

MAY 4

Nuclear fundamentalism and the Iran story

Years from now, when historians look back at agenda-building for a missile attack on Iran, they should closely examine a story that took up the USA's most coveted space for media spin – the upper right corner of the New York Times front page – on the first day of May 2005.

Under the headline "Threats Shadow New Conference on Nuclear Arms," the lead article in the Sunday edition set a tone that was to echo in U.S. media during the next several days. The review conference for the Non-Proliferation Treaty "was meant to offer hope of closing huge loopholes in the treaty, which the United States says Iran and North Korea have exploited to pursue nuclear weapons," the Times reported. "Instead, the session appears deadlocked even before it begins, according to senior American officials and diplomats."

But the Times could have led off by pointing out that "huge loopholes in the treaty" have been exploited by the United States and a few other countries to maintain their nuclear-arms dominance. And, instead of resorting to fuzzy euphemisms, the story could have clearly reported that the U.S., Japanese and French governments are so committed to the commercial nuclear power industry that they still insist on promoting it – and further boosting nuclear arms proliferation in the process.

For more than five decades now, U.S. government leaders – along with countless reporters and pundits – have insisted that the split atom can be wondrous rather than just ominous. In a speech to the United Nations in December 1953, President Dwight Eisenhower proclaimed a commitment to "atoms for peace." He portrayed nuclear power as redemptive: "The United States pledges before you – and therefore before the world – its determination to help solve the fearful atomic dilemma – to devote its entire heart and mind to find the way by which the miraculous inventiveness of man shall not be dedicated to his death, but consecrated to his life."

One-third of a century later, the New York Times was in the midst of a protracted crusade on behalf of the Shoreham nuclear power project on Long Island. In July 1986, Jack Newfield wrote in the Village Voice that he had counted 22 different times when

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the New York Times had editorialized in favor of the Shoreham nuclear plants during the previous 40 months. As it happened, members of the Times board of directors also sat on the boards of nuclear-invested utilities and banks.

Grassroots activism was often successful when it challenged the utilities seeking to generate more electricity with atomic power. Along the way, activists pointed out that nuclear power plants and nuclear weapons share the same basic fuel cycle. And the anti-nuclear movement warned that fervent efforts to export nuclear power technology all over the globe would lead to the development of atomic weapons in more and more countries. But enormous media campaigns on behalf of the nuclear power industry are still with us.

On May 4 – despite the dangers of catastrophic reactor accidents, the horrendous folly of creating massive amounts of atomic waste, and the proven role of nuclear power technology in nuclear weapons proliferation – a New York Times editorial contended “there is mounting evidence that damage from global warming may dwarf any environmental risk posed by nuclear power. It is therefore critical to keep nuclear power as part of the nation’s energy mix.” Such commentaries encourage us to believe that widespread conservation and renewable resources aren’t viable, as if the only real choices are a radioactive future or an overheated globe.

This kind of nuclear fundamentalism is exactly what has smoothed the way for countries to acquire nuclear weapons technologies – and in some cases nuclear bombs – in recent decades. Like an institution run by religious fanatics, the New York Times still cannot let go of its corporate faith in the great god nuclear power.

These days, there is ugly irony in the emergence of Jimmy Carter as an advocate for nuclear sanity. In 1979, when the Three Mile Island nuclear power disaster occurred in Pennsylvania, President Carter went out of his way to flack for the atomic-energy industry. And like his predecessors and successors in the Oval Office, he pushed nuclear power on people in many other countries. Now Carter is singing a somewhat different tune. In an oped piece that appeared in the International Herald Tribune on May 2, he warned: “Iran has repeatedly hidden its intentions to enrich uranium while claiming that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only. This explanation has been given before, by India, Pakistan and North Korea, and has led to weapons programs in all three states.”

Meanwhile, Carter is suitably adamant about the importance of not allowing nuclear test explosions. “The comprehensive test ban treaty should be honored,” he wrote in the same article, “but the United States is moving in the opposite direction.” You wouldn’t know it from Carter, or from the U.S. media, but his administration chose to

jettison the appreciable prospects that a comprehensive test ban could have been locked into place a quarter-century ago.

When I visited the State Department early in the fourth year of the Carter presidency, an arms-control specialist asked me to turn off my tape recorder before he talked about ways that top officials at the government's nuclear weapons labs were successfully sinking the test-ban efforts. Several months later, in October 1980, I summed up the situation in a Nation magazine article: "While proclaiming a desire to halt the nuclear arms race, the U.S. government has been quietly undermining chances for the most far-reaching disarmament treaty on the horizon – a comprehensive international ban on atomic bomb tests. The latest round of talks in Geneva ended in failure – with the United States' tactics of delay drawing criticism from other delegations. And no wonder: The Carter administration has caved in to the nuclear-weapons laboratories, which want to continue to test bombs and are opposed to a meaningful agreement that will stop the spread of nuclear weapons."

In 2005, it's bad enough that such history is scarcely on the U.S. media radar screen, while propaganda looms larger for an attack on Iran either by the Pentagon or by the U.S.-backed Israeli government. But in the present day, the hypocrisy of Washington's righteous finger-pointing toward Iran is extremely dangerous. Carter has it right when he now calls the United States "the major culprit" in erosion of the Non-Proliferation Treaty: "While claiming to be protecting the world from proliferation threats in Iraq, Libya, Iran and North Korea, American leaders not only have abandoned existing treaty restraints but also have asserted plans to test and develop new weapons, including antiballistic missiles, the earth-penetrating 'bunker buster' and perhaps some new 'small' bombs. They also have abandoned past pledges and now threaten first use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states."

The odds are good that if the Pentagon doesn't launch a major missile attack on Iranian facilities in the next year or so, the Israeli government will – with a wink and nod from President Bush. Yet, unlike Iran's government, Israel is not even a signer of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. With a nuclear bomb stockpile now estimated at more than 200 warheads, Israel is fueling the nuclear arms race in the Middle East. But, from the White House to Capitol Hill to newsrooms across the United States, the Israeli nuclear arsenal draws scant mention let alone criticism.

A former U.N. weapons inspector in Iraq who previously served as Australia's ambassador to the United Nations, Richard Butler, astutely wrote on May 1 in the Sydney

Morning Herald that the U.S. government "can be expected to seek to draw attention away from its policies and actions by attempting to insist that the most significant issue at the review conference should be the potential breakout by Iran and North Korea." Butler added: "In this context, it was remarkable to see the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, during his recent visit to President George Bush's Texas ranch, call on the U.S. to take urgent steps against Iran's nuclear weapons program – the intelligence on which is quite divided. Neither side made any reference to the world's largest clandestine nuclear weapons program – Israel's."

The person who has done more than anyone else to inform the world about that nuclear weapons program, Mordechai Vanunu, left his job as a technician at Israel's Dimona nuclear facility before spilling the beans to the Sunday Times of London in 1986. The Israeli government promptly sent agents to kidnap Vanunu from Rome and take him back to Israel. As a result, Vanunu spent 18 years behind bars, mostly in solitary confinement. Since his release in April 2004, the Israeli authorities have imposed a travel ban along with other restrictions on Vanunu – and they're threatening to put him back in prison if he keeps talking to journalists.

If Vanunu were Iranian instead of Israeli, the U.S. press would be hailing him as a hero instead of giving him short shrift.

Like almost every other mainstream U.S. media outlet, the New York Times has provided little coverage of Vanunu, so the American public has scant knowledge of his real-life experience with truth and consequences. Likewise, the Times has little to say about Washington's extreme hypocrisies while the newspaper and the government denounce certain other countries for their nuclear programs.

But the New York Times has not skimped on coverage that adds to momentum for a military attack on Iran. And evidently the newspaper of record is just getting started.

Norman Solomon's latest book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," will be published in early summer. His columns and other writings can be found at: www.normansolomon.com