Arms Experts Rap Congress for Backing Bush Administration's Nuclear Weapons Ambitions

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A "Setback" for Addressing Global Nuclear Dangers

For Immediate Release: November 7, 2003

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(Washington, D.C.): A congressional decision announced today to allow the Bush administration to further explore new nuclear weapons is a “serious error that will be a setback to U.S. efforts to persuade and prevent other nations from developing nuclear weapons,” according to the Arms Control Association, a nonpartisan membership organization dedicated to promoting effective arms control policies.

As part of their consideration of the fiscal year 2004 defense authorization bill, House and Senate legislators complied with a White House request to repeal a 10-year-old ban on research leading to development of new nuclear weapons with yields of less than five kilotons, so-called “low-yield” weapons. They also approved Bush administration proposals to continue researching new types of nuclear “bunker busters” to destroy targets deep underground and shorten the time required to prepare for a full-scale nuclear test from 24 months to 18 months.

“Congress and the Bush administration have made a mistake by opening the door to a new wave of global nuclear weapons competition. The diplomatic and security costs of the Bush administration’s proposals to explore new nuclear weapons far outweigh any marginal benefits such arms might yield,” said Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association.

“This sends a dangerous message that will hamper U.S. efforts to prevent other nations from developing nuclear weapons,” he warned.

Lawmakers have signaled that they also harbor some unease with the administration’s plans to reinvigorate U.S. nuclear weapons research and test preparations. While supporting research into new low-yields weapons, legislators withheld authorization to actually engineer, develop, and test new or modified nuclear bombs. And earlier this week, congressional appropriators cut proposed 2004 funding for studying bunker busters in half—from $15 million to just $7.5 million—and barred the Department of Energy from spending $4 million of an approved $6 million for new weapon concepts until it submits a report on U.S. nuclear stockpile requirements.

This congressional skepticism may help head off future, more dangerous Bush administration nuclear arm proposals, Kimball noted. “Further efforts by this or another administration to win necessary congressional approval for engineering, development, and testing of new or modified nuclear weapons will be vigorously opposed and must be defeated,” he said.

Expert scientists have contradicted the arguments made by proponents of “low-yield” nuclear weapons, saying that new and “smaller” nuclear warheads are dirty, dangerous, and unnecessary. Dr. Sidney Drell, a Stanford University physicist and longtime advisor to the U.S. nuclear program,
wrote in Arms Control Today in March, “Even a lower-yield, one-kiloton nuclear warhead (1/13 the size of the Hiroshima bomb) detonated at a depth of 20-50 feet would eject more than one million cubic feet of radioactive debris, forming a crater about the size of ground zero at the World Trade Center.” Drell added, “The result would be a highly contaminated zone and atmospheric fallout that would endanger civilians, as well as military personnel who might be ordered into the area.”

The perceived “usability” of such weapons is a dangerous notion, Kimball argued. “Nuclear weapons should not be considered just another weapon in our arsenal. They are mass terror weapons whether used by the United States or another country,” he stressed.

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The Arms Control Association is an independent, nonprofit membership organization dedicated to promoting public understanding of and support for effective arms control policies to address security threats posed by nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, as well as conventional arms.

Posted: November 7, 2003

Source URL: https://www.armscontrol.org/pressroom/2003/Nov_07