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News media's love-hate for nuclear weapons

Since the Soviet Union collapsed a decade and a half ago, nuclear weaponry has been mostly relegated to back pages and mental back burners in the United States. A big media uproar about nuclear weapons is apt to happen only when the man in the Oval Office has chosen to make an issue of them.

Sometimes a "nuclear threat" has been imaginary. During the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration went into rhetorical overdrive – fabricating evidence and warning that an ostensible smoking gun could turn into a mushroom cloud. The White House publicly obsessed about an Iraqi nuclear-weapons program that didn't exist.

In sharp contrast, North Korea really seems to have a nuclear warhead or two. And because the Pyongyang regime is apparently nuclear-armed, Bush isn't likely to order an attack on that country, as he did against Iraq and as he has been not-too-subtly threatening to do against Iran.

By all credible accounts, Tehran is at least several years – and probably more like a full decade – away from acquiring a nuclear bomb. But America's top officials and leading pundits have been sounding urgent alarms.

Judging from the frequent denunciations of some countries for alleged plans to build a nuclear arsenal, you might think that the U.S. media are down on nuclear weapons. Not so.

Red-white-and-blue nuclear weaponry has been depicted by U.S. news media as a reassuring guarantor of national security – or at worst an unfortunate necessity – since the nuclear age went public 61 years ago with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

That first atomic bombing of Japan came three days before an initial presidential lie about U.S. nuclear weapons policies. The lie was huge, but very few journalists in the United States have ever done so much as murmur a complaint about it.

On Aug. 9, 1945, President Harry Truman told the public this whopper: "The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, in so far as possible, the killing of civilians."

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Actually, the U.S. government went out of its way to select Japanese cities of sufficient size to showcase the extent of the A-bomb's deadly power – in Hiroshima on Aug. 6 and in Nagasaki on Aug. 9. As a result of those two bombings, hundreds of thousands of civilians died, immediately or eventually. If Truman's conscience had been clear, it's doubtful he would have felt compelled to engage in such a basic distortion at the dawn of the nuclear era.

The scientific know-how of the Manhattan Project that developed the atomic bomb was headquartered at the secret Los Alamos laboratory in northern New Mexico beginning in the spring of 1943. Today, that one laboratory has a \$2 billion annual budget, with most of the money devoted to the lab's key role in helping to maintain the "reliability and safety" of the U.S. government's nuclear arsenal – which currently includes about 10,000 thermonuclear weapons. But you'd have to search far and wide to find mainstream American news coverage that raises fundamental questions about that arsenal as any kind of "nuclear threat."

Meanwhile, experts say that the Israeli government now has about 200 nuclear weapons. Israel's military actions in recent weeks underscore its willingness to use high-tech weaponry for reckless offensives that kill many civilians.

But in U.S. news media, the implicit message is that American nuclear bombs are A-OK, and the fact that Washington's ally Israel maintains a large nuclear arsenal is supposed to be no cause for major concern.

Until the moment when events prove otherwise, the policy of deploying an array of nuclear weapons with the rationale of "deterrence" can convince the faithful that the nuclear priesthood in Washington is worthy of our trust.

But, going deeper than nationalistic blind faith, some important questions should be considered. Last week, the Latin American writer Eduardo Galeano asked two of them: "Who calibrates the universal dangerometer? Was Iran the country that dropped atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima?"

The paperback edition of Norman Solomon's latest book, "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death," was published this summer. For information, go to: www.warmadeeasy.com

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