

Bush's Nuclear Doctrine: From MAD to NUTS?

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Foreign policy issues were mostly an afterthought during the 2000 presidential campaign, and they continue to take a back seat in President-elect George W. Bush's discussions of the priorities of his incoming administration. But one critical foreign policy issue—U.S. nuclear weapons policy—demands immediate attention and debate. The Bush foreign policy team is quietly contemplating radical changes in U.S. strategy that could set off a global nuclear arms race that will make the U.S.-Soviet competition of the cold war period look tame by comparison.

In his only significant public pronouncement on the subject, delivered last spring, Bush put forward a schizophrenic view of the nuclear conundrum. On the positive side, he spoke of making unilateral cuts in U.S. nuclear forces and taking those forces off of hair-trigger alert. He even implied that the cold war doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD—the doctrine that spurred the U.S. and the Soviet Union to build thousands upon thousands of nuclear weapons as a way of ensuring that neither side would dare attack the other for fear of being annihilated in return) was a “dead relic” of a bygone era. On the negative side of the ledger, Bush endorsed the deployment of a massive missile defense program on the scale of Ronald Reagan's “Star Wars” plan, complete with interceptor missiles based on land, at sea, in the air, and in outer space.

The seeming contradiction in the Bush view—taking reassuring steps by reducing the size of the U.S. arsenal and taking forces off of alert on the one hand, while provoking other nuclear powers with a massive Star Wars program on the other—disappears if you look at the common thread uniting these proposals: nuclear unilateralism.

Spurred on by the ideological rantings of conservative think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and Frank Gaffney's Center for Security Policy, a powerful bloc within the Republican Party has increasingly come to treat negotiated arms control arrangements—like the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START I and II), and the proposed Comprehensive Test Ban treaty—as obstacles to U.S. supremacy rather than guarantors of a fragile but critical level of stability in the nuclear age. The right-wing rallying cry is “peace through strength, not peace through paper.” If that means shredding two decades of international arms control agreements (most of which were negotiated by Republican presidents), so be it.

This unilateralist approach to nuclear strategy is a disaster waiting to happen. Bush advisers like Stephen Hadley have suggested that the U.S. can significantly reduce the numbers of nuclear weapons in its current arsenal of 8,000 to 10,000 strategic warheads. Simultaneously, the U.S. would need to modernize the force by developing low-yield nuclear weapons that could be used for missions like destroying hardened underground command centers or hidden weapons facilities.

The barely concealed premise of this emerging nuclear doctrine is a desire to make U.S. nuclear weapons more usable. This dubious proposition is grounded in the notion that a low-yield weapon could more readily be used as a threat, or actually dropped on a target, without sparking nuclear retaliation by another nuclear power. Some conservative analysts have even suggested that low-yield nukes are a “humanitarian” weapon, claiming that they can be used to take out underground biological warfare laboratories, for example, with less loss

of life than would result from other approaches to destroying such facilities!

Of course, in the unfortunate event of a nuclear exchange prompted by a U.S. threat to use “mini-nukes,” the Bush doctrine would trust in our spiffy new Star Wars system to protect us. The fact that such a system is far from reality and may never successfully be built does not seem to cool the passions of the new generation of nuclear use theorists (or NUTs, as some critics have called them).

Perhaps the scariest aspect of this new doctrine of making nuclear weapons more usable is that the Bush administration is going to try to sell it to the American public as a forward-looking, responsible approach to nuclear arms control. Because it will entail reductions in the numbers of U.S. nuclear weapons, it will be presented as a step forward from the nuclear gridlock of the Clinton/Gore administration, a fallow period during which not a single significant nuclear arms reduction agreement was negotiated. The fact that it might provoke nuclear buildups in Russia and China, ratchet up the nascent nuclear

arms race between India and Pakistan, terrify our European allies, and reduce the stigma attached to the use of nuclear weapons will be waved aside by the Bush spin control team as “old thinking” on the part of arms control ideologues who are mired in the past.

At least one sector of American society will benefit from this dangerous new doctrine. Weapons manufacturers like Lockheed Martin (which runs the Sandia nuclear weapons engineering laboratory in New Mexico and builds Trident submarine-launched ballistic missiles) will profit handsomely from Bush’s Orwellian approach to reducing the numbers of old nuclear weapons in the field, while investing heavily in the development and deployment of new nukes. The big four weapons contractors—Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon, and TRW—will reap billions in taxpayer funds to build the Bush version of Star Wars, which could cost as much as \$240 billion over a ten- to fifteen-year period.

As for the rest of us, we need to raise our voices now to demand real nuclear disarmament, not the bait-and-switch approach offered by the

Bush administration. It’s not like we haven’t been through this before. Ronald Reagan came into office in 1981 with guns blazing, pushing for a new generation of nuclear weapons and a Star Wars system. By the end of his second term, however, he had put Star Wars on the shelf and signed on to two major nuclear arms reduction treaties, the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). Reagan’s historic reversal came as a direct result of pressure brought to bear by the nuclear freeze campaign, the European Nuclear Disarmament movement (END), and pressures from European allies and our erstwhile adversaries in Moscow, led by Mikhail Gorbachev, who wouldn’t take no for an answer. It will take a similar international outcry to stop Bush’s reckless nuclear doctrine. The sooner we get started, the safer we’ll be.

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