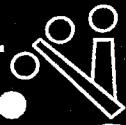


SECURITY, SCIENCE & SURVIVAL



Bulletin

of the Atomic Scientists

SEVEN MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT

September/October 2006

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9/11

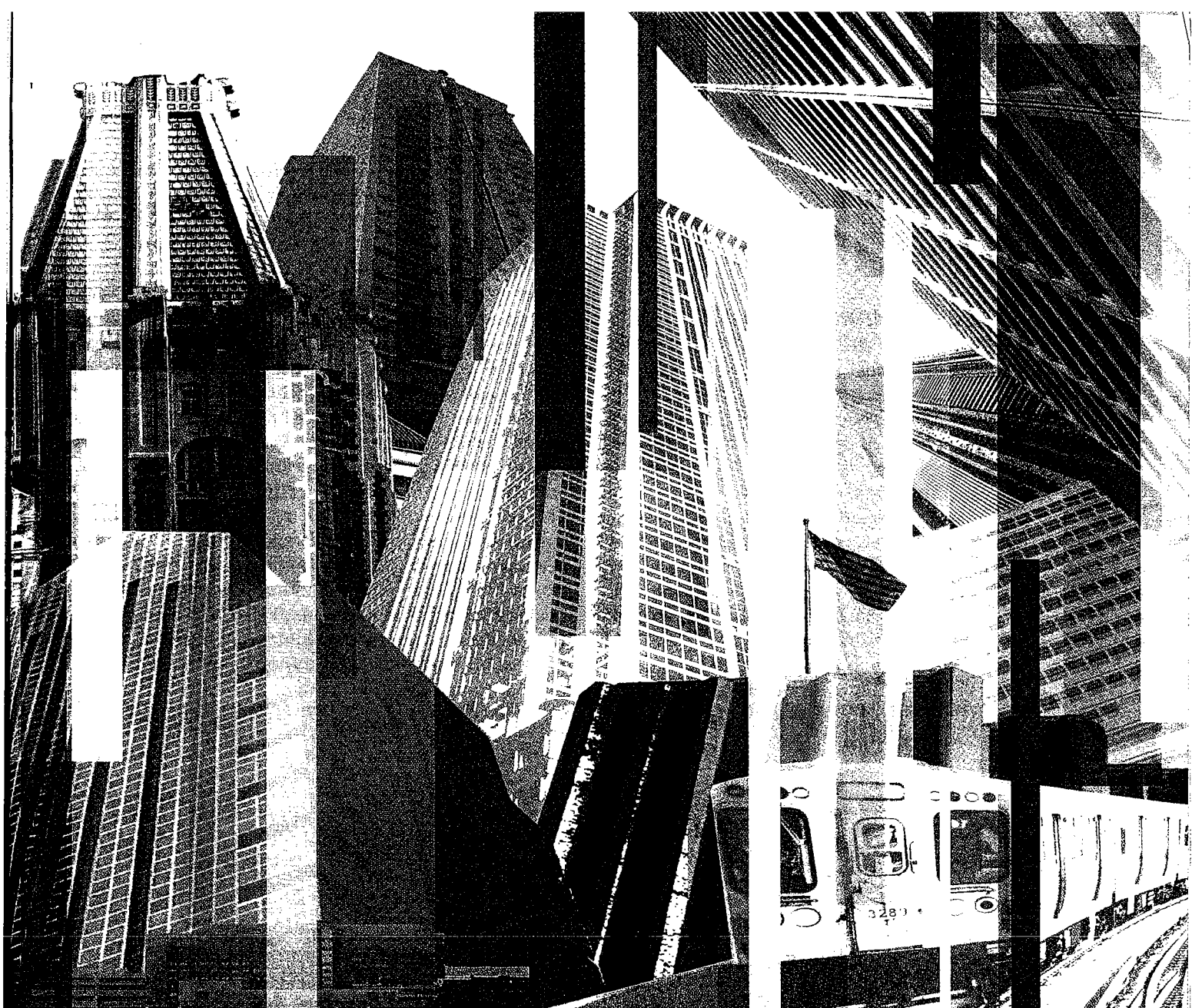


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NUCLEAR



9/11?

When the Twin Towers fell on September 11, 2001, so too did America's confidence that it was secure from calamitous acts of terrorism. Mindful that terrorists might next seek to use nuclear weapons, the United States has undertaken concerted efforts to secure loose nukes and bombmaking materials. But, five years later, are we any safer? For an assessment, the *Bulletin* sought the views of **GRAHAM ALLISON (P. 36)**, author of *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe*, and **WILLIAM M. ARKIN (P. 42)**, a security analyst and online columnist for the *Washington Post*.

The ongoing failure of **imagination**

BY GRAHAM ALLISON

PRIOR TO 9/11, MOST AMERICANS FOUND the idea that international terrorists could mount an attack on their homeland and kill thousands of innocent citizens not just unlikely, but inconceivable. Psychologically, Americans imagined that they lived in a security bubble. Terrorist attacks, including those on U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, occurred elsewhere. These beliefs were reinforced by the conventional wisdom among terrorism experts, who argued that terrorists sought not mass casualties but rather mass sympathy through limited attacks that called attention to their cause.

As we approach the fifth year without a second successful terrorist attack upon U.S. soil, a chorus of skeptics now suggests that 9/11 was a 100-year flood. They conveniently forget the deadly explosions in Bali, Madrid, London, and Mumbai, and dismiss scores of attacks planned against the United States and others that have been disrupted.¹ The idea that terrorists are currently preparing even more deadly assaults seems as far-fetched to them as the possibility of terrorists crashing passenger jets into the World Trade Center did before that fateful Tuesday morning.

As one attempts to assess where we now stand, and what the risks are, the major conclusion of the bipartisan 9/11 Commission deserves repetition: The principal failure

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to act to prevent the September 11 attack was a "failure of imagination."² A similar failure of imagination leads many today to discount the risk of a nuclear 9/11.

How great a risk? Risk equals probability times consequences. During the Cold War, strategists understood that even the slight possibility of a nuclear war that could kill every American made it imperative to do everything possible to avoid nuclear conflict. Similarly, the magnitude of the consequences of even a single nuclear bomb exploding in just one U.S. city swamps differences in judgments about the likelihood of such an attack. A terrorist armed with one nuclear bomb could murder a million people—killing in one day twice as many American souls as died in both World Wars combined.

On a normal workday, half a million people crowd the area within a half-mile radius of New York City's Times Square. If terrorists detonated a 10-kiloton nuclear weapon in the heart of midtown Manhattan, the blast would kill them all instantly. Hundreds of thousands of others would die from collapsing buildings, fire, and fallout in the hours and days thereafter.

The blast would instantly vaporize Times Square, Grand Central Terminal, and every other structure within half a mile of the point of detonation. Buildings three-quarters of a mile from ground zero would be fractured husks.

Lest this seem too hypothetical, recall an actual incident that occurred in New York City one month to the day after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. A CIA agent, code-named Dragonfire, reported that Al Qaeda had acquired a live nuclear weapon produced by the former Soviet Union and had successfully smuggled it into New York City.³ A top-secret Nuclear Emergency Support Team was dispatched to the city. Under a cloak of secrecy that excluded even Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, these nuclear ninjas searched for the 10-kiloton bomb whose blast could have obliterated a significant portion of Manhattan. Fortunately, Dragonfire's report turned out to be a false alarm. But the central take-away from the Dragonfire case is this: The U.S. government had no

grounds in science or in logic to dismiss the warning.

A nuclear terrorist attack on the United States would have catastrophic consequences even for other countries. After the nuclear detonation, the immediate reaction would be to block all entry points to prevent another bomb from reaching its target, resulting in the disruption of the global "just-in-time" flow of goods and raw materials. Vital markets for international products would disappear, and closely linked financial markets would crash. Researchers at RAND, a U.S. government-funded think tank, estimated that a nuclear explosion at the Port of Long Beach in California would cause immediate indirect costs worldwide of more than \$3 trillion and that shutting down U.S. ports would cut world trade by 10 percent.⁴

The negative economic repercussions would reverberate well beyond the developed world. As U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan has warned, "Were a nuclear terrorist attack to occur, it would cause not only widespread death and destruction, but would stagger the world economy and thrust tens of millions of people into dire poverty."⁵

How does one assess the probability of an unprecedented event that could have catastrophic consequences? Since there is no established methodology, the soundest way to proceed is to ask and answer the core questions: who, what, where, when, and how?

Who could be planning a nuclear terrorist attack?

Al Qaeda remains a formidable enemy with clear nuclear ambitions. In 1998, Osama bin Laden declared that he considered obtaining weapons of mass destruction "a religious duty."⁶ According to the final report of the 9/11 Commission, "Al Qaeda has tried to acquire or make nuclear weapons for at least 10 years . . . and continues to pursue its strategic goal of obtaining a nuclear capability." The commission also discusses bin Laden's fascination with what he calls an American "Hiroshima."⁷

Documenting Al Qaeda's growing intent, the CIA reports uncovering "rudimentary diagrams of nuclear weapons inside a suspected Al Qaeda safe house in Kabul. These diagrams, while crude, describe essential





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components—uranium and high explosives—common to nuclear weapons.”⁸

But the threats do not stop at Al Qaeda. A report by the United Nation’s Terrorism Prevention Branch, leaked to the press four months before 9/11, indicated that 130 terrorist groups were capable of developing a homemade atomic bomb if they obtained highly enriched uranium (HEU) or plutonium left over from the Cold War.⁹ More recently, “An Encyclopedia for the Preparation of Nuclear Weapons: The Nuclear Bomb of Jihad and the Way to Enrich Uranium” has begun appearing in the virtual training library of some jihadist websites.¹⁰

What nuclear weapons could terrorists use? Terrorists could acquire a bomb one of two ways: by obtaining a ready-made weapon from the arsenal of one of the nuclear weapon states or by constructing an elementary nuclear bomb from highly enriched uranium made by a state. Theft of a warhead by insiders, or a combination of insiders and intruders, would not be easy. But attempted thefts in Russia and elsewhere are not uncommon.

In 2005, the Russian interior minister in charge of security for many of the nation’s nuclear installations stated that “international terrorists have planned attacks against nuclear and power industry installations” with the objective to “seize nuclear materials and use them to build weapons of mass destruction for their own political ends.”¹¹ Such terrorists may find help on the inside: In

April 2006, police arrested a foreman of the Elektrostal nuclear fuel fabrication facility and co-conspirators for stealing 49 pounds of low-enriched uranium. The same facility processes large amounts of weapons-usable HEU.¹² The International Atomic Energy Agency has documented 18 cases of trafficking in HEU or plutonium, either of which is a key ingredient of a terrorist’s nuclear bomb.¹³

Once a terrorist group acquires 45 kilograms (around 100 pounds) of HEU, building an elementary nuclear bomb no longer takes the mind of an Oppenheimer. With fissile material acquired from a weapon state, using publicly available documents and items commercially obtainable in any technologically advanced country, terrorists could conceivably construct a gun-type bomb like the one dropped on Hiroshima. As John Foster, a leading U.S. bombmaker and former director of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, wrote a quarter-century ago, “If the essential nuclear materials are at hand, it is possible to make an atomic bomb using information that is available in the open literature.”¹⁴

Where could terrorists acquire a nuclear bomb?

If a nuclear terrorist attack occurs, Russia will be the most likely source of the weapon or material—not because the Russian government would sell or lose them, but simply because Russia’s 11-time-zone expanse contains more nuclear weapons and materials than any other country in the world, much of it still vulnerable to theft.

A close second would be North Korea. Its top leadership has openly boasted that it intends to sell fissile material and even a nuclear weapon—for the right price. During talks in Beijing in April 2003, North Korea’s deputy director general for American affairs Li Gun told Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly that Pyongyang not only possessed nuclear weapons but might also export them, saying, “It’s up to you whether we . . . transfer them.”¹⁵

In addition, research reactors in 40 developing and transitional countries still hold the essential ingredient for nuclear bombs. In the past year, the Washington, D.C.-based Nuclear Threat Initiative partnered with the government of Kazakhstan to downblend 6,400 pounds of weapons-usable uranium—enough to make two dozen bombs—so that it is no longer suitable for weapons use.¹⁶ The good news is that, as of October 2005, the material is no longer sitting at a research reactor in Aktau. The bad news is that there are dozens of sites that need similar interventions to keep bombmaking materials out of terrorists’ hands.

When could terrorists launch the first nuclear attack?

If terrorists bought or stole a nuclear weapon in good working condition, they could explode it today. If the weapon had a lock, the date of

detonation would be delayed for several days.¹⁷ If terrorists acquired the 45 kilograms of HEU needed for an elementary nuclear bomb, they could have a working bomb in less than a year.

How could terrorists deliver a nuclear weapon to its target? Two plausible methods would be to “follow the golf clubs” or “follow the drugs.”

Imagine a woman who lives in Tokyo wants to play golf at Pebble Beach, but prefers to avoid the hassle of carrying her clubs through U.S. customs. How would she get her clubs to the resort? She would call a freight forwarder, provide a plausible description of the contents of her shipment, and have her golf bag picked up at her home. The clubs would travel by ship from Tokyo to the Port of Oakland in California and then by truck to the golf course. The chance of anyone inspecting her bag between her house and the links is less than 3 percent.

If that seems too risky, terrorists might “follow the drugs,” tons of which find their way to U.S. cities every day. The illicit economy for narcotics and illegal immigrants has built up a vast infrastructure that terrorists could exploit. As Albert Carnesale, an arms control expert, has noted, no one should doubt the ability of terrorists to bring a nuclear weapon to New York: They could simply hide it in a bale of marijuana, which we know comes to all global cities.

In sum, my best judgment is that based on current trends, a nuclear terrorist attack on the United States is more likely than not in the decade ahead. Developments in Iraq, Iran, and North Korea leave Americans more vulnerable to a nuclear 9/11 today than we were five years ago. Former Defense Secretary William Perry has said that he thinks that I underestimate the risk. In the judgment of most people in the national security community, including former Sen. Sam Nunn, the risk of a terrorist detonating a nuclear bomb on U.S. soil is higher today than was the risk of nuclear war at the most dangerous moments in the Cold War. Reviewing the evidence, Warren Buffett, the world's most successful investor and a legendary oddsmaker in pricing insurance policies for unlikely but catastrophic events like earthquakes, has concluded: “It's inevitable. I don't see any way that it won't happen.”¹⁸

The ultimate preventable catastrophe. It is difficult to disagree with Buffet. Nonetheless, I believe that the largely unrecognized good news is that this ultimate catastrophe is, in fact, *preventable*. There exists a feasible, affordable checklist of actions that, if taken, would shrink the risk of nuclear terrorism to nearly zero. The strategic narrow in this challenge is to prevent ter-

rorists from acquiring nuclear weapons or the materials from which weapons could be made. If this choke point can be squeezed tightly enough, we can deny terrorists the means necessary for the most deadly of all terror acts. As a fact of physics: No HEU or plutonium, no nuclear explosion, no nuclear terrorism.

My book, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe*, proposes a strategy for pursuing that agenda, organized under a “Doctrine of Three Nos”:

No loose nukes requires securing all nuclear weapons and weapons-usable material, as quickly as possible. The United States and Russia have proven themselves adept at locking up valuable or dangerous items: Gold is not stolen from Fort Knox, nor treasures from the Kremlin Armory.

No new nascent nukes means no new domestic capabilities to enrich uranium or reprocess plutonium. The 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) contains a loophole that allows nations to develop these capacities as civilian programs, withdraw from the NPT, utilize equipment and know-how received as a beneficiary of the NPT, and proceed to build nuclear weapons. The proposition of no new nascent nukes acknowledges what the national security community has belatedly come to realize: HEU and plutonium are bombs about to hatch.

No new nuclear weapon states unambiguously declares the nuclear club will not expand beyond its current eight members. Without endorsing the behavior of current nuclear powers, this principle recognizes that the most urgent task is to stop the bleeding before the problem gets worse. The urgent test of this principle is North Korea, which now stands three-quarters of the way across that line. In February 2006, North Korea declared itself a nuclear weapon state, but it has not yet conducted a nuclear test to gain forced entry into the group of nuclear nations. Preventing Pyongyang from becoming a “Nukes ‘R’ Us” for terrorists is the biggest challenge the international community faces in the Asian arena.

But what has been done on these fronts to combat nuclear terrorism? Are we any safer from a nuclear terrorist attack than we were on 9/11?

After the Trade Center towers fell, President George W. Bush declared war on terrorism; toppled the Taliban, eliminating Al Qaeda's sanctuary in Afghanistan; and articulated a new doctrine in which the United States would “make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.” The Bush administration made an important conceptual advance in recognizing that the gravest danger lies in what Vice President Dick Cheney termed the “nexus between terrorists and weapons of mass destruction.” To minimize that threat, the United States successfully sponsored U.N. Security Council Resolution 1540, which requires states to criminalize proliferation; promoted a new Proliferation Security Initiative, which expands upon existing legal



The United States **cannot undertake or sustain** the war on nuclear terrorism alone. Nor can the necessary actions be commanded, compelled, or coerced.

frameworks to allow the interception of WMD-related cargo; and persuaded other members of the G-8 Global Partnership to match a U.S. commitment of \$1 billion annually over the next decade to secure and eliminate former Soviet nuclear weapons. Furthermore, in February 2005 Bush leveraged his personal friendship with Russian President Vladimir Putin to reach an agreement at Bratislava that each leader would make securing loose nuclear material his personal responsibility and that their respective energy ministers should meet and report regularly on progress toward that goal.

On the other hand, in combating what Bush has rightly identified as “the single most serious threat to the national security to the United States” and the only terrorist attack that could kill a million Americans in one blow, the Bush administration has demonstrated a puzzling absence of focus, energy, and urgency. Indeed, some of the administration’s actions have, in fact, made U.S. citizens more vulnerable.

September 11, 2001 demonstrated terrorists’ capacity for mega-terrorism. As former CIA Director Porter Goss told Congress last year, “There is sufficient [Russian] material unaccounted for so that it would be possible for those with know-how to construct [a] nuclear weapon.”¹⁹ But as of 2005, as the most comprehensive review of what has and has not been done on this agenda concludes, only 54 percent of the buildings in the former Soviet Union holding nuclear material had received comprehensive security upgrades.²⁰

Before 9/11, North Korea had, at most, two nuclear weapons worth of plutonium (acquired during the presidency of George H. W. Bush). Today, North Korea has reprocessed enough plutonium for eight additional nuclear bombs and restarted its Yongbyon reactor, where it is producing enough plutonium for two additional bombs a year. In 2003, Tehran offered to negotiate with the Unit-

ed States over Iran’s nuclear program and even halt its support for Hamas and Hezbollah terrorists. In the period since the United States rejected that proposal, Iran has defied the U.N. Security Council’s demand that it suspend uranium enrichment-related activity at Isfahan and Natanz, accelerated its program, and elected a new president who has called for Israel to be “wiped off the map.”

On its current trajectory, Iran could join North Korea in becoming a nuclear weapon state before the end of the decade, triggering what the U.N. High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change calls an “erosion of the nonproliferation regime” to a point that “could become irreversible and result in a cascade of proliferation.”²¹ Having called for war against Iraq on false premises, the Bush administration has paradoxically increased the WMD threat. According to the CIA, while the good news is that Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda command can no longer operate headquarters and training camps in Afghanistan, the bad news is that Iraq now provides “recruitment, training grounds, technical skills, and language proficiency for a new class of terrorists who are ‘professionalized’ and for whom political violence becomes an end in itself.”²² As jihadi networks strengthen in Iraq, on one hand, and Iran and North Korea accelerate their fissile material production, on the other, the likelihood of a deadly nexus between a terrorist buyer and nuclear seller increases. Reversing these trends will require a new strategic approach to the threat of nuclear terrorism.

Winning the war on nuclear terrorism.

The United States cannot undertake or sustain the war on nuclear terrorism alone. Nor can the necessary actions simply be commanded, compelled, or coerced. Instead, they require deep and steady international cooperation rooted in the recognition that nations share an overriding common threat and can only succeed with a common strategy.

Each nation’s best hope to achieve conditions essential for its own security requires serious cooperation with the others. The great powers are therefore ripe for mobilization for a new Global Alliance Against Nuclear Terrorism. The mission of this alliance should be to minimize the risk of nuclear terrorism by taking every action physically, technically, and diplomatically possible to prevent nuclear weapons or materials from falling into the hands of terrorists.

Existing alliances are ill-suited to address this global security threat. NATO covers one regional area, the U.S.-Japanese Security Treaty another. The nuclear nonproliferation “regime” consists of a patchwork of treaties like the NPT, informal agreements like the Nuclear Suppliers Group and the Proliferation Security Initiative, nuclear-weapon-free zones in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and

the Australia-Pacific region, and assorted bilateral agreements. Meeting the global threat of nuclear terrorism will require a more comprehensive global response.

Construction of this new alliance should begin with the United States and Russia, who have a special obligation to address this problem since they created it—and since they still own 95 percent of all nuclear weapons and materials.

Initially, members of the alliance would join in five common undertakings. First, they would embrace a principle of *assured nuclear security* to personally assure that all nuclear weapons and materials on their own territory are secured to a “gold standard”—beyond the reach of terrorists or thieves. Assured nuclear security requires sufficient transparency to allow other leaders to reassure their own citizens that terrorists will never get a nuclear bomb from another member of this alliance. Second, the alliance would shape a global consensus in support of enforcing the Three Nos. Third, the new alliance should reinvent a more robust nonproliferation regime to control the sale and export of nuclear technologies, materials, and know-how. While Security Council Resolution 1540 obligates sovereign states to close the loopholes exploited

by black-market WMD networks, it currently lacks necessary enforcement mechanisms. Fourth, the new alliance would provide a formal infrastructure to apply “lessons learned” from U.S.-Russian and other cooperative ventures against the Taliban and Al Qaeda to the nuclear challenge. For example, this fall, a first-ever joint field exercise seeking to find and capture hypothetical terrorists who have stolen nuclear material will involve Americans and Russians working together in Russia. Finally, this alliance should be not just a signed document but a living institution committed to its mission.

Establishment of a Global Alliance Against Nuclear Terrorism could help us overcome the psychological barriers to sustained, focused action. Faced with the possibility of an American Hiroshima, many are paralyzed by a combination of denial and fatalism. Either it hasn't happened, so it's not going to happen; or, if it is going to happen, there's nothing we can do to stop it. Both propositions are wrong. The countdown to a nuclear 9/11 can be stopped, but only by a combination of imagination, a clear agenda for action, and fierce determination to pursue it. *

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15. Glenn Kessler, “N. Korea Says It Has Nuclear Arms; At Talks With U.S., Pyongyang Threatens ‘Demonstration’ or Export of Weapon,” *Washington Post*, April 25, 2003, p. A1.

16. Mohamed ElBaradei and Jonas Gahr Støre, “How the World Can Combat Nuclear Terrorism,” *Financial Times*, June 15, 2006.

17. In the 1960s, U.S. nuclear guardians recognized the risk of nuclear theft or unauthorized detonation and began equipping the nation's weapons with safety devices. The most successful product was called a Permissive Action Link (PAL). PALs are locks that make it especially challenging to explode a nuclear weapon without first entering a top-secret code. Yet during the Cold War, Soviet officials rebuffed multiple efforts by American officials to share PAL and ESD technologies. Consequently, many of Russia's nuclear warheads mounted on long-range ballistic mis-

siles, and most of its small tactical weapons, today lack any technical protections. In 1996, a leaked top-secret CIA report assessed that Russia's tactical nuclear weapons “appear to be . . . most at risk,” noting that even the few locks that did exist—on the Russian Navy's nuclear-tipped torpedoes, for example—could easily be removed. The report concluded, “All technical [security] measures can be circumvented—probably within weeks or days depending on the weapons involved.” See Peter Feaver, *Guarding the Guardians: Civilian Control of Nuclear Weapons in the United States* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992); Bruce Blair, *The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War* (Brookings Institution Press, 1993); Sara Fritz and John Broder, “Nuclear Russian Roulette,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 31, 1991; and Bill Gertz, “Russian Renegades Pose Nuke Danger CIA Says Arsenal Lacks Tight Controls,” *Washington Times*, October 22, 1996, p. A1.

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The continuing misuses of **fear**

BY WILLIAM M. ARKIN

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM SAYS THAT THE wide availability of fissile materials and nuclear know-how make the likelihood of nuclear use by a terrorist group some time in the future extremely high. From Vice President Dick Cheney to Massachusetts Democratic Sen. Ted Kennedy, there is near unanimity about this threat of nuclear terrorism. Virtually every government agrees; so do most experts in the arms control community, the scientific establishment, academia, the news media, and even the peace movement.

The disparate political players profess markedly different agendas to deal with this threat and have radically divergent worldviews. In Cheney's world, preventing nuclear terrorism means preemptive war, an unrelenting battle against Al Qaeda, and pressure on Iran, North Korea, and others to dissuade them from sharing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) technologies. The Kennedy side of the spectrum likes to stress negotiations, international organizations, and the rule of law in lessening the threat.

The differences, though, are more cosmetic than substantive. In the run up to war in Iraq, opponents of action against Saddam Hussein dickered about the evidence and pleaded that inspections should be given more time or that international support was essential. But because the dispute was ultimately over WMD, hardly any of the war's "opponents" questioned the need to fight if inspections indeed failed or if the international community consented. Some antiwar voices even argued that other WMD enemies and wars—against Al Qaeda, North Korea, or Iran—should be of a higher priority.

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When it comes to future threats, there is also widespread agreement on the need for preemption and even on the advisability and necessity of unilateral U.S. action—that is, if intelligence were ever to identify another nuclear renegade with the potential to share its wares. Even former-Vermont Gov. Howard Dean said during the 2004 Democratic presidential primary that he supported the principle of preemptive war in response to an imminent threat to the United States.

On this fifth anniversary of 9/11, with Iraq out of the WMD business and Al Qaeda on the run and denied state sanctuary, one might think that the concern and panic about nuclear terrorism would have diminished, if not disappeared. To many though, the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks merely confirmed a decades-old presumption that if they could, terrorists would acquire weapons of mass destruction, and they would also use them. This threat is not only amorphous, in that it cannot be measured in warheads or forces and cannot be “deterred” in the traditional sense. It is also based on faith and completely divorced from intent, political realities, and technological possibilities. But because the consequences of failure are so high, it is a threat that never really goes away.

Could terrorists really obtain sufficient materials and put together all of what would be needed to manufacture a nuclear weapon? I’ll go out on a limb and say, not after 9/11.

Anxiety about nuclear terrorism predates the events of 9/11. It goes back at least to the early 1970s when European terrorism was rampant and nuclear weapons were stored at more than 1,000 depots worldwide, a high percentage of them in western Europe. Since then, concern about nuclear terrorism has ebbed and flowed with the times and been employed by counterterrorism and security types, by arms control and nonproliferation specialists and activists, and by anti-nuclear power advocates. The joining of proliferation and counterterrorism concerns in the 1990s—with the specter of a WMD terrorist attack—proved a particularly potent and enduring combination.

Today, government officials and analysts, even the communities that one might expect to express deep skepticism in the aftermath of the Iraq experience, enlist nuclear terrorism and tout it as the great fear. The recent Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission (the so-called Blix commission) couldn’t resist including terror in the title of its final report earlier this year, placing counterterrorism on equal ground with disarmament and nonproliferation. The threat, the commission said, demanded improvements in security and greater control of nuclear materials as well as a return to general arms control and disarmament negotiations.

There is no factual answer as to whether the threat of nuclear terrorism is actually worthy of equal billing. One thing is clear, though, in the post-9/11 environment: A threat that is nightmarish and enduring and can neither be proved nor disproved is a powerful lubricant. The cataclysmic threat of nuclear terrorism, impervious to either deterrence or international law, produces a presumption of extraordinary action, even preemption, in dealing with it. The intensity of the professed danger suggests that there is little that can be done beyond the military sphere; the unpredictability of the enemy leads to the conclusion that the use of force is no longer a final option, but the only option.

When critics of the Iraq War resorted to the image of nuclear terrorism to argue a preferred agenda, or the arms control world uses it today to energize stagnated negotiations or other agendas, they are merely bolstering this pernicious universal message. I am not questioning the intent of the Kennedy camp. Its motive is exactly as it is professed, just like the Cheney camp: a genuine and deep-seated desire to preserve U.S. and international security. For both camps though, the unthinkable has become the unthinking answer.

The devastating consequences associated with the universal and unchallenged assumption of nuclear terrorism are what should be of concern to all. Since 9/11, we have gone to war with Iraq because of nuclear fear; our domestic security apparatus gave single-minded attention to WMD, seducing the Department of Homeland Security and FEMA to prepare for the wrong disaster before Katrina; “global strike” programs, counterproliferation efforts, and attempts to “combat weapons of mass destruction” presume preemption and demand a preemption, a resurgence of American nuclear capability and missile defenses.

This March, Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte and the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Lt. Gen. Michael Maples, testified before Congress that the threat of terrorist attack with WMD was “more likely” than an attack by any state, including Iran and North Korea. Negroponte reported, “In fact, intelligence reporting indicates that nearly 40 terrorist organizations, insurgencies, or cults have used, possessed, or expressed an interest in chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear agents or weapons. Many are capable of conducting simple, small-scale attacks, such as poisonings, or using improvised chemical devices.” Maples added, “Al Qaeda’s stated intention to conduct an attack exceeding the destruction of 9/11 raises the possibility that future attacks may involve unconventional weapons.”

Neither Negroponte nor Maples offered any detail indicating evidence or even trends toward terrorists acquiring any of these capabilities. Instead, they put forth the “possibility” of a future terrorist WMD attack, thus



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promoting the war on terrorism while seeking bureaucratic sanctuary in an enduring state of national insecurity. A few months before the 2004 election and less than a week before the third anniversary of 9/11, Vice President Cheney similarly demonstrated the political utility of this conceit, saying that if the United States made the wrong choice on November 2 “then the danger is that we’ll get hit again.”

At a later campaign stop, Cheney added, “The biggest threat we face now as a nation is the possibility of terrorists ending up in the middle of one of our cities with deadlier weapons than have ever before been used against us—biological agents or a nuclear weapon or a chemical weapon of some kind to be able to threaten the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans.”

This statement implied that only the Bush administration had the wherewithal to take the extraordinary measures and unilateral action needed to combat the grave threat. Of course, the opposition camp of Massachusetts Democratic Sen. John Kerry protested, stressing the senator’s military background and seeking to one-up the keepers of the national security flame. But the substance of the Kerry response merely confirmed the centrality of WMD and the nuclear terrorist threat in the security debate, enhancing the dominant position of the administration and robbing the U.S. public of any real alternative. “He wants to scare Americans about a possible nuclear 9/11 while the Bush administration has been on the sidelines while the nuclear threats from North Korea and Iran—the world’s leading sponsor of terrorism—have increased,” a Kerry spokesman said.

Senator Kennedy uttered this same line of argument in a speech at George Washington University a month before. By shifting attention from Osama bin Laden to Iraq,

Kennedy said, President Bush had increased the danger of a nuclear 9/11. “The war in Iraq has made the mushroom cloud more likely, not less likely,” he said. Other WMD experts echoed this view, unconsciously confirming the wisdom and necessity of the administration’s fight.

If the very assumption of nuclear terrorism is not going to be reevaluated, if the arms control and scientific communities don’t want to rethink their role in the manufacture and perpetuation of nuclear fear, if specialists and WMD experts profess reluctance to get involved in politics, perhaps they will open up to a discussion of the conventional wisdom’s limits and implications.

The partisan political argument still says that President Bush and his advisers “lied” about Iraqi WMD in order to drive the United States to war, that even experts were fooled by selective evidence. This argument, however, ignores the Bush administration’s strong belief that it needed to sell the necessity for Iraqi regime change to the U.S. public because preemptive attack to eliminate WMD was such a departure. Waiting for proof to take action was the old, pre-9/11 way, the White House argued and believed. That the administration showed no patience and no subtlety in dealing with Baghdad was shortsighted and even criminal, but the decision to attack fundamentally drew from genuine and widely accepted nuclear fear.

In this sense, there is no conspiracy underlying the Bush administration’s decision on Iraq. Well before 9/11, seemingly everyone argued that the threat of WMD was getting inexorably worse. The problem of biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons was deteriorating; more countries were proliferating weapons and materials; “loose nukes” and other unsecured weapons and technologies were accumulating in the wrong hands. The Right and the Left, alike, believed that the Iraqs, Irans, and North Koreas of the world were ever more frightening and that nothing should be spared to fight them and the spread of WMD.

Indeed throughout the 1990s, WMD proliferation served so many so well. Saddam’s pursuit provided the first Bush administration great Cold War-like comfort—a threat to give shape to the emerging “new world order.” The massive failure to understand the extent of Iraq’s program prior to Operation Desert Storm led to a high point for U.N. inspection and disarmament work and mobilized the minds of an intelligence community otherwise completely astray in a post-Cold War desert. Disintegration of the Soviet Union kindled a gentleman’s nonproliferation salon, where once opposing scientists and governments could find common cause in keeping the nuclear genie out of the wrong hands. The Clinton administration discovered rogue states, anthrax, and terrorism—and in doing so, found its own post-Cold War national security voice.

The domestic WMD consequence management business was born, paving the way for the post-9/11 homeland security industry. The ballistic missile defense industry was reinvigorated by claims that fanatical nuclear rogues were immune to the calculus of mutual assured destruction. Proliferation replaced disarmament in the nonprofit world. WMD was always good for a front-page story.

Nuclear warriors, arms controllers, international apparatchiks, and peaceniks all argued that not enough was being done. Government commitment wasn't strong enough; budgets weren't big enough; intelligence wasn't good enough; and action wasn't enough. After 9/11, fear of nuclear terrorism might have gotten an enormous boost, but, in truth, all sides had already accepted and confirmed the presumption of the threat. Even U.S. intelligence filtered incomplete and uncertain information through this prevailing lens and wrongly assessed the state of Iraq's WMD programs. This is the universal nuclear 9/11 truth.

Is there a possibility that there is a different "truth?" In the world I see after 30 years in this business, the United States and Russia have withdrawn thousands of nuclear weapons from service; nations have denuclearized aircraft and naval ships; and they have lessened high operational-readiness levels. In this world, the spread of nuclear weapons—particularly U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons, which were once deployed in scores of countries at many hundreds of sites—has significantly declined. Britain and France have significantly reduced their arsenals; China's arsenal has pretty much stood still. Worldwide stockpiles of nuclear weapons have declined by more than two-thirds since the late-1960's Cold War peak.

In this world, the roster of countries out of the WMD business far exceeds the numbers who have gone nuclear in the past 30 years: Iraq, Libya, South Africa, Brazil, and Argentina, not to name the list of northern democracies, from Japan to Sweden. Former Soviet republics agreed to relinquish physical possession of former Soviet weapons. Nuclear-weapon-free zones now exist in Latin America, the South Pacific, Africa, and Southeast Asia. International bodies are experienced and unsentimental in pursuit of the craft of inspections and disarmament. Like it or not, disarmament by force in Iraq has also communicated to potential state proliferators the cost of defying the international community. Post-Iraq, moreover, there is ever-greater vigilance in both monitoring and interdicting the trade in nuclear materials.

All of the evidence indicates that the threat of nuclear, biological, or chemical war has diminished to a lower level than at anytime in most of our lifetimes, yet the specter of a "nuclear handoff" from a nuclear nation to a terrorist group or the supposed ready availability of nuclear materials drives a completely different supposition. This cataclysmic picture has no factual rebuttal, yet that

does not mean that nuclear terrorism is a vital, valid, or, even, the most important WMD threat.

Yes, much more has to be done to rid the world of the WMD menace. I'm not completely confident that some nuclear-armed countries—specifically the United States, China, Russia, Israel, Pakistan, or India—won't use them in our lifetime. 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.

In the run up to the 2003 Iraq War, as the Bush administration mobilized public opinion and prepared physically for war, there was an expert debate. Prague, mobile laboratories, aluminum tubes, ranges of missiles—Washington debated capabilities, as well as its own prospective war plans, the best targets, and how many troops were needed. By sheer repetition, Iraqi WMD materialized. The infinite nature of the threat promoted and produced only one answer: war. The only real question was what color it was going to be.

Are we just repeating this pattern when it comes to Iran? There are centrifuges instead of aluminum tubes, Hezbollah instead of Al Qaeda. Again, "intelligence" about intentions and capabilities, U.N. inspections, and the involvement and consent of the international community, dominate the discussion. WMD experts, all of whom sound eminently reasonable and who eschew the language of extremism, ask whether the intelligence is good enough, what the targets might be, whether U.S. forces are sufficient to do the job. They simultaneously jump on every nuclear twitch, subsist on each nuclear breath. The argument suggests that if there is sufficient intelligence, if the targets are found, if U.S. forces are mustered and a sound war plan developed, and if the international community gets thwarted, then another preemptive war is not only inevitable but necessary.

Iran may be a decade or more away from producing a nuclear weapon, an endeavor and a timetable made all the more difficult if not impossible by the post-9/11 realities and the vigilance and competence of the nonproliferation industry. Theirs is God's work. Treaties, inspections, and regimes of control have worked.

A more accurate picture of the state of WMD five years after 9/11 is that the threat has indeed diminished. A truer intelligence assessment is that the danger has steadily declined despite the continued existence of eight nuclear nations and two serious rogues. To argue in favor of a new perspective on WMD is not cockeyed optimism or naiveté. But to get there will require breaking the near-unanimous stranglehold of the Cheney and Kennedy camps. Theirs is the real nuclear terror. *