

# “Do as I say, not as I do” Nuclear Policy

By Michelle Ciarrocca | May 27, 2003

The Bush administration has its foreign policy hands full with each nation in its “Axis of Evil.” From the ongoing search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, to the appearance of negotiations with North Korea, and the push to declare Iran in violation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, President Bush is following through with his promise to make certain these “dangerous regimes and terrorists” can not threaten the U.S. with the world’s most destructive weapons.

But he’s going about it in a way that will actually increase the nuclear threat to the U.S. and the world.

Buried in the President’s 2004 defense budget are two particularly troubling requests. The first seeks to repeal a 10-year-old ban on the development of smaller, lower-yield nuclear weapons, also known as mini-nukes. The second is a \$15.5 million request to conduct research on a new bunker buster bomb called the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator.

The Senate voted 51 to 43 to lift the ban on research and development of low-yield nuclear weapons. Actual production of the weapons would require the President to obtain congressional authorization. The House is expected to vote on the measure this week.

Administration officials contend they are not seeking to build new nuclear weapons, but only studying and researching the options. Speaking at a press conference, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld added, “Many of the things you study, you never pursue.” Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), a supporter of the ban, replied, “Does anyone really believe that?”

The Bush administration’s desire to develop a low-yield nuclear weapon stems from the theory that a cold war nuclear weapon is so massive and destructive the U.S. would never actually use one. The thinking goes, a smaller, 5-kiloton nuclear weapon—about a third the size of the nuclear bomb used in Hiroshima—would be more useful in deterring nations such as North Korea. But as Senator Jack Reed (D-RI) rightly noted, “We’re moving away from more than five decades of efforts to delegitimize the use of nuclear weapons.”

As for research into a new bunker-buster nuclear weapon, the Union of Concerned Scientists released a fact sheet outlining the “troubling science” behind

the proposed weapons. The scientists note that even a small, low-yield earth-penetrating weapon will create radioactive debris, there is no guarantee that the nuclear blast would successfully destroy chemical or biological weapons, and there are current conventional weapons that could be used as alternatives.

The Bush administration’s *Nuclear Posture Review*, released in January 2002, was a foreshadowing of a new nuclear era in which the once-termed “weapon of last resort” has turned into a usable, necessary tool in the anti-terror arsenal.

As part of the *Nuclear Posture Review*, the Pentagon expanded the nuclear hit list to include a wide range of potential adversaries, such as North Korea, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, whether or not those nations possess nuclear weapons. The circumstances under which the use of nuclear weapons might be considered has also expanded beyond situations threatening the national survival of the United States to include retaliation for a North Korean attack on South Korea, or simply as a response to “surprising military developments.” The review also sanctions the first use of nuclear weapons to “dissuade adversaries from undertaking military programs or operations that could threaten U.S. interests or those of allies and friends.”

The Bush administration’s nuclear doctrine represents an abrupt departure from the policies of prior administrations, Democratic and Republican alike. How likely are countries like Iran, North Korea, Syria, Libya, Russia, and China—all of which have been targeted in Bush’s new nuclear plan—to heed the administration’s calls to reduce or renounce their own nuclear arsenals in the face of this new threat from the United States?

“I can’t believe that I have witnessed in my time on Capitol Hill a more historic debate than what we are

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undertaking at this moment,” said Sen. Richard Durbin (D-IL). “We are literally talking about whether or not the United States will initiate a nuclear arms race again. Nothing that I can think of meets this in terms of gravity and its impact on the future of the world.”

If President Bush were serious about reducing the threat posed by nuclear weapons he would focus on preventive measures, such as increasing funds for nonproliferation and threat reduction programs, while also reducing our own massive arsenal. Nonproliferation programs receive about \$1.8 billion annually. Compare that to the \$41 billion budget for homeland defense, or the \$79 billion supplemental for the war in Iraq. Representative John Spratt (D-SC) pointed out the disparity between funding saying the almost \$10 billion “ballistic missile defense is a prime example of how the emphasis on counter-proliferation comes at the expense of nonproliferation.”

The Russian parliament recently ratified the nuclear arms reduction treaty signed by Russian President Putin and President Bush last year. The U.S. Senate approved the treaty in March. The treaty reduces each nation’s arsenals of strategic nuclear weapons by two-thirds, to fewer than 2,200 each over the next decade. While the treaty is a worthy and symbolic signal of a new relationship with Russia, much more can and should be done.

By taking ten years to make the proposed reductions, allowing both sides to keep thousands of their withdrawn warheads in “reserve” rather than destroying them, and giving either party the right to withdraw from the agreement on just 90 days notice, the Pentagon has preserved its ability to rapidly reverse

the Bush administration’s proposed reductions in the U.S. arsenal whenever it wants to, even as it continues to seek new types of nuclear weapons.

Deeper, verifiable cuts on both sides—to as low as 200 to 500 strategic warheads each rather than the 1,700 to 2,200 allowed in the current proposal—would give Washington and Moscow leverage to begin pressing nuclear-armed states like Britain, France, China, India, Pakistan, and Israel to eliminate their own arsenals. This move toward multilateral reductions would also make it much easier to get states with nuclear capabilities to agree not to aid nations like Iraq, Iran, or North Korea to develop their own weapons of mass destruction.

Whereas Ronald Reagan left office saying that a nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought, two decades later, the word coming from the Bush administration is that nuclear weapons are here to stay. The recommendations contained in the *Nuclear Posture Review* and 2004 budget requests are steps backwards, and arguably violations of U.S. commitments to “pursue negotiations in good faith” for the reduction and eventual abolition of nuclear weapons under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. The only way to protect the American people, and the people of the world, from the threat of nuclear weapons—big and small—is to take determined steps to get rid of them, once and for all.

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