

THE COSTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF EFFORTS TO PREVENT PROLIFERATION¹

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Since 1945 nuclear proliferation has been a major security policy preoccupation. However, compared to the dire predictions endlessly and urgently spun out over the decades, remarkably few countries have taken advantage of the opportunity actually to develop the weapons. Most important in this process perhaps is the realization, consistently underestimated by generations of somber alarmists, that the possession of such expensive armaments actually conveys in almost all cases rather little advantage to the possessor. Nuclear proliferation, while not necessarily desirable, is unlikely to accelerate or prove to be a major danger. However, the anxious quest to prevent the spread of these weapons has proved to be substantially counterproductive and has often inflicted dire costs.

¹ This paper presents ideas and approaches to be developed more fully in John Mueller, *Atomic Obsession* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Judicious policies designed to hamper the proliferation of nuclear weapons are generally desirable. However, when the approach is pushed to a logical extreme as happens frequently, policies can emerge that are at once destructive of human life--sometimes even more destructive than atomic bombs themselves--and that may actually enhance the desires of some states to obtain a nuclear capability. The plea in this paper is not to abandon nonproliferation policies, but to warn about the dangers inherent in becoming obsessed by the issue.

The costs of excessive nonproliferation policies

Negative consequences of the nuclear nonproliferation quest have shown up both in the foreign and domestic policy realms.

Foreign policy

Many foreign policy efforts to increase the difficulties for additional states to enter the nuclear club and for terrorists to get the bomb are justified. For example, since a terrorist group cannot manufacture fissile material itself, it makes sense to try to secure existing material around the world.²

However the obsession over nuclear proliferation and atomic terrorism has had a number of other, more questionable, effects on foreign policy. In particular it leads to a damn-the-costs perspective. For example, in his influential book, Nuclear Terrorism, Graham Allison argues that "no new nuclear weapons states" should be a prime foreign policy principle, and he goes on to pronounce it to be no less than a "supreme priority" that North Korea be stopped from joining the nuclear club.³ Similarly, Joseph Cirincione labels nonproliferation "our number one national-security priority."⁴

There is nothing wrong with making nonproliferation a high priority. However, it ought to be topped with a somewhat higher one: Not killing hundreds of thousands of people in the service of worst case scenario imaginings. And the obsessive bipartisan quest to control nuclear proliferation--particularly since the end of the Cold War--has sometimes inflicted major costs on innocent people.

Iraq. The current war in Iraq, with deaths that may well run into the hundreds of thousands--that is to say, considerably greater than those inflicted at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined--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 presumably threatening weapons and to prevent him from palming off some of these to eager and congenial terrorists.⁵ As Francis Fukuyama has crisply put it, a prewar request to spend "several hundred

² Most of it, as it happens, is in Russia, and there have been strenuous efforts to get the stuff controlled and locked up. For the most part this process seems to be proceeding apace, albeit at a pace too slow for some. However, there is substantial consensus that Russian nuclear materials are much more adequately secured than they were ten or fifteen years ago. Charles D. Ferguson and William C. Potter, with Amy Sands, Leonard S. Spector, and Fred L. Wheling, The Four Faces of Nuclear Terrorism (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 145; Richard G. Lugar, The Lugar Study on Proliferation Threats and Responses (Washington, DC: Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2005), p. 2; Matthew Bunn, Securing the Bomb 2007 (Cambridge, MA: Project on Managing the Atom, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2007), pp. 13-14, 25-25, 36-37.

³ Graham Allison, Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe (New York: Times Books, 2004), ch. 7.

⁴ Joseph Cirincione, "Cassandra's Conundrum," National Interest, Nov./Dec. 2007, p. 15.

⁵ For critical examinations of the assumption that Iraq, however armed, posed much of a threat, see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "Iraq: An Unnecessary War," Foreign Policy, January/February 2003, pp. 50-59; John Mueller (in debate with Brink Lindsey), "Should We Invade Iraq?," Reason, January 2003; John Mueller,

billion dollars and several thousand American lives in order to bring democracy to...Iraq" would "have been laughed out of court."⁶

Thus, in his influential 2002 book, The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq, Kenneth Pollack continually cited the dangers of what would happen if Saddam were to acquire nuclear weapons. He fully recognized the costs of the war he advocated, costs that he felt might cause thousands of deaths and run into the tens of billions of dollars.⁷ But war would be worth this price, concluded Pollack, because with nuclear weapons, Saddam would become the "hegemon" in the area, allowing him to control global oil supplies.⁸ Indeed "the whole point" of a war would be to "prevent Saddam from acquiring nuclear weapons" which Western intelligence agencies, he reported, were predicting would occur by 2004 (pessimistic) or 2008 (optimistic).⁹

The nuclear theme was repeatedly applied by the administration in the runup to the war. In 2002, President George W. Bush pointedly and prominently warned that "The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons."¹⁰ Most famous, perhaps, is National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice's dire warning about waiting to have firm evidence before launching a war: "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud." And as the Defense Department's Paul Wolfowitz has pointed out, nuclear weapons, or at any rate weapons of mass destruction, was the "core reason" for the war.¹¹

For their part, Democrats have derided the war as "unnecessary," but the bulk of them only came to that conclusion after the United States was unable to find either weapons or weapons programs in Iraq. Many of them have made it clear they would support putatively preemptive (actually, preventive) military action and its attendant bloodshed if the intelligence about Saddam's programs had been accurate.¹²

However, the devastation of Iraq in the service of limiting proliferation did not begin with the war in 2003. For the previous thirteen years, that country had suffered under economic sanctions visited upon

Overblown (New York: Free Press, 2006), pp. 131-33.

⁶ Francis Fukuyama, "America's parties and their foreign policy masquerade," Financial Times, March 8, 2005, p. 21.

⁷ Kenneth M. Pollack, The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq (New York: Random House, 2003), p. xiv. Added to this, Pollack estimated, would be another \$5 to \$10 billion over the first three years for rebuilding (p. 397).

⁸ Pollack, Threatening Storm, pp. 335, 413.

⁹ Pollack, Threatening Storm, p. 418.

¹⁰ Mitchell B. Reiss, "The Nuclear Tipping Point: Prospects for a World of Many Nuclear Weapons States," in Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss, eds., The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), p. 11. See also Allison, Nuclear Terrorism, p. 137.

¹¹ <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0305/30/se.08.html> Saddam Hussein's nuclear weapons potential was also used by the George H. W. Bush administration as an argument to gain support for going to war against Iraq in 1991 after it was discovered that the nuclear argument polled well. John Mueller, Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 118. Contrary to earlier reports that the Iraqis were five to ten years from making a bomb, said the administration, they might be able to do so within one year. For the argument that Iraq was very far from having a workable bomb in 1991, see Jacques Hymans, "Breaking Up (the Atom) is Hard to Do: Nuclear Weapons Capacity as a Function of State Structure," Department of Government, Smith College, 2008.

¹² On this issue, see also William M. Arkin, "The continuing misuses of fear," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, September/October 2006, pp. 42-45.

it 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) and to keep the country from developing weapons, particularly nuclear ones. The goals certainly had their admirable side, but the sanctions proved to be a necessary cause, as multiple studies have shown, of hundreds of thousands of deaths in the country, most of them children under the age of five--the most innocent of civilians.¹³

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 queried about whether the results were worth the costs. To my knowledge, this happened only once, on television's "60 Minutes" on May 12, 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 come "cleaner on some of these weapons programs" and had recognized Kuwait.¹⁴ Or, as George H. W. Bush's deputy national security adviser had put it earlier, while Saddam remains in power, "Iraqis will pay the price."¹⁵

A Lexis-Nexis search suggests that Albright's dismissal on a prominent television show of the devastation sanctions had inflicted on innocent Iraqi civilians went completely unremarked upon by the country's media.¹⁶ In the Middle East, by contrast, it was widely and repeatedly covered and noted.¹⁷ Among the outraged was Osama bin Laden who repeatedly used the punishment that sanctions were inflicting on Iraqi civilians as a centerpiece in his many diatribes against what he considered to be heartless American policy in the area.¹⁸

North Korea. The extreme perspective on atomic proliferation is also evident in policies advocated by Allison and many others toward North Korea. In proclaiming it to be a "supreme priority" that North Korea be kept from obtaining nuclear weapons, he derides then-Secretary of State Colin Powell for stating that North Korea's reactivation of a key nuclear reactor was "not a crisis," but merely "a

¹³ Richard Garfield, Morbidity and Mortality Among Iraqi Children from 1990 to 1998 (South Bend, IN: Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame, 1999). John Mueller and Karl Mueller, "The Methodology of Mass Destruction: Assessing Threats in the New World Order," Journal of Strategic Studies 23(1) March 2000, pp. 163-87. Matt Welch, "The Politics of Dead Children," Reason, March 2, 2002, pp. 53-58. Pollack, Threatening Storm, pp. 138-39. Mohamed M. Ali, John Blacker, and Gareth Jones, "Annual mortality rates and excess deaths of children under five in Iraq, 1991-1998," Population Studies 57 (2003), pp. 217-26. Andrew Cockburn and Patrick Cockburn, Out of the Ashes: The Resurrection of Saddam Hussein (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), ch. 5.

¹⁴ In her memoirs, Albright recalls of the incident, "As soon as I had spoken, I wished for the power to freeze time and take back those words. My reply had been a terrible mistake, hasty, clumsy and wrong. Nothing matters more than the lives of innocent people. I had fallen into the trap and said something that I did not mean." Madam Secretary (New York: Miramax, 2003), p. 275. Presumably, what was mistaken and wrong about the reply was not its content, but the fact she said it, because she continued to support the sanctions even while knowing they were a necessary cause of the deaths of "innocent people." Obviously, something did matter more to her than those lives.

¹⁵ Cockburn and Cockburn, Out of the Ashes, p. 43.

¹⁶ The general acceptance of the sanctions, despite their human costs, among the public is quite impressive because, unlike, say, the Japanese in World War II, the American public was strongly disinclined to blame the Iraqi people for the policies of the country's leadership. Mueller, Policy and Opinion, p. 79.

¹⁷ Cockburn and Cockburn, Out of the Ashes, p. 263.

¹⁸ Lawrence Wright, The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11 (New York: Knopf, 2006), pp. 259-60.

matter of great concern."¹⁹

To deal with what he considers an urgent threat, Allison proposes several steps of diplomacy 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 even though he acknowledges that potential targets have been dispersed and disguised and that a resulting war might kill tens of thousands in the South--though to cut down on the civilian body count there he does suggest preemptively evacuating Seoul, one of the world's largest cities which already boasts some of the most impressive traffic jams on the planet.²⁰

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 accepting Allison's urgent advice, and North Korea has now become something of a nuclear weapons state.²¹ In 2004 Allison had 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 now in position to watch to see if Allison's predictions come true: a North Korean bomb, he declared, would "unleash a proliferation chain reaction, with South Korea and Japan building their own weapons by the end of the decade" (that is by 2009) and 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."²²

The same mentality was shown by decision-makers in the Clinton administration in 1994. The United States never actually sent troops into action in its confrontation with North Korea at that time, but it certainly edged threateningly in that direction.

Already the most closed and secretive society in the world, North Korea became even more isolated after the Cold War when its former patrons, Russia and China, notably decreased their support. Its economy descended into shambles, and it was having trouble even feeding its population, conditions that were exacerbated by the fact that it continued to be led by an anachronistic Communist party dictatorship whose leaders celebrated theory and persistent self-deception over reality. In incessant fear of attack from the outside, the regime continued to spend 25 percent of its wealth to maintain a huge, if fuel short, military force of over a million underfed troops.²³

According to some American analysts, North Korea was also trying to develop nuclear weapons as part of this process. By 1994, a US National Intelligence Estimate concluded that there was "a better than even" chance that North Korea had the makings of a small nuclear bomb. This conclusion was hotly contested by other American analysts and was later "reassessed" by intelligence agencies and found possibly to have been overstated. In addition, even if North Korea had the "makings" in 1994, skeptics

¹⁹ Allison, Nuclear Terrorism, pp. 165, 168.

²⁰ Allison, Nuclear Terrorism, pp. 165-71.

²¹ For questions about whether North Korea has really been successful in obtaining a nuclear arsenal, see Jacques Hymans, "Assessing North Korean Intentions and Capacities: A New Approach," Journal of East Asian Studies, forthcoming.

²² Allison, Nuclear Terrorism, p. 166. In 1995 Allison suggested that "we have every reason to anticipate acts of nuclear terrorism against American targets before this decade is out." Graham Allison, "Must We Wait for the Nuclear Morning After?" Washington Post, April 30, 1995, p. C7.

²³ Don Oberdorfer, The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 314.

pointed out, it still had several key hurdles to overcome in order to develop a deliverable weapon.²⁴

Nonetheless, the Clinton administration was apparently prepared to go to war with the miserable North Korean regime to prevent or to halt its nuclear development, fearing the North Koreans might produce an arsenal of atomic bombs which could be sold abroad or used suicidally to threaten a country that possessed thousands of its own.²⁵ Accordingly, the United States moved to impose deep economic sanctions to make the isolated country even poorer (insofar as that was possible), a measure which garnered no support even from neighboring Russia, China, and Japan.²⁶ It also moved to engage in a major military buildup in the area. So apocalyptic (or simply paranoid) was the North Korean regime about these two developments that some important figures think it might have gone to war on a preemptive basis if the measures had been carried out.²⁷ A full-scale war on the peninsula, estimated the Pentagon, not perhaps without its own sense of apocalypse, could kill 1,000,000 people including 80,000 to 100,000 Americans, cost over \$100 billion, and do economic destruction on the order of a trillion dollars.²⁸ A considerable price, one might think, to prevent a pathetic regime from developing weapons with the potential for killing a few tens of thousands--if they were actually exploded, an act that would surely be suicidal for the regime.

In effect and perhaps by design, however, the North Korean leaders seem mainly to have been practicing extortion.²⁹ No one ever paid much attention to their regime except when it seemed to be developing nuclear weapons, and they appear to have been exceedingly pleased when the 1994 crisis inspired a pilgrimage to Pyongyang by ex-President Jimmy Carter, the most prominent American ever to set foot in the country.³⁰ Carter quickly worked out a deal whereby North Korea would accept international inspections to guarantee that it wasn't building nuclear weapons for which it would graciously accept a bribe from the West: aid, including some high tech reactors which were capable of producing plenty of energy, but no weapons-grade plutonium, as well as various promises about normalizing relations.³¹ These promises went substantially unfulfilled in the hope and expectation that the North Korean regime would soon collapse.³²

In the next years, that hope sometimes seemed justified as floods and bad weather exacerbated the economic disaster that had been inflicted upon the country by its rulers. Famines ensued, and the number of people who perished reached hundreds of thousands or more, with some careful estimates putting the

²⁴ Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, p. 307. Selig S. Harrison, Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 213.

²⁵ Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, pp. 308, 316. On this issue, see also James Fallows, "The Panic Gap: Reactions to North Korea's Bomb," National Interest, Winter 1994/95, pp. 40-45.

²⁶ Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, p. 318.

²⁷ Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, p. 329. See also Derek D. Smith, Deterring America: Rogue States and the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 70-71.

²⁸ Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, p. 324. See also Harrison, Korean Endgame, pp. 117-18.

²⁹ Nicholas Eberstadt, "The Most Dangerous Country," National Interest, Fall 1999, pp. 45-54. Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, pp. 305, 336.

³⁰ Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, p. 327; see also Harrison, Korean Endgame, p. 217.

³¹ Leon V. Sigal, Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), chs. 6-7. Harrison, Korean Endgame, ch. 18.

³² Harrison, Korean Endgame.

number at over two million.³³ Food aid was eventually sent from the West, though in the early days of the famine in particular, there seem to have been systematic efforts to deny the famine's existence in fear that a politics-free response to a humanitarian disaster would undercut its efforts to use food aid--that is, to increase suffering by exacerbating famine conditions--in a futile attempt to wring diplomatic concessions on the nuclear issue from North Korea.³⁴

Iran. Urged on by Israel and by its influential and voluble allies in the United States,³⁵ those 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 only thing worse than military action against Iran, says John McCain repeatedly, would be a nuclear-armed Iran, and Hillary Clinton insists that Iran must be kept from getting the bomb "at all costs."³⁶

The concern inspired in Israel by some of the fulminations of Iran's current president, a populist windbag whose tenuous hold on office has been enhanced by foreign overreaction to his windbaggeries, are understandable. But it does not necessarily lead to wise policy, even for Israel. Indeed, the long term negative consequences for Israel from an attack on Iran could surpass those that developed even from such ill-advised ventures as its government-induced settlement policy and its 1982 invasion of Lebanon.

The casualties inflicted by an attack on Iran by direct action and by "collateral damage" (including, potentially, induced nuclear radiation) could rival those suffered by Iraq under sanctions or during the current war there. 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 Dan Reiter and Richard Betts have pointed out, actually caused Saddam Hussein to speed up his nuclear program after decreasing its vulnerability by dispersing its elements--a lesson Iran has also learned.³⁷

An attack on Iran is likely to have a similar effect, and the radicalization it would inspire in Pakistan could lead to atomic assistance or even to the fraternal loan of a bomb or two, inspiring fears, potentially disastrous for Israel, that one might find its way to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Moreover, the outrage it would inspire throughout Muslim lands might make it unsafe for an American to be anywhere in the Middle East except Israel (and perhaps not even there), while Iran would probably exercise its considerable capacity for helping to make the U.S. position both in Iraq and in Afghanistan markedly more difficult.

Russia. The nonproliferation obsession has also had negative consequences in other foreign policy areas, albeit less dramatic ones. One of these has been to inform and enforce a rather tolerant attitude toward Vladimir Putin's Russia where democratic, and to a lesser extent capitalistic, reforms are

³³ Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, p. 399. Andrew S. Natsios, The Great North Korean Famine (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001), p. 215.

³⁴ Natsios, Great North Korean Famine, pp. 147-48.

³⁵ Richard Boudreaux, "Israel sounds alarm on Iran's nuclear efforts; The Jewish state warns of a second Holocaust if nations fail to prevent Tehran from acquiring the bomb," Los Angeles Times, February 7, 2007, p. A1. Allison, Nuclear Terrorism, p. 164.

³⁶ CNN, June 6, 2007.

³⁷ Dan Reiter, "Preventive Attacks against Nuclear Programs and the 'Success' at Osirak," Nonproliferation Review 12 (July 2005), pp. 355-71. Dan Reiter, Preventive War and Its Alternatives: The Lessons of History (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2006), pp. 4-6. Richard K. Betts, "The Osirak Fallacy," National Interest, Spring 2006, pp. 22-25. Moreover, as Hymans also stresses, the reactor the Israelis bombed was not even capable of producing weapons-grade fissile material. Hymans, "Breaking Up."

being gradually dismantled. Clearly, if halting the spread of nuclear weapons, especially to terrorists, is some sort of absolute foreign policy priority, then it becomes "realistic" to accept just about anything else Putin happens to want to do. As Allison and Dimitri Simes put it, "it is hard to take seriously the argument that the United States can realistically expect to try to undermine Putin's role in Russia and Russia's influence on its periphery on the one hand and receive whole-hearted Russian cooperation on matters nuclear."³⁸ However, regardless of what the Americans do, the Russians already have a very substantial interest in preventing the proliferation of weapons to terrorists and to bordering states like Iran and North Korea because Russia is considerably more likely to become a victim of such developments than is the United States.

Pakistan. Something similar happened with respect to policy toward General Perez Musharraf's increasingly unpopular authoritarian rule in Pakistan. When bothered by outside criticism of his political repression, Musharraf sometimes suggests that perhaps he'll stop cooperating on the terrorism front, and this threat has an effect even though he is substantially beholden to foreign aid and even though he had an intense incentive to bring terrorists and other extremists to heel since he is one of their primary targets.³⁹ And there is an additional cost. As the prominent Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid has pointed out, millions of middle class Pakistanis protested against Musharraf's rule, advocating a return to civilian rule, and in the process they turned "very anti-American because they just see this continuous barrage of statements in favor of Musharraf, nothing in favor of the democratic movement."⁴⁰

Domestic policy

Concern about proliferation, and particularly about atomic terrorism, has preoccupied a huge amount of homeland security attention and spending. Since no weapons more complicated than box cutters were employed on September 11, it would seem that the experience ought to be taken to suggest that the scenario most to be feared is not the acquisition by terrorists of devices of mass destructiveness, but one in which terrorists are once again able, through skill, careful planning, suicidal dedication, and great luck, to massively destroy with ordinary, extant devices. Not only were the 9/11 bombings remarkably low tech, but they were something that could have happened long ago: both skyscrapers and airplanes have been around for a century now. In addition, the potential for destruction on that magnitude is hardly new: a tiny band of fanatical, well-trained, and lucky terrorists could have sunk or scuttled the Titanic and killed thousands.⁴¹

Nonetheless, terrorism analyses tend to focus on lurid worst-case scenarios involving weapons of mass destruction, a concept that, especially after the Cold War, has been expanded to embrace chemical and biological and sometimes radiological weapons as well as nuclear ones.⁴² As Bruce Hoffman laments, "Many academic terrorism analyses are self-limited to mostly lurid hypotheses of worst-case scenarios, almost exclusively involving CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear) weapons, as opposed

³⁸ Graham Allison and Dimitri K. Simes, "Churchill, Not Quite," National Interest, Sept./Oct. 2006, p. 13.

³⁹ Frederic Grare, "Musharraf in the Twilight," washingtonpost.com's Think Tank Town, July 10, 2007.

⁴⁰ Weekend Edition, National Public Radio, July 14, 2007.

⁴¹ Karl P. Mueller, "The Paradox of Liberal Hegemony: Globalization and U.S. National Security," in Jonathan Kirshner, ed., Globalization and National Security (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 156.

⁴² For a discussion of the phrase, "weapons of mass destruction" and for documentation of its much escalated use in the 1990s, see W. Seth Carus, Defining "Weapons of Mass Destruction" (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press. Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction Occasional Paper 4, 2006), p. 8. See also Mueller, Overblown, ch. 1.

to trying to understand why--with the exception of September 11--terrorists have only rarely realized their true killing potential."⁴³

Relatedly, William Arkin has issued a sustained lament about what he calls "the devastating consequences associated with the universal and unchallenged assumption of nuclear terrorism." Among these consequences have been not only the war in Iraq, but the single-minded attention to WMD that seduced federal agencies "to prepare for the wrong disaster before Katrina," the rise of "preemption," and the "resurgence of American nuclear capability and missile defenses."⁴⁴

Concerns about atomic terrorism have led to a special focus on port security driven by the assumptions, apparently, 1) that after manufacturing their device at great expense and effort overseas, the terrorists would supply a return address and then entrust their precious product to the tender mercies of the commercial delivery system, and 2) that Randall Larsen is incorrect to conclude that "anyone smart enough to obtain a nuclear device will be smart enough to put half an inch of lead around it."⁴⁵ As a result, with bipartisan support, huge amounts of money have been hurled in that direction to inspect and to install radiation detectors. The amazing, hugely costly, and, it would appear, quite unwarranted, even quixotic, preoccupation about detecting radioactive parcels in materials arriving at U.S. ports currently triggers 500 false alarms daily at the Los Angeles/Long Beach port alone generated by such substances as kitty litter and bananas.⁴⁶ This preoccupation is impressive as well because there seems to be no evidence that any terrorist has indicated any interest in, or even much knowledge about, using transnational containers to transport much of anything.⁴⁷ Perhaps, as some suggest, some of the concern was inspired by the bizarre dispute that erupted in 2006 about having a Dubai-related firm in charge of U.S. port security.⁴⁸

The nonproliferation focus has also exacerbated the nuclear waste problem in the United States. In the late 1970s, the Carter administration banned the reprocessing of nuclear fuel, something that radically reduces the amount of nuclear waste, under the highly questionable assumption that this policy would reduce the danger of nuclear proliferation.

Nonproliferation efforts worldwide also hamper worldwide economic development by increasing the effective costs of developing nuclear energy--sometimes even making them prohibitive for some countries. As countries grow, they require ever increasing amounts of power. Any measure that limits their ability to acquire this vital commodity--or increases its price--effectively slows economic growth

⁴³ Bruce Hoffman, "Rethinking Terrorism and Counterterrorism Since 9/11," Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 2002, pp. 311-12.

⁴⁴ Arkin, "Continuing misuses of fear," p. 43.

⁴⁵ Randall Larsen, Our Own Worst Enemy (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2007), p. 99.

⁴⁶ Pam Fessler, "Auditors, DHS Disagree on Radiation Detectors," Morning Edition, National Public Radio, September 19, 2007.

⁴⁷ Jeremy Shapiro, Managing Homeland Security: Develop a Threat-Based Strategy (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, Opportunity 08 paper, 2007), pp. 4, 15-16. See also Veronique de Rugy, "Is Port Security Funding Making Us Safer?" Audit of the Conventional Wisdom, Center for International Studies, MIT, November 2007.

⁴⁸ On the other hand, if officials really do believe an atomic bombing is so likely, one might expect that there would be more public information disseminated about what to do when it happens, particularly about what to do if radiation levels are significantly increased as a result of the explosion (or, for that matter, as a result of a "dirty bomb" attack). But thus far there has been little. For an exception, see William J. Perry, Ashton B. Carter, and Michael M. May, "After the Bomb," New York Times, June 12, 2007.

and essentially kills people by reducing the gains in life expectancy commonly afforded by economic development. The Non-Proliferation Treaty specifically guarantees to signing nonnuclear countries "the fullest possible exchange of technology" for the development of peaceful nuclear power. However, as Richard Betts points out, this rationale has been undermined by the development of a "nuclear suppliers cartel" which has worked to "cut off trade in technology for reprocessing plutonium or enriching uranium," thereby reducing the NPT to "a simple demand to the nuclear weapons have-nots to remain so."⁴⁹

More broadly the nonproliferation quest has from time to time boosted international oil prices to the detriment of almost all the countries in the world except for the potential proliferator.

Because nuclear power does not emit greenhouse gases, it is an obvious potential candidate for helping with the problem of global warming, an issue many people hold to be of the highest concern for the future of the planet.

Counterproductive aspects of excessive nonproliferation policy

The handful of countries to have acquired nuclear weapons programs seem to have done so sometimes as an ego trip for current leaders, and more urgently (or perhaps merely in addition) as an effort to deter a potential attack on themselves: China to deter the United States and the Soviet Union, Israel to deter various enemy nations in the neighborhood, India to deter China, Pakistan to deter India, and now North Korea to deter the United States and maybe others.⁵⁰

Insofar as nuclear proliferation is a response to perceived threat, it follows that one way to reduce the likelihood such countries would go nuclear is a simple one: *stop threatening them*.

American policy

From this perspective, George W. Bush's 2002 declaration which dramatically and imaginatively grouped Iraq, Iran, and North Korea into an "axis of evil" was one of the most ill-advised presidential pronouncements ever made. These states did have regimes that were evil--though those less inclined to the theological might rather prefer the word "contemptible." But, as William Arkin puts it, "From the perspective of an Iran or North Korea, the 1990's erosion of absolute sovereignty and the post-9/11 presumption of preemption, together with the abandonment of meaningful disarmament by the permanent five, makes WMD seem both necessary and justified."⁵¹

Actually, however, the American threat, particularly with respect to the Middle East, is considerably broader. Bush may have happened to specify three regimes, but many of his supporters,

⁴⁹ Richard K. Betts, "Universal Deterrence of Conceptual Collapse? Liberal Pessimism and Utopian Realism," in Victor A. Utgoff (ed.), The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Interests, and World Order (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2000), p. 70n.

⁵⁰ Hymans puts prime emphasis on ego with the added proviso that only when the ego in charge has a conception of national identity that can be considered to be what he calls of the "oppositional nationalist" variety, will the country really try to get nuclear weapons. Hymans, Psychology. For somewhat related findings, see Etel Solingen, Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). See also the discussion in William C. Potter and Gaukhar Mukhatzhanova, "Divining Nuclear Intentions," International Security 33 (Summer 2008), pp. 139-69.

⁵¹ Arkin, "Continuing misuses of fear," p. 45. Hymans argues that the North Koreans have avidly wanted to become nuclear for decades and have been delayed more by their own incompetence than anything else, although increased threats from abroad would have an enhancing effect. Hymans, "Assessing." More generally, see also Hymans, "Breaking Up."

particularly in the neoconservative camp, went quite a bit farther. In an article 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."⁵² 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."⁵³ 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."⁵⁴ At a speech given at the Army War College as Baghdad was falling in 2003, Richard Perle triumphally issued an extensive litany of targets, adding for good measure, and possibly in jest, France and the State Department. He also suggested at the time that "a short message" should be delivered to other hostile regimes in the area: "You're next."⁵⁵ And, in the runup to the war, neoconservatism's champion guru, Norman Podhoretz, strongly advocated expanding Bush's "axis of evil" beyond Iraq, Iran, and North Korea "at a minimum" to embrace "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." However, 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."⁵⁶

These men do not, of course, directly run the Bush administration. However, given the important role people like that have had in its intellectual development and military deployment, the designated target regimes would be foolish in the extreme not take such existential threats very seriously indeed. And if they do, it is the deterrence value of the nuclear option that could prove to seem the most appealing. As Mitchell Reiss observes, "one of the unintended 'demonstration' effects" of the American anti-proliferation war against Iraq "was that chemical and biological weapons proved insufficient to deter America: only nuclear weapons, it appeared, could do this job."⁵⁷

Israeli policy

I am not a fan of worst case scenarios. However, one that may be worthy of consideration concerns the danger that, stoked into a state of hysteria by an obsession over atomic weapons in the hands

⁵² Charles Krauthammer, "In Defense of Democratic Realism," National Interest, Fall 2004, pp. 23, 17.

⁵³ Charles Krauthammer, "Past the Apogee: America Under Pressure," www.fpri.org, December 2006.

⁵⁴ Lawrence F. Kaplan and William Kristol, The War over Iraq: Saddam's Tyranny and America's Mission (San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books, 2003), pp. 124-25.

⁵⁵ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 274.

⁵⁶ Norman Podhoretz, "In Praise of the Bush Doctrine," Commentary, September 2002, p. 28, emphasis in the original. Podhoretz has proved to be more realistic about democracy than other neoconservatives, but his extravagant notion that the U.S. would somehow have the capacity to impose a new political culture throughout the non-Israeli Middle East seems, like Krauthammer's comparable vision, so fantastic as to border, not to put too fine a point on it, on the deranged.

⁵⁷ Reiss, "Nuclear Tipping Point," p. 12. See also John Mueller, "What If We Leave? When nightmare scenarios are used to justify endless war, it's time to wake up," American Conservative, February 28, 2007, pp. 7-9.

of its enemies, Israel could essentially destroy itself--that is, cease to exist as a coherent Jewish state--without a single shot being fired or bomb exploded.

Although a remarkable success in many important ways, Israel has several key problems. It remains surrounded by countries filled with hostile people some of whom continue to present a persistent, if intermittent, terrorism threat; it has followed a program, widely considered illegal, of erecting settlements in occupied territories and seems incapable of reversing this process; it is confronted by a ominous demographic dilemma in which Jews may eventually become a minority in their own land, a predicament, only recently really comprehended, that could logically lead to efforts essentially to rein in or even abandon its vibrant democratic system.⁵⁸

The fears and insecurities inspired by these conditions have led to such fantastic, widely unrealistic proposals as those noted earlier by Norman Podhoretz and Charles Krauthammer for using force to reorder the entire Middle East in a manner that would make the neighborhood safer for Israel. The war in Iraq has been a part of the project, but it has obviously not been a successful one in this respect.

In recent years, these anxieties have been topped--or amalgamated into--extreme apprehensions about atomic annihilation at the hands of Iran, apprehensions stoked by some of the fulminations of Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Together with the other concerns, those about Iran have sometimes inspired a sense of despair and desperation, and in many quarters a loss of hope.⁵⁹ These fears are understandable, but they do not necessarily lead to wise policy. As political scientist Ian Lustick points out,

The Israeli definition of the threat posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran is existential and desperate. Apart from the fact that this is precisely the image of Iran that Ahmedinejad and his allies are seeking to create, it is worth noting that once defined in this manner, there is no limit on the measures Israelis can imagine justified in taking against it. After all, when survival is perceived to be at stake, there is neither need nor rationale for thinking about consequences or about how to calibrate the use of force to foster positive outcomes or reduce the political fallout of military action. More generally, military options to eliminate the threat can be discussed with no attention to their long-term consequences for peace in the region.

In this, Lustick notes the striking application in Israeli thinking of "the primitive, but overwhelming psychological and mythic power of the Holocaust. Israelis seems haunted by the specter of catastrophic destruction that Ahmedinejad has so skillfully associated with Iran's ambiguous but apparently vigorous attempt to become a nuclear power," and dire analogies with the 1930s and Hitler's Germany are constantly drawn by commentators from the political left as well as right.⁶⁰ Indeed, observe Yossi Klein Halevi and Michael Oren, "Military men suddenly sound like theologians when explaining the Iranian threat," and some of the ponderings can become downright spooky:

Ahmadinejad's pronouncements about the imminent return of the Hidden Imam and the imminent destruction of Israel aren't regarded as merely calculated for domestic consumption; they are seen as glimpses into an apocalyptic game plan. Ahmadinejad has reportedly told his Cabinet that the

⁵⁸ On these issues, see Jeffrey Goldberg, "Unforgiven," *Atlantic*, May 2008, p. 49.

⁵⁹ Benny Morris, "Israel's unhappy birthday," *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 2008, pp. M7-8.

⁶⁰ Ian S. Lustick, "Abandoning the Iron Wall: Israel and 'the Middle Eastern Muck,'" *Middle East Policy*, August 2008. See also Yossi Klein Halevi and Michael B. Oren, "Israel's Worst Nightmare," *The New Republic*, January 30, 2007.

Hidden Imam will reappear in 2009--precisely the date when Israel estimates Iran will go nuclear.⁶¹

The long term negative consequences for Israel from an attack on Iran nuclear facilities either by Israel or by the United States could surpass those that developed even from such ill-advised ventures as Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon and its government-induced policy to encourage settlement in occupied territories. As noted earlier, if the experience with the Osirak bombings of Iraq holds, an attack on Iran would at best merely slow down its atomic progress somewhat, and its most likely response would be to launch a truly dedicated effort to obtain a bomb, something now required, as the Iranians would see it, for defensive purposes.⁶² Indeed, according to Halevi and Oren, the Israelis are fully aware of this: at best, an Israeli assault could only delay Iran's nuclear program, particularly because Israel could not sustain an air campaign against remote targets, though some Israelis hold out a hope that this would be accomplished by the United States in a campaign similar to the "shock and awe" caper that began its catastrophic war in Iraq.⁶³ There is a considerable element of fantasy--or desperate optimism--in all this. Despite the worldwide fiasco of intelligence about Iraq's nuclear and other military capacities that preceded the war there and despite the Israeli intelligence debacle that accompanied Israel's war against Hezbollah in 2006, Israeli defense experts, note Halevi and Oren, continue to downplay the possibility that some Iranian nuclear facilities could be unknown to Western intelligence agencies. "If we can locate a suicide bomber as he moves from place to place," extrapolates one former defense official irrelevantly, "we know how to locate static targets, even deep underground."⁶⁴ In the end, there is no way the United States or Israel can keep Iran from getting nuclear weapons eventually except by invading the country directly--an enterprise that would likely make America's disastrous war in Iraq look like child's play in comparison.

However, the potentially existential problem of sizable Jewish emigration from Israel could arise even if there is no attack on Iran, and it arises from Israel's obsession over regional proliferation. In order to gin up support for an attack on Iran, the Israelis have been hyping the threat. Not only do they constantly and extravagantly compare it to the Holocaust, but the process has required them to insist without qualification that Iran is inevitably going to develop an atomic weapon despite that country's repeated protestations that it has no such intentions, that its acquisition of those weapons is a near term prospect, and that its leadership is so deranged and suicidal that it will actually use the weapon on Israel despite Israel's ability massively to retaliate--not to mention the capacity of its ardent backer, the United States, to react in a similar manner. They also fancy that no Arab country would "be able to make concessions with a nuclear Iran standing over them," while the bomb would somehow give Tehran the ability to dictate the price of oil.⁶⁵

Indeed, the Israelis seem to be working themselves into a frenzy over this issue--as has often been noted, propagandists principally tend to propagandize themselves. Thus, contends the able American journalist, Jeffrey Goldberg, Iran "poses the most immediate threat to Israel's physical existence" while citing the distinguished Israeli historian, Benny Morris, who warns of the "danger of extinction in the short term from an Iranian nuclear bomb."⁶⁶ Unless the words, "immediate" and "short term" are treated

⁶¹ Halevi and Oren, "Israel's Worst Nightmare."

⁶² Shlomo Ben-Ami and Trita Parsi, "The alternative to an Israeli attack on Iran," Christian Science Monitor, July 2, 2008.

⁶³ Halevi and Oren, "Israel's Worst Nightmare."

⁶⁴ Halevi and Oren, "Israel's Worst Nightmare."

⁶⁵ Halevi and Oren, "Israel's Worst Nightmare."

⁶⁶ Goldberg, "Unforgiven," pp. 34, 50.

very expansively, these declarations verge on the hysterical.

Goldberg also quotes a prominent Israeli peace activist who protests, "When the leader of a nation of 75 million people with ballistic missiles, with modern weapons, with a declared desire to possess a nuclear capacity, threatens Israel with annihilation, can I ignore it?"⁶⁷ Beyond noting that some of the items in that catalogue of anguish are notably exaggerated, the answer, of course, is "no." However (and in contrast), a calm--that is to say, non-hysterical--policy discussion should take several considerations into account, ones apparently almost completely ignored in the kneejerk conclusion to which, report Halevi and Oren, "nearly everyone agrees," to wit: "Israel cannot live with a nuclear Iran."⁶⁸ Among these considerations:

- Iran claims it has no intention of developing nuclear weapons; there is some chance this is true and that it never will.

- If Iran really does want to acquire nuclear weapons, there is no way this can be prevented, at least in the long term, except by invading the country--something that would have to be done by the United States in the aftermath of its experience with a similar venture in Iraq.

- If Iran does develop nuclear weapons under present conditions, the process, contrary to intelligence exaggerations persistently spun out by Israel, will likely take years⁶⁹--or even decades if the Pakistan experience is any guide.

- Iran scarcely has a viable delivery system for nuclear weapons and nothing in the way of an adequate missile capacity.⁷⁰

- Although the ravings of Iran's president Ahmadinejad can be distinctly unsettling, he does not have final control of the military, is in considerable disrepute within Iran because of economic difficulties, may well not be reelected in 2009, and, while distinctly hostile to the state of Israel, apparently meant his remark, routinely translated as calling for Israel to be "wiped off the map," to mean that the state of Israel should eventually disappear from history, not that its Jewish population should be exterminated.⁷¹ The United States and western Europe lived for decades under a similar sort of threat from the Soviet Union which possessed an impressive (if inferior) arsenal of nuclear weapons and was explicitly dedicated to overthrowing their form of government and economy. And from time to time Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev would casually point out how few of his nuclear bombs would be required to annihilate France or Britain.

- While hostile and unpleasant in many ways, the leadership of Iran does not consist of a self-perpetuating gaggle of suicidal lunatics.

- If Iran does develop nuclear weapons, it will most likely "use" them in the same way all other nuclear states have: for prestige and deterrence.⁷²

⁶⁷ Goldberg, "Unforgiven," p. 46.

⁶⁸ Halevi and Oren, "Israel's Worst Nightmare."

⁶⁹ Richard L. Garwin, "Evaluating Iran's missile threat," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, May/June 2008, p. 41.

⁷⁰ Garwin, "Evaluating," p. 40.

⁷¹ For a discussion of the "map" issue, see Ethan Bronner, "Just How Far Did They Go, Those Words Against Israel?" New York Times, June 11, 2006, p. 4-4. Jonathan Steele, "Lost in translation," Guardian (London) Comment is free..., June 14, 2006 commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/jonathan_steele/2006/06/post_155.html2006.

⁷² For the conclusion that these would be Iran's sole motivations, see Colin Dueck and Ray Takeyh, "Iran's Nuclear

- If it does develop nuclear weapons, it is exceedingly unlikely Iran will ever detonate them, or give them to a substate group like Hezbollah to detonate--particularly on a country like Israel--not least because the nonlunatics in charge would fear that the source of the weapon would be detected by nuclear forensics inviting devastating retaliation.

- If Iran does develop nuclear weapons and brandishes them to intimidate others or to get its way, it will likely find that those threatened, rather than capitulating to its blandishments, will ally with others to stand up to and confront the intimidation.⁷³

The existential danger for Israel in all this arises not so much from Iran's capacity or potential capacity to do harm--though judicious and balanced concerns about that danger are, of course, justified--as from the consequences of the hype, at once apoplectic and apocalyptic, over the prospective Iranian bomb.

The problem is that, if the hysteria persists, a considerable, and increasing, number of Israelis may be led to conclude that, since there is no way really to guarantee that Iran will never be able to obtain a bomb, the situation is hopeless, that Israel is ultimately doomed, and that it is best to live elsewhere--in a place where one can bring up children free from nuclear fears.

"There is nothing more regular in Jewish history and myth than Jews 'returning' to the Land of Israel to build a collective life," observes Lustick, "except for Jews leaving the country and abandoning the project." And "so far, in the twenty-first century," he continues, "more Jews have left than have arrived," noting in addition a recent survey indicating that only 69 percent of Jewish Israelis say they want to stay in the country.⁷⁴ He also cites a 2007 poll indicating that one quarter of Israelis were considering leaving the country, including almost half of all young people.⁷⁵ Goldberg points to another survey finding that 44 percent of Israelis say they are ready to leave if they could find a better standard of living elsewhere, and notes that "the emigration of Israel's most talented citizens is a constant worry of Israeli leaders."⁷⁶ For his part, Morris insists that "the overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews, for whom Israel is and always has been home, is staying put," although he does acknowledge that "a small minority is making tracks, or may make tracks, for the West."⁷⁷

In short, if Iran does develop something of an atomic arsenal, it will likely find, following the experience of all other states so armed in the "nuclear age," that the bombs are essentially useless and a very considerable waste of money and effort. On the other hand, there is a danger that in pursuing its current hysterical policy toward Iran's as yet limited (and legal) atomic program, in wallowing in its atomic obsession, Israel will scare itself into extinction.

The incentives for, and the prospects of, proliferation

William Langewiesche concludes that we have passed the point of no return on weapons

Challenge," Political Science Quarterly 122 (Summer 2007), p. 195.

⁷³ Stephen M. Walt, "Containing rogues and Renegades: Coalition Strategies and Counterproliferation," in Victor A. Utgoff (ed.), The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Interests, and World Order (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2000), pp. 191-226. Mueller, "What If We Leave?"

⁷⁴ Efraim Inbar and Ian Lustick (in debate), "Israel's Future: The Time Factor," Israel Studies Forum 23, 1 (Summer 2008), pp. 6, 10.

⁷⁵ Lustick, "Abandoning the Iron Wall."

⁷⁶ Goldberg, "Unforgiven," p. 40. See also Lustick "Abandoning the Iron Wall."

⁷⁷ Morris, "Israel's unhappy birthday."

proliferation to established states. That is, the nuclear genie is out of the bottle and any state, even quite poor ones (North Korea is a pertinent case in point) can eventually obtain nuclear weapons if they really want to make the effort--although in many cases that might involve, as a former president of Pakistan once colorfully put it, having to "eat grass."⁷⁸ Langewiesche thinks they will do so even though he stresses that the weapons are expensive: there is "a premium for working fast and in the shadows," and Pakistan apparently had to pay two or three times the going rate for equipment and material it needed. The driver in this process, he somewhat mysteriously concludes, will be "the desire for self-sufficiency."⁷⁹

However, we've heard predictions about impending, rampant proliferation repeatedly since 1945, and they've all been proven wrong. Indeed, nuclear proliferation has proceeded at a remarkably slow pace, confounding the predictions of generations of alarmists.⁸⁰ Indeed, as Jacques Hymans has pointed out, even the supposedly optimistic forecasts about nuclear dispersion have proven to be too pessimistic.⁸¹ Thus, in 1958 the National Planning Association predicted "a rapid rise in the number of atomic powers...by the mid-1960s."⁸² A couple of years later, C. P. Snow sagely predicted that, "Within, at the most, six years, China and several other states [will] have a stock of nuclear bombs,"⁸³ and John Kennedy observed that there might be "ten, fifteen, twenty" countries with a nuclear capacity by 1964.⁸⁴ Britain's sometime defense minister, Denis Healey, remarked at the time that "So far, no country has resisted the temptation to make its own atomic weapons once it has acquired the physical ability to do so,"⁸⁵ and British defense commentator F.W. Mulley observed: "All the arguments which led Britain to decide to develop her own independent nuclear weapons are equally valid...for France herself, and there is no reason why other members of NATO should not decide to follow suit."⁸⁶

As part of this, it was assumed that nuclear weapons would continue to be important status--or virility--symbols and therefore that all advanced countries would want to have them in order to show how "powerful" they were. Thus France's De Gaulle opined in 1965, "No country without an atom bomb could properly consider itself independent,"⁸⁷ and Robert Gilpin concludes that "the possession of nuclear

⁷⁸ William Langewiesche, The Atomic Bazaar: The Rise of the Nuclear Poor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 88.

⁷⁹ Langewiesche, Atomic Bazaar, pp. 103, 177.

⁸⁰ For careful and informed debunkings of the notion that this slow pace has been the result of the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty and other international efforts, see Hymans, Psychology, pp. 214-16, and Solingen, Nuclear Logics, pp. 261-67. Interestingly, those who give great credit to the NPT (for example, Cirincione, "Cassandra's Conundrum") are also among those most alarmed about future proliferation, thereby suggesting the Treaty will provide little hindrance to future proliferators.

⁸¹ Hymans, Psychology, p. 5.

⁸² National Planning Association, 1970 Without Arms Control (Washington, DC: National Planning Association, 1958), p. 42.

⁸³ C. P. Snow, "The Moral Un-Neutrality of Science," Science, January 27, 1961, p. 259.

⁸⁴ Sidney Kraus, ed., The Great Debates: Kennedy vs. Nixon, 1960 (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1962), p. 394.

⁸⁵ Denis Healey, The Race Against the H-Bomb (London: Fabian Tract 322, 1960), p. 3.

⁸⁶ F. W. Mulley, The Politics of Western Defense (New York: Praeger, 1962), pp. 79-80.

⁸⁷ Charles De Gaulle, "The Thoughts of Charles DeGaulle," New York Times Magazine, May 12, 1968, p. 103.

weapons largely determines a nation's rank in the hierarchy of international prestige."⁸⁸ In Gilpinian tradition, some analysts who describe themselves as "realists" have insisted for years that Germany and Japan must soon surely come to their senses and quest after nuclear weapons.⁸⁹

Such punditry has gone astray in part because the pundits insist on extrapolating from the wrong cases. A more pertinent prototype would have been Canada, a country that could easily have had nuclear weapons by the 1960s, but declined to make the effort.⁹⁰ In fact, over the decades a huge number of countries capable of developing nuclear weapons have neglected even seriously to consider the opportunity--for example, Canada, Norway, and Italy--while Brazil, Argentina, South Korea, Libya, and Taiwan have backed away from or reversed nuclear weapons programs, and South Africa, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan have actually surrendered or dismantled an existing nuclear arsenal.⁹¹ Some of this is no doubt due to the hostility of the nuclear nations, but even without this, the Canadian case seems to have proven to have rather general relevance.

To begin with, as Stephen Meyer has shown, there is no "technological imperative" for countries to obtain nuclear weapons once they have achieved the technical capacity to do so.⁹² Insofar as most leaders of most countries have considered acquiring the weapons, they came, like Canada, 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 seems to be to avoid the weapons unless they seem vital for security.⁹³

Moreover, like military prowess in general, the weapons have *not* proved to be crucial status

⁸⁸ Robert Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics (New York: Cambridge University Press 1981), p. 215.

⁸⁹ Christopher Layne contended in 1993 that Japan by natural impulse must soon come to yearn for nuclear weapons: "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise, International Security 17 (Spring 1993), p. 37. And three years earlier John Mearsheimer argued that "Germany will feel insecure without nuclear weapons": "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," International Security 15 (Summer 1990), p. 38. Meanwhile, the Japanese and the Germans themselves continue uncooperatively to seem substantially uninterested. See Jennifer Mackby and Walter Slocombe, "Germany: A Model Case, A Historical Imperative," in Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss, eds., The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), pp. 175-217; Kurt M. Campbell and Tsuyoshi Sunohara, "Japan: Thinking the Unthinkable," in Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss, eds., The Nuclear Tipping Point: Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), pp. 218-253.

⁹⁰ For a discussion of the relevance of the Canadian case, concluding from it that the issue of nuclear proliferation--then often known as the "Nth country problem"--was approaching "a finite solution," see John Mueller, "Incentives for Restraint: Canada as a Nonnuclear Power," Orbis 11 (Fall 1967), pp. 864-84. On the remarkable slowness of nuclear proliferation, see also Hymans, Psychology. For some prescient early commentary on this, see Richard N. Rosecrance, "International Stability and Nuclear Diffusion," in Richard N. Rosecrance (ed.), The Dispersion of Nuclear Weapons: Strategy and Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp. 293-314.

⁹¹ Arkin, "Continuing misuses of fear," p. 45. Mitchell Reiss, Bridled Ambition: Why Countries Constrain Their Nuclear Capabilities (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995). T.V. Paul, Power versus Prudence: Why Nations Forgo Nuclear Weapons (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000). Reiss, "Tipping Point," pp. 12-13.

⁹² Stephen M. Meyer, The Dynamics of Nuclear Proliferation (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984). See also Hymans, Psychology, pp. 2-12.

⁹³ On this point, see also Hymans, Psychology.

symbols. As 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."⁹⁴ 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 the country would be invited to participate in the G8 economic club if it had no atomic arsenal. As Jenifer Mackby and Walter Slocombe observe,

Undoubtedly some countries have pursued nuclear weapons more for status than for security. However, Germany, like its erstwhile Axis ally, Japan, has become powerful because of its economic might rather than its military might, and its renunciation of nuclear weapons may even have reinforced its prestige. It has even managed to achieve its principal international objective--reunification--without becoming a nuclear state.⁹⁵

It is not clear that the bomb has been of much value militarily either. It is routinely stated that nuclear weapons are what kept the Cold War from becoming a hot one. However, the people who have been in charge of world affairs since World War II have been the same people or the intellectual heirs of the people who tried assiduously, frantically, desperately, and, as it turned out, pathetically, to prevent World War II, and when, despite their best efforts, world war was forced upon them, they found the experience to be incredibly horrible, just as they had anticipated. On the face of it, to expect these countries somehow to allow themselves to tumble into anything resembling a repetition of that experience--whether embellished with nuclear weapons or not--seems almost bizarre. That is, although the people who have been running world politics since 1945 have had plenty of disagreements, they have not been so obtuse, depraved, flaky, or desperate as to need visions of mushroom clouds to conclude that another catastrophic world war, nuclear or nonnuclear, win or lose, could be distinctly unpleasant.⁹⁶

It is also difficult to see how nuclear weapons benefited their possessors in specific military ventures. Israel's presumed 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 possession of the bomb benefit America in Korea or Vietnam, France in Algeria, or the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. (Actually, given their essential uselessness, it is not clear why a country like France even continues to cling to a nuclear arsenal. Perhaps it is under the influence of 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.)

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. In fact, even threatened states may not develop nuclear weapons. Actually, in the wake of the Iraq disaster, Iran can creditably deter an invasion by the ever-threatening Americans 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

⁹⁴ Robert Jervis, The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989). For an assessment of this issue, see Hymans, Psychology, pp. 211-12.

⁹⁵ Mackby and Slocombe, "Germany: A Model Case", p. 210.

⁹⁶ John Mueller, Quiet Cataclysm (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), ch. 5

desperate and ridiculous invaders. The Iranians may not yet have grasped this new reality, but perhaps others on the Bush administration's implicit hit list will.

Conclusion

It may be time, then, to reconsider the "supreme priority" approach to nuclear proliferation.

It would certainly be preferable that a number of variously designated 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--if that is the term--the same way other nuclear countries have: to stoke their collective egos and to deter real or perceived threats.

Proliferation alarmists (a category which seems to embrace 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 the newly nuclear country will then use its nuclear weapons to dominate the area. This argument was repeatedly used with dramatic urgency by Kenneth Pollack and many others 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 make 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 North Korea 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 any threatened states 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, in the case of Iran, Israel.

Cirincione paints a much darker picture. He thinks a nuclear Iran or North Korea could readily be deterred from using a nuclear weapon against their neighbors or the United States, and he discounts the likelihood either might "intentionally give a weapon to a terrorist group they could not control." What sets Cirincione off instead is an extravagant fear cascade which envisions "a nuclear chain reaction where states feel they must match each other's nuclear capability," something "underway already in the Middle East where a dozen Muslim nations suddenly declared interest in starting nuclear-power programs" which, he asserts, are a "nuclear hedge against Iran" (or, one might add, against the United States). This, continues Cirincione, "could lead to a Middle East with not one nuclear-weapons state, Israel, but four or five," and that, he concludes, "is a recipe for nuclear war."⁹⁷ President Bush is more blunt, but equally fanciful: "if you're interested in avoiding World War III, it seems like you ought to be interested in preventing [Iran] from having the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon."⁹⁸ Following this imaginative chain of logic, and it becomes clear that, if North Korea and Iran cannot be stopped by lesser means from getting a bomb (or in Bush's terms even from acquiring the *knowledge* of how to do so), the world has no choice but to apply military force to stop them, killing in the process thousands, or even tens or hundreds of thousands, of people. All this to avoid finding out if the extreme imaginings have any substance.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Cirincione, "Cassandra's Conundrum," pp. 16-17.

⁹⁸ Quoted, Fareed Zakaria, "Stalin, Mao And...Ahmadinejad?" Newsweek, October 20, 2007.

⁹⁹ Cirincione and Bush are members of a vast company. As Potter and Mukhatzhanova observe, "Today it is hard to find an analyst or commentator on nuclear proliferation who is not pessimistic about the future. It is nearly as difficult to find one who predicts the future without reference to metaphors such as proliferation chains, cascades, dominoes,

If a leader of a state is determined to obtain a nuclear capacity, dedicated antiproliferators have choice of two policy options: 1) let him have it, or, in distinct contrast, 2) let him have it. Under the first option, antiproliferators might seek to make things difficult and costly for the nuclear aspirant, but in the end they would stand back and let the undesirable development come about, trusting (or hoping) that the new nuclear country could be kept in line by deterrence even as they remain mindful of historical experience which strongly suggests that new nuclear countries--even ones that once seemed to be hugely threatening like China in 1964--have been content to use their weapons for purposes of prestige and deterrence. Under the second option, antiproliferators, under the influence of imaginings about dire things that could conceivably transpire should the nuclear aspirant succeed, would desperately apply military action or sanctions against the determined nuclear aspirant, policies that will inevitably result in the deaths of a very considerable number of people, quite possible more than have been killed by all the nuclear explosions in all of history.

This paper warns against the second of these, and recommends the first. "It is dangerous," muses Jacques Hymans aptly, "to fight smoke with fire."¹⁰⁰ Nuclear proliferation, while not necessarily desirable, is unlikely to accelerate or prove to be a major danger. And extreme policies based, however logically, on worst case fantasies about proliferation need careful reconsideration.¹⁰¹ They can generate costs far higher than those likely to be generated by the potential (and often imaginary) problems they seek to address.

waves, avalanches, and tipping points." However, after considerable study and research on the issue, they finally became "convinced that the metaphor is inappropriate and misleading, as it implies a process of nuclear decisionmaking and a pace of nuclear weapons spread that are unlikely to transpire." "Divining Nuclear Intentions," p. 159.

¹⁰⁰ Hymans, Psychology, p. 225.

¹⁰¹ The phrase "worst case fantasies" is Bernard Brodie's, and his cautionary comment in the 1970s about the alarmists in the defense community holds as well for those today: they are "people of a wide range of skills and sometimes of considerable imagination. All sorts of notions and propositions are churned out, and often presented for consideration with the prefatory works: 'It is conceivable that...!' Such words establish their own truth, for the fact that someone has conceived of whatever proposition follows is enough to establish that it is conceivable. Whether it is worth a second thought, however, is another matter." Bernard Brodie, "The Development of Nuclear Strategy," International Security 2 (Spring 1978), p. 83.