

## Fearing fear itself

*The Atomic Bazaar: The Rise of the Nuclear Poor*, by William Langewiesche, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 181 pages, 2007, \$22.

> BOOK REVIEW BY JOHN MUELLER

**W**HEN A BOOK IS recommended as a remedy for insomnia, the prescription is usually taken to be a negative commentary on its style and appeal. By contrast, William Langewiesche's engaging and fluid *The Atomic Bazaar: The Rise of the Nuclear Poor* could serve as a palliative for the sleep disorder that affects people such as former Gov. Thomas Kean, chair of the 9/11 Commission, who confesses that what keeps him up at night is "the worry of a terrorist with a nuclear device in one of our major cities."

After spending a great deal of time and effort assessing that danger, Langewiesche, who has moved from the *Atlantic* to *Vanity Fair* since he wrote the book, concludes that this scenario "remains very, very unlikely. It's a possibility, but unlikely."

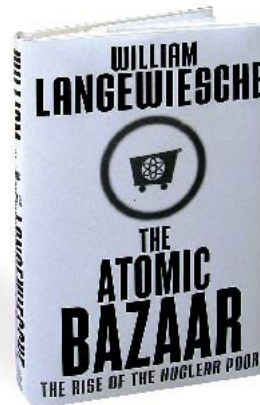
That bold declaration, however, comes from a book discussion telecast last June on C-SPAN. Judgments in the book itself, while consistent with that conclusion, are expressed more ambiguously, even coyly: "At the extreme is the possibility, entirely real, that one or two nuclear weapons will

pass into the hands of the new stateless guerrillas." Or, "If a would-be nuclear terrorist calculated the odds, he would have to admit that they are stacked against him," but they "are not impossible."

Even more, blurb writers have apparently concluded that, whatever the effect on sleep patterns, it is fear, not reassurance, which sells. Thus, the jacket flap says the book

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"examines in dramatic and tangible detail the chances of such weapons being manufactured and deployed by terrorists"—an accurate description, but one that deftly avoids revealing the author's conclusion as to what those chances actually happen to be. And when the *Atlantic* (purveyor last decade of cheery cover screeds about "The Crisis of Public Order," "The Drift Toward Disaster," "The Coming Anarchy," and "The Coming Plague") published the relevant chapter from Langewiesche's book in December, it



chose to accentuate the negative by entitling the piece, "How to Get a Nuclear Bomb." Many alarmists have taken that to be the book's message.

If the prospects that terrorists might come up with a bomb are "not impossible," how close to impossible are they? Langewiesche's bottom-up

reporting, based on extensive travels in relevant areas, helps us assess the many ways such a quest could fail. Consider the following:

First, "loose nukes," if they exist at all, require constant maintenance, are in the process of degradation, and are protected by locks. Moreover, even a rather nutty nuclear weapon state would not give or sell a bomb to a terrorist group out of fear that the weapon would be misused or that its

origins could be detected. Therefore the terrorists would have to make the bomb themselves.

Since stateless groups are simply incapable of manufacturing the required fissile material for a bomb, they would have to steal it or buy it illicitly.

Although some material, particularly in Russia, may be inadequately secured (though things have improved considerably), it is under lock and key, and even sleepy, drunken guards will react with hostility (and noise) to a raiding party. Thieves also

need to know exactly what they want and where it is, and this presumably means trusting bribed, but not necessarily dependable, insiders. And to even begin to pull off such a heist, they need to develop what Langewiesche describes as a highly nuanced “sense for the street” in foreign lands filled with people who are often congenitally suspicious of strangers.

Corruption in some areas may provide an opportunity to buy the relevant material, but purchasers of illicit goods and services would have to pay off a host of greedy confederates, any one of whom could turn on them, or, either out of guile or incompetence, furnish them with stuff that is useless.

If terrorists were somehow successful at obtaining the requisite amount of relevant material, they would have to transport it hundreds of miles out of the country over unfamiliar terrain, probably while being pursued by security forces. Crossing international borders could be facilitated by following established smuggling routes, and, notes Langewiesche, “it is generally assumed that for the right price, opium traffickers will provide transportation, lodging, and expert advice to nuclear terrorists.” But opportunistic allies like that could also prove to be unreliable, and the routes are often under the watch of a handful of criminal regulators who might find it in their interest to disrupt passage, perhaps to collect reward money.

Once outside the country with their precious booty, terrorists would have to set up a large and well-equipped machine shop to manufacture a bomb. But where would they locate such a facility? “Not Libya, not Sudan, not Iran,” Langewiesche concludes. “The certainty of retribution after its use far outweighs whatever benefit might be gained. Moreover you could never trust those governments not to wait until the end and confiscate the goods.” Consequently, building a bomb would take months of very careful and dangerous labor by several highly skilled and completely loyal scientists and machinists, and it would have to be carried out in utter secret even while local and international

security police are on the prowl and while people in the area observe with increasing curiosity and puzzlement the constant coming and going of technicians likely to be foreigners: “It would be difficult to keep the locals from asking inconvenient questions,” Langewiesche notes. The finished product would then have to be transported thousands of miles, smuggled into the relevant country, and moved over local roads to the target site accompanied by a work crew savvy enough to carry out the task without arousing suspicion.

At the target site, the crew, presumably suicidal, would have to set off their improvised and untested nuclear device hoping, and fervently praying, that the machine shop work has been perfect, that there have been no significant shake ups in the treacherous process of transportation, and that the thing, after all this effort, doesn’t prove to be a dud.

Whatever the problems for terrorists, Langewiesche concludes that we have passed the point of no return on weapons proliferation among established states, including the poorer ones.

Any country willing to “eat grass,” as a Pakistani president once colorfully put it, can over time obtain an atomic arsenal if that’s their idea of a good time, and Langewiesche thinks they will do so. The driver in this process, he mysteriously concludes, will be “the desire for self-sufficiency.” In other places, however, Langewiesche attributes proliferation mostly to a quest for security against external threats. But few countries face such threats, and, of those who do, many can deter with far cheaper measures. As the Iraq experience has demonstrated, a nation doesn’t need the Bomb to deter a U.S. invasion, only a trained and dedicated cadre of prospective insurgents.

The atomic genie may be out of the bottle, but few are likely to be seduced by its charms, particularly if eating grass is a prerequisite. Get some sleep, Governor Kean. ✱

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