

White House defends nuclear war plans with sophistries and saber-rattling

Patrick Martin
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In the week since the press first reported that the US government is laying plans for a greatly expanded nuclear capability—increasing both the number of countries targeted and the circumstances under which the use of nuclear weapons could be authorized—the Bush administration has publicly sought to downplay the revelation.

One official after another, beginning with Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice on the Sunday morning television interview programs, claimed that the Nuclear Posture Review was nothing more than a bureaucratic exercise, with no immediate military significance.

Powell claimed the report was “conceptual planning” and not the preparation for an imminent attack on any country. “We should not get all carried away with some sense that the United States is planning to use nuclear weapons in some contingency that is coming up in the near future,” he claimed. “It is not the case.”

Rice even portrayed the plan—which drastically lowers the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons—as a move to “make the use of weapons of mass destruction less likely.” By this Orwellian logic, preparations by the United States to more freely use its nuclear arsenal, the world’s largest, are merely “a very strong signal to anyone who might try to use weapons of mass destruction against the United States.”

Vice President Dick Cheney faced a barrage of press questions about US nuclear war plans in London March 11, during the first stop on his 10-nation trip to build support for a US war against Iraq. He also dismissed the reaction to the nuclear review as overblown, without denying the substance of the plan. He said, “The notion that I’ve seen reported in the press that somehow this means we are preparing preemptive nuclear strikes—I’d say that’s a bit over the top.”

Both Powell and Rice, however, confirmed press reports that the Pentagon plan calls for the United States to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries in the event these countries make use of what the US defines as “weapons of mass destruction.” General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said such weapons could be “nuclear, biological, chemical, or, for that matter, high explosives.”

By that standard, the United States is currently guilty of using weapons of mass destruction dozens if not hundreds of times in Afghanistan, from the huge “daisy-cutters” used against Taliban troop concentrations to the super-high-pressure thermobaric bombs it has dropped on Al Qaeda fighters holding out in the mountains above the Shahikot valley.

As former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara noted in a commentary published March 13 in the *Los Angeles Times*, the Nuclear Posture Review amounts to a public repudiation of US obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The US, Britain and the Soviet Union pledged in 1978 never to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries that signed the treaty. All three countries, joined by France and China, reiterated this pledge in 1995.

The new nuclear weapons doctrine was drawn up in a secret Pentagon report delivered to Congress in January, and made public by the *Los*

Angeles Times March 10. Seven countries are on the US hit list, including Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Libya, and the US military would be authorized to use nuclear weapons under a wide range of conditions, including whenever conventional weaponry proved inadequate for Washington’s purposes.

The governments of the states targeted for nuclear annihilation were naturally unwilling to accept US assurances that the Pentagon nuclear plan was merely a continuation of contingency plans drawn up under the Clinton administration. (No US spokesman has sought to explain the contradiction between the claim that the plan contains “nothing new” and the fact that it was devised in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks).

China’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi stressed that China and the United States had agreed not to target each other with nuclear weapons. “Like many other countries, China is deeply shocked with the content of this report,” he declared. “The US side has a responsibility to explain this.”

A leading Russian legislator, Dmitri Rogozin, declared that the US government seemed to have lost touch with reality since September 11. “They’ve brought out a big stick—a nuclear stick that is supposed to scare us and put us in our place,” he told NTV television. Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov called the reports destabilizing and said that top-level Bush administration officials had an obligation to “make things clear and calm the international community, convincing it that the United States does not have such plans.”

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov went through with a previously scheduled trip to Washington for talks with US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. As columnist Mary McGrory noted, this gave Rumsfeld “the novel experience of playing host to an official whose country found its name on the target list.”

Iranian government spokesman Abdollah Ramezanzadeh said the Pentagon plan showed that America would never observe international laws on the use of nuclear weapons. “Those who resort to the logic of force follow exactly the same logic as terrorists, although they are in the position of power,” Ramezanzadeh said. The semi-official *Tehran Times* said the report indicates that the United States “is going to wreak havoc on the whole world in order to establish its hegemony and domination.”

There was also considerable concern expressed throughout Europe, as well as by other nuclear powers not currently on the US target list. Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes said that every country would be compelled to draw the same lesson: “Before one challenges the United States, one must first acquire nuclear weapons.”

The nuclear posture review, and the sharp international reaction, were a major topic of discussion at Bush’s hastily called press conference March 13, for which reporters had only three hours’ notice. The first question asked concerned the nuclear plan, and Bush responded with prepared remarks portraying his administration as peace-loving and determined to significantly reduce the US nuclear arsenal.

But the US president sent an unmistakable signal in subsequent comments. Asked why US nuclear targeting would include Libya or Syria, he replied, “We’ve got all options on the table, because we want to make it very clear to nations that you will not threaten the United States or use weapons of mass destruction against us, or our allies or friends.”

Bush then used identical language in describing, not a hypothetical response to a future attack on the US, but the ongoing campaign of American pressure and provocation against Iraq. Referring to Cheney’s trip, Bush said, “What the Vice President is doing is he’s reminding people about this danger, and that we need to work in concert to confront this danger. Again, all options are on the table.”

The truth is, the more Bush and his administration protest that their nuclear weapons planning is only hypothetical—a bureaucratic preparation for an unlikely future possibility—the more likely they are actively considering the use of nuclear weapons, and not in the distant future.

One of the contingencies for using nuclear weapons listed in the nuclear review was an Iraqi attack on Israel, something which American policymakers consider a likely response by Baghdad to a new US-led military assault. There is no reason to assume that the Pentagon and the Bush White House would rule out attacking Iraq with nuclear weapons in the war they are presently planning.

Indeed, the leak of the Nuclear Posture Review may have been orchestrated as a means of testing out public opinion and the reaction of various political forces, both at home and abroad, to such an action. Many press commentators have noted that the administration, normally obsessed with secrecy, was blasé about the leak of what is supposedly the most closely guarded national security document.

The White House previously used a leak to the *Washington Post*—the revelation that Bush established a “shadow government” after September 11—to test out public reaction to its preparations for dictatorial rule. The administration dismissed concerns over the implications of its plans to set up a secret government consisting only of the executive, and excluding both the legislative and judicial branches. As in the case of the nuclear weapons plan, Bush and his aides argued that nothing more was involved than routine “contingency planning.”

While much of the American media—the *Washington Post* and the television networks, for instance—have echoed the complacent comments emanating from the White House and State Department, the nuclear posture review has provoked the first significant public criticism of US foreign policy since September 11.

Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle declined to make any direct comment on the Pentagon plan, and Senator Joseph Lieberman, the 2000 Democratic vice presidential candidate, called it “useful” as a measure to threaten “renegade nations.” But several other Democrat senators criticized the administration, including two who have been unswerving supporters of a more belligerent US policy in the Middle East, and particularly against Iraq.

Carl Levin of Michigan, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said the plan could “reverse the direction of where arms control has been going for decades.” Senator Dianne Feinstein of California said the US risks being seen as “a rogue nation going off and finding ways to use nuclear weapons.” John Kerry of Massachusetts called the plan “very disturbing,” adding that it undermined US efforts to restrict the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Press criticism of the nuclear war plans has largely focused on the likelihood that having announced a greater willingness to use nuclear weapons on the battlefield, the Bush administration will provoke potential US targets to redouble their efforts to acquire such weapons themselves, thus increasing the likelihood these weapons will eventually be used.

The *Louisville Courier-Journal* wrote, “Friends and foes alike have reacted with alarm and incredulity to a new Pentagon review of United States doctrine regarding nuclear weapons. So should Americans.” The *St.*

Paul Pioneer Press denounced “the Bush administration’s shocking about-face in nuclear weapons policy planning.”

The *Boston Globe* called it “questionable at best and, at worst, truly dangerous and destabilizing.” The *Globe* also noted that the proposals to build miniaturized and therefore more “usable” nuclear warheads and “bunker-buster” bombs, as well as to resume underground nuclear testing, were on the table before September 11, and therefore cannot be seen as a response to the terrorist attacks.

The *Los Angeles Times* called on Bush to “publicly disavow ... the apparent lowering of the threshold for using nuclear weapons and the blurring of lines between nuclear and conventional weapons.” The newspaper noted the Pentagon plans suggestion that nuclear weapons could be used in the event of “surprising military developments,” calling this “a term so vague as to imply a launch-at-will concept...”

Perhaps the most politically significant commentary came in the *New York Times*, which has slavishly supported the Bush administration’s conduct of the “war on terrorism.” Under the headline, “America as Nuclear Rogue,” the *Times* wrote: “If another country were planning to develop a new nuclear weapon and contemplating pre-emptive strikes against a list of non-nuclear powers, Washington would rightly label that nation a dangerous rogue state. Yet such is the course recommended to President Bush by a new Pentagon planning paper that became public last weekend.”

The *Times* noted that the most dangerous feature of the Bush administration’s policy is the transformation of nuclear arms from the proverbial “weapon of last resort” to just one among many options for Pentagon war planners.

At the same time, the *Times* failed to draw any connection between this extraordinary shift and the overall conduct of the Bush administration on both the domestic and overseas fronts of the “war on terrorism”—mass detentions without trial, illegal POW camps, the formation of a secret “shadow government,” refusal to investigate the circumstances of the September 11 attack, refusal to spell out the scope and aims of the global war which Bush proclaimed in his State of the Union speech.



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