For some time now, I have been searching for answers to a deeply perplexing question: Why is the United States promoting the spread of atomic bombs worldwide?

By "atomic bombs" I mean the kind that turned Hiroshima and Nagasaki into a fiery hell in 1945 -- A-bombs made from plutonium (Nagasaki) or "enriched" uranium (Hiroshima).

In this series, I will briefly examine the facts, then consider some of the possible reasons why the U.S. might favor the proliferation of atomic weapons worldwide.

In at least four different ways, the U.S. is refusing to limit -- and in some cases is actively promoting -- the spread of atomic bombs around the globe.[1]

(1) The U.S. is helping foreign nations acquire nuclear power plants, which everyone acknowledges have provided the basis for A-bomb programs in India, Pakistan, South Africa, North Korea and, during the 1980s, in Iraq.[2] In the hands of a willing nation, nuclear power equals nuclear weapons.

(2) The U.S. is dragging its feet in achieving its stated goal of preventing theft of nuclear weapons within the former Soviet Union.[1]

(3) The U.S. is failing to retrieve 35,000 pounds of weapons-grade uranium that the U.S. loaned or gave to 43 countries during the past 50 years. A crude but effective A-bomb requires 110 pounds (50 kg) of enriched uranium.[3]

(4) President Bush has ordered a fundamental shift in U.S. nuclear weapons policies, initiating what the New York Times calls "the second nuclear age."

These new policies entail (a) creation of a new class of smaller nuclear weapons, (b) guiding small A-bombs to their targets from outer space, (c) reducing the time it takes to launch a nuclear strike, and (d) a new policy of pre-emptive first use of nuclear weapons even against non-nuclear states.

"It is precisely these kinds of provocative new weapons capabilities -- at a time when the administration seeks to prevent proliferation of weapons of mass destruction elsewhere -- that worries even hawkish Republicans," says James Sterngold of the San Francisco Chronicle.[4]

Let's examine each of these four developments in more detail:

I. Nuclear power = nuclear weapons

The U.S. is urging -- and subsidizing -- foreign nations to build new nuclear power plants to generate electricity, while acknowledging that every nuclear power plant certainly provides the stepping stones to A-bombs.

For example, when Vice-President Dick Cheney visited China in April, 2004, he was promoting the sale of Westinghouse nuclear power plants to the Chinese.[5] Current U.S. policy restricts the export of nuclear technology to China but the Bush administration is expected to lift those restrictions in September. The immediate beneficiaries will be Westinghouse and General Electric.[6] China has already announced plans to build 32 nuclear power plants, and to export the technology to other countries. For example, China has said it intends to help Pakistan build two large nuclear power plants capable of producing plutonium.[5]

Within the U.S. itself, in recent months two corporate consortiums have proposed building new nuclear power plants.[7] President Bush is an enthusiastic supporter of nuclear power.

But nuclear power plants always carry an unspoken danger. For nations that want to build A-bombs, nuclear power provides the basis for all that's needed in the way of technology, opportunity and know-how.

No one disputes this view -- the "nuclear club" has been able to expand only because the spread of nuclear power plants has been encouraged and subsidized. Why does the U.S. continue down this path?

As the New York Times wrote recently, "'If you look at every nation that's recently gone nuclear,' said Mr. [Paul] Leventhal of the Nuclear Control Institute, 'they've done it through the civilian nuclear fuel cycle: Iraq, North Korea, India, Pakistan, South Africa. And now we're worried about Iran.' The moral, he added, is that atoms for peace can be 'a shortcut to atoms for war.'"[8]

The Times goes on, "Today, with what seems like relative ease, scientists can divert an ostensibly peaceful program to make not only electricity but also highly pure uranium or plutonium, both excellent bomb fuels."[8]

And: "Experts now talk frankly about a subject that was once taboo: 'virtual' weapon states - Japan, Germany, Belgium, Canada, Brazil, Kazakhstan, Taiwan and a dozen other countries that have mastered the basics of nuclear power and could, if they wanted, quickly cross the line to make nuclear arms, probably in a matter or months."[8] Experts call crossing that line "breakout."

Other nations thought to have the know-how (though not necessarily the inclination) to cross the breakout line include Egypt, Syria, Nigeria, and South Korea.

The U.S. is on record as vigorously opposing the proliferation of nuclear weapons. However, U.S. actions to prevent proliferation are half-hearted and contradictory at best.[1,9] For example, when U.S. allies break all the rules and export A-bomb technology, the U.S. looks the other way. Earlier this year, the world was rocked by news that Pakistan's chief nuclear engineer, Abdul Qadeer Khan, had sold a "complete package" of A-bomb technology to Libya, to North Korea, and probably to Iran. The "complete package" included enriched uranium, centrifuges for making more enriched uranium, and one or more designs for A-bombs.[10] Dr. Khan even maintained a telephone support hotline for his A-
bomb customers. It was a good business -- Dr. Khan reportedly received more than $100 million from Libya alone.[11]

When Dr. Khan's international smuggling network was discovered, the President of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf, forced Dr. Khan to retire as head of Khan Research Laboratories, then turned around and gave him an official pardon, lavished him with praise and gave him the title "special adviser" to the president.[10] According to the New York Times, "...some former and current American officials say there was considerable evidence that General Musharraf was turning a blind eye to Dr. Khan's activities, which they say may have involved parts of the Pakistani military."[12]

The Bush administration did nothing. "Although Mr. Bush has vowed to pursue and prosecute those who spread nuclear weapons technology, the administration did not criticize Mr. Musharraf when he decided to pardon Mr. Khan, who ran what now appears to be one of the largest nuclear proliferation networks in the past half-century."[10]

Did Dr. Khan provide bomb-grade uranium and nuclear know-how to Al Qaeda? "It's mystifying that the administration hasn't leaned on Pakistan to make Dr. Khan available for interrogation to ensure that his network is entirely closed," writes New York Times columnist Nicholas D. Kristof. "Several experts on Pakistan told me they believe that the [U.S.] administration has been so restrained because its top priority isn't combating nuclear proliferation -- it's getting President Pervez Musharraf's help in arresting Osama bin Laden before the November election," Kristof writes.[13]

Pakistan was not the only U.S. ally involved in selling A-bombs to Libya, North Korea and Iran. Dubai in the United Arab Emirates served as the "key transfer point" for all the technology Dr. Khan was selling. Just as the Cayman Islands are known for laundering drug money, Dubai is known for laundering black-market products like A-bomb parts.[14]

When President Bush learned of Dubai's role in Pakistan's atomic shopping mall, he again did nothing. As the scandal was breaking in March, 2004, the Times reported that Lockheed Martin was proceeding with the sale of 80 F-16 fighters to Dubai -- apparently a reward to a trusted and valued ally.[14]

Even when wealthy, technically-savvy governments play strictly by the rules, the civilian nuclear fuel cycle has proven impossible to control. For example, the Japanese acknowledged earlier this year that they have lost 435 pounds of plutonium -- enough to make about 25 nuclear bombs as big as the one that wiped out Nagasaki in 1945. They know they produced it but they have no idea where it went.[15]

So long as the U.S. continues to promote nuclear power for itself and its allies, the fiery hell on earth draws ever closer and more vivid.

I used to think this problem of "nuclear weapons proliferation" was the "Achilles heel" of nuclear power -- the uncontrollable problem that would finally convince the world to stuff the nuclear power genie back into the bottle and never let it out again.

I am now wondering whether I had it exactly backwards: perhaps nuclear weaponry is the main appeal of nuclear power -- both to those who are buying it AND to those who are selling it. (More on this in Part 3.)

II. Turning a Blind Eye to Loose Soviet A-Bombs

The U.S. has continually failed to secure nuclear weapons left over from the cold war in countries of the former Soviet Union. As the New York Times reported in March 2004, "The bipartisan [U.S.] program to secure weapons of mass destruction is starved for funds -- but Mr. Bush is proposing a $41 million cut in 'cooperative threat reduction' with Russia."[13]

"I wouldn't be at all surprised if nuclear weapons are used over the next 15 or 20 years," Bruce Blair, president of the Center for Defense Information, told the New York Times recently, "first and foremost by a terrorist group that gets its hands on a Russian nuclear weapon or a Pakistani nuclear weapon."[13]

There are an estimated 15,000 nuclear weapons in the countries of the former Soviet Union -- 7,000 of them strategic weapons plus an estimated 8,000 tactical weapons.[3] Strategic weapons are the big ones capable of incinerating whole cities. They are covered by disarmament treaties and so have been pretty well inventoried. They are also physically large and protected with several layers of elaborate codes and anti-detonation devices. It would be extremely difficult to steal one and set it off.

But tactical nuclear weapons are a different story. "The most troublesome gap in the generally reassuring assessment of Russian weapons security is those tactical nuclear warheads - -smaller, short-range weapons like torpedoes, depth charges, artillery shells, mines. Although their smaller size and greater number makes them ideal candidates for theft, they have gotten far less attention simply because, unlike all of our long-range weapons, they happen not to be the subject of any formal treaty," says the New York Times.[3]

The commonly-used estimate of 8,000 tactical nukes is "an educated guess," says the Times. Other estimates range from a low of 4,000 to a high of 32,000 tactical A-bombs. Even the Russians don't seem to have a reliable inventory.[3]

"The other worrying thing about tactical nukes is that their anti-use devices are believed to be less sophisticated, because the weapons were designed to be employed in the battlefield. Some of the older systems are thought to have no permissive action links at all, so that setting one off would be about as complicated as hot-wiring a car," says the Times.[3]

But stealing a nuclear weapon may not be the easiest way for a terrorist group to join the nuclear club.

Bill Keller, who wrote the eye-opening article, "Nuclear Nightmares" for the New York Times magazine two years ago, says, "The closest thing I heard to consensus among those who study nuclear terror was this: building a nuclear bomb is easier than you think, probably easier than stealing one."[3]

III. Sluggish Response to Weapons-Grade Uranium
So the third way that the U.S. is promoting the spread of atomic bombs is by failing to retrieve the weapons-grade enriched uranium that the U.S. sent abroad during the past 50 years.

Here is the opening paragraph from a New York Times story March, 7, 2004: "As the United States presses Iran and other countries to shut down their nuclear weapons development programs, government auditors have disclosed that the United States is making little effort to recover large quantities of weapons-grade uranium -- enough to make roughly 1,000 nuclear bombs -- that the government dispersed to 43 countries over the last several decades," including Iran and Pakistan.[16]

Why would President Bush fiddle around in the face of a threat as serious and obvious as this one? --Peter Montague

[To be continued.]

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[1] This newsletter was written before the New York Times editorialized as follows on May 28, 2004:

"While the Bush administration has been distracted by the invasion and occupation of Iraq, it has neglected the far more urgent threat to American security from dangerous nuclear materials that must be safeguarded before they can fall into the hands of terrorists. That is the inescapable conclusion to be drawn from a new report that documents the slow pace of protecting potential nuclear bomb material at loosely guarded sites around the world.

"The report -- prepared by researchers at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard -- does not directly blame the invasion of Iraq for undermining that effort. It simply notes that less nuclear material was secured in the two years immediately after the 9/11 attacks than in the two years before....

"The most plausible explanation is that the administration has focused so intensely on Iraq, which posed no nuclear threat, that it had little energy left for the real dangers. Indeed, the Harvard researchers said that if a tenth of the effort and resources devoted to Iraq in the last year was devoted to securing nuclear material wherever it might be, the job could be accomplished quickly."


