

New Security Threat Disclosed

by Jeremy Brecher*

Memo to the In-Coming Secretary of Defense:

This is to alert you to an unanticipated threat to our national security effort.

To bring you up to speed: The tritium in nuclear weapons must be replenished periodically. All our tritium plants are now shut down as radioactive basket cases.

The Department of Energy has recently informed the National Security Council that it will cost \$81 billion to rehabilitate and decontaminate our nuclear production facilities. Manufacturing new nuclear weapons and modernizing the old ones will cost \$250 billion. Even with such spending there may not be enough tritium produced to maintain our 23,000 or so nuclear warheads.

It has recently been suggested that we could save money by making our tritium with an accelerator instead of a nuclear reactor. But according to the report that proposed this alternative, the accelerator would cost as much as a reactor; experts like Dr. Harold W. Lewis, a top advisor to the Energy Department, have suggested it might cost even more.

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When the ban-the-bombers beginning to realize the potential this situation opens for playing havoc with our defense effort, you will have a serious peril on your hands. All they need to do is propose a moratorium on manufacturing tritium and rehabilitating tritium plants.

Their argument will go something like this: Here we are, about to spend hundreds of billions of dollars we can ill afford. The Soviets are already trying to cut back on military spending they can't afford. Reports indicate that their nuclear production facilities are facing problems similar to ours. Before we and the Soviets spend those hundreds of billions, the ban-the-bombers will contend, why not at least try to work out an agreement, negotiated or tacit, with Gorbachev?

This proposal might be framed in ways that would make it difficult for you to mount effective opposition. For example, proponents might call for a mere 90-day moratorium on rehabilitating tritium plants. That might be coupled with a provision that the moratorium would be continued only if Gorbachev in turn halts the rehabilitation and use of the Soviet plants.

The ban-the-bombers will love this idea for the same reason it will give you nightmares -- because if bombs don't have their tritium periodically replenished, they will gradually decay, leading to a symmetrical year-by-year reduction in nuclear capability, a sort of spontaneous bilateral nuclear disarmament. Tritium, after all, decays

at the same rate on both sides of the Iron Curtain; that's a law of nature that requires no verification.

No doubt you can deal with the ban-the-bombers by the usual means. The peril is that such a proposal will mobilize far more important constituencies:

-- environmentalists. They will point out that the Energy Department report proposes only \$29 billion for environmental clean-up. The Department itself said earlier that four times that much would be needed. A dozen states now have nuclear weapons production plants within their borders, not to mention fifteen others where old sites must be cleaned up. Their representatives in Congress may well hold appropriations for the weapons program hostage to a thorough clean-up effort.

-- budget balancers. Even powerful segments of the business community might be interested in saving hundreds of billions in Federal spending and thereby lowering their taxes and interest rates.

-- big spenders. There are plenty of people around Washington who fear that their own pet projects will be cut from the Federal budget to pay for this nuclear rehabilitation. Other people will realize what the savings could provide in the way of housing, education, urban rehabilitation, and the like.

-- Those who think we should make a positive response to Gorbachev's arms initiatives. This is a much bigger

group than the ban-the-bombers, and one that reaches far into the Establishment.

Such a moratorium will not, alas, depend on Presidential initiative. Any member of Congress can attach the proposal as a rider to some bill or other. Then when you try to make the case for expending those hundreds of billions, the Congressional committees will just have to ask why you shouldn't first find out whether the Soviets will go along with a moratorium.

Since a moratorium proposal would not require preliminary negotiations with the Soviets to kick it off, you couldn't bog it down in the bargaining process. And it would be hard to attack as "unilateral disarmament" since it doesn't require that we destroy a single weapon.

Our intelligence agencies will find themselves in a very embarrassing situation. Imagine a scenario in which the heads of the CIA and military intelligence are hauled up before Congress and asked whether they are capable of verifying Soviet compliance. If they admit they can, you won't be able to oppose the moratorium on the ground that "we can't trust the Russians."

But the alternative is too humiliating to consider. You can't make tritium in a bathtub, after all; it takes a vast industrial complex. Are you going to ask the heads of the CIA and military intelligence to testify nonetheless that they can't tell whether or not the Soviets are making tritium?

There's one more aspect of this nightmare. Suppose, when some congressperson proposes such a moratorium, Gorbachev says, "Sounds like a good idea; let's talk about it." How could we say no?

p.s. Lest you doubt the urgency of this threat, please note that at a hearing of the House Budget Committee February 9, Rep. Barbara Boxer of California questioned nuclear production spending on the grounds that arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union could lead to reductions in nuclear warheads. "If the arsenal can be reduced, we're going to see a need for less tritium and less plutonium," she said. "Arms control means saving money."