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by Lawrence S. Wittner

According to recent news reports and as hinted in the president's State of the Union Address, the neocons who dominate the Bush administration are gearing up for another pre-emptive military attack, this time upon Iran. The ostensible reason for such an attack is that the Iranian government is developing nuclear weapons.

In fact, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which regularly inspects Iran's nuclear operations, has not found any signs of nuclear weapons. Although the IAEA has reported that Iran has produced enriched uranium--which can be used for either civilian or military purposes--such production has been halted thanks to a November 2004 Iranian agreement with France, Germany, and Britain. Thus, although it is possible that Iran might produce nuclear weapons some time in the future, this is hardly a certainty. Nor is it clear that the Iranian government has ever planned to produce them.

Ironically, in the midst of this delicate situation, the Bush administration is busy dismantling the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This treaty, signed in 1968 by officials of the United States and of almost all other countries, obligates non-nuclear nations to forgo development of nuclear weapons and nuclear nations to take steps toward nuclear disarmament. The Bush administration reveres the first obligation and wants to scrap the second.

In late December 2004, news accounts quoted an administration official as saying that the final agreement at the NPT review conference in 2000--which commits the declared nuclear weapons states to an "unequivocal undertaking" to abolish nuclear weapons--is a "simply historical document," which does not reflect the drastic changes in the world since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Thus, he said, the Bush administration "no longer supports" all of the thirteen steps toward disarmament outlined in the 2000 agreement and does not view it as "being a road map or binding guideline or anything like that."

For those who have followed the Bush administration's nuclear policy, this position should come as no great surprise. The administration has not only abandoned efforts toward negotiating nuclear arms control and disarmament agreements with other nations, but has withdrawn the United States from the ABM treaty (signed by President Nixon) and refused to support ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (signed by President Clinton).

It has also championed a program of building new U.S. nuclear weapons, including so-called "bunker busters" and "mini-nukes," and of facilitating the resumption of U.S. nuclear testing. Only an unexpected revolt in Congress--led by Representatives David Hobson and Pete Viclosky, the Republican chair and ranking Democrat of the House Energy and Water Appropriations Committee--blocked funding for the Bush administration's proposed new nuclear weapons in 2004. Political analysts expect the administration to make another effort to secure the funding this year.

For the Bush administration and its fans, this evasion of U.S. obligations under the NPT makes perfect sense. The United States, they believe, is a supremely virtuous nation, and nations with whom it has bad relations--such as Iran--are "evil." In line with this belief, the U.S. government has the right to build and use nuclear weapons, while nations it places on its "enemies" list do not.

As might be expected, this assumption does not play nearly as well among government officials in Iran, who seem unlikely to fulfill their part of the NPT agreement if U.S. officials flagrantly renege on theirs. At the very least, the Bush administration is offering them a convenient justification for a policy of building Iranian nuclear weapons.

Other nations have drawn this same conclusion. In the fall of 2004, Helen Clark, the prime minister of New Zealand, warned: "First and foremost we need to keep before us the essential bargain that the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty represents. While we will willingly contribute to non-proliferation and counter-proliferation initiatives, those initiatives should be promoted alongside initiatives to secure binding commitments from those who have nuclear weapons which move us further towards the longer-term goal of nuclear disarmament."

Much the same point was made in early January 2005 by Mohamed ElBaradei, the director of the IAEA. Calling upon all countries to commit themselves to forgo building facilities for uranium enrichment and nuclear reprocessing for the next five years, ElBaradei added: "We should not forget the commitment by the weapons states to move toward nuclear disarmament."

In fact, ElBaradei's evenhanded approach to nuclear issues has angered the Bush administration, which is now working to deny him reappointment as IAEA director.

The responsibility of all nations under the NPT will undoubtedly receive a good deal of discussion at the NPT review conference that will convene at the United Nations this May. Certainly it will be interesting to see how the Bush administration explains the inconsistencies in its nuclear policy.

Unfortunately, by then we may well have another bloody military confrontation on our hands. Like the war in Iraq, it will be sold to us on the basis of the potential threat from a nation possessing weapons of mass destruction. And, also like the war in Iraq, it will be unnecessary--brought on by the arrogance and foolishness of the Bush administration.

This article originated at History News Network. Lawrence S. Wittner is Professor of History at the State University of New York, Albany. His latest book is Toward Nuclear Abolition: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1971 to the Present.

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