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Why Bush Abandoned the Plan for New Nukes: Stopping the Bunker Buster

By Lawrence S. Wittner

Confronted with strong opposition from disarmament groups and from Congress, the Bush administration has abandoned its plan to develop a nuclear "bunker buster."

This new weapon, formally known as the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator, became the symbol of the Bush administration's plan to build up the U.S. nuclear arsenal and wage nuclear war. The administration alleged that the bunker buster was necessary to destroy deeply buried and hardened enemy targets, and that—thanks to the fact that it would explode underground—it would produce minimal collateral damage. But critics charged that, with more than 70 times the destructive power of the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima, a single bunker buster might kill millions of people. This contention was reinforced by an April 2005 report from a National Academy of Sciences panel, which claimed that such a device, exploded underground, would likely cause the same number of casualties as a weapon of comparable power exploded on the earth's surface.

In addition, building the weapon symbolized the Bush administration's flouting of the U.S. government's commitments to nuclear arms control and disarmament. Under the terms of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968, the nuclear powers—including the United States—agreed to move toward elimination of their own nuclear arsenals. And, in fact, after much hesitation, this is what they began to do, through treaties and unilateral action, over the ensuing years. Therefore, it came as a shock to the arms control community when the Bush administration pulled out of the ABM Treaty, opposed ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and pressed Congress for funding to build new nuclear weapons, including "mini-nukes" and bunker busters.

Given the symbolic, high-profile status of the bunker buster, groups like the Union of Concerned Scientists, the Council for a Livable World, the Friends Committee on National Legislation, and Peace Action worked hard to defeat it—mobilizing public opposition and lobbying fiercely against congressional funding. Last year, their efforts paid off, when Congress, despite its Republican majority, refused to support the weapon's development. A key opponent was Representative David Hobson, the Republican chair of the House Energy and Water Appropriations Committee, who insisted that the U.S. government could hardly expect other nations to honor their NPT commitments if it ignored its own.

With the Bush administration determined to secure the new weapon, bunker buster funding came to the fore again this year. Debate on the proposal was intense. U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) insisted that building the bunker buster "sends the wrong signals to the rest of the world by reopening the nuclear door and beginning the testing and development of a new generation of nuclear weapons." Ultimately, both the Senate and the House rejected the administration measure. The administration's only remaining hope lay in pushing through a scaled-back version of its plan, for $4 million. Championed by U.S. Senator Pete Domenici (R-NM), long an avid supporter of nuclear weapons development in his home state, the bill passed the Senate but was again blocked in the House, where Representative Hobson once more led the way. In recent months, a House-Senate conference committee grappled with the legislation, but without making a decision on it.

Finally, on October 25, Senator Domenici pulled the plug on the funding proposal, announcing that it was being dropped at the request of the Energy Department. An administration official explained that a decision had been made to concentrate on a non-nuclear bunker buster. Naturally, the arms control and disarmament community was overjoyed. According to Stephen Young, a senior analyst with the Union of Concerned Scientists, "this is a true victory for a more rational nuclear policy." Although the reason for the administration's abandonment of its new nuclear weapon program remains unclear, it does appear that it resulted from public pressure, Democratic opposition, and a division on the issue among Republicans.

Of course, much more has to be done before the world is safe from the nuclear menace. Some 30,000 nuclear weapons remain in

existence, with about 10,000 of them in the hands of the U.S. government.

But the story of the bunker buster's defeat illustrates that, even in relatively unpromising circumstances, it is possible to rein in the nuclear ambitions of government officials.

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