

Nuclear Security as Partisan Politics

by Peter Huessy

GRAHAM ALLISON, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: Times Books, 2004), 272 pp., \$24.00.

As a rule, any book that examines the threat of a nuclear device being detonated over or in an American city should be taken seriously. And Graham Allison's *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* is most definitely about that problem—arguably the most grievous facing the United States today. But it is not a serious book. Instead, it reads like a polemic against the Bush administration first and foremost, and second a whitewash of the Clinton record on nonproliferation.

Nuclear Terrorism's first thesis is that it is probably an impossibility to stop a nuclear device or nuclear materiel from coming across our borders. Given the number of trucks, trains, planes, people, and automobiles crossing the frontiers of the United States by land, air or sea, such an enterprise would require a Herculean effort, and multiple trillions of dollars annually.

The second is that no bombs will be made and used against America if we can secure the two principal means by which weapons-grade nuclear material is produced—reprocessing spent fuel from nuclear reactors or the enrichment of uranium through centrifuges. As a corollary, Allison is an ardent advocate of securing such material in the former Soviet Union and in the United States.

The third and fourth premises are that the liberation of Iraq has ruined our chances for serious nonproliferation, and that defending the continental United States against ballistic missile attack is a waste of money and time.

The partisan nature of Allison's effort is easy to discern. Almost 100 pages paint the Bush administration in a derogatory light, while the Clinton White House warrants one small criticism and only half a dozen mentions. This, despite the fact that the Clinton administration did not eliminate a single Russian warhead, while the Bush team has initiated and sustained an ambitious program to do just that. And, though the Clinton White House failed to finalize the START II treaty when it was presented on a silver platter, the Bush administration has successfully secured an agreement to eliminate more than 20,000 Russian and U.S. nuclear weapons.

When it comes to the Clinton administration, Allison—an Assistant Secretary of Defense during the first Clinton term—gives credit where no credit is due, lauding it for succeeding in ridding Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine of their nuclear weapons. In fact, it was the first Bush administration that in 1991 and 1992 got the three nations to accede to both START I and the NPT as a prelude to formally abdicating their nuclear weapons. Allison also turns a blind eye to the Clinton administration's abysmal record on proliferation. Between 1993 and 2000, India and Pakistan exploded



PETER HUESSY is President of GeoStrategic Analysis, a Potomac, Maryland defense consulting firm, and a member of the new Committee on the Present Danger. A more extensive review is available directly from the author: huessyp@ndu.edu.

nuclear devices; North Korea developed and produced nuclear weapons, including an initial centrifuge effort that it hid from the signatories to the 1994 “Agreed Framework” and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA); and Iran moved swiftly to build nuclear weapons, even as the Clinton administration repeatedly belittled prescient warnings and issued laughably inaccurate intelligence reports.

Allison’s treatment of border security is similarly myopic. He completely leaves out a key issue—the role of Canada and Mexico in U.S. border security—neglecting the current lapses evident in both countries. He also misses the fact that the major form of illegal immigration into the United States is from overstays—the method used by at least some of the 9/11 hijackers. And he seems unaware of the extraordinary efforts now being made by customs authorities, the Coast Guard, border security agents and the U.S. private sector to create safe port initiatives here and abroad, and to vastly improve the ability to monitor ships, planes and trains entering the country.

Most of all, Allison seems blissfully unaware of a simple fact: the Clinton administration chose deliberately to leave the United States naked and vulnerable to mounting threats. Nowhere was this attitude on the part of the Clinton team clearer than in a June 2000 congressional briefing given by Richard Clarke, then the National Security Council’s counterterrorism czar. A comprehensive anti-terror plan for the United States, Clarke told Congressman Christopher Shays at that time, was a “silly” idea. This is the same Clarke who as a State Department Bureaucrat dismissed the idea that Iran was pursuing nuclear weapons.

When he turns to Iraq, Allison gets nearly everything wrong. He does admit that terrorists must be denied the sanctuary of countries in which they can train, operate, live and organize. But he

completely misses that the liberation of Iraq and Afghanistan have begun just such a transformation.

Having taken the obligatory partisan potshots at the Bush administration over Iraq, Allison moves to another target of opportunity, missile defense, with the usual results. According to both the Senate and House Armed Services Committee reports for the FY06 budget, funding for the defense of the United States against long-range ballistic missiles stands at roughly \$2.3 billion, not the \$10 billion that Allison criticizes.

Allison also seems blissfully unaware of the benefits that missile defenses deployed in the Persian Gulf, Israel and the Far East can provide to American allies and the Global War on Terror. Paradoxically, for all of his analysis of “nuclear terrorism,” Allison somehow never entertains the notion that a nuclear device against America could come on the tip of a missile.

Nuclear Terrorism certainly paints a frightening picture of a daunting problem. Its solutions, however, leave a lot to be desired. To hear Allison tell it, securing the nuclear material in Russia and the United States, as well as compelling China, North Korea, Pakistan, Iran and others to do the same, is to be accomplished largely through greater, more invasive international oversight. This suggestion ignores the fact that, throughout the 1990s, the atomic watchdogs of the IAEA were found time and again to be sound asleep, face down in their bowls of Viennese Alpo.

Given that shameful track record, Allison’s faith in such international arrangements seems sorely misplaced. And his antagonism toward the current White House is equally inexplicable—particularly since the Bush administration has already eliminated two aspiring nuclear powers (Iraq and Libya), and is in negotiations with North Korea and Iran to curb two more. 