

OP-ED

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RISKS THAT BYPASS THE RADAR

In May 1997, I wrote an op-ed piece for the *International Herald Tribune* titled "What Will the Children Ask?" Considering the enormous demands on scarce federal funds and the huge costs of maintaining our nuclear capability, it's time to pose that very same question again.

We used to think that the greatest post-World War II nuclear threat came from the deteriorating stockpile of warheads in the former Soviet Union. Indeed there were an estimated 21,000 aging warheads rotting in the Bylo-Russian and Ukrainian missile silos. Now it seems a threat may also exist from the warheads *within* our own defense shield.

An alarming article appeared in a UK publication last month questioning the reliability of the W-76 nuclear warheads. These, and their British counterpart technology, equipped US and British submarines in the Atlantic and the Pacific. The particular concern is that these weapons -- if used -- might not detonate as planned. They could deliver far less of a wallop than once predicted.

Two things bother me. First, a monumental lethal weapons system is circling the world's oceans -- an arsenal which some experts now believe is unpredictable. (I should mention the casings on many of these warheads is unimaginably thin.) Second, it's estimated that billions will be needed to overhaul and update the system.

Back in January, one of our nuclear subs rammed into an undersea mountain. According to a May 9th Navy report, this sub -- with a heft of nearly 7,000 tons -- collided because crew members failed to coordinate the navigational charts they were using. Such a breakdown makes me worry about cataclysmic what-ifs. Fortunately the ship's reactor was undamaged, and subs of this class don't carry Trident missiles. The risk of underwater nuclear detonation was pointed out by Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell in their Manifesto of 1955. Not only is sea life obliterated, but radioactive particles ultimately reach the upper air to rain down on the world. The aftermath can last for centuries or even millennia. What if a Trident-carrying sub has a similar navigational accident . . . with a worst-case outcome?

We are making admirable efforts to stop the development of military nuclear technology in Iran and North Korea. But, what signal do we send to the rest of the world by housing a nuclear weapons system that is the most dangerous on the planet? These warheads -- thanks to a global moratorium -- have not been tested for more than a decade. Now, it seems we have a system fraught with unknowns. Talk about a loose cannonball shipboard! If one needs a reminder of the grim horror of a *single* nuclear accident, look no further than the children of Chernobyl.

Unpredictability is the first factor. Overhead is the second. These weapon systems were designed with Cold War scenarios in mind. Warfare in the Gulf and Afghanistan has shown these threats to be outmoded. Upgrading our stock of W-76 warheads won't help an inch on the war against terrorism. Further, the two decades from now, we are likely to face the same problem again. The next repair job will be two or three times as costly. A nuclear arsenal of this scale is an expensive and unreliable commitment. And will it even

be reliable? And, if detonated, its deadly toxins live for thousands of years.

Why don't we at least radically scale back our nuclear fleet? Wouldn't the more sensible solution be to take the billions and to spend the money on more intelligible, practical solutions like financing our education system? Believe me our grandchildren and great-great grandchildren will be asking why we didn't.

Sincerely, Al Roach