This volume reprints three articles on the nuclear dilemma from the New Yorker. Their appearance in such a journal helps explain the growing opposition to the nuclear arms race in the United States. While atomic scientists may have first sounded the alarm in 1945, it is now being echoed throughout the scientific, medical and religious worlds. Schell’s book helps to carry their message to non-experts whose response will ultimately be decisive.

The first part of the book, “A Republic of Insects and Grass”, outlines the probable effects of a large-scale nuclear exchange. Schell recognises that most people shrink from the unimaginable horror of a holocaust but he leads the reader “through the valley of the shadow of death” with great skill. One is actually compelled to go through it.

It helps the reader to get through this chapter by the revelation that some of the effects of nuclear war border on the ridiculous. Thus, while the notion of “the economy” will be meaningless for the unlucky survivors, just one of the multi-kiloton weapons detonated 125 miles above Omaha, Nebraska, will generate an electromagnetic pulse capable of crippling all the unshielded computers from Mexico to Canada.

The only new data which could be added to Schell’s study relates to long-term effects on climate. Frank Barnaby, interviewed on the ABC’s Science Show on August 21 last year, estimated that 1,400 million, or about one quarter of the earth’s population would die from starvation in both hemispheres. The clouds of dust and smog would obliterate the sun for months and food production would be reduced to near zero in the main food-producing regions. This opinion is supported by Joseph Rotblat, Emeritus Professor of Physics at the University of London who is one of the leading figures in the Pugwash Movement.

Both American and Soviet authorities agree that a full-scale nuclear exchange would mean the end of civilisation, if not the end of the human species. But insects are unusually resistant to radiation and the roots of many grasses survive underground for considerable periods.

On an earth deprived of most of its terrestrial species, strange insects and grasses would settle down to a new ecology.

In The Second Death Schell introduces the notion that the destruction of the species implies that the countless numbers of the unborn, who can perhaps look forward to happiness in a better world, are also to be eliminated: he writes: “To kill a human is murder, and there are some who believe that to abort a foetus is also murder, but what crime is it to cancel the numberless multitude of unconceived people? In what court is such a crime to be judged?”

He goes on to point out that by extinguishing the species we also destroy all cultural heritage and, in a sense, betray the efforts of humanity over millions of years. Among Reagan’s supporters are a few Christian fundamentalists who suggest that the nuclear holocaust is the Armageddon threatened by God in the Bible. Schell replies that this view “arrogates to ourselves not only God’s knowledge but also His will”. He adds that Christ is believed to have died to save the world, not to destroy it.

I found the third section of the book ‘The Choice’ less satisfactory. While his philosophic insight continues to be perceptive — the holocaust would certainly mean the end of war since there would ultimately be no-one to fight it — his command of history falls short.

While it is popular in some quarters to equate the policies and much of the behaviour of the United States and the Soviet Union, and much suggests that Schell takes this view, I do not believe it can be supported by history which is a good deal better than much of the scientific data that Schell draws on. The evidence that the first use of the atom bomb had little to do with WWII and much with the preparations for WWIII is compelling. As Schell has pointed out earlier, “overkill” is senseless and irrational but he does not point out that the continued arms race makes sense to those who profit from it, and to those who hope to break the Soviet economy with massive arms spending. This is certainly understood by both the US and Soviet leaderships and, I believe, by many in the USSR and Europe. Until it is equally understood by the peoples of the US and her not-so-reluctant allies, I fail to see how Schell’s support for so many admirable goals will make the necessary progress.

The book is certainly a powerful addition to those in constant use in the peace struggle. It has been enthusiastically received by the reviewers cited on the backcover. I would, however, warn that, in many places it is very tightly argued and those not used to such material might tire after the first hundred pages. I had to read some parts three or four times and found a pencil for notation useful. But it will certainly be of use in invading areas still to be reached by the peace movement.

Jack Legge was a professor in the science faculty at Melbourne University until his recent retirement.