fission, giving birth to two neutrons. In the expression $e^{\tau t}$ for the increase of neutron density with time, τ would be about 4×10^{-9} sec, very much shorter than in the case of a chain reaction depending on slow neutrons.

If the reactions proceed until most of the uranium is used up, temperatures of the order of 10^{10} degrees and pressures of about 10^{13} atmospheres are produced. It is difficult to predict accurately the behavior of matter under these

¹ Note added March 1994: This was a surprising slip. The correct figure is about 3 times smaller, and the estimate of critical mass is therefore 3^3 , or about 30 times too small.

extreme conditions, and the mathematical difficulties of the problem are considerable. By a rough calculation we get the following expression for the energy liberated before the mass expands so much that the reaction is interrupted:

$$E = 0.2M(r^2 / \tau^2) \sqrt{(r / r_0) - 1} \quad (1)$$

(M , total mass of uranium; r , radius of sphere; r_0 , critical radius; τ , time required for neutron density to multiply by a factor e). For a sphere of diameter 4.2 cm ($r = 2.1$ cm), $M = 4700$ grams, $\tau = 4 \times 10^{-9}$ sec, we find $E = 4 \times 10^{22}$ ergs, which is about one-tenth of the total fission energy. For a radius of about 8 cm ($M = 32$ kg) the whole fission energy is liberated, according to formula (1). For small radii the efficiency falls off even faster than indicated by formula (1) because τ goes up as r approaches r_0 . The energy liberated by a 5 kg bomb would be equivalent to that of several thousand tons of dynamite, while that of a 1 kg bomb, though about 500 times less, would still be formidable.

It is necessary that such a sphere should be made in two (or more) parts which are brought together first when the explosion is wanted. Once assembled, the bomb would explode within a second or less, since one neutron is sufficient to start the reaction and there are several neutrons passing through the bomb in every second, from the cosmic radiation. (Neutrons originating from the action of uranium alpha rays on light-element impurities would be negligible provided the uranium is reasonably pure.) A sphere with a radius of less than about 3 cm could be made up in two hemispheres, which are pulled together by springs and kept separated by a suitable structure which is removed at the desired moment. A larger sphere would have to be composed of more than two parts, if the parts, taken separately, are to be stable.

It is important that the assembling of the parts should be done as rapidly as possible, in order to minimize the chance of a reaction getting started at a moment when the critical conditions have only just been reached. If this happened, the reaction rate would be much slower and the energy liberation would be considerably reduced; it would, however, always be sufficient to destroy the bomb.

It may be well to emphasize that a sphere only slightly below the critical size is entirely safe and harmless. By experimenting with spheres of gradually increasing size and measuring the number of neutrons emerging from them under a known neutron bombardment, one could accurately determine the critical size, without any danger of a premature explosion.

For the separation of the uranium 235, the method of thermal diffusion, developed by Clusius and others, seems to be the only one which can cope with the large amounts required. A gaseous uranium compound, for example,

uranium hexafluoride, is placed between two vertical surfaces which are kept at a different temperature. The light isotope tends to get more concentrated near the hot surface, where it is carried upwards by the convection current. Exchange with the current moving downwards along the cold surface produces a fractionating effect, and after some time a state of equilibrium is reached when the gas near the upper end contains markedly more of the light isotope than near the lower end.

For example, a system of two concentric tubes, of 2 mm separation and 3 cm diameter, 150 cm long, would produce a difference of about 40 percent in the concentration of the rare isotope between its ends, and about 1 gram per day could be drawn from the upper end without unduly upsetting the equilibrium.

In order to produce large amounts of highly concentrated uranium 235 a great number of these separating units will have to be used, being arranged in parallel as well as in series. For a daily production of 100 grams of uranium 235 of 90 percent purity, we estimate that about 100,000 of these tubes would be required. This seems a large number, but it would undoubtedly be possible to design some kind of a system which would have the same effective area in a more compact and less expensive form.

In addition to the destructive effect of the explosion itself, the whole material of the bomb would be transformed into a highly radioactive state. The energy radiated by these active substances amount to about 20 percent of the energy liberated in the explosion, and the radiation would be fatal to living beings even a long time after the explosion.

The fission of uranium results in the formation of a great number of active bodies with periods between, roughly speaking, a second and a year. The resulting radiation is found to decay in such a way that the intensity is about inversely proportional to the time. Even one day after the explosion the radiation will correspond to a power expenditure of the order of 1000 kW, or to the radiation of a hundred tons of radium.

Any estimates of the effects of this radiation on humans must be rather uncertain because it is difficult to tell what will happen to the radioactive material after the explosion. Most of it will probably be blown into the air and carried away by the wind. This cloud of radioactive material will kill everybody within a strip estimated to be several miles long. If it rained the danger would be even worse because active material would be carried down to the ground and stick to it, and persons entering the contaminated area would be subjected to dangerous radiation even after days. If one percent of the active material sticks to the debris in the vicinity of the explosion and if the debris is spread over an area of, say, a square mile, any person entering this area would be in serious danger, even several days after the explosion.

In these estimates, the lethal dose of penetrating radiation was assumed to be 1,000 roentgens; consultation of a medical specialist on X-ray treatment and perhaps further biological research may enable one to fix the danger limit more accurately. The main source of uncertainty is our lack of knowledge as to the behavior of materials in such a super-explosion, and an expert on high explosives may be able to clarify some of these problems.

Effective protection is hardly possible. Houses would offer protection only at the margins of the danger zone. Deep cellars or tunnels may be comparatively safe from the effects of radiation, provided air can be supplied from an uncontaminated area (some of the active substances would be noble gases which are not stopped by ordinary filters).

The irradiation is not felt until hours later when it may be too late. Therefore it would be very important to have an organization which determines the exact extent of the danger area, by means of ionization measurements, so that people can be warned from entering it.