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## DAILY MOJO

September 19, 2003

# Dumb Bombs

Is the war on terror fuelling a nuclear arms race? Looks like it: The United States is moving to invest millions in a new generation of nukes; Syria, Iran and North Korea are reportedly busy with weapons programs; and Saudi Arabia is taking a serious look at joining the ranks of the nuclear-armed

On Tuesday, the Republican-controlled Senate [rejected a Democratic measure](#) aimed at blocking funding for research into low-grade nuclear "bunker-buster" bombs and tactical "mini nukes." The 53-41 vote doles out more than \$20 million to the Department of Energy for nuclear weapons research, and OKs the resumption of underground nuclear tests. The issue is red hot and highly controversial: in July the House voted to cut funding for the research, over objections from the Bush administration. The measure now goes to a House-Senate conference, with the energy department likely to get some, if not all, of the funds requested.

Edward Kennedy, the senator co-sponsoring the resolution to nix the research, explained that the U.S. can hardly expect other countries to hold back on nuclear weapons if we don't.

"At the very time when we are urging other nations to halt their own nuclear weapons programs, the administration is rushing forward to develop our

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own new nuclear weapons."

Fans of the bunker-busters and mini-nukes, like Sen. Pete Domenici (also known as the "patron saint" of the nuclear industry) say advanced weapons research is needed to give U.S. policymakers new options in the war against terrorism, and that scientists need the freedom to look ahead at America's future national security needs. "Let [nuclear scientists] think, let those people design," he said. "Don't put mental blinkers and blinders on their brains."

But Kennedy, who warned that "a nuclear arms race" could result, was backed up by co-sponsor Sen. Diane Feinstein:

"By seeking to develop new nuclear weapons ourselves we send a message that nuclear weapons have a future battlefield role and utility."

The world will watch and the world will respond, and the way they will respond is with a new nuclear arms race. How long will it take for India and Pakistan to say, 'We should do the same thing'? How long will it take North Korea and Iran?"

As if on cue, it emerged this week that Saudi Arabia is looking into [nuclear weapons program](#) of its own.

The *Guardian* of London reported that Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz has responded to the destabilization of the Middle East by launching a strategic review of the nation's defense system. This review will pursue [three defense options](#): acquiring nuclear capability as a deterrent, entering an alliance with a protecting nuclear power, or achieving a regional anti-nuclear treaty. The *Guardian* reports that the Saudi decision marks a drastic change in Washington-Riyadh relations.

"Until now, the assumption in Washington was that Saudi Arabia was content to remain under the US nuclear umbrella. But the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the US has steadily worsened since the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington: 15 of the 19 attackers were Saudi.

Saudi Arabia does not regard Iran, a past adversary with which Riyadh has restored relations, as a direct threat. But it is unnerved by the possibility of Iran and Israel having nuclear weapons. "

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's eastern neighbors look to be dabbling in nuclear weaponry. Iran is under increasing heat from the international community to come clean about its nuclear energy program, which the International Atomic Energy Agency says is a cover for developing nukes. On Thursday, Iran's foreign minister complained that European Union requests for the state to [cooperate with the U.N.](#) were not founded on "mutual respect."

And the U.S. has lately been warning Syria to abandon its presumed [nuclear ambitions](#). [Not to mention](#)

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[North Korea, of course, which has perhaps one, or maybe even six](#), nuclear weapons.

Given all this, it seems an odd time to commit to researching nuclear weaponry.

"Mini nukes" and "bunker-busters" are scary because, as well as being nuclear, they're portable. Modeled on a conventional weapon used in the U.S. strikes against Iraq and Afghanistan, the bunker-buster, or Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator, is designed to detonate deep in the earth and vaporize potential stocks of underground weapons. "Mini nukes" are for tactical battlefield use.

While some argue that the weapons would be useful, many think the risk of fueling a nuclear arms race is too great. In August *USA Today* editorialized that developing the bunker-buster was [moving modern warfare in the wrong direction](#).

"In spite of the ominous sound of the weapon, the military has strong arguments for developing it. Unlike most of the Cold War-era nuclear arsenal designed to wipe out large chunks of the former Soviet Union, the nuclear bunker-buster could target today's threats, such as buried weapons of mass destruction.

But while the military utility of the bunker-buster is undeniable, the logic behind building it is flawed. It would set the U.S. on an unnecessary course that could trigger a new nuclear arms race.

Unlike the rest of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, which was built to deter an attack, the nuclear bunker-buster would be a first-use weapon. Its development would put new nuclear muscle behind the administration's new policy of waging pre-emptive war. Considering the promise of conventional weapons to handle that same bunker-busting mission, building such a nuclear device would send the wrong message to fledgling nuclear powers with itchy trigger fingers."

Boosters say the bombs' radioactive elements will stay underground, but some scientists aren't buying it. Martin Butcher the director of security programs at Physicians for Social Responsibility, a Washington-based advocacy group, told the *Asia Times* that these bombs present the [possibility of nuclear fallout](#).

"Constraints of physics stop bunker busters from being effective, as there are limits to how far the bomb can penetrate. In order to hit the deepest bunker -- meaning 20-30 feet -- it has to be a large bomb to send shock waves to penetrate down...However, this will lead the fireball to disperse and radiate dust particles up into the atmosphere, creating a dirty bomb - the most dangerous weapon there is...These questions just weren't addressed by those who are in charge of the development of these weapons."

But ultimately, Butcher told the *Times*, U.S. resumption of nuclear testing will destroy the relevance of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

With the rapid deterioration of U.S. relations with the Arab world (make that the world, period), moving forward on nuclear research seems provocative, to say the least. ■

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