criticism having more to do with agendas and interests of the critics than with the intelligence community's actions. The two assessments about postwar issues, which contained very little sensitive reporting, should have been far easier to declassify than the Top Secret estimate on weapons. Yet it has taken almost three more years, and a change in party control in Congress, to release them or any report based on them. (But give the Senate committee credit for even belatedly doing something that neither its House counterpart nor the executive branch did.)

The Republican interest in protecting the administration, and in so doing shifting blame for the Iraq disaster to the intelligence community, clearly is a large part of this. But the scapegoating has a bipartisan element as well. For all members of Congress who supported the war, the assessments about postwar consequences are an inconvenient reminder of how they bought into the administration's false equation of a presumed weapons program with the need to invade, and how in trying to protect themselves against charges of being soft on national security they failed to consider all of the factors that should have influenced their votes.

Spinning the intelligence community's performance through selective attention has consequences that go far beyond institutional pride or the historical record. One consequence is to divert attention from the real reasons for ill-informed or ill-directed foreign policy. The more attention that is consumed by aluminum tubes or other minutiae of weapons-related intelligence, the less attention is available to direct to the far more fundamental decision-making pathology that led to the Iraq War. Another consequence is disruption of the work of the intelligence community itself in the name of "fixing" it. The enactment in late 2004 of an intelligence reorganization of doubtful effectiveness depended in large part on the public perception—incomplete and incorrect—that intelligence on Iraq had been all wrong.

A final observation concerns how the intelligence community really did perform on Iraq. It offered judgments on the issues that turned out to be most important in the war, even though those judgments conspicuously contradicted the administration's rosy vision for Iraq. And for the most part, the judgments were correct. Missed opportunities all the way down. □

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Radioactive Hype

John Mueller

LET ME be clear at the outset (since it will likely be forgotten by readers who manage to get past this paragraph) that I consider dissuading more countries from obtaining nuclear weapons to be quite a good idea and preventing terrorists from getting them to be an even better one. Indeed, I am even persuaded from time to time that the world might well be better off if the countries who now have them gave them up. Perhaps we could start with the

French, who cling to an arsenal presumably under the imaginative notion that the weapons might one day prove useful should Nice be savagely bombarded from the sea or should a truly unacceptable number of Africans in former French colonies take up English.

My concern, however, is that the obsessive quest to control nuclear proliferation—particularly since the end of the Cold War—has been substantially counterproductive and has often inflicted dire costs. Specifically, the effort to prevent proliferation has enhanced the appeal of—or desperate desire for—nuclear weapons for some regimes, even as it has resulted in far more deaths than have been caused by all nuclear—or even all Weapons of Mass Destruction—detonations in all of history.

Presidents, White House hopefuls, congressmen, those in the threat-assessment business and the American public are convinced the biggest danger to the United States, and perhaps even the entire world order, comes from the two-pronged threat of nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism. This concern is understandable, but it is overwrought and has had undesirable consequences.

Casualties of the Non-proliferation Quest

THE QUEST to prevent atomic spread and the resulting destruction has been bipartisan. The current disastrous Iraq War, with deaths that may well run into the hundreds of thousands, is a key case in point. It was almost entirely sold by the Republican administration as a venture required to keep Saddam Hussein's pathetic—and fully containable and deterrable—rogue state from developing nuclear and other potentially threatening weapons, and to prevent him from palming off some of these to eager and congenial terrorists. Democrats have derided the war as "unnecessary", but the bulk of them only came to that conclusion when neither weapons nor weapons programs were found in Iraq: Many of them have made it clear they would support military action and its attendant bloodshed if the intelligence about Saddam's programs had been accurate.

However, the devastation of Iraq in the service of limiting proliferation did not begin with Bush's war in 2003; this time they just embellished the terrorism angle. Over the previous 13 years, Iraqis suffered under economic sanctions visited upon them by both Democratic and Republican administrations that were designed to force Saddam from office (and effectively from life since he had no viable sanctuary elsewhere) while keeping the country from developing chemical, biological and especially nuclear weapons. The goals certainly had their admirable side. But, as multiple studies have shown, the sanctions proved to be a necessary cause of the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, most of them children under the age of five—the most innocent of civilians.

One might have imagined that the people carrying out this policy with its horrific and well-known consequences would from time to time have been asked whether the results were worth the costs. To my knowledge, this happened only once, on television's *60 Minutes* in 1996. Madeleine Albright, then the American ambassador to the United Nations, was asked, "We have heard that a half a million children have died. I mean, that's more children than died in Hiroshima. . . . Is the price worth it?" Albright did not dispute the number and acknowledged it to be "a very hard choice." But, she concluded, "We think the price is worth it", pointing out that because of sanctions Saddam had recognized Kuwait and had come "cleaner on some of these weapons programs."

A Lexis-Nexis search suggests that Albright's dismissal of the devastation on a prominent television show went com-

AP Images

Maj. T. J. Kong had no fear. Neither should you.

pletely unremarked upon by the U.S. media. In the Middle East, however, it was covered widely and repeatedly. Osama bin Laden was among the outraged and used the punishment that sanctions were inflicting on Iraqi civilians as a centerpiece in his many diatribes against heartless American policy in the region.

The damn-the-costs perspective on atomic proliferation is also evident in the thinking of the distinguished Harvard political scientist, Graham Allison. In his thoughtful, well-argued and determinedly alarming 2004 book, *Nuclear Terrorism*, Allison proclaims "no new nuclear weapons states" to be a central foreign-policy principle. He goes on to pronounce it to be no less than a "supreme priority" that North Korea be stopped from joining the nuclear club.

To deal with what he considers an urgent threat, Allison proposes several diplomatic steps, including the screening of a horror video for North Korea's Kim Jong-il ("known to be a great fan of movies") that would graphically depict the kind of destruction American munitions could visit upon Kim's errant country. Should diplomacy fail and this vivid bluff be called, however, Allison essentially advocates launching a Pearl Harbor–like attack. Yet he acknowledges that potential nuclear targets have been dispersed and disguised; we would likely fail to locate and destroy them all. Moreover, a resulting war might kill tens of thousands in South Korea—though to cut down on the civilian body count Allison does humanely suggest pre-emptively evacuating Seoul, one of the world's largest cities, which already boasts some of the most impressive traffic jams on the planet.

Members of the Bush Administration, perhaps because they had become immersed in their own anti-proliferation war in Iraq, were able to contain their enthusiasm for Allison's urgent advice, and North Korea is now a nuclear-armed state. Allison sternly insisted that such an outcome would be "gross negligence" and would foster "a transformation in the international security order no great power would wittingly accept." So, with all that behind us, we are in position to sit back and see if Allison's predictions have come true: A North Korean bomb, he declares, will "unleash a proliferation chain reaction, with South Korea and Japan building their own weapons by the end of the decade", with Taiwan "seriously considering following suit despite the fact that this would risk war with China" and with North Korea potentially "becoming the Nukes R' Us for terrorists."

And now we are at it again. Urged on

by Israel and by its influential and voluble allies in the United States, the same geniuses who gave us the Iraq War seem to be contemplating air strikes or even an invasion of Iran to keep that country from getting an atomic bomb. The hysteria inspired in Israel by some of the fulminations of Iran's current president, a populist whose tenuous hold on office has been enhanced by foreign overreaction to his windbaggeries, may be understandable. But it does not necessarily lead to wise policy, even for Israel.

The casualties inflicted by an attack on Iran either through direct action or "collateral damage" (including, potentially, induced nuclear radiation) could rival those suffered by Iraq. And the results would most likely be counterproductive. Israel's highly touted air strike against Iraq's nuclear program in the Osirak attack of 1981, as Richard Betts pointed out in these pages in the spring of 2006, actually caused Saddam Hussein to speed up his nuclear activities and decrease the program's vulnerability by dispersing its elements—a lesson Iran has also learned. An attack on Iran is likely to lead to an uptick in their programs as well, and the radicalization it would inspire in Pakistan could lead to atomic assistance—or even the fraternal loan of a bomb or two. Iran would also probably exercise its capacity for making the U.S. position both in Iraq and in Afghanistan considerably more dire.

The Atomic Terrorist

HERE IS another favorite fantasy of the alarmists: A newly nuclear country will pass a bomb or two to friendly terrorists for delivery abroad. Yet as William Langewiesche stresses in *Atomic Bazaar: The Rise of the Nuclear Poor*, this is highly improbable. There would be too much risk, even for a country led by extremists. If the ultimate source of the weapon were discovered—whether before or after detonation—international retribution could be unfathomably fierce. Potential detection as a nuclear-terrorist abettor carries too high a price. Moreover, no state is likely to trust Al-Qaeda—most are already on its extensive enemies list.

Since they are unlikely to be aided by an established state, terrorists would need to buy or steal the crucial fissile material and then manufacture the device themselves. On this front, there is much rumor but little substance. Even though Bin Laden sometimes appears to talk a good game, the degree to which Al-Qaeda has pursued a nuclear-weapons program may have been exaggerated by the arch-terrorist himself, as well as by the same slam-dunkers who packaged Saddam's WMD-development scare.

The 9/11 Commission, media and various threat-mongers have trotted out evidence ranging from the ludicrous to the merely dubious when it comes to Al-Qaeda's nuclear intentions. One particularly well-worn tale—based on the testimony of an embezzling Al-Qaeda operative who later defected—describes Bin Laden's efforts to obtain some uranium while in Sudan in 1993. For his prize-winning book, *The Looming Tower*, Lawrence Wright interviewed two relevant people—including the man who supposedly made the purchase—and both say the episode never happened.

Then there are the two sympathetic Pakistani nuclear scientists who met with top Al-Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan in August 2001. Pakistani intelligence officers say the scientists found Bin Laden to be "intensely interested" in chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, but insist that the talks were wide-ranging and "academic", likely rendering little critical help on bomb design.

In what would seem to be other frightening news, a hand-written 25-page document entitled "Superbomb" was found in the home of an Al-Qaeda leader

in Afghanistan. But according to physicist David Albright, some sections are sophisticated while others are "remarkably inaccurate and naïve." Many critical steps for making a nuclear weapon are missing; the bomb design figures, "not credible." In short, the entire program seems "relatively primitive."

When in full-on fantasyland, we even worry about decade-old reports of Al-Qaeda's purchase of twenty nuclear warheads from Chechen mobsters for $30 million and two tons of opium. And then there's the supposed acquisition of nuclear suitcase bombs in Russia, asserted by Al-Qaeda's second in command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, on the eve of Al-Qaeda's collapse in Afghanistan. Given the circumstances, this seems a desperate bluff, and it has been much disputed by Moscow officials and experts on the Russian program. Even if they still exist, these Soviet-era bombs have a short shelf life and today are nothing more than "radioactive scrap metal."

Of course, absence of evidence, we need hardly be reminded, is not evidence of absence. Thus, Allison reports that, when no abandoned nuclear-weapons material was found in Afghanistan, some intelligence analysts responded: "We haven't found most of Al-Qaeda's leadership either, and we know that they exist." Since we know Mount Rushmore exists, maybe the tooth fairy does as well.

Even if there is some desire for the bomb, fulfilling that desire is another matter. Though Allison assures us that it would be "easy" for terrorists to assemble a crude bomb if they could get enough fissile material, we see how difficult it is for states to acquire these capabilities (it took Pakistan 27 years)—let alone the Lone Ranger. Al-Qaeda would need people with great technical skills, a bevy of corrupted but utterly reliable co-conspirators and an implausible amount of luck to go undetected for months, if not years while developing and delivering their capabilities.

Perhaps aware of these monumental difficulties, terrorists around the world seem in effect to be heeding the advice found in a memo on an Al-Qaeda laptop seized in Pakistan in 2004: "Make use of that which is available . . . rather than waste valuable time becoming despondent over that which is not within your reach." That is, "Keep it simple, stupid."

Threats and the Incentives

CONSIDERING ALL the false scares and attendant unnecessary civilian casualties they've engendered, it may be time to think a bit about the strategic consequences of treating nuclear proliferation as the "supreme priority" of foreign policy.

As Langewiesche points out, the nuclear genie is out of the bottle, and just about any state can eventually obtain nuclear weapons if it really wants to make the effort—although in many cases that might involve, as a former president of Pakistan once colorfully put it, "eating grass" to pay for it.

Despite the predictions of generations of alarmists, nuclear proliferation has proceeded at a remarkably slow pace. In 1958 the National Planning Association predicted "a rapid rise in the number of atomic powers . . . by the mid-1960s", and a couple of years later, John Kennedy observed that there might be "ten, fifteen, twenty" countries with a nuclear capacity by 1964. But over the decades a huge number of countries capable of developing nuclear weapons has not done so—Canada, Sweden and Italy, for example—and several others—Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, South Korea and Taiwan—have backed away from or reversed nuclear-weapons programs.

There is, then, no imperative for countries to obtain nuclear weapons once they have achieved the appropriate tech-

nical and economic capacity to do so. Insofar as states that considered acquiring the weapons, they came to appreciate several defects: The weapons are dangerous, distasteful, costly and likely to rile the neighbors. If one values economic growth and prosperity above all, the sensible thing is to avoid the weapons unless they seem vital for security.

It has often been assumed that nuclear weapons would prove to be important status symbols. However, as Columbia's Robert Jervis has observed, "India, China, and Israel may have decreased the chance of direct attack by developing nuclear weapons, but it is hard to argue that they have increased their general prestige or influence." How much more status would Japan have if it possessed nuclear weapons? Would anybody pay a great deal more attention to Britain or France if their arsenals held 5,000 nuclear weapons, or would anybody pay much less if they had none? Did China need nuclear weapons to impress the world with its economic growth? Perhaps the only such benefit the weapons have conferred is upon contemporary Russia: With an economy the size of the Netherlands, it seems unlikely that the country would be invited to participate in the G-8 economic club if it didn't have an atomic arsenal.

It is also difficult to see how nuclear weapons benefited their owners in specific military ventures. Israel's nuclear weapons did not restrain the Arabs from attacking in 1973, nor did Britain's prevent Argentina's seizure of the Falklands in 1982. Similarly, the tens of thousands of nuclear weapons in the arsenals of the enveloping allied forces did not cause Saddam Hussein to order his occupying forces out of Kuwait in 1990. Nor did the bomb benefit America in Korea or Vietnam, France in Algeria or the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

The handful of countries that have pursued nuclear-weapons programs seem to have done so as an ego trip (think, again, of France) or else (or additionally) as an effort to deter a potential attack on themselves: China, Israel, India, Pakistan and now North Korea. Although there were doubtless various elements in their motivations, one way to reduce the likelihood such countries would go nuclear is a simple one: Stop threatening them. From this perspective, Bush's 2002 declaration grouping Iraq, Iran and North Korea into an "axis of evil" was, to put it mildly, foolish. However, many of his supporters, particularly in the neoconservative camp, went quite a bit further. In an article in this journal in the fall of 2004 proposing what he calls "democratic realism", Charles Krauthammer urged taking "the risky but imperative course of trying to reorder the Arab world", with a "targeted, focused" effort on "that Islamic crescent stretching from North Africa to Afghanistan." And in a speech in late 2006, he continued to champion what he calls "the only plausible answer", an amazingly ambitious undertaking that involves "changing the culture of that area, no matter how slow and how difficult the process. It starts in Iraq and Lebanon, and must be allowed to proceed." Any other policy, he has divined, "would ultimately bring ruin not only on the U.S. but on the very idea of freedom."

In their 2003 book, *The War Over Iraq*, Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol stress that, "The mission begins in Baghdad, but does not end there. . . . War in Iraq represents but the first installment. . . .Duly armed, the United States can act to secure its safety and to advance the cause of liberty—in Baghdad and beyond." At a speech given at the Army War College as Baghdad was falling in 2003, Richard Perle triumphantly issued an extensive litany of targets, adding for good measure, and possibly in jest, France and the State Department.

Most interesting is a call issued in *Commentary* by neoconservatism's champion guru, Norman Podhoretz, in the

run-up to the war. He strongly advocated expanding Bush's "axis of evil" beyond Iraq, Iran and North Korea "at a minimum" to "Syria and Lebanon and Libya, as well as 'friends' of America like the Saudi royal family and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, along with the Palestinian Authority." More realistic about democracy than other neoconservatives, Podhoretz pointedly added, "the alternative to these regimes could easily turn out to be worse, even (or especially) if it comes into power through democratic elections." Accordingly, he emphasized, "it will be necessary for the United States to *impose* a new political culture on the defeated parties."

These men, with their extravagant fantasies, do not, of course, directly run the Bush Administration. However, given the important role such people have played in the administration's intellectual development and military deployments, the designated target regimes would be foolish in the extreme not to take such existential threats very seriously indeed.

It is certainly preferable that none of these regimes (and quite a few others) ever obtain nuclear weapons. But if they do so they are by far most likely to put them to use the same way other nuclear countries have: to deter.

Nonetheless, even threatened states may not develop nuclear weapons. In the wake of the Iraq disaster, an invasion by the ever-threatening Americans can probably now be credibly deterred simply by maintaining a trained and well-armed cadre of a few thousand troops dedicated to, and capable of, inflicting endless irregular warfare on the hapless and increasingly desperate and ridiculous invaders. The Iranians do not yet seem to have grasped this new reality, but perhaps others on the Bush Administration's implicit hit list will.

Alarmists about proliferation (which seems to include almost the totality of the foreign-policy establishment) may occasionally grant that countries principally obtain a nuclear arsenal to counter real or perceived threats. But many go on to argue that newly nuclear countries will then use nuclear weapons to dominate the area. This argument was repeatedly used with dramatic urgency for the dangers to world peace and order supposedly posed by Saddam Hussein, and it is now being dusted off and applied to Iran.

Exactly how this domination business is to be carried out is never made very clear. The United States possesses a tidy array of thousands of nuclear weapons and can't even dominate downtown Baghdad—or even keep the lights on there. But the notion apparently is that should an atomic Iraq (in earlier fantasies) or Iran (in present ones) rattle the occasional rocket, all other countries in the area, suitably intimidated, would supinely bow to its demands. Far more likely is that they will make common cause with each other against the threatening neighbor, perhaps enlisting the convenient aid eagerly proffered by other countries, probably including the United States and conceivably even Israel.

Proliferation of the bomb, particularly to terrorists, may indeed be the single most serious threat to the national security of the United States. Assessed in appropriate context, that could actually be seen as a rather cheering conclusion. □

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