

Media, politicians maintain silence on flight of US nuclear bomber

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When analyzing the US corporate-controlled media, it is often more important to take note of what is not reported than what is.

Such is clearly the case with the revelation earlier this month that a US B-52 Stratofortress bomber flew nearly 1,500 miles over the length of the United States with six nuclear-tipped cruise missiles fixed to its wings.

The flight took place August 30 between Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota and Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana.

The story was broken by *Military Times*, the web site of the weekly papers published by the Gannett Corporation for the different branches of the American military. It evinced only minimal interest from the major media outlets, which relegated it to news items buried deep in the inside pages of major dailies like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, both of which uncritically regurgitated the official line of the Air Force that the flight represented a “mistake” that never represented any serious danger.

Since then, there has been only silence. No major newspaper or broadcast network has made any attempt to carry the story forward. No background pieces have been published analyzing the present state of the US nuclear war machine. And there is no evidence of any attempt to obtain more information from the Air Force officers who leaked the story to the *Military Times*.

The media blackout cannot be explained by any objective standard of the newsworthiness of this story. According to what is publicly known, it marked the first time that an American bomber armed with nuclear weapons has taken to the air in nearly 40 years.

Each of the missiles mounted on the pylons of the aircraft’s wings carried warheads that are 10 times as destructive as the first American atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima six decades ago. Given the death toll inflicted upon the Japanese city in 1945, a rough mathematical extrapolation would suggest that the plane was carrying weapons of mass destruction capable of killing five to six million people in a nuclear holocaust that would eclipse any single atrocity in the history of the planet.

The silence of the press has the earmarks of self-censorship in the face of what was in all likelihood a sharp admonition from the White House and the Pentagon that any public discussion of the event could endanger national security. There is an ample record of such suppression of news, including, for example, the admission by the *New York Times* last year that it had bowed to White House pressure to hold back a story on the National Security Agency’s illegal domestic spying program in the run-up to the 2004 elections.

It appears that the Bush administration’s ostensible political opponents in the Democratic Party are keeping their mouths shut for the similar reasons.

In the immediate aftermath of the revelations concerning the flight, several lawmakers issued statements expressing shock over the flight and acknowledging that the event was something that they had consistently been told could never happen.

Typical was that of Congressman Ike Skelton, the Democratic chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, who declared the development “deeply disturbing.”

“There is no more serious issue than the security and proper handling of nuclear weapons,” he said, adding, “This committee will continue to pursue answers on this classified matter to ensure that the Air Force and the Department of Defense address this particular incident and strengthen controls more generally.”

Yet, when contacted on September 13, more than a week after this statement, a spokesperson for Skelton’s committee said that no hearings have been scheduled on the nuclear flight.

“No decisions about that have been made,” she said. “We’ve been pretty busy the past week.”

The Senate Armed Services Committee likewise confirmed that it has called no hearings on the matter.

Skelton’s reference to his supposed intention to “pursue answers on this classified matter” strongly suggests that to the extent the Democratic Congress does receive any information, it will be kept secret from the public.

For its part, the Pentagon, as a matter of policy, refuses to confirm or deny that the plane was carrying nuclear warheads.

The Air Force is continuing an investigation into the matter—reportedly including daily briefings to Defense Secretary Robert Gates. It has scheduled a general mission “stand-down” for the US Air Combat Command on Friday, September 14, in which all units—including those that do not handle nuclear weapons—will review procedures.

A report from the Air Force apparently will be issued following this review, but it is almost certain to be classified.

The real questions are from whom are these secrets being kept and to what end?

The answer to the first question is self-evident; it is the American people who are being kept in the dark. Why this is being done cannot be stated with certainty, but it appears that both the silence and the initial account given by the Air Force that the nuclear-armed flight represented a “mistake” are aimed at covering up why this plane was really sent into the air.

One place where the event has been given extensive attention is on the readers’ forum page of the *Military Times* web site, which headlines the section “Mistake or message.” Some 500 items have been posted, in many cases by people identifying themselves as

former Air Force personnel who were involved in the US nuclear strike force. A substantial share of these postings sharply question the official story floated by the Pentagon.

One correspondent, identifying himself as a “retired B-52 crew chief,” described the official account as “unbelievable.”

He wrote: “Back in 1979 we had to sign for nuclear weapons verifying serial numbers, the security folks posted two man guards at the aircraft, the cops enforced two man maintenance crews access to the aircraft, the 781s are annotated, maintenance job control was informed, the wing command post was informed, weapons were moved in an armed convoy, etc. How were the weapons removed from storage? Who was guarding the weapons, military troopers or contractors? How were they transported to the aircraft? How were the aircraft forms updated? How was the chain of custody broken? Did the flight crew and munitions maintenance OICs [officers in charge] verify weapons status? What the hell happened here?”

Someone self-described as a “former cruise missile troop” writes, “I do not see how this could have happened. If the ‘missile shop’ failed to download the heads before taking them to the flightline, the crew loading them on the plane has a checklist asking them to ‘verify no warheads installed,’ as do the pilots...”

Another correspondent questions claims that the weapons were merely being moved from one base to be decommissioned (destroyed): “When I was in the Air Force and worked on these types of missiles we never would have sent these missiles out on a B-52 for decommissioning. These missiles would have had their warheads removed and boxed for shipping and the missile body itself would have been boxed up and both items would have been shipped out [on a] C-5. This was the only way we...could have shipped them out, not on or in a B-52. This could not have happened, we are not being told the whole story, there has to be more to it!”

Another posting reads: “I think everyone here is making an assumption that they didn’t know. This is an absurd assumption. As soon as those ACMs [advanced cruise missiles] hit the hard-mounts, the talkback between the computers instantly enabled. The crew knew they were carrying nukes long before they finished the checklist for takeoff.”

A correspondent who writes that he was an Air Force officer in the late 1970s describes the intricate procedures that are carried out before a nuclear weapon leaves the site where it was stored:

“A nuclear weapon can only be removed from an igloo upon written orders originating with a very limited number of senior base command officers and signed by at least three other senior officers. Even then, the senior OIC of the arsenal site along with at least one junior officer will only order a weapon be retrieved and prepared for transfer after they both have verbally confirmed their written orders to do so with the base commander or his deputy. This is done using special limited access and encrypted telephone lines or in person, and verification is accomplished only after each party has correctly read a unique sequence of letters and numbers printed on their orders. A senior OIC along with at least one junior munitions officer will arrive at the arsenal site at the time designated in their orders to transport the weapon. They will have already verified their written orders with a very senior base command officer. Each pair of munitions officers can only sign and be responsible for a single weapon at a time, and they must be accompanied by a special highly trained munitions crew and by a squad of heavily armed security police officers. After the two arsenal site officers and the two munitions officers have each visually verified the serial number of the weapon being transferred matches the

serial number typed on both sets of their orders, all four must sign both sets of orders indicating the transfer has been verified and completed. A maximum of four nuclear weapons can be transferred to the flight line in each convoy, but each weapon must have their own team of officers with verified orders, munitions specialist, and a security detail. Also, the printed orders for the OIC of each munitions team indicate exactly which aircraft will receive that weapon and exactly where every weapon is to be mounted. Everyone involved is trained to repeatedly triple check everything for accuracy.”

He goes on to detail similar procedures for the flight crew, which he notes “can easily and clearly view a weapons display that electronically verifies every weapon system installed on their aircraft. That display also clearly identifies every weapon as being a practice, conventional or nuclear weapon.”

The former officer concludes: “Therefore the only conclusion I can come up with is that this event must have been concocted by someone to appear as an accident. And, because nuclear weapons were said to be involved, orders approving such an event most certainly came from the White House.”

The present administration in Washington has repeatedly boasted that it maintains “all options on the table,” including the use of nuclear weapons, in its global war on terror and its confrontations with supposed “rogue states.” In 2002, it drafted a Nuclear Posture Review that for the first time enunciated a preemptive nuclear first-strike policy against non-nuclear nations.

In 2006, it was revealed that the Bush administration had drawn up plans for attacks on Iran, including the use of “tactical nuclear devices” to wipe out the country’s fledgling nuclear program as well as its security forces and much of its infrastructure.

And, more recently, two leading British military analysts published a report on US preparations for an attack on Iran in which they note “clear evidence that nuclear weapons use [against Iran] is being given serious political consideration” in Washington. (See “British academics warn US is preparing ‘shock and awe’ attack on Iran”)

Under these conditions, the flight of the nuclear-armed US bomber has the most ominous significance. The silence of the media and the politicians is aimed at concealing the dire implications of this event from the people of the US and the world.



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