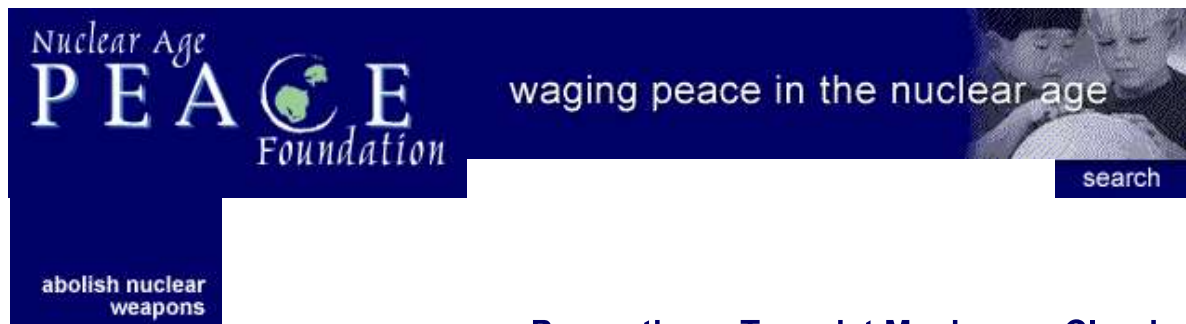




Preventing a Terrorist Mushroom Cloud

By David Krieger

The images of the hijacked planes crashing into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania are nightmare images of unspeakable horror that will forever be a part of our reality.

Imagine, however, another nightmare -- that of a mushroom cloud rising over an American city. This is a threat we can no longer ignore. Terrorists have demonstrated their willingness to attack US cities and the possibility of them doing so with nuclear weapons cannot be ruled out. After September 11th, citizens and leaders alike should be better able to understand the seriousness of the nuclear threat.

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were powerful warnings. They signaled that determined terrorists are prepared to sacrifice their lives to harm us, that future attacks could involve weapons of mass destruction, and that nuclear dangers are increasing because of terrorist activity.

Our leaders have failed to grasp that our present nuclear weapons policies contribute to the possibility of nuclear terrorism against our country. We are simply not doing enough to prevent nuclear weapons or weapons-grade nuclear materials from falling into the hands of terrorists.

A US blue ribbon commission, headed by former Senate majority leader Howard Baker, has called for spending \$3 billion a year over the next ten years to maintain control of the nuclear weapons, nuclear materials and nuclear scientists in the former Soviet Union. Yet, the Bush administration has proposed funding cuts for this program from \$1.2 billion to \$800 million next year.

The Bush Administration's primary response to the nuclear threat has been to push for a national missile shield costing billions of dollars, the technology of which is unproven, and which would at best be years away from implementation. A missile shield would likely do irreparable harm to our relations with other countries, countries that we need to join us in the fight against international terrorism.

The mad nuclear arms race during the Cold War, and the paltry steps taken to reverse it since the end of the Cold War, have left tens of thousands of nuclear weapons potentially available to terrorists. Today there is no accurate inventory of the world's nuclear arsenals or weapons-grade fissile materials suitable for making nuclear weapons. Estimates have it, however, that there are currently more than 30,000 nuclear weapons in the world. We simply don't know whether these weapons are adequately controlled, or whether some could already have fallen into the hands of terrorists.

Osama bin Laden claims to possess nuclear weapons. His claim is feasible. Former Russian Security Advisor Aleksandr Lebed has stated that some 80 to 100 suitcase-size nuclear

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weapons in the one kiloton range are missing from the Russian arsenal. This claim was reiterated by Alexey Yablokov, an advisor to former Russian President Boris Yeltsin.

The Russian government has denied the claims of missing Russian nuclear weapons, but former US Deputy Energy Secretary Charles Curtis has expressed doubt about these assurances. According to Curtis, "We believe we have a full accounting of all of Russia's strategic weapons, but when it comes to tactical weapons - the suitcase variety - we do not know, and I'm not sure they do, either."

More than ten years after the end of the Cold War we and the Russians still have more than 10,000 nuclear weapons each with a total of some 4,500 of them on hair-trigger alert, ready to be fired in moments. Russia has been urging the US to move faster on START 3 negotiations to reduce the size of the nuclear arsenals in both countries, but US leaders had been largely indifferent to their entreaties.

In November 2001, President Bush announced that the US was prepared to reduce its arsenal of long-range nuclear weapons to between 2,200 and 1,700 over the next ten years. President Putin indicated that Russia would make commensurate cuts. These steps are in the right direction, but they still indicate reliance on Cold War strategies of deterrence. They also do not address tactical or battlefield nuclear weapons, which are the most likely weapons to be used and to fall into the hands of terrorists.

Large nuclear arsenals, measured in the thousands, on hair-trigger alert are Cold War relics. They do not provide deterrence against terrorist attacks. Nor could a missile shield have prevented the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center or the Pentagon, or protect against future nuclear terrorism.

From the outset, the Bush administration's foreign policy course has been based on unilateral US actions and indifference bordering on hostility to international law. Since September 11th, the administration seems to have recognized that we cannot combat terrorism unilaterally. A multilateral effort to combat terrorism will require the US to change its policies and embrace multilateral approaches to many global problems, including the control and elimination of all weapons of mass destruction.

The global elimination of nuclear weapons can no longer be a back-burner, peace activist issue. It is a top-priority security issue for all Americans, and it will require US leadership to achieve.

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