



CURRENT EVENTS

***Whole World on Fire: Organizations, Knowledge, and Nuclear Weapons Devastation*, by Lynn Eden. Cornell, January 2004. \$32.50**

By virtue of its subject matter, *Whole World on Fire* is a sobering book. The empirical puzzle that Eden sets out to solve is, Why, after fifty-plus years of experience with nuclear war planning, did those charged with understanding the effects of nuclear weapons fail to directly consider the implications of mass fire that would have resulted in a nuclear exchange? By focusing solely on the effects of blast damage, the U.S. government has purchased far more nuclear weapons than it has otherwise “needed” and has systematically underestimated the consequences of engaging in nuclear crisis diplomacy. In short, while the subject matter is highly technical and arcane (though Eden’s presentation is neither), the implications are very real indeed. Eden’s path-dependent explanation for the focus on blast damage is highly convincing. At its foundation is the notion that the “science of destruction” is social. That is, the manner in which individuals—embedded in the organizations responsible for understanding the effects of nuclear weapons—interpret and understand the physical world is predicated on the “organizational frames” through which reality is judged. Organizational frames become reified through knowledge-laden routines or the processes of problem-solving activities adopted by organizations over time. Once reified, the ability of organizations to change the manner in which they plan for the future declines dramatically, especially when the consequences of failing to change are not substantial or immediately manifest. This book has been deeply researched and is written exceptionally well. *Whole World on Fire* will stand, alongside Diane Vaughn’s study of the *Challenger* disaster, among the best in-depth studies of how organizations interact with the physical world.

—*Spencer D. Bakich*