

Targets of Opportunity

By Hans Kristensen

IN 1978, IN AN ATTEMPT TO SHORE up support for the still-shaky Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Carter administration issued a “negative security assurance.” It said, in effect, that if a non-nuclear state attacked the United States or one of its allies, the United States would not fight back with nuclear weapons—unless the attacking state was already in bed with a nuclear weapon power.

But then, not everyone pays much attention to matters as trivial as national policy. In 1995, for instance, the ink was barely dry on a reaffirmation of that pledge when the Pentagon updated a nuclear plan to target certain Third World nations, even if they were *not* in league with a nuclear power.

The Carter/Clinton pledge was simply swept away by military planners determined to protect and expand the role of nuclear weapons, a strategy pursued since the early 1990s, according to documents recently declassified and released under the Freedom of Information Act. As a result, there is a fundamental disharmony between declared policy and U.S. nuclear warriors’ activities that contradicts and undermines U.S. nonproliferation objectives in the post-Cold War world.

In the spring of 1995, the signatories to the NPT were scheduled to determine whether the treaty should be made permanent or whether it should merely be extended for a finite number of years.

How nuclear planners found new targets for old weapons.

The United States pushed hard for an “indefinite” extension. In April 1995, as part of a deal to get that extension, the Clinton administration renewed the 1978 pledge. But eight months later, in December 1995, the Pentagon’s “Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations” (also known as “Joint Pub 3-12”) was issued. It made a hash of the restated we-won’t-use-nuclear-weapons pledge.

In fact, nuclear bureaucrats had been quietly slicing and dicing the pledge for several years. Planners first expanded nuclear targeting to include regional troublemakers armed with “weapons of mass destruction” in an earlier version of the document, which emerged in April 1993. But when the plan was made public, it caused a scandal. How could the United States promise not to use nuclear weapons against NPT members, but simultaneously approve a doctrine advocating just that? The Pentagon hurried to downplay the document’s importance.

When Thomas Graham, the head of the U.S. delegation, was asked about the apparent contradiction a few weeks before the NPT Review and Extension Conference, he took cover behind a technicality—the U.S.-Russian

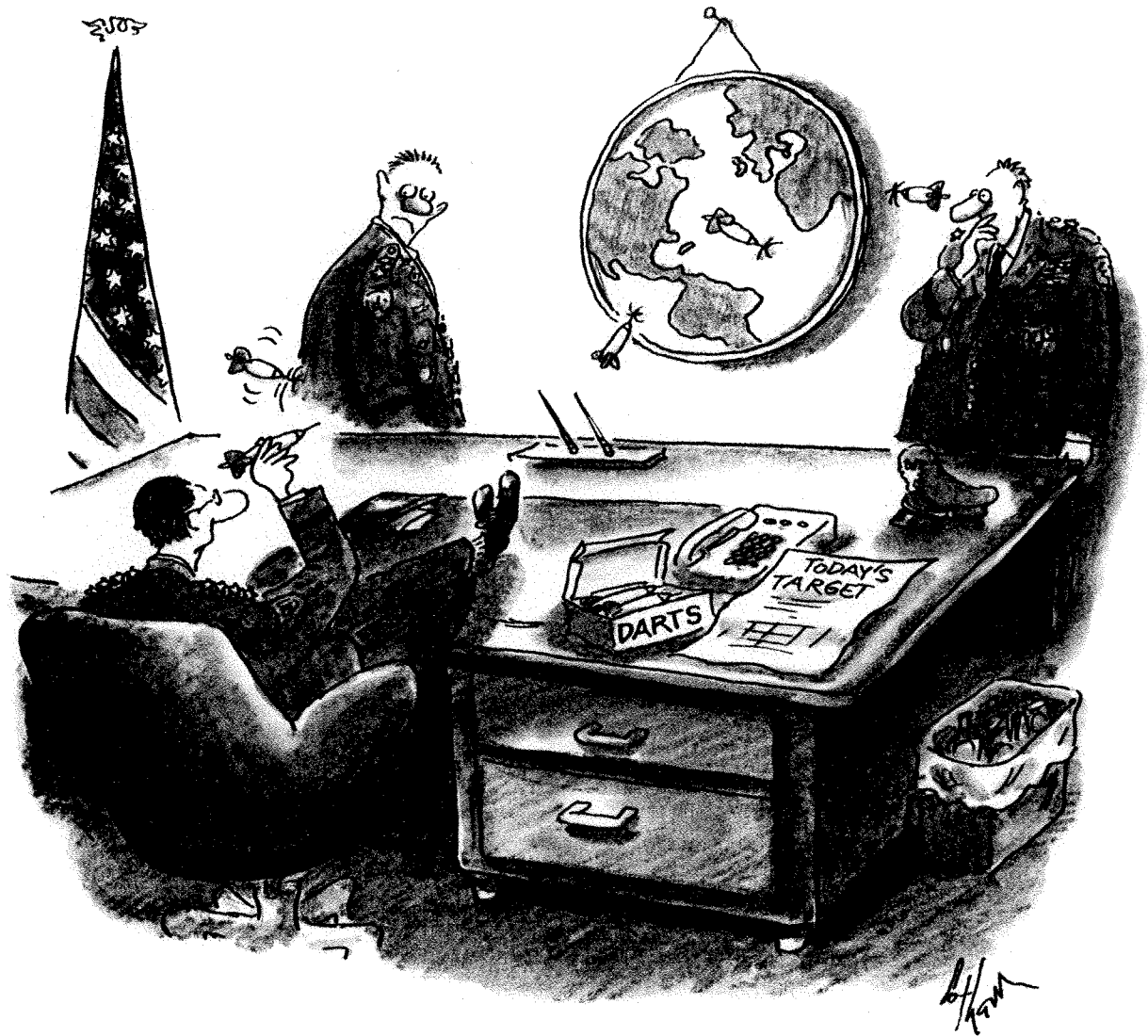
agreement not to store target data in missile guidance systems. “As of May 31, 1994, no country is targeted by the strategic forces of the United States,” Graham told a U.N. press conference. Similarly, Mitchell Wallerstein, a deputy assistant secretary for counterproliferation policy, told *Air Force Magazine* in October 1995 that “the United States is not looking to retarget our missiles.”

But the planners at the Joint Chiefs continued putting the final touches on their updated nuclear doctrine expanding U.S. nuclear targeting to non-nuclear countries.

STRATCOM signs on

In 1989, the Berlin wall fell and the Warsaw Pact dissolved. It looked as if the traditional role of U.S. nuclear weapons—countering the Soviet “threat”—might evaporate as well. Gen. Lee Butler, then the head of Strategic Command (STRATCOM), told an Air Power History Symposium in September 1992: “As early as October 1989, we abandoned global war with the Soviet Union as the principle planning and programming paradigm for the U.S. armed forces.” The Pentagon undertook a “complete revisit of nucle-

Hans Kristensen is an independent military and foreign affairs analyst and a member of the Danish Defense Commission. He lives in San Francisco.



ar weapons policy and the SIOP [the Single Integrated Operational Plan] target base,” reducing the number of targets from 10,000 to around 2,500.

What to do with the weapons that were no longer needed? The planners began to shift their attention to “a new series of threats.”¹

The shift was already evident in the Joint Chiefs’ “Military Net Assessment” of March 1990, which cited “increasingly capable Third World threats” to justify the stockpiles of both strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons.² Then, in June 1990, testifying before the Senate Appropriations Committee, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney made the first high-level statement that the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction was a rationale for

keeping U.S. nuclear weapons.

Just after the Gulf War—and following the disclosure of Iraq’s clandestine nuclear weapons program—Cheney issued the top-secret “Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy,” which formally tasked the military with planning nuclear operations against potential proliferators.³

Military planners went to work. The 1991 Joint Military Net Assessment suggested that non-strategic nuclear weapons “could assume a broader role globally in response to the proliferation of nuclear capability among Third World nations.”

“The possibility that Third World nations may acquire nuclear capabilities,” Cheney wrote in the Defense Department’s annual report in Febru-

ary 1992, “has led the department to make adjustments to nuclear and strategic defense forces and to the policies that guide them.” Nuclear strategy, he added, “must now also encompass potential instabilities that could arise when states or leaders perceive they have little to lose from employing weapons of mass destruction.”

One “adjustment” involved the 1993 SIOP, which went into effect four months early, on June 1, 1992.⁴ Another was a rewrite of Annex C of the “Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan,” which contains the targeting and damage criteria for the use of nuclear weapons. The new Annex C was completed in the spring of 1993.

Before that revision was complete, General Butler told the *New York*

Times that “our focus now is not just the former Soviet Union, but any potentially hostile country that has or is seeking weapons of mass destruction.” Butler established the Joint Intelligence Center “to assess from STRATCOM’s operational perspective the growing threat represented by the global proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.”⁵

The “living SIOP”

But STRATCOM soon found that the existing nuclear war machine was ill-suited for wars in the Third World. Cold War hardware and software had been “configured for the Northern Hemisphere only.” Key targeting technology had “no capability south of the equator,” according to a STRATCOM study from 1992. STRATCOM recommended the development of a “global capability” by the late 1990s.⁶

What was needed was “adaptive planning,” a term since adopted by NATO as well. Adaptive planning would allow weapons that once had exclusive targets to be quickly retargeted against regions inside and outside Russia. In December 1992, STRATCOM formed the Strategic Planning Study Group “to develop a flexible, globally focused, war-planning process.” This group developed the concept of a “living SIOP”—a real-time nuclear war plan that could respond instantaneously to war-fighting commands. During peacetime, the system would be capable of making automatic target changes daily. A complete attack plan for a new enemy could be readied in a matter of months.

General Butler described the new concept in a May 11, 1993 interview with *Jane’s Defence Weekly*: “Adaptive planning” was designed to respond to “spontaneous threats which are more likely to emerge in a new international environment unconstrained by the Super Power stand-off.” The plans would use “generic targets, rather than identifying specific scenarios and specific enemies.” Adaptive planning would offer “unique solutions, tailored to generic regional dangers involving weapons of mass destruction.”

The National Academy of Sciences recently recommended that adaptive planning be used to alleviate the rigidity of the Cold War-era SIOP. But it is adaptive planning itself that gives nuclear weapons a broader role against chemical, biological, and radiological weapons, with nuclear responses of a more limited nature and weapons that result in less collateral damage. Adaptive planning grants nuclear deterrence an aura of acceptability, and it is a central element of “the living SIOP.”

The “living SIOP,” based on “continuous analysis of guidance, forces, and target changes,” was approved within weeks instead of years in July 1993, for implementation on April 1, 1994.⁷ Its birth coincided with the Joint Chiefs’ completion of the first version of Pub 3-12.

Another review

Meanwhile, the Nuclear Posture Review, described as the most ambitious study of U.S. nuclear weapons and nuclear planning in decades, was initiated in 1993.⁸ With the Cold War over, it was widely believed that the review would recommend deep cuts in the nuclear stockpile.

STRATCOM was concerned about that. For instance, STRATCOM officials worried that Assistant Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, who was in charge of the review process, had “negative feelings” about nuclear weapons. Background information on Carter suggested “a less-than-favorable long-term outlook for nuclear weapons.” He might even favor “complete denuclearization” over the long term—not popular thoughts to a nuclear command. Persuading policy makers that nuclear weapons should play a “wider role,” STRATCOM feared, would be “an uphill battle.”⁹

But as it turned out, Carter did not rock the boat. When the review was completed in September 1994, little had changed. The Pentagon announced that it had changed the way it thought about nuclear weapons and reduced their role, although it reaffirmed nuclear deterrence and endorsed the continuation of the nuclear

triad. Moreover, it granted nuclear weapons prominent roles in counterproliferation scenarios—several of which were deleted from the public version of the report.¹⁰

The “Silver Books”

With doctrine and policy in favor of expanding the nuclear role, it was now time for planning. STRATCOM assisted regional commands in drawing up plans for nuclear war with regional troublemakers.

Butler wanted STRATCOM to have overall responsibility—to move “firmly into the counterproliferation mission.” In an October 1993 white paper, STRATCOM argued that it already had the necessary experience—“countering weapons of mass destruction in the context of deterring their use by the former Soviet Union.”¹¹ STRATCOM’s next targets should be the more “undetectable” leaders such as Qaddafi and Saddam Hussein.¹²

STRATCOM began developing the “Silver Books”—plans for military strikes against facilities in “rogue nations,” including Iran, Iraq, Libya, and North Korea. “Silver” stood for “Strategic Installation List of Vulnerability Effects and Results,” and the project involved “the planning associated with a series of ‘silver bullet’ missions aimed at counterproliferation.”¹³ Targets included nuclear, chemical, biological, and command and control installations.

The Weapons Subcommittee of STRATCOM’s Strategic Advisory Group began analyzing various target sets and weapons capabilities in early 1994, emphasizing mechanisms that could defeat chemical and biological targets as well as buried targets. The subcommittee compared the effectiveness of conventional, unconventional, and nuclear attack on six potential targets.¹⁴

By late 1994, STRATCOM had prepared a Silver Book for European Command, and it was developing a prototype for Pacific Command. STRATCOM briefed European Command staff during a November 1994 visit, and it later briefed Pacific and Central Commands and the Joint Staff

Roles and Functions Working Group.¹⁵

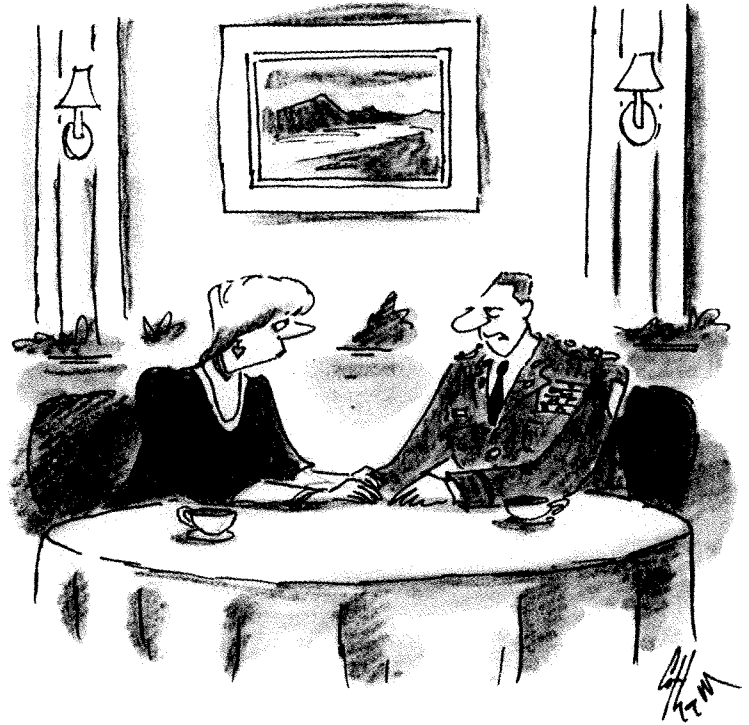
Reactions were mixed. General Butler and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell wanted nuclear planning and authority focused in one command, removing nuclear autonomy from European, Central, and Pacific Commands. Centralizing all nuclear planning under one hat, they felt, would increase control and stability, and help prevent accidents or unauthorized launch. But the regional commanders did not like the idea of STRATCOM taking overall control. As 1994 drew to a close, it was increasingly apparent that STRATCOM was not going to get the overall counterproliferation mission. In early 1995, the Joint Chiefs ordered STRATCOM to drop the Silver Books project—but regional nuclear war planning continued under other names.

Target: Third World

The expansion of the nuclear role was probably aided by the U.S. decision to eliminate its own chemical and biological weapons. In the cynical logic of deterrence, removing those weapons from the U.S. arsenal meant that if rogue nations were to use them, the United States no longer had a tit-for-tat response. The only “big stick” left in the U.S. arsenal—apart from overwhelming conventional superiority—was nuclear weapons.

In June 1994, while the Nuclear Posture Review was being prepared, the Strategic Advisory Group recommended in a white paper on the future of nuclear forces that nuclear weapons should be assigned the job of deterring chemical and biological weapons:

“Those who argue that biological and chemical threats can always be safely deterred without requiring the last resort of U.S. nuclear forces must bear the burden of proof for their argument. Until they make a compelling case that nuclear force is not necessary for successful deterrence, it is not in the nation’s interest to forswear the uncertainty as to how we would respond to clear and dangerous threats of other weapons of mass destruction. ‘Measured ambiguity’ is still a powerful tool



“I’ll be honest, Marjorie. I really miss the Cold War.”

for the President trying to deter an intransigent despot.”¹⁶

General Butler’s successor, Adm. Henry Chiles, later commended the advisory group for the white paper, which, he said, was “particularly effective” in preparing the Nuclear Posture Review.¹⁹

Throughout 1995 and 1996, the advisory group continued to advance the role of nuclear weapons in deterring weapons of mass destruction. In July 1995, only two months after the NPT conference at which the Clinton administration reiterated its pledge not to use nuclear weapons, a STRATCOM advisory group subcommittee completed its in-depth review of deterring Third World proliferators. The review provided terms of reference to be used by other subcommittees as a baseline “to expand the concept of deterrence of [weapons of mass destruction].”¹⁵

This review, “Essentials of Post-Cold War Deterrence,” bluntly criticized the president’s pledge. It was “easy to see the difficulty we have caused ourselves,” the review said, “by putting forward declaratory policies

such as the ‘negative security assurances’ which were put forward to encourage nations to sign up for the nonproliferation treaty.”¹⁹ The review warned that “if we put no effort into deterring these threats, they will be ‘undeterrable’ by definition.”

The review recommended a policy of ambiguity, using as an example President George Bush’s warning to Saddam Hussein in January 1991 not to use chemical weapons. And the planners added another twist to the equation, warning that in threatening nuclear destruction, the United States should not appear too rational or cool-headed. If “some elements . . . appear potentially ‘out of control,’” it would create and reinforce fears and doubts within the minds of an adversary’s decision-makers. “That the U.S. may become irrational and vindictive if its vital interests are attacked should be part of the national persona we project.”

The penalty for using weapons of mass destruction should include not only military defeat, but “the threat of even worse consequences.” On the other hand, it should not result in too



many civilian casualties. Unless the United States itself were threatened, it “does not require the ‘ultimate deterrent’—that a nation’s citizens must pay with their lives for failure to stop their national leaders from undertaking aggression.” Fear of “national extinction” should be enough.

Iran became the first test case for the new doctrine, with STRATCOM performing an in-depth study in the fall of 1995 of how to target nuclear and chemical targets in Iran with U.S. nuclear weapons. As a party to the NPT, Iran was one of the countries President Clinton had pledged only a few months earlier not to use nuclear weapons against. The planners at STRATCOM, however, found that further coordination with Central Command was necessary before they could complete the study, so Admiral Chiles asked the planners to apply the new deterrence theory to North Korea instead.²⁰ North Korea is also a party to the NPT.

In February 1996, regional nuclear counterproliferation was formally enshrined in “Doctrine for Joint Theater Nuclear Operations (Joint Pub 3-12.1),” which “translated” overall doctrine for use in regional scenarios in Europe, the Middle East, and the Ko-

rean Peninsula. Third World proliferation dangers had been transformed to “the preeminent threat.” The targets of deterrence were to be short-, medium-, and intermediate-range missiles capable of carrying nuclear, biological, or chemical warheads.²¹

But adding Third World targets to nuclear war plans began to collide with the demand to reduce nuclear arsenals. If the nuclear arsenal were reduced further, there might not be enough weapons to target Russia, China, and the half dozen or so identified regional troublemakers. So the subcommittee also reviewed the pros and cons of reducing the number of nuclear warheads below the level set by START II. The subcommittee recommended against deeper cuts, partly to maintain enough nuclear weapons for their new and “broader base” of targets.²²

Rapid response

Adding Third World nations to the target pool also meant upgrading weapon systems. That upgrading is already in progress. The navy is installing a system to enable Trident submarines to “quickly, accurately, and reliably retarget missiles” and “allow timely and re-

liable processing of an increased number of targets.”²³ Although it was originally conceived as a way to allow Trident submarines to attack dispersed Soviet SS-24 rail-mobile and SS-25 road-mobile ICBMs, this new system will add capabilities against new or mobile targets globally.

In a similar development, the air force is spending more than \$4 billion on the “Rapid Execution and Combat Targeting” or “REACT” system, which will upgrade Minuteman IIIs for “rapid message processing [and] rapid re-targeting.” When completed early in the next century, the program will “upgrade Minuteman to Peacekeeper-class accuracy . . . to hold at risk the hardest enemy targets.”²⁴

The air force is also adding conventional capabilities to B-2 bombers. Although it was originally conceived as a purely anti-Soviet Union weapon, the B-2 needs a conventional capability to justify its expense. It has also been designated as the carrier of the Pentagon’s new bomb, the B61-11.²⁵ With enhanced earth-penetrating capabilities and low yield, the B-2 with B61-11 bombs is the likely weapon of choice for nuclear counterproliferation scenarios against rogue nations.

The “Duck”

As reported in the May/June 1997 *Bulletin* [“New Bomb, No Mission,” by Greg Mello], the B61-11 program began in October 1993. One month earlier, the Pentagon had completed a more general Defense Department assessment, the “Bottom Up Review,” which also shifted the focus of strategic forces from the former Soviet Union to regional scenarios in which rogue nations were armed with various weapons of mass destruction. The request for the new bomb was generated by Harold Smith, then assistant to the secretary of defense for atomic energy, who asked the air force to study the replacement of the aging B53 gravity bomb with a stockpile weapon.

The idea of building new nuclear weapons was not very popular in the early 1990s. After it was disclosed in 1992 and 1993 that the nuclear weap-

ons laboratories were designing mini-nukes specifically tailored for use against rogue nations, Congress banned "research and development which could lead to the production by the United States of a new low-yield nuclear weapon, including a precision low-yield nuclear weapon."

As a result, the B61-11—which was nicknamed "the Duck" because its flight characteristics were identical to those of the B61-7 bomb—was not submitted to the Nuclear Weapons Council for approval. Frank Miller, the assistant secretary of defense for international security policy, was concerned that Congress would not support it.

But after the Nuclear Policy Review recommended replacing the B53—and after November 1994, when the elections produced a change in committee chairman to one more favorably inclined to reopening the nuclear weapons production line—Miller "re-energized" the project "before Congress changed again."

Once the Defense Department was convinced that it was time to act, the project was approved in February 1995, briefings in Congress followed, with authorization in July, and in August 1995—less than a year after the congressional election, and only three months after the conference at which the United States had restated its commitment to pursue nuclear disarmament—the B61-11 program was under way. By the end of 1996, the new bomb entered the stockpile.

And in the pipeline . . .

The B61-11 is not the only nuclear weapon "modification" in the pipeline. Scientists in the Energy Department's "Core Research and Advanced Technology Program Element Plans" are busily researching "concept design studies, arising out of the experience during the Gulf War that indicate potential military utility for types of nuclear weapons not currently in the stockpile."²⁶

Some of this work is taking place at Sandia National Laboratory, where scientists are "examining changes to other

B61 designs to add additional value to those systems for our military customers." One of these efforts is the "Bomb Impact Optimization System" or "BIOS" program, which is investigating the feasibility of "modifying a B61 payload for use in a guided glide bomb for aircraft delivery against defended target complexes." Efforts include analysis, design, model fabrication and testing, and ground and flight testing of a functional prototype.²⁷

Other exotic design concepts stem from the emphasis on underground and deeply buried targets and the concern to limit collateral damage from the use of nuclear weapons—all features central to the counterproliferation mission.

The Defense Special Weapons Agency's 1997 projects include adjusting electromagnetic pulse (EMP) data for nuclear weapons to allow war planners to assess the damage that would be "inflicted by nuclear weapons' EMP effects." The project will also investigate possible design modification and delivery methods that could "limit or minimize collateral damage." Models for using EMP to knock out hardened targets will be developed to "devise a new tool for PC-based weapon lethality prediction and target damage assessment."²⁸

It is too early to predict whether any of these exotic designs will mature into actual nuclear weapons. But the work is a clear indication that the new weapons machine is still at work. And the expansion of U.S. nuclear doctrine is a prominent driver in justifying that work.

Libya: The first case?

Even before the B61-11 came on line, Libya was identified as its first potential target. "We could not take [the alleged chemical plant at Tarhunah] out of commission using strictly conventional weapons," Assistant Defense Secretary Smith complained in April 1996. The B61-11 "would be the nuclear weapon of choice."

Like the disclosure of the Silver Books, these remarks about targeting Libya got widespread attention, and

the Pentagon quickly retreated from them. "Any implication that we would use nuclear weapons preemptively against this plant is just wrong," said Assistant Defense Secretary Kenneth Bacon. Still, said Bacon, Washington would not rule out using nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear, chemical, or biological attack on the United States or its allies.

Libya is a party to the nonproliferation treaty. It signed the treaty and a nuclear safeguards agreement in 1975. It is therefore by international nonproliferation standards a non-nuclear member of the NPT. Under the terms of the 1978 pledge, as renewed in 1995, it falls within the group of nations that the United States had pledged not to attack with nuclear weapons. But Libya, like Iran and North Korea, is a target nonetheless.

The search for new targets

In the words of the Defense Special Weapons Agency, the international environment "has now evolved from a 'weapon-rich environment' to a 'target-rich environment.'"

In the old days, "weapons of mass destruction" referred to nuclear weapons, because they were the weapons that could destroy en masse. But as the Cold War came to an end, and coalition forces expelled Iraq from Kuwait, the discovery of Iraq's clandestine nuclear weapons program propelled the idea of proliferation to a new level. Iraq's use of chemical-capable Scud missiles against Israel and Saudi Arabia, and allegations of Libyan chemical weapons ambitions a few months later elevated "weapons of mass destruction" to the new threat to international security. With the former Soviet threat rapidly fading into the background, U.S. military planners eagerly grabbed this new enemy and incorporated it into nuclear planning.

When the Joint Chiefs published the first Joint Nuclear Doctrine in 1993, its "Terms of Definitions" did not explain what "weapons of mass destruction" meant. But the text of the document talked about three types: nuclear, biological, and chemical. The updated

1995 doctrine, however, clearly defines weapons of mass destruction as "weapons that are capable of a higher order of destruction and/or of being used in such a manner as to destroy large numbers of people." Moreover, the new document adds "radiological weapons" to the list.²⁹

The ramifications of an ever-expanding target list are endless. Adding radiological weapons to the nuclear doctrine essentially means that if someone puts a bucket of nuclear waste on top of an old missile and tosses it into a city or onto our forward-deployed troops, U.S. nuclear doctrine defines the act as qualifying for a nuclear response. We may all agree that this is unlikely, but the inclusion of "radiological weapons" is a worrisome addition to the ever-expanding pool of post-Cold War nuclear targets.

Where does it end? So far the

post-Cold War trend is that any time a crude new weapon emerges that could possibly qualify for the Pentagon's checklist, it will be added to U.S. nuclear planning as a matter of routine.

But the implications deserve a little more debate and consideration than that. For along with inclusion comes actual nuclear planning. Adding radiological weapons to the list means that somewhere in the basement of STRATCOM Headquarters at Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska, as well as at Regional Command Headquarters in Europe, the Middle East and the Pacific, someone has been given the order to investigate where the targets are and which nuclear warheads on U.S. missiles, submarines, bombers, attack submarines, and dual-capable aircraft should be designated to insure their destruction.

Who is in charge of U.S. counter-

proliferation policy? Does the State Department know that the Pentagon is incorporating non-nuclear NPT countries into U.S. nuclear targeting? And is President Clinton aware that as he pledged in 1995 not to attack non-nuclear NPT countries with nuclear weapons, STRATCOM planned to do so anyway? Probably not, but the nuclear planning that goes on at STRATCOM is clearly out of tune with the nonproliferation message the Clinton administration is trying to convey to the world.

If the White House wants its nonproliferation efforts to produce results in the long term, and the commitment to nuclear disarmament and a reduced role for nuclear weapons to be more than rhetoric, then it is time for someone to pay a visit to the Pentagon before the proliferation hype pushes post-Cold War nuclear planning too far in the wrong direction. ■

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