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George W. Bush's Nuclear Addiction

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George W. Bush might have kicked his alcohol and drug habits, but he still appears to have at least one serious addiction -- to nuclear weapons.

Last year, Congress refused to fund the administration's ambitious proposal for new nuclear weapons, largely because both Republican and Democratic lawmakers agreed that the world would be a safer place with fewer -- rather than more -- nuclear explosives in existence.

But, undeterred by last year's rebuff, the Bush administration recently returned to Congress with a proposal for funding a new generation of "usable" nuclear weapons. These weapons are the so-called "bunker busters." Despite the rather benign name, the "bunker buster" is an exceptionally devastating weapon, with an explosive power of from several hundred kilotons to one megaton (i.e. a thousand kilotons). To put this in perspective, it should be recalled that the nuclear weapons that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki had explosive yields of from 14 to 21 kilotons. "These weapons will bust more than a bunker," remarked U.S. Senator Jack Reed. "The area of destruction will encompass an area the size of a city. They are really city breakers."

In addition, the Bush administration has requested funding for the "Reliable Replacement Warhead." If continued beyond the planning stage, this program would lead to the spending of hundreds of millions of dollars on upgrading U.S. nuclear warheads and might result in the resumption of U.S. nuclear testing, which has not occurred since 1992.

Of course, it is not unusual for the leaders of nation states to crave nuclear weapons. After all, the history of the international system is one of rivalry and war and, consequently, many national leaders itch to possess the most devastating weapons available. This undoubtedly accounts for the fact that, today, there are eight nations that possess nuclear weapons, a ninth (North Korea) that might, and additional nations that might be working to develop them.

Even so, there is a widespread recognition that the nuclear arms race -- indeed, the very possession of nuclear weapons -- confronts the world with unprecedented dangers. And, for this reason, nations, among them the United States, have signed nuclear arms control and disarmament treaties. The most important of them is probably the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968, in which non-nuclear nations agreed to forgo the development of nuclear weapons and nuclear nations agreed to move toward nuclear disarmament. As late as the NPT review conference of 2000, the declared nuclear weapons states proclaimed their commitment to an "unequivocal undertaking . . . to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals."

Thanks to these agreements and to independent action, there has been a substantial reduction in the number of nuclear weapons around the world.

Furthermore, even if nations were to disregard these treaty obligations and cling doggedly to their nuclear weapons, how many do they need? The United States possesses more than 10,000 nuclear weapons -- a number that,

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together with Russia's arsenal, constitutes more than 90 percent of the world total. Does it really need more? And how are they to be used?

President Bush, of course, wraps all his military policies in the "war on terror," and his nuclear policies are no exception. But how, exactly, are nuclear weapons useful against terrorists? Terrorists do not control fixed territories that can be attacked with nuclear weapons. Instead, they are intermingled with the general population in this country and abroad. Unless one is willing to attack them by conducting a vast and terrible nuclear bombardment of civilians, dwarfing in scale any massacre that terrorists have ever implemented, nuclear weapons have no conceivable function in combating terrorism.

Indeed, adding to the stockpile of nuclear weapons only adds to the dangers of terrorism. Terrorists do not have the knowledge or materials that would enable them to build their own nuclear weapons. But, the more nuclear weapons that exist, the more likely terrorists are to obtain them from a government stockpile -- through theft, or purchase, or conspiracy. Therefore, as Congress has recognized, the United States would be safer if it encouraged worldwide nuclear disarmament rather than the building of additional nuclear weapons.

In this context, Bush's voracious appetite for new nuclear weapons is, to say the least, remarkable. In addition to his repeated attempts to get Congress to fund a U.S. nuclear buildup, he has pulled the United States out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (thereby effectively scrapping the START II Treaty, negotiated and signed by his father), opposed U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (negotiated and signed by President Clinton), pressed Congress to smooth the path toward the resumption of U.S. nuclear testing, and dropped further negotiations for nuclear disarmament.

These repeated attempts to escape from the constraints of nuclear arms control and disarmament agreements and acquire new nuclear weapons suggest that Bush has what might be called a nuclear addiction.

There are other signs of this addiction, as well. Indifferent to everything but acquiring their desired substance, addicts typically lose their appetite for the fundamentals of life, even eating. In a similar fashion, the president has proposed a budget that severely slashes funding for U.S. health, education, and welfare programs and redirects it to the military, including his pet nuclear projects. But how long can a society be starved of health, education, and welfare before it collapses? Impervious to reason or to the consistent public support for funding in these areas, Bush does not seem to consider this question. Instead, he presses forward with his demand for . . . more nukes!

When the 2005 NPT review conference opens this May at the United Nations, Bush's lust for nuclear weapons seems likely to be criticized by many nations. It is already being assailed by numerous peace and disarmament organizations, which are planning a massive nuclear abolition march and rally in New York City on May 1, the day before the NPT review conference convenes. And popular sentiment is not far behind. A recent AP-Ipsos poll reports that two-thirds of Americans believe that no nation should possess nuclear weapons, including the United States.

Is George Bush able to accept the idea of a nuclear-free world? It's certainly possible. But, first, it might take a decision by him to buckle down and kick his nuclear addiction.

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