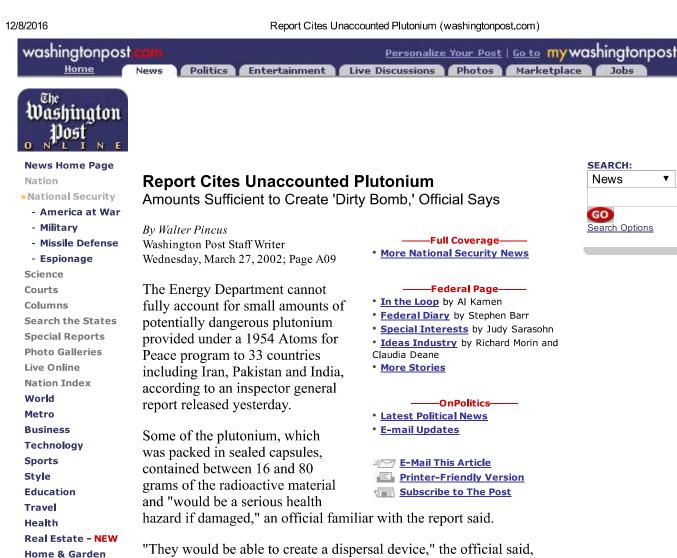
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Classifieds

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referring to "our concern being the dirty bomb."

Although it would take more than six pounds of plutonium to create a nuclear explosion, the chemical explosion of radioactive material in a "dirty bomb" could spread minute amounts of plutonium that, if inhaled or ingested, could be fatal, said Thomas B. Cochran, a physicist with the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The Energy Department inspector general report noted that the plutonium capsules sent overseas were supposed to be followed through a Sealed Source Registry, but that program was discontinued by the Reagan administration in 1984.

The capsules, which were distributed under the Atoms for Peace program until the late 1970s, were intended for use in calibrating radiation-measuring devices or for research.

The Clinton administration disclosed in 1996 that the United States had distributed abroad "approximately two to three kilograms of plutonium mostly in the form of sealed sources to foreign countries since the late 1950s.'

Among the other countries that received sealed plutonium capsules were Brazil, Israel, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, Greece, Colombia, Thailand, Turkey, Venezuela and Vietnam.

At that time it was unclear as to the ownership of the plutonium capsules because some were only loaned to foreign governments and others were actually transferred. The report says "it has inconsistent historical data regarding the ownership of the material."

Robert S. Norris, a researcher for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said yesterday that U.S. nuclear assistance to Iran and India under the program helped those governments' efforts to build a bomb.

"The Atoms for Peace program was designed to put a good spin on the atom," Norris said, "and instead it has helped Iran and India to start their bomb programs."

Although relatively small amounts of plutonium are involved, Energy Inspector General Gregory H. Friedman said in his report, "Recent world events have underscored the need to strengthen the control over all nuclear materials, including sealed sources." He added, "In the wrong hands, these sources could be misused."

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