Volume 1 | Issue 5 | Article ID 1793 | May 23, 2003

A Revolution in American Nuclear Policy

Jonathan Schell

In a shocking innovation in American nuclear policy, recently disclosed in the Washington Post by military analyst William Arkin, the administration has created and placed on continuous high alert a force whereby the President can launch a pinpoint strike, including a nuclear strike, anywhere on earth with a few hours' notice. The senatorial "nuclear option" was covered extensively, but somehow this actual nuclear option -- a "full-spectrum" capability (in the words of the presidential order) with "precision kinetic (nuclear and conventional) and non-kinetic (elements of space and information operations)" -- was almost entirely ignored.

The order to enable the force, Arkin writes, was given by George W. Bush in January 2003. In July 2004, Gen. Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated to Adm. James Ellis Jr., then-commander of Stratcom, "the President charged you to 'be ready to strike at any moment's notice in any dark corner of the world' [and] that's exactly what you've done." And last fall, Lieut. Gen. Bruce Carlson, commander of the 8th Air Force, stated, "We have the capacity to plan and execute global strikes."

These actions make operational a revolution in US nuclear policy. It was foreshadowed by the Nuclear Posture Review Report of 2002, also widely ignored, which announced nuclear targeting of, among others, China, North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Libya. The review also recommended new facilities for the manufacture of nuclear bombs and the study of an array of new delivery vehicles, including a new ICBM in 2020, a new submarine-launched ballistic missile in 2029, and a new heavy bomber in 2040. The review, in turn, grew out of Bush's broader new military strategy of pre-emptive war, articulated in the 2002 White House document, the National Security Strategy of the United States of America, which states, "We cannot let our enemies strike first." The extraordinary ambition of the Bush policy is suggested by a comment made in a Senate hearing in April by Linton Brooks, head of the National Nuclear Security Administration, who explained that the Defense Secretary wanted "bunker buster" nuclear bombs because "it is unwise for there to be anything that's beyond the reach of US power."

The incorporation of nuclear weapons into the global strike option, casting a new shadow of nuclear danger over the entire planet, raises fundamental questions. Perhaps the most important is why the United States, which now possesses the strongest conventional military forces in the world, feels the need to add to them a new global nuclear threat. The mystery deepens when you reflect that nothing could be more calculated to goad other nations into nuclear proliferation. Could it be that the United States, now routinely called the greatest empire since Rome, simply feels the need to assert its dominance in the nuclear sphere?

History suggests a different explanation. In the past, reliance on nuclear arms has in fact varied inversely with reliance on conventional arms. In the very first weeks of the nuclear age, when the American public was demanding demobilization of US forces in Europe after World War II, the U.S. monopoly on the bomb gave it the confidence to adopt a bold stance in postwar negotiations with the Soviet Union over Europe. The practice of offsetting

conventional weakness with nuclear strength was soon embodied in the policy of "first use" of nuclear weapons, which has remained in effect to this day. The threat of first use under the auspices of the global strike option is indeed the latest incarnation of a policy born at that time.

This compensatory role for nuclear weapons emerged in a new context when, after the protracted, unpopular conventional war in Korea, President Eisenhower adopted the doctrine of nuclear "massive retaliation," intended to prevent limited Communist challenges from ever arising. And it was in reaction to the imbalance between local "peripheral" threats and the world-menacing "massive" nuclear threats designed to contain them that, in the Kennedy years, the pendulum swung back in the direction of conventional arms and a theory of "limited war" to go with them. Meanwhile, nuclear arms were officially assigned the more restricted role of deterring attacks by other nuclear weapons -- the posture of "mutual assured destruction."

Today, though the Cold War is over, the riddle of the relationship between nuclear and conventional force still vexes official minds. Once again, the United States has assigned itself global ambitions. (Then it was containing Communism, now it is stopping "terrorism" and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.) Once again, the United States is fighting a limited war -- the war in Iraq -- and other limited wars are under discussion (against Iran, North Korea, Syria, etc.). And once again, nuclear arms appear to offer an all too tempting alternative. Arkin comments that a prime virtue of the global strike option in the eyes of the Pentagon is that it requires no "boots on the ground." And Everett Dolman, a professor at the Air Force School at Maxwell Air Force Base, recently commented to the San Francisco Chronicle that without space weaponry, "we'd face a Vietnam-style buildup if we wanted to remain a force in the world."
For just as in the 1950s, the boots on the ground are running low. The global New Rome turns out to have exhausted its conventional power holding down just one country, Iraq. But the 2000s are not the 1950s. Eisenhower's overall goal was mainly defensive. He wanted no war, nuclear or conventional, and never came close to ordering a nuclear strike. By contrast, Bush's policy of preventive war is inherently activist and aggressive: The global strike option is not only for deterrence; it is for use.

A clash between the triumphal rhetoric of global domination and the sordid reality of failure in practice lies ahead. The Senate, on the brink of its metaphorical Armageddon, backed down. Would the President, facing defeat of his policies somewhere in the world, do likewise? Or might he actually reach for his nuclear option?

Jonathan Schell, author of The Unconquerable World, is the Nation Institute's Harold Willens Peace Fellow. The Jonathan Schell Reader was recently published by Nation Books. This is a slightly abbreviated version of an article that appeared in The Nation on June 13, 2005. Posted at Japan Focus on May 28, 2003.