

Bombs Away! or Bomb Any Way

Col. Daniel Smith, U.S. Army (Ret.) | May 16, 2006

December 2001: the U.S. Air Force dropped the 15,000-pound “Daisy Cutter” on the cave complex in Afghanistan known as Toro Bora. At the time, this was the largest bomb in the U.S. arsenal.

The same month, the Pentagon sent 10 of the more lethal 2,000-pound thermobaric bombs to U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Thermobaric weapons are dual action: one explosion disperses a fine mist of under-oxidized fuel into a confined space such as a room in a building or a cave. A second explosion ignites the mixture, generating a flash fireball and pressure wave that will kill any person or animal in the immediate effects zone. Anyone who escapes these effects most likely will still die as the spreading fireball consumes all the oxygen in the space.

Those old enough to remember Jimmy Carter’s presidency might recall the so-called “neutron bomb” which was supposed to be an alternative to “ordinary” nuclear weapons. Unlike a “conventional” nuclear weapon, the neutron bomb only killed people. It did not destroy things. Thermobarics come close to the same result, although the pressure wave shock could collapse some structures and the fireball ignites flammables.

The latest iteration of “kill people—don’t destroy things” (or innocent bystanders) weapon under development is the “focused-lethality munition,” touted as a super-precision weapon. Perhaps most people remember the first Gulf War and the video tapes from airplane nose cameras showing a 2,000- or maybe a 1,000-pound laser-designated bomb going down a building chimney or through a window. Today’s bomb of choice for urban combat

support is a satellite-guided 500-pound bomb, soon to be a 250-pound weapon. These bombs work—that is, kill—by the tried and true methods of blasting and spraying shrapnel 360 degrees.

Enter tomorrow’s bomb sporting a carbon composite case which, because it fractures more easily than current metal casings, absorbs less of the blast (which goes further) but also doesn’t distribute shrapnel as far. The interior of the bomb includes the usual explosives augmented by a metal powder that, riding the blast wave, is lethal but limited in range by gravity. The net effect of all these changes is to reduce the lethality radius, but within that radius to blow away every hard object—including people (*Wall Street Journal*).

One hesitates to commend development of weapons with increased lethality even with the prospect that, when used, casualties among innocent bystanders are reduced. Yet there is something less onerous in the “focused lethality” bomb when it is stacked beside another USAF development that will be tested June 2 at the former Nuclear Weapons Test Site 90 miles north of Las Vegas. This test will detonate 700 tons (in later reports lowered to just under 600 tons)—that is to say 1,400,000 pounds—of conventional explosives in a hole 36 feet deep to allow scientists to measure ground shock waves, and from these to estimate damage to various underground or buried facilities (*Washington Post*).



The deeper rationale for the ground test is to try to determine if a very large conventional weapon could be powerful enough to damage deeply-buried bunkers sufficiently to knock them out of a battle (command and control headquarters) or destroy possible chemical, biological, or even nuclear weapons and missiles.

Some skeptics think the test will not be conducted fairly or that the results will be skewed to “demonstrate” that the only way to be sure buried targets can be neutralized is by using nuclear weapons. And considering that the administration is pressing for money to build 125 new nuclear weapons annually—including new designs—on the specious claim that older bombs cannot be (or soon will not be) certified reliable, the skeptics may be on to something.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the United States was a prominent force in the drive for a worldwide moratorium on creating and testing new nuclear weapons that effectively closed the nuclear door. Blocked by Congress from developing a new earth penetrating nuclear “bunker-buster,” the Bush administration is trying to get inside the nuclear weapons house through the “reliability” window.

Does anyone else feel a chill?

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p. 2

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