

Rachel's Environment & Health News
#793 -- Fiery Hell on Earth, Part 2
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The U.S. is enabling the spread of atomic bombs worldwide in at least four different ways (see Rachel's #792). But why? Do Mr. Bush's military advisors or his core supporters in the Republican party imagine some benefit from allowing A-bombs to slip into the hands of terrorists?

In this series, I am searching for answers.

By "atomic bombs" I do not mean "dirty bombs" -- a few sticks of dynamite wrapped with a packet of radioactive medical waste. I mean the kind of A-bomb that turned the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki into a lake of fire in 1945.

There can be no question about it: In at least four ways the U.S. is failing to stop -- in some cases is actually promoting -- the spread of A-bombs by:

(1) Helping foreign government acquire nuclear power plants -- a sure stepping stone to an A-bomb for any government inclined to take the step (see Rachel's #792). All the newest members of the "nuclear club" -- such as India, Pakistan and North Korea -- gained membership by acquiring nuclear power plants, then developing A-bombs. Nuclear power = nuclear weapons, and the U.S. is aggressively promoting the spread of nuclear power worldwide.

(2) The U.S. is dragging its feet in securing A-bombs that are lying around in the countries of the former Soviet Union. Thousands of Soviet A-weapons are still poorly secured. As the New York Times wrote two years ago, "No observer of the unraveling Russian military has much trouble imagining that a group of military officers, disenchanted by the humiliation of serving a spent superpower, embittered by the wretched conditions in which they spend much of their military lives or merely greedy, might find a way to divert a warhead to a terrorist for the right price." [1]

Furthermore, the U.S.-Russian program to secure 68 tons of plutonium (enough to make more than 10,000 A-bombs), begun in 1998, is "stalled" over a trivial legal technicality. As the Washington Post reported last month, some analysts and politicians -- including Republican Senator Pete Domenici (a staunch proponent of nuclear power and weapons) -- "are doubting the Bush administration's commitment" to securing the plutonium. [2]

(3) The U.S. is failing to aggressively retrieve 35,000 pounds of weapons-grade uranium that the U.S. and the Soviets gave or lent to 43 countries during the cold war -- enough to make more than 300 hefty A-bombs; and

(4) Reversing long-standing policy, the U.S. is now building a new class of smaller A-bombs, which are being advertised as "more usable" -- meanwhile telling the rest of the world to renounce atomic weapons. "This administration seems to believe that the United States can move the world in one direction while we ourselves move in a different direction," says U.S. Representative John M. Spratt, Jr. (D-S.C.), a

senior member of the House Armed Services Committee and an expert on U.S. nuclear policy. Mr. Spratt says President Bush is "taking us back to somewhere where we were years ago and were thankful to have moved beyond." [3]

Here we pick up the story with point 3:

Late last month U.S. Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham announced a \$450 million effort to retrieve the 35,000 pounds of weapons-grade uranium from 43 countries. [4] It is expected to take 13 years, if all goes according to plan. Mr. Abraham said his plan would ensure that nuclear materials "will not fall into the hands of those with evil intentions." [5] This sounds reassuring until you learn that Pentagon auditors concluded two months earlier, in March, that "large quantities of U.S.-produced highly-enriched uranium were out of U.S. control." [6]

The New York Times reported in March, 2004, that "The Energy Department's inspector general says that about half of the [35,000 pounds of enriched] uranium is in the hands of government agencies, universities or private companies in 12 countries that are "not expected to participate in the program" to return it. Among those countries are Iran, Pakistan, Israel, Mexico, Jamaica and South Africa. [6] Furthermore, according to the Wall Street Journal, other countries with "research reactors" that could be used to make weapons include Vietnam, Syria, Serbia, Pakistan and North Korea. [7]

Commenting on Secretary Abraham's announcement, Graham Allison, a Harvard professor and author of the forthcoming book, Nuclear Terrorism [ISBN 0805076514], told the New York Times that the plan would be "important if the words are matched by deeds." However, he said, the scale and speed of the effort are still woefully inadequate. "There is still a serious imbalance between the magnitude of the nuclear threat he [Abraham] describes and the remedies proposed," Allison said. [4] Mr. Allison subsequently signed up to advise the John Kerry campaign, which has said the uranium cleanup job should take 4 years, not 13. Administration officials scoff at the Kerry timetable as unrealistic. [8]

The fastest possible retrieval does seem warranted. As the New York Times editorialized May 28, "Highly enriched uranium is scattered at some 130 research reactors in more than 40 countries, often guarded by little more than a night watchman and a chain-link fence. Dozens of these sites have enough material to make a bomb." [9]

But, inexplicably, U.S. retrieval efforts have actually slowed since 9/11. The Times noted that "less nuclear material was secured in the two years immediately after the 9/11 attacks than in the two years before." [9]

And: "Although the United States and Russia are cooperating on a program to safeguard dangerous materials and have fixed some of the most glaring vulnerabilities, only a fifth of the dangerous nuclear material not in weapons has been

protected by comprehensive security upgrades, an appallingly sluggish performance," the Times's editors said.[9]

Why is President Bush approaching this problem in an "appallingly sluggish" fashion? Who among the President's advisors or core supporters in the Republican party imagine that there's something to be gained by this approach?

Point 4: Provocative new A-bomb policies

The Bush administration is promoting the spread of nuclear weapons worldwide in a fourth way -- by starting its own provocative program to build a new generation of A-bombs, reversing long-standing U.S. policy. Furthermore, the administration has announced a new policy of possible pre-emptive first use of nuclear weapons in emergencies, even against non-nuclear states.[10]

Mr. Bush's military strategists say the new generation of smaller weapons is desirable because smaller A-bombs are "more usable." A New York Times editorial June 8 says "more usable" means "easing the taboo that has kept nuclear weapons sheathed since 1945 on behalf of a bomb that could still expose hundreds of thousands of people to death or radiation sickness. With nine countries now believed to have nuclear weapons, including North Korea, Pakistan, India and Israel, the world does not need America's encouraging the idea of more usable bombs." [11]

The Bush administration is also developing a new generation of large A-bombs -- called bunker busters -- intended to penetrate deep into the ground before exploding. "Just imagine launching nuclear bunker busters based on weapons intelligence as unreliable as that circulating before the Iraq war," says the Times editorial. "Even if underground sites were accurately identified, the resulting nuclear explosions could spread the blast, radiation and toxins over populated areas." As an alternative, the Times favors conventional ways of dealing with underground fortresses -- like blocking air supplies or cutting off external energy sources.

The normally-staid editors of the Times call Mr. Bush's new A-weapons programs a "different and dangerous direction" for U.S. policy, a "reckless folly" that "boggles the mind." [11]

Even some Republicans are dismayed at these policy shifts. Rep. Joel Hefley (R-Colo.), a senior member of the Armed Services Committee, told the San Francisco Chronicle, "We don't need new weapons, and in fact we cause more harm than good in our relations with other countries in our moral position on nuclear proliferation. I think they're almost obsolete. I'm not convinced that we have to have that capability." [10]

Even inside the Pentagon some argue there is no need for a new generation of nuclear weapons. A classified study by the Defense Science Board, leaked in November 2003, stated, "Current [Department of Defense] structure provides neither clear requirements nor persuasive rationale for changing the nuclear stockpile." [10]

Strangely, this is an issue that divides Democrats from Republicans: "Traditionally, Democrats have viewed nuclear weapons as nearly unusable, a deterrent of last resort," said

Loren Thompson, chief operating officer of the libertarian Lexington Institute and an opponent of such new nuclear research. "Republicans, on the other hand, particularly since the Reagan years, have sought to integrate nuclear weapons into the broader arsenal of war-fighting tools, to treat them simply as a more powerful version of conventional weapons." [12]

This is precisely President Bush's approach -- to treat small A-bombs as if they were simply more powerful versions of conventional weapons. But of course they will leave radioactive fallout and long-term radiation sickness in their wake, and so, if used, they will send shockwaves of anger and outrage throughout the world. After the U.S. unleashed a small A-bomb or a larger atomic bunker buster, many small countries could become convinced that there's no reason why they shouldn't have their own A-bombs. Terrorists would no doubt redouble their efforts to retaliate in kind, eager to deliver an A-bomb by boat to the Statue of Liberty or the Golden Gate Bridge. An effective A-bomb could enter U.S. waters in a "conex" shipping container and be detonated before passing through customs. Such an attack would be extremely difficult to prevent. [1; and see Rachel's #749.]

A tiny one-kiloton A-bomb (1/20th the size of the Hiroshima bomb) set off in New York City would probably kill 20,000 people immediately. In the next few days, tens of thousands more would die from third-degree burns and radiation sickness. The cloud of radioactive fallout would injure many more in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, or New Jersey -- depending upon the wind. [1]

President Bush's new policy is to fight arms of mass destruction with arms of mass destruction -- something approaching a modern version of an eye for an eye -- except that Mr. Bush has announced he may be willing to take the first eye. As the Times reported a year ago, "diplomacy and arms control, for now, have taken a back seat to muscle flexing." [13]

Others are itching to flex back. CIA director George Tenet said more than a year ago, "The desire for nuclear weapons is on the upsurge among small countries, confronting the world with a new nuclear arms race that threatens to dismantle more than three decades of nonproliferation efforts.... We have entered a new world of proliferation," he said. [14]

And the U.S. is making very deliberate and systematic contributions to arming this new world with A-bombs.

I keep asking myself, "What would possess President Bush to do such a thing?"

How could the President or his core supporters in the Republican party imagine that they -- or anyone else -- might benefit from a world awash in A-bombs?

Some possible answers next time.

[To be continued.]

--Peter Montague

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[1] Bill Keller, "Nuclear Nightmares," New York Times Magazine May 26, 2002.

[2] Peter Slavin, "U.S.-Russia Plutonium Disposal Project Languishing," Washington Post May 10, 2004, pg. A17.

[3] Peter Slevin, "Sounding the Alarm on Nuclear Proliferation," Washington Post June 1, 2004, pg. A21.

[4] Wathew L. Wald and Judith Miller, "Energy Department Plans a Push to Retrieve Nuclear Materials," New York Times May 26, 2004.

[5] Anonymous, "Update: Abraham Announces Plan to Cut Nuclear Threat," Dow Jones Newswires May 26, 2004.

[6] Joel Brinkley and William J. Broad, "U.S. Lags in Recovering Fuel Suitable for Nuclear Arms," New York Times Mar. 7, 2004.

[7] John J. Fialka, "U.S., Russia Will Seek Return of Nuclear Fuel," Wall Street Journal May 26, 2004.

[8] Jodi Wilgoren, "Kerry Promises Speedier Efforts to Secure Nuclear Arms," New York Times June 2, 2004.

[9] "Editorial: A Real Nuclear Danger," New York Times May 28, 2004.

[10] James Sterngold, "New era of nuclear weapons: Bush's buildup begins with little debate in Congress," San Francisco Chronicle Dec. 7, 2003.

[11] "Editorial: The Wrong Proliferation Message," New York Times June 8, 2004.

[12] Robert Schlesinger, "Senate OK's repeal of 'mininuke' ban," Boston Globe May 21, 2003.

[13] William J. Broad, "Chain Reaction: Facing a Second Nuclear Age," New York Times August 3, 2003.

[14] Walter Pincus, "CIA Head Predicts Nuclear Race," Washington Post Feb. 12, 2003.

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