

WEAPONRY

The Nuclear Jitters

Fear not research,
and a wise deterrence

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Life has been hard of late for the handful of journalists, academics, and pundits who have made a profession of being distraught over U.S. nuclear weapons and policies. Credible polls show that a majority of the public appreciates the value of U.S. nuclear capabilities, and the size of that majority has been increasing for over a decade.

Since coming to office the Bush administration has rapidly succeeded in gaining the high ground on the issue of nuclear weapons. It decided on deep strategic nuclear reductions, and then codified them in an agreement with Moscow without the usual arms-control trappings of decade-long negotiations and 1,000-page treaties. Critics had called the administration's approach naïve. Yet it triumphed in record time, and in doing so stole the Left's thunder and most of its favorite lines. Anti-nuclear activists were left to mutter that the agreed two-thirds reduction in deployed strategic weapons hadn't been achieved in their favored old, Cold War style. Most Americans figured that was a good thing.

Next, the president withdrew from the 1972 ABM Treaty, an agreement that effectively prohibited homeland protection against long-range offensive missiles. The anti-nuclear crowd responded along predictable lines: Relations with Russia would explode, an arms race would ensue, and deterrence would be 'destabilized.' The president withdrew from the treaty in June 2002, and committed in December to the deployment of new missile defenses. And the sky didn't fall—it didn't even sag. Russian president Vladimir Putin

reacted calmly, relations continued to progress, and, funny thing, the American people prefer being protected against missiles.

Thus the Bush administration succeeded at deep nuclear reductions, and moved forward on missile defense while demonstrating that the Left's three-decades-old arguments against it were bogus. Bush administration; 2; anti-nuclear ideologues; 0.

The core arguments of the anti-nuclear Left have not moved since the Cold War. They continue to apply the old set of talking points to contemporary events and, as a result, often sound absurd: We shouldn't build defenses against North Korean long-range missiles because doing so might "destabilize" mutual assured destruction (MAD) deterrence. Are we now to believe that vulnerability to North Korea is a condition we should perpetuate because it fits with an old deterrence concept? Not likely.

Nowhere has this inability to move with the times been more apparent than in the Left's heated response to congressional efforts supported by the Bush administration, to allow research on precision, low-yield nuclear weapons, and weapons capable of threatening deep underground bunkers. The Senate and House have approved funding for a modest study, originally requested by the Clinton administration, to examine whether an existing nuclear weapon could be made capable against hardened, deeply buried facilities, such as might house an opponent's biological weapons.

In both style and substance, the response to these initiatives has been familiar. First comes the overheated, partisan rhetoric, intended to frighten and politicize the unsuspecting. A *Los Angeles Times* article, for example, warns of a "hawkish Republican dream," a "nuclear road of no return" that "could put the world on a suicidal course." Next, the truth is further distorted to justify the hysterical rhetoric. The current line is that these research initiatives reflect a cavalier approach to nuclear weapons and a rejection of the fundamental goal of deterring war. It's all nonsense, of course, but its scary nonsense—which is the point.

Why should we give our scientists freedom to study new, low-yield nuclear weapons and the feasibility of threatening hardened and deeply buried

facilities? First, to deter weapon of mass destruction (WMD) attacks on us and our allies; and second, to dissuade rogue states from investing further in WMD.

Deterrence. Those who claim that research into new, low-yield nuclear weapons represents a move away from the goal of deterring war fail to grasp the most basic realities of deterrence. To begin with a deterrent threat must be believable. If we want to deter an opponent from attacking, the opponent must actually believe our threat to some degree. This is not a complicated issue. Threats that are known—or thought—to be empty just don't work; ask any parent or police officer

We need research on new, low-yield nuclear weapons because that research may contribute to a deterrent that is believable, i.e., a deterrent that works. Our existing arsenal's generally high yields and limited precision could inflict so many innocent casualties that enemies may believe the U.S. president would be paralyzed by self-deterrence." America's popular aversion to causing "collateral damage" is well known. Precision, low-yield weapons that would inflict a much lower level of civilian casualties will appear much more credible to some opponents, and thus constitute a better deterrent to war.

Dissuasion. This goal, highlighted by the 2001 Nuclear Posture Review is to reduce the incentives for rogue states to acquire WMD. Most Western non-proliferation efforts attempt to control the supply of WMD technology; dissuasion targets demand.

Anti-nuclear activists claim that any new U.S. nuclear initiative, including loosening the restrictions on low-yield research, would instead inspire rogues to seek WMD. "Lead by example" is the usual refrain—the idea being that once we've backed away from nuclear weapons, rogues will see that we ascribe them no value and follow our good example, thus establishing a "global norm."

Nice thought. But we call them "rogues" for a reason because they engage in the most egregious behavior and flout international norms when it suits them. Saddam Hussein's mass murders and torture chambers are an ugly example. Think about it: Our proliferation concerns aren't with Canada or Luxemburg. The rogue "Axis of Evil" is

of greatest concern, and the leaders of those countries are not going to decide that it is really naughty of them to buy more WMD simply because our scientists are barred from doing research on low-yield nuclear weapons. Indeed, if “global norms” worked, rogue states wouldn’t have WMD now. These restrictions on U.S. scientists have been in place for the past decade, during which states like North Korea have happily made great strides in their WMD programs, in some cases nuclear.

Potential enemies want WMD for their very own reasons—not just because we have a nuclear arsenal. They have calculated that WMD can serve their political and military purposes against regional foes or trump U.S. conventional

military advantages. If we gave up nuclear research, or even, our entire nuclear arsenal, rogues would still have the same incentives to acquire WMD.

A working U.S. nuclear deterrent, however, *can* help to devalue rogue WMD, by credibly threatening a costly reply if those WMD were ever used. *Threatening* a costly reply, please note. We remain in the deterrence mode, which is all about using threats to prevent attacks. All the frightening talk about this being a surreptitious rejection of deterrence in favor of “nuclear warfighting” is merely Cold War vintage scare-mongering.

The Clinton administration’s modest research program on the feasibility of targeting hardened, deeply buried

facilities—a program now supported by the Bush administration and Congress—should be viewed in the same deterrence-and-dissuasion light. Do we want rogue leaders to believe that they can create a sanctuary for themselves and their WMD just by digging? The point is to show the Saddam Husseins of the world that if they use WMD, there will be no place on—or under—the earth for them to hide.

This is what both the initiative to repeal legal restrictions on low-yield research and the feasibility study really are all about. Their purple prose may get the anti-nuclear activists some attention, but it fails to allow for the fact that times have changed.

