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Voting against nuclear war with Iran

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The outcome of the November election is likely to determine whether or not the US goes to war with Iran before President Bush leaves office. For multiple reasons recounted below such war will with very high probability include the US use of tactical nuclear weapons. In casting or not casting a vote in November, each of us will contribute to determine events of potential consequences immensely larger than local taxes, illegal immigration or even the Iraq war. Crossing the nuclear threshold in a war against Iran will trigger a chain reaction that in weeks, years or decades could lead with high probability to global nuclear war and widespread destruction of life on the planet.

10/16/06 "Information Clearing House"

The Bush administration has radically redefined America's nuclear use policy [1], [2]: US nuclear weapons are no longer regarded as qualitatively different from conventional weapons. Many actions of the administration in recent years strongly suggest that an imminent US nuclear use is being planned for, and this was confirmed by Bush's explicit refusal to rule out a US nuclear strike against Iran. We have all been put on notice. The fact that North Korea is now a nuclear country does not change the agenda - quite the contrary.

There were fears that the US would use nuclear weapons in the Iraq attack [1], [2], which did not materialize, hence some will argue that the current fears of nuclear use against Iran may not materialize either. Some will argue that there were many other occasions in the past 60 years where the US appeared to come close to using nuclear weapons and did not [1], [2], that the threshold for using nuclear weapons always was and remains extraordinarily high, and that the US nuclear "saber rattling" is just trickery to scare our opponents ("madman theory"). These arguments are wrong. The US is much closer than it has ever been since Nagasaki to using nuclear weapons again. This year for the first time in its history the American Physical Society, representing 40,000 members of the profession that created nuclear weapons, issued a statement of deep concern on this matter: "The American Physical Society is deeply concerned about the possible use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states and for pre-emptive counter-proliferation purposes".

In the case of Iraq, our adversary was so weak that there was no way a US nuclear weapon use could have been justified in the eyes of the world. Iran is different: it possesses missiles that could strike US forces in Iraq and the Persian Gulf as well as Israeli cities, and a large conventional army. 150,000 US soldiers in Iraq will be at great risk if war with Iran erupts, and Americans will support a nuclear

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strike on Iran once the administration creates a situation where it can argue that such action will save a large number of American or allies' lives.

In previous US wars, nuclear use did not occur because it carried an unacceptably high risk of triggering a nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union or China [1], [2], [3]. Because North Korea appears to have now a nuclear deterrent, and because of the possibility that China could get involved, there is no danger that the US will attack North Korea. In fact, Bush will use the fact that North Korea has joined the nuclear club, and charges that he was not "tough enough" on North Korea, as an argument to "justify" attacking Iran before it achieves that status, notwithstanding the fact that unlike North Korea Iran has stated no intention to follow that path nor is there any evidence that it is doing so. The nuclearization of North Korea only helps the plan to nuke Iran, which is why the administration did everything it could to encourage it.

No nuclear country is likely to intervene nor threaten to intervene when the US uses nuclear weapons against Iran, hence there is no military deterrent to such use. The US has now achieved vast nuclear superiority, and is about to demonstrate to the world that its 5-trillion nuclear arsenal is not "unusable".

The US Nuclear Posture

The Bush administration has made sweeping changes in the nuclear weapons policy of the United States during the past 5 years, singlehandedly without consulting Congress nor the American people [1], [2], [3]. Under the name of "New Triad", the key concept is "integration" of conventional and nuclear forces. Don't be fooled by the rhetoric stating that it means that some missions previously assigned to nuclear forces will be taken over by conventional forces. What it really means is "a seamless web of capabilities": there is no longer a sharp line, a sharp distinction, between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons.

Why should there be such a sharp line? Because, as a newly set up website from the Department of Defense kindly explains, "weight for weight, the energy produced by a nuclear explosion is millions of times more powerful than a conventional explosion". Consequently, it shouldn't be difficult to understand, even for a Yale C-student, that a nuclear conflict that gets out of hand will take a million times more lives than a conventional conflict. The last global conventional conflict took over 50 million lives.

What is the benefit of making such policy declarations? The US has never ruled out the use of nuclear weapons, and it carries a cost to remind other countries of this fact, since it provides an incentive for others to develop nuclear capability. There is no benefit in openly announcing such ominous policy changes, unless the intention is to put them into

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practice. Just like Bush announced in 2002 that "the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively" in preparation for the "preemptive" attack on Iraq.

The aforementioned Department of Defense website on "nuclear matters" states that "there are a number of arms control agreements restricting the deployment and use of nuclear weapons, but there is no conventional or customary international law that prohibits nations from employing nuclear weapons in armed conflict". That statement defines the "rules" by which the U.S. government plays. No matter that it ignores (and the website's list of "arms control agreements" also doesn't mention it) the "negative security assurance" issued by the US in 1978 and reaffirmed in 1995 promising not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states. Nor that it ignores the 1996 ruling of the International Court of Justice.

The reason the changes in declaratory policy were made is to gauge public opinion, and to prepare the public for the implementation of this policy. Because reaction to these radical statements [1], [2], [3], [4] unfortunately has been rather muted, the administration will be able to claim that the American people by and large have embraced the new nuclear doctrine of "integration" of nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities" and approve of the use of nuclear weapons when they provide "the most efficient use of force". The November vote may be your last chance to disagree.

The Rumsfeld "downsizing" transformation

The changes in nuclear doctrine did not occur in a vacuum. They were accompanied by a strong push by the White House to develop new and more usable nuclear weapons, and they are intimately tied and go hand in hand with Rumsfeld's "transformation" of the military [1]. The overarching goal of this transformation is "downsizing" [1], [2], [3], [4], [5]. What Rumsfeld did as CEO of Searle, he set out to do for the US military.

As Time Magazine reported in its Aug. 20, 1945 issue right after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, "One hundred and twenty-three planes, each bearing a single atomic bomb, would carry as much destructive power as all the bombs (2,453,595 tons) dropped by the Allies on Europe during the war". And this was before hydrogen bombs. To the extent that the US military will be able to replace conventional weapons by nuclear weapons to carry out its missions, it will have achieved the ultimate "downsizing". That in a nutshell is the key to Rumsfeld's "transformation of the military", everything else is window-dressing.

The principal vehicle to achieve this transformation is the radical redefinition of the mission of USSTRATCOM, one of the nine U.S. Unified Combatant Commands. Before Rumsfeld, STRATCOM's sole mission was nuclear deterrence and if necessary the use of nuclear weapons. Since 2001,

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"USSTRATCOM' nuclear focus broadened considerably with the latest Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)". Now it is a "global integrator charged with the missions of full-spectrum global strike...", and provides "a range of options, both nuclear and non-nuclear, relevant to the threat and military operations". And it is in particular "the lead Combatant Command for integration and synchronization of DoD-wide efforts in combating weapons of mass destruction". A supporting role will be played by the expanded USSOCOM, US Special Operations Command, providing Rumsfeld with convenient "intelligence" and covert operations capabilities.

The new nuclear doctrine is the software, the new USSTRATCOM is the hardware, and Rumsfeld is the driver, for the "downsizing" program that is about to be launched. Brace yourself.

There have been many voices across the political spectrum calling for Rumsfeld's resignation for the botched Iraq war [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], yet he "retains the full confidence" of Bush. Why? Because Rumsfeld cannot be fired until he demolishes the "nuclear taboo" barrier, by detonating a small tactical nuclear weapon against a US enemy. The US military is reluctant to even consider the use of nuclear weapons against Iran, because it would provoke "an outcry over what would be the first use of a nuclear weapon in a conflict since Nagasaki". Only after a small tactical nuclear weapons strike against Natanz or another Iranian facility will such a barrier no longer exist for future US nuclear threats and uses, and Rumsfeld's transformation will be a fait accompli.

Why is "downsizing" the military so important to the PNAC crowd? Because the American public has no stomach for a draft nor large losses of American military personnel. If it becomes possible to wage war "on the cheap", without loss of American life, and in the process we can lower the price of oil and spread "liberty" across the world, opposition will be muted. Public opinion on the Iraq war was not turned by the enormous number of Iraqi lives lost (of which there isn't even an effort to keep a count), it is only affected by the number of American lives lost.

How it will happen

"The decision as to the employment of atomic weapons in the event of war is to be made by the Chief Executive when he considers such decision to be required" according to NSC 30 from 1948. According to the Goldwater-Nichols Act, the chain of command flows from the President through the Secretary of Defense to the geographic combatant commanders. If Gen. John Abizaid (CENTCOM commander) or Gen. James Cartwright (STRATCOM commander) ask authorization from President Bush to use nuclear weapons, following the guidelines in the Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations, what will Bush's response be? As he often repeats, "I'm going to be listening to the people that know what they're talking about, and that's the commanders on the ground in Iraq. They'll make the decisions". The commanders on the ground will be driven by what they

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perceive to be the immediate military necessity, without regard to the larger issues such as the survival of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Congress will not be asked in advance to authorize the Iran war. Congress has already declared, in passing H.R.6198, that Iran should be held accountable "for its threatening behavior" (which merely consists in Iran's refusal to give up its rights under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty). The Iran war is likely to start with selected bombing of a few Iranian facilities. Recall that on October 3rd, 2002, over 5 months before the US invasion of Iraq, we learned that "Coalition forces this morning struck an Iraqi air defense center after a coalition plane in the area dropping leaflets was fired upon, defense officials said". On December 16, 1998, Clinton informed the American people that "Earlier today, I ordered America's armed forces to strike military and security targets in Iraq. They are joined by British forces. Their mission is to attack Iraq's nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs and its military capacity to threaten its neighbors". Neither of these operations, nor many other US military operations, were done with Congressional authorization.

Bush will threaten Iran with a massive attack if it responds to such a bombing. Iran will certainly respond, and Bush will proclaim that this constitutes Iranian "aggression" against the US, and that Iran has "chosen" war. It will be less farfetched than in the case of Iraq, where Bush stated shortly before the US invasion "war is upon us because Saddam Hussein has made that choice" (speech of March 6, 2003), and as the US was about to attack on March 17, 2003 "Should Saddam Hussein choose confrontation, the American people can know that every measure has been taken to avoid war". Once war with Iran has started, Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and their hand-picked nuclear advisors will find plenty of convenient "surprising military developments" to seize on to "justify" the use of nuclear weapons.

Consequences

The nuclear weapons that the administration is planning to use against Iran are low yield earth penetrating weapons expected to cause "reduced collateral damage". Their real purpose is not to destroy facilities that are too deep underground to be destroyed by conventional weapons: it is primarily to erase the nuclear taboo, and secondarily to shock-and-awe Iran into surrender.

Of course the potentially disastrous consequences of this action cannot be overestimated. Once the US has used its nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear country signatory of the NPT, the NPT will fall apart. Many more countries will strive to develop and test nuclear weapons, overtly or covertly, as North Korea has just done. With no longer a nuclear taboo many more countries will feel entitled to use their nuclear weapons in aggression against or to defend against aggression from

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nuclear and non-nuclear adversaries. Military conflicts inevitably lead to escalation, and they usually end only when one side prevails. That is not how a global nuclear conflict will end.

If the US attacks Iran and does not use nuclear weapons, it will incur military losses that will vastly outweigh any benefit of such war. If there is no Iran war, the Bush presidency will be remembered predominantly for the disastrous Iraq war. Crossing the nuclear threshold will overshadow all other events of the Bush presidency. To the (however unlikely) extent that it results in an advantage to America, Bush's achievement could conceivably be hailed by future generations. The "rational" choice for the administration is clear.

Like desperate gamblers in a losing streak, Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld have nothing to gain and everything to lose by not attacking Iran with nuclear weapons.

Why the November vote matters

On November 7th, 33 Senate seats and all 435 House seats will be contested. There are many reasons why even Republicans may wish that one or both Houses are won by Democrats, and the prospect of nuclear war should be a dominant one.

The President can legally order the use of nuclear weapons under any circumstance without asking Congress. However, Congress could block the authority of the President to order the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon countries by passing legislation under Article I, Sect. 8, Clause 14 of the Constitution to "make rules for the government and regulation" of the Armed Forces. If Congress passed such a law (see an example for a bill here), it would in practice also impede a conventional attack on Iran. Congress may also find other ways to derail a presidential push towards using nuclear weapons, for example by demanding that the Administration publicly discloses plans or preparatory moves such as deployment of nuclear weapons in the Persian Gulf. Which Congress is more likely to do this, a Republican or a Democratic one?

Only Democratic congressmembers, however weakly, have questioned the wisdom of the new US nuclear weapons policies [1], [2], [3]. Not a single Republican in Congress has, nor have they questioned the fact that the nuclear option against Iran is "on the table". This is not to say that Republican candidates would necessarily approve of the use of nuclear weapons against Iran, in fact many if not most are likely to oppose it. And some Democratic candidates may be more hawkish than Republicans in regard to Iran [1], [2], [3]. However, the principle of "party discipline" applies to both Republicans and Democrats. And the administration that is planning to use nuclear weapons against Iran is Republican.

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No matter how wise, moral, resolute, and independent of Bush a Republican candidate appears to be, when push comes to shove he/she is more likely than not to vote the party line. In the current Congress, as reported by the non-partisan Hill Monitor website, Republican senators voted for the White House position 92.57% of the time, Democratic senators only 54.56%. In the House, the respective numbers are 88.50% and 40.99%. On the October 2002 vote requested by the White House authorizing the Iraq attack, a single Republican senator opposed it, versus 21 Democrats; in the House, only 6 Republicans opposed it, versus 126 Democrats.

A US attack on Iran will lead to the US use of nuclear weapons and will be disastrous for America. It is the path that Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld, with the advice of Kissinger [1], [2], are hell-bent on pursuing. A military takeover of government is not likely, and military refusal to carry out immoral orders is uncertain at best. Congress has a role to play, perhaps the most important one in its history, and a Republican Congress is likely to rubberstamp any White House plan on Iran. Voting Republican in November is voting to wage nuclear war.

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