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Nature bats last

FOR THOSE of us who view life and the passing of time as a long game in which Nature bats too, it was fitting that the earthquake came while the nation was watching, expecting the World Series.

In an interview with some of the ball players moments after the quake, the TV interviewer kept asking, "What's going to happen to the game?" The players looked a bit disgusted and one said, "Forget the game, this is serious, people are hurt."

The interviewer sagged as it sunk in. A player had put the game, and life, in perspective for him.

Nature had taken its swing at the ball.

We got off lightly considering its power. The collapse of the elevated freeway and part of the Oakland Bay Bridge was very bad, but had we not taken precautions, the devastation and death from the earthquake would have been far worse.

To appreciate this possibility, consider the deaths from the earthquakes elsewhere this past decade. Over 25,000 were reported dead in Armenia in 1988; 9,500 in Mexico in 1985; 4,800 in Italy and 4,500 in Algeria in 1980.

It is a compliment to Californians that we learned from the horror of the 1906 earthquake.

Over the years, our political leaders have spent thousands of hours playing hardball, making sure progressive regulations were passed for earthquake safety. We established tough building codes, we reinforced our schools, and our professionals were trained and readied.

Faced with an uncertain long-term threat, California prepared. We led the nation in the fight to keep nuclear power plants and other dangerous technologies away from fault lines, or at least from going on-line. It all paid off.

Last week proved that every tax dollar spent was a wise investment. But more funds should have been available to make sure all structures were reinforced before this time.

There is a larger lesson for us in the aftermath of the penultimate "big one." We have equally and even more serious threats we are not preparing for locally, nationally, or globally.

Scientists have long warned us about earthquakes, and we listened. Scientists and other experts are now warning us about environmental threats like the decline in air quality and the threats of rising seas due to global warming. We are only partially preparing for these events and are vulnerable.

We continue to build huge gas-guzzling cars that emit too much carbon, cancer rates continue to rise as man-created pollutants accumulate above us. We ignore the toxics that are killing off small oxygen-producing plants in the sea, as acid rain is doing to forests and croplands. We continue to dump chemicals in our drinking water. We exploit our forests, thinking only of cutting and not of regeneration. Our soils are eroding into the air and into our waterways.

The most disturbing part of all this is that we know what to do to solve these problems, but we have chosen not to do so.

What we noted last week is that real security includes a peace of

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mind, a knowledge that safeguards have been taken, and that programs are in place to prevent disaster.

Our choice so far has been to put most of our tax dollars into military weapons to protect us from threats that are waning, providing us with an outmoded, lopsided sense of security.

The choice is still ours if we want a more balanced security, but that balancing needs to be a high priority now.

The recent Fleet Week exercises — with the military jets leaving a trail of noise and air pollution as they roared back and forth over The City — symbolize our current priorities. What good were those fighter pilots after the earthquake? What use will those planes and ships serve to combat global warming?

We need to balance our expenditures to include protection of the Earth. For although we normally think of Nature in terms of its beauty and its bounty, it does hit some very wild pitches from time to time, and we have to be ready for them. Otherwise, we will end up losing the game for all future players.

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