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Trends. A Case for Less Powerful Nuclear Warheads

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Abstract: This article considers the strategic and political implications of developing less powerful nuclear warheads.

Opponents of the Bush administration's effort to authorize research on a new generation of less powerful nuclear warheads most commonly employ three arguments. The first is that the research will hinder efforts to counter the proliferation of nuclear weapons both through a new state-sponsored nuclear arms race and through non-state trafficking in nuclear arms components and materiel. The second is that the very threshold of nuclear weapons employment would be significantly lowered by the addition of new types of nuclear weapons, by the realization that less destruction would be generated upon employment, and by the blurring of distinction between conventional and nuclear weapons—if research were followed by weapons development, fielding, and employment. The third is that the amount of resultant radioactive material and the unlikelihood of incontrovertible intelligence about the specific target of the new nuclear weapons would or should preclude the employment of any nuclear weapon. The problem with all three arguments is that they are based on an assumption of unnecessary ethical, moral, and functional equivalences among all current and future nuclear weapons.

As an example of unnecessary equivalences, let's assume that significantly less powerful nuclear weapons—e.g. with a yield below 5 kilotons—can be developed that result in the dispersal of virtually little radioactive material. If this can occur—and research would allow one to generate meaningful hypotheses about the probability of this occurrence—then each of the three arguments of the opponents would take on a new twist. The proliferation argument would have to face up to the logic of asserting that very qualitatively different nuclear weapons would necessarily facilitate or disinherit proliferation of existing nuclear weapons. The lower threshold to employment argument would have to face up to the logic that what would be facilitated or disinherited would be, again, qualitatively different nuclear weapons—not necessarily existing nuclear weapons. As to the third argument bearing on radioactivity and intelligence uncertainty, one should immediately note that the first part of the argument would be immediately contradicted by the nature of new, qualitatively different nuclear weapons, while the second part of the argument would still apply to all weapons—not just existing and or qualitatively different nuclear weapons.

Given that successful research might lead to new weapons more successful and politically employable against new threats—e.g., underground bunkers containing weapons of mass destruction facilities controlled by political actors bent on attacking the United States—and even new scientific discoveries with non-military benefits, the case against authorization is certainly not a cut-and-dried one. In fact, when one assumes that existing strategic nuclear weapons may be politically unemployable—because of their physical impact—in the present and future political climate against present and future adversaries, the Bush call for research may be very prudent. (See Bunn, G., & Braun, C. (2003). Terrorism potential for research reactors compared with power reactors: Nuclear weapons, "dirty bombs," and truck bombs. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 46, 714-726; Nuclear mirage. (June 2, 2003). *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Taylor, B. C., & Freer, B. (2002). Containing the nuclear past: The politics of history and heritage at the Hanford Plutonium works. *Journal of Organizational Change*

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