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N. Korea Bomb Tied to Bush Fiasco

By Robert Parry
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North Korea's nuclear test has been linked to a plutonium process that was unfrozen after George W. Bush started talking tough about regime change in Pyongyang and reversed a Clinton administration policy against aiming nuclear weapons at non-nuclear states.

The New York Times reported that U.S. officials have identified the source of the North Korean nuclear blast as plutonium harvested from a small nuclear reactor whose nuclear fuel was put under seal in 1994 through a deal reached with the Clinton administration.

But in 2003, after two years of mounting threats from George W. Bush – including listing North Korea as part of the “axis of evil” – the government of Kim Jong Il threw out international inspectors, unsealed the plutonium and began processing it.

Since then, although Bush has denounced North Korea and pushed for more sanctions, he has avoided a direct threat of military action. In part, Bush's critics say, that is because the United States is bogged down in a war in Iraq, which was justified by false claims that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was building weapons of mass destruction.

In early 2001, Bush began his tough talk toward North Korea because of indications that Pyongyang had started a second nuclear development program using technology obtained from Pakistan and relying on uranium. Republicans blamed President Bill Clinton's softness for this alleged breach of the 1994 agreement.

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But U.S. intelligence agencies have concluded that North Korea's Oct. 9, 2006, nuclear test did not use this uranium process; instead the explosion relied on reprocessed plutonium unsealed in 2003 or possibly produced since then, the New York Times reported. [[NYT, Oct. 17, 2006](#)]

In other words, the Oct. 9 detonation could not have occurred if the Clinton agreement had remained in place and the plutonium program was still frozen.

Nuclear Confirmation

After the Oct. 9 explosion, there was doubt that North Korea had actually detonated a nuclear device. However, the office of Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte released a statement on Oct. 16 confirming that the blast was nuclear.

“Analysis of air samples collected on Oct. 11, 2006, detected radioactive debris which confirms that North Korea conducted an underground nuclear explosion in the vicinity of Punggye on Oct. 9, 2006,” the statement said. U.S. intelligence calculated the bomb's explosive yield as “less than a kiloton.”

Despite the bomb's relatively small size, North Korea's success in detonating a nuclear device marks another setback for Bush's strategy of demanding “regime change” in countries that he has labeled “evil.”

Bush's tough talk about North Korea even predated 9/11. In his first weeks in office, it was Pyongyang's reclusive communist dictatorship that became the initial test for Bush's bellicose diplomacy, which rejected as weak Clinton's carrot-and-stick negotiations that had stalled but not eliminated North Korea's nuclear program.

At a March 2001 summit, Bush also rebuffed South Korean leader Kim Dae Jung's détente strategy for dealing with North Korea. Bush's blunt rejection humiliated both Kim, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, and Secretary of State Colin Powell, who wanted to continue pursuing the negotiation track.

Instead, Bush cut off nuclear talks with North Korea and stepped up spending on a “Star Wars” missile shield. After the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, Bush got tougher still, vowing to “rid the world of evil” and listing North Korea as part of the “axis of evil.”

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More substantively, Bush sent to Congress a “nuclear posture review,” which laid out future U.S. strategy for deploying nuclear weapons. Leaked in 2002, the so-called NPR put North Korea on a list of potential targets for U.S. nuclear weapons.

By putting North Korea on the nuclear target list, Bush reversed Clinton’s commitment against targeting non-nuclear states with nuclear weapons. Clinton’s idea was that a U.S. assurance that non-nuclear states wouldn’t be nuked would reduce their incentives for joining the nuclear club.

But to Bush and his neoconservative advisers, that was just another example of Clinton’s appeasement of U.S. adversaries. In March 2002, however, Pyongyang signaled how it would react, warning of “strong countermeasures” against Bush’s nuclear policy shifts.

North Korea accused the Bush administration of “an inhuman plan to spark a global nuclear arms race” and warned that it would “not remain a passive onlooker” after being put on the Pentagon’s list of nuclear targets.

A commentary by the official Korean Central News Agency cited Bush’s threat in the context of the U.S. nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, in 1945. “If the U.S. intends to mount a nuclear attack on any part of the D.P.R.K. [North Korea] just as it did on Hiroshima, it is grossly mistaken,” the communiqué read.

The North Koreans were telegraphing how they would respond to Bush’s nuclear saber-rattling. They would build a nuclear saber of their own.

But Bush was in no mood to seek accommodation with North Korea. During one lectern-pounding tirade before congressional Republicans in May 2002, Bush denounced North Korea’s leader Kim Jong Il as a “pygmy” and “a spoiled child at a dinner table,” Newsweek magazine reported.

Clearly, North Korea was on Bush’s menu for “regime change,” but it wasn’t the first course. The “Bush Doctrine” of preemptive wars was to begin in Iraq, where Saddam Hussein, along with his two sons and top associates, would face elimination.

Worrying Signs

By early July 2002, however, U.S. intelligence agencies had picked up evidence that North Korea had acquired key equipment for enriching uranium.

“On Sept. 12, [2002], the same day Mr. Bush addressed the U.N. about the dangers posed by Iraq, the President met quietly in New York with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to brief him on the U.S. intelligence findings about North Korea,” the Wall Street Journal reported. [WSJ, Oct. 18, 2002]

In early October 2002, U.S. diplomats confronted Pyongyang with this evidence and were surprised when North Korean leaders admitted that they were working on building nuclear weapons.

Despite North Korea’s public warnings seven months earlier, official Washington was still stunned. Many analysts puzzled over what might have caused Pyongyang to violate its earlier promises about suspending its nuclear program and then admit to it. Bush formally canceled the 1994 agreement.

For its part, North Korea issued a press release at the United Nations on Oct. 25, 2002, explaining its reasoning. The statement cited both Bush’s “axis of evil” rhetoric and the administration’s decision to target North Korea for a possible preemptive nuclear strike.

“This was a clear declaration of war against the D.P.R.K. as it totally nullified” the 1994 agreement, the North Korean statement read. “Nobody would be so naïve as to think that the D.P.R.K. would sit idle under such a situation. ... The D. P.R.K., which values sovereignty more than life, was left with no other proper answer to the U.S. behaving so arrogantly and impertinently.”

Bush’s supporters blamed North Korea’s defiance on Clinton, arguing that his 1994 agreement to stop North Korea’s nuclear program had coddled the communist dictatorship.

According to aides, Bush said he would never go down the path of compromise that Clinton followed. North Korea “would not be rewarded for bad behavior,” Bush aides told reporters. [NYT, Oct. 26, 2002]

Amid Bush’s stratospheric poll numbers in fall 2002, few Washington voices dared challenge the Bush administration’s finger-pointing at Clinton.

Iraq Lesson

What then happened in Iraq only reinforced North Korea’s thinking. Despite Saddam Hussein’s assurances that he had no weapons of mass destruction and his granting permission to U.N. inspectors to search any suspicious site, Bush ignored

the U.N.'s negative findings and invaded on March 19, 2003.

Within three weeks, U.S. forces routed the overmatched Iraqi army and toppled Hussein's government. Later, Hussein's two sons were hunted down and killed, and the Iraqi dictator was captured.

Humiliating photos of Hussein being examined by doctors and sitting in his underwear were flashed around the world. He was then put on trial in Iraq – rather than before an international tribunal at The Hague – so the proceedings could end with his execution by hanging, an expected outcome that Bush clearly relished.

The war's consequence for Iraqis over the past 3 ½ years also have been horrific. Possibly hundreds of thousands of Iraqis – men, women and children – have died; the once-prosperous country has sunk into chaos and poverty; ethnic cleansing and a bloody civil war have begun.

Though Bush may have intended the Iraq War to be an object lesson about the futility of defying his will, some American adversaries learned something else – that disarmament and cooperation with the U.N. are for suckers.

After all, Hussein had complied with U.N. demands for eliminating his stockpiles of unconventional weapons and had forsaken active development of nuclear weapons. He even agreed to unfettered U.N. inspections.

Hussein's reward was to see his two sons killed, his country ravaged, and the almost certain end of his own life coming as he dangles from the end of a rope, rather than his request that he die before a firing squad.

So, instead of cowering before Bush and his Doctrine, North Korea pressed ahead with its nuclear program, detonating a nuclear device on Oct. 9, 2006.

U.S. Reaction

Bush responded to the news with more threats and more tough rhetoric, calling the explosion a “provocative act” and “a threat to international peace and security.”

For their part, Democrats argued that Bush's Iraq War had distracted the United States from addressing the worse threat from North Korea.

“What it tells you is that we started at the wrong end of the ‘axis of evil’” said

former Democratic Sen. Sam Nunn of Georgia. “We started with the least dangerous of the countries, Iraq, and we knew it at the time. And now we have to deal with that.” [NYT, Oct. 10, 2006]

Clinton’s Defense Secretary William Perry criticized Bush’s failure to contain North Korea’s development of a plutonium-based bomb. Perry had delivered the Clinton administration’s threat in 1994 that the U.S. military would destroy North Korea’s nuclear facilities if it didn’t agree to a suspension, the stick in the carrot-and-stick diplomacy.

“There was a brief window to catch this plutonium before it was made into bomb fuel,” Perry told the New York Times. “It’s gone. It’s out of the barn now.” [NYT, Oct. 17, 2006]

Another lesson for the United States could be that Bush’s cowboy rhetoric may play well with TV pundits, newspaper columnists and radio hosts. But it doesn’t protect America’s national security very well.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq*, can be ordered at secrecyandprivilege.com. It’s also available at Amazon.com, as is his 1999 book, *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth.'*

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