

America and Iran: At the Brink of the Abyss

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Whether [the U.S. will use nuclear weapons against Iran](#) if [a military confrontation erupts](#) is in the hands of a single person, President Bush, as stated in [NSC 30](#) from 1948: " [the decision as to the employment of atomic weapons](#) in the event of war is to be made by the Chief Executive when he considers such decision to be required." Bush will certainly *not* ask Congress nor the public permission once hostilities start. Whether or not tactical nuclear weapons should be deployed and used against Iran is a matter that [needs to be faced by America right now](#) !

So are U.S. tactical nuclear weapons deployed in the Persian Gulf, on hair-trigger alert, and ready to be launched against Iran at a moment's notice?

I [posed the question in December](#) , arguing that every other element needed for a nuclear strike on Iran was "deployed" and ready. On Feb. 3, 2006, an answer was kindly provided by the Chief of Naval Operations in the form of [OPNAVINST 5721.1F](#) [.pdf], which states:

"Military members and civilian employees of the Department of the Navy shall not reveal, purport to reveal, or cause to be revealed any information, rumor, or speculation with respect to the presence or absence of nuclear weapons or components on board any specific ship, station or aircraft, either on their own initiative or in response, direct or indirect, to any inquiry."

Oh well then, we don't know for sure, and there is no way to know. Really?

We do know. Because it would be inconsistent with every fiber of the current administration, and with [all the circumstances surrounding the Iran scenario](#) , if [tactical nuclear weapons were not deployed](#) in the Persian Gulf, following [NSPD 35](#) , on high alert and ready to be used in a confrontation with Iran. So we may safely assume they are deployed and they will be used, and [make our choices](#) accordingly. Once it happens, [it cannot be undone](#) .

The Impending Nuclear Attack

All the elements have been put in place carefully and methodically for the U.S. to use tactical nuclear weapons against Iran in a way that will seem "acceptable" at first sight, [as discussed in previous columns](#) : the [new nuclear doctrine](#) , the [nuclear hitmen](#) , the [weapons](#) , the [justification](#) , the [legal framework](#) , and [the public mindset](#) . The [IAEA resolution of Feb. 4](#) [.pdf] has [paved a smooth road](#) to confrontation, paralleling the events after the passage of UN Security Council [Resolution 1441](#) of November 2002. The use of [low-yield earth-penetrating nuclear weapons](#) will appear to be a [military necessity](#) , one that will save thousands of American and Israeli lives, deter an Iranian response, and achieve " [rapid and](#)

[favorable war termination on U.S. terms.](#) ”

The public mindset has been thoroughly prepared for war by a barrage of untrue propaganda against Iran, [extending over many years](#) and [gradually escalating](#) in volume and [tone](#) . Iran has been demonized as the pure incarnation of evil: the [foremost sponsor of terrorism](#) , [pursuing nuclear weapons](#) , intent on [harming America](#) , [harboring al-Qaeda](#) , hiding [arsenals of chemical and biological weapons](#) and their [means of delivery](#) , [oppressing its own people](#) , intent on [destroying Israel and the West](#) . Max Boot [just wrote](#) in the *Los Angeles Times* , “In sum, a terrorist-sponsoring state led by an apocalyptic lunatic will soon have the ability to incinerate Tel Aviv or New York,” which “leaves only one serious option ? air strikes by Israel or the U.S.” [Niall Ferguson wrote a few days earlier](#) in the same newspaper that a U.S. preemptive strike against Iran today would prevent an Iranian nuclear strike on Israel in 2007, ignoring among other things the [reality](#) that it is [physically impossible](#) for Iran to produce a nuclear weapon in a year. Nicholas Goldberg, who edits the *Times* ‘ opinion page, studiously avoids publishing any alternative viewpoints. A similar approach is taken by the rest of the mainstream media in the U.S. and Western Europe. Is it surprising that a few days after these two opinion pieces were published the *Los Angeles Times* found that [57 percent of the U.S. public backs a military strike on Iran?](#)

Whether Iran has nuclear weapons today, [10 years from today](#) , or never is not the issue anymore. The U.S. has declared that Iran will not be allowed to have a ” [nuclear weapons capability](#) . ” How? Perhaps [the CIA will supply Iran with misleading documents](#) indicating that $E=mc^2$ rather than $E=m^2c$? Unlikely. The nuclear weapons “capability” will be defined as broadly as needed, no matter what Iran agrees to, to justify the military option, which has already been endorsed by [senators on both sides of the aisle](#) .

However, neither the media nor Congress are bringing up the inconvenient little fact that the military option [will necessarily lead](#) to the use of nuclear weapons against Iran. And they are unwilling to weigh the fact that using nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear country like Iran will likely have [disastrous consequences](#) for the U.S. and the rest of the world.

The Fallacy of Nuclear “Deterrence”

We are told over and over that the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons [is to “deter” adversaries](#) , which surely provides some comfort to [otherwise moral people](#) who [devote their efforts](#) to [building up the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal](#) . The argument made some sense before: an adversary like the Soviet Union could arguably be deterred by the U.S. nuclear arsenal from launching a nuclear attack against the U.S. or its allies, or even a massive conventional attack against Western Europe.

However, the “deterrent” role of U.S. nuclear weapons [has recently been extended](#) to [deter WMD](#) (e.g., chemical weapons) attacks, and the administration argues that [“low-yield” nuclear weapons make deterrence more “credible”](#) [.pdf], and [low-yield earth penetrating weapons \(B61-11\)](#) are [already in the U.S. nuclear stockpile](#) [.pdf]. Where does this lead?

As Keith Payne, a proponent of the current U.S. Nuclear Posture well puts it, ” [deterrence is inherently unreliable: prepare for its failure.](#) ” This means that if an adversary undertakes an action that the U.S. nuclear threat was meant to deter, the U.S. will respond by making good on its threat and use its nuclear weapons. Couple this with the recently adopted preemptive [National Security Strategy](#) , and the fact that [the U.S. accuses Iran of having chemical weapons](#) and that it can ” [deploy chemical warheads on its long-range missiles](#) ,” and you

are led to the following scenario: *If in response to an aerial attack on Iran's facilities, Iran fires or threatens to fire a single missile against Israel or against U.S. forces in Iraq, the U.S. will attack Iran with tactical nuclear weapons .*

Why is this a [realistic expectation](#) ? Because no matter what the political cost, it would support the [much broader role desired for the U.S. nuclear arsenal](#) in the " [second nuclear age](#)," which currently has [no credibility](#) . According to the [2001 Nuclear Posture Review](#) , the U.S. nuclear arsenal is now also supposed to "dissuade adversaries from undertaking military programs or operations that could threaten U.S. interests or those of allies and friends." Well, it has already failed in this regard. Iran is pursuing its nuclear program, undeterred by all [overt](#) and [less overt](#) U.S. threats. Once the U.S. makes good on its nuclear deterrence threat once and uses its nuclear weapons, the validity of the nuclear deterrence policy against any action opposed by the U.S. will be established for future contingencies. There is a good reason why U.S. documents emphasize that " [there is no customary or conventional international law to prohibit nations from employing nuclear weapons in armed conflict](#) ."

Tactical Nuclear Weapons Deployment

The Navy instruction [OPNAVINST 5721.1F](#) [.pdf] just released concerning "the release of information about nuclear weapons and nuclear capabilities of U.S. forces" is an update of the earlier [1993 version](#) [.pdf] with some changes. One is this added paragraph:

"The current NCND [neither confirming nor denying] policy mirrors the original policy taking into account employment and program policy changes. In general, it is U.S. policy not to deploy nuclear weapons aboard surface ships, naval aircraft, attack submarines, or guided missile submarines."

Note the "in general" wording, which clearly allows for exceptions. That phrasing was conspicuously absent in the 1993 version, which instead stated "It is general US policy not to deploy nuclear weapons?." Note also that the new statement explicitly mentions that it is issued in view of "employment and program policy changes," which presumably refers to the [2001 Nuclear Posture Review](#) and the associated " [Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations](#) ," which envision the U.S. use of tactical nuclear weapons in [vastly expanded circumstances](#) .

The policy's purported rationale is that

" Uncertainty as to the location of nuclear weapons complicates an adversary's military planning and reduces his chances of successful attack thereby increasing the deterrent value of our forces and the security of the weapons ."

Perhaps. But it also serves the clear function of allowing preparations for [a tactical nuclear strike against Iran](#) without raising public alarm. The same considerations that were being made [back in 1948](#) ? "The novel nature of atomic war nevertheless made it advisable to refrain from openly declaring an American atomic strategy, because that would alarm the American public, triggering a moral debate?" ? apply today. [Americans would vehemently oppose](#) the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to be used against Iran if such action was publicly disclosed.

Blaming the Military

The principal responsibility for what is about to happen will be assigned to the military. Linton Brooks, the National Nuclear Security Administration director, [stated that](#) “recently funded research into earth-penetrating bombs came at the request of military leaders who have seen potential uses for them against rogue states that hide sensitive sites deep underground.” The weapons that will be used are [B61-11 nuclear earth penetrators](#), in the U.S. nuclear stockpile [since 2001](#) [.pdf].

The Pentagon draft document “ [Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations](#) ” provides “guidance for the employment of U.S. nuclear forces” and states, “Geographic combatant commanders may request presidential approval for use of nuclear weapons for a variety of conditions,” then proceeds to list [several conditions](#) that will undoubtedly apply in a military confrontation with Iran:

- “An adversary using or intending to use WMD against U.S., multinational, or alliance forces or civilian populations”
- “Attacks on adversary installations including WMD, deep, hardened bunkers containing chemical or biological weapons”
- “To counter potentially overwhelming adversary conventional forces”
- “For rapid and favorable war termination on U.S. terms”
- “To ensure success of U.S. and multinational operations”
- “To demonstrate U.S. intent and capability to use nuclear weapons to deter adversary use of WMD.”

Bush and Rumsfeld often emphasize that their decisions on military operations in Iraq rely on recommendations of military commanders on the ground. As [Bush recently put it](#),

“The people don’t want me making decisions based upon politics; they want me to make decisions based upon the recommendation from our generals on the ground. And that’s exactly who I’ll be listening to.”

When Rumsfeld was accused of overruling advice from Gen. Tommy Franks on preparations for the war on Iraq, the [BBC reported](#) that he “flatly denied overriding military commanders,” instead stating,

“You will find, if you ask anyone who has been involved in the process in the central command, that every single thing that they [military commanders] have requested has, in fact, happened.”

This shameful approach of shifting responsibility from the policymakers to the commanders on the ground will be an essential element in the nuking of Iran. The motivation is transparent: the administration’s hope that the strong American inclination to “ [support the troops](#) ” will blunt criticism of the political decision to nuke Iran.

The mere possibility that Iranian missiles targeting U.S. troops could carry chemical warheads, suggested by faulty or even true intelligence and already [assumed by U.S.](#)

[officials](#), could prompt a geographic commander to request authorization from the president to use low-yield nuclear weapons against Iran, particularly if such weapons are already deployed in the theater. Or such a request could be prompted by “intelligence” that [chemical weapons hidden in underground facilities](#) in Iran will be [supplied to terrorists to be used against Americans](#), and can only be destroyed by nuclear bunker-busters. It is obviously unconscionable to demand that a military commander, whose prime concern is the safety of the troops under command, take into account the long-term consequences for America of crossing the nuclear threshold.

How will President Bush respond to such a request? Will he not authorize the use of tactical nuclear weapons after the military commander has stated that thousands of soldiers under his/her command could be at risk? We’re talking about the president whose “[top priority is the safety and security of the American people](#)” and who has proclaimed that “[\[t\]he greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction ? and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack.](#)” This is the same man who [year after year has requested that Congress](#) lift the ban on research and development of low-yield nuclear weapons ([he finally succeeded](#)), who year after year asks Congress to fund [new, more “usable” nuclear bunker-busters](#) [.pdf], who has said that “[\[i\]f America shows uncertainty and weakness in the decade, the world will drift toward tragedy. This will not happen on my watch.](#)”

A decision that will determine the future of humanity and its possible annihilation lies in the hands, mind and soul of a geographic combatant commander.

Make No Mistake About It: Nuking Iran Is Wrong

Attacking Iran with nuclear weapons, [no matter how small](#), is evil for the following reasons:

- It will not be the result of military necessity, but a [premeditated act](#), the circumstances to make it possible having been methodically put in place by the United States over the course of many years.
- Iran [does not have ready-to-use chemical nor biological weapons](#), just like Iraq didn’t in 2003, despite [identical U.S. accusations](#), no matter what “[intelligence](#)” tells you. Iran is party to international treaties proscribing [chemical](#) and [biological](#) weapons and [terrorism](#).
- Iran [is not pursuing nuclear weapons](#); it is [pursuing a civilian nuclear program](#). Even if it wanted to, [it is many years away](#) from the ability to make nuclear weapons.
- Iran [advocates a political solution](#) to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; it *does not* threaten the use of force against Israel. The U.S. may not agree with Iran’s advocated political solution (elimination of the state of Israel), but that does not give the U.S. the right to attack Iran, just as the [Spanish claim over Gibraltar](#) does not entitle Britain to attack Spain.
- Iran has never attacked nor threatened to attack another state in modern times.
- [Iran has no](#) more [connection to al-Qaeda](#) than do the U.S., [Spain](#), or [Germany](#),

and [a lot less than the state of Florida](#) .

- Iran is a signatory to the [Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty](#) as a non-nuclear-weapon state, does not have nuclear weapons, and does not threaten to use them, [unlike the U.S.](#)
- Iran's missiles serve the purpose of [detering an Israeli attack](#) (like the [Israeli attack on Osirak](#)), not an offensive purpose.
- Iran's government [was democratically elected](#) and has popular support. Attacking Iran will *not* result in Iranians rebelling against their government, despite [the LA Times'](#) (here we [go again, Nick](#)) claim to the contrary.

The U.S. [has just declared](#) that it will defend Israel militarily against Iran if needed. Presumably this includes a scenario where Israel would initiate hostilities by unprovoked bombing of Iranian facilities, as it did with Iraq's Osirak, and Iran would respond with missiles targeting Israel. The U.S. intervention is likely to be further bombing of Iran's facilities, including underground installations that can only be destroyed with low-yield nuclear bunker-busters. Such nuclear weapons may cause low casualties, [perhaps only in the hundreds](#) [.pdf], but the nuclear threshold will have been crossed.

Iran's reaction to a U.S. attack with nuclear weapons, no matter how small, cannot be predicted with certainty. U.S. planners may hope that it will deter Iran from responding, thus saving lives. However, just as the U.S. forces in Iraq were not greeted with flowers, it is likely that such an attack would provoke a violent reaction from Iran and lead to the severe escalation of hostilities, which in turn would lead to the use of larger nuclear weapons by the U.S. and potential casualties in the hundreds of thousands. Witness the current uproar [over cartoons](#) and try to imagine the resulting upheaval in the Muslim world after the U.S. nukes Iran.

The Military's Moral Dilemma

Men and women in the military forces, including civilian employees, may be facing a difficult moral choice at this very moment and in the coming weeks, akin to the moral choices faced by Colin Powell and Dan Ellsberg. The paths these two men followed were radically different.

Colin Powell was an American hero, widely respected and admired at the time he was appointed secretary of state in 2001. In February 2003, he chose to follow orders despite his own [serious misgivings](#) , and delivered the pivotal UN address that [paved the way for the U.S. invasion of Iraq](#) the following month. Today, most Americans believe the Iraq invasion was wrong, and Colin Powell is [disgraced](#) , his future destroyed, and his great past achievements forgotten.

[Daniel Ellsberg](#) , a military analyst, played [a significant role](#) in ending the Vietnam War by leaking the Pentagon Papers. He knew that he would face prosecution for breaking the law, but was convinced it was the correct moral choice. His [courageous](#) and principled action earned him [respect and gratitude](#) .

The [Navy has just reminded](#) [.pdf] its members and civilian employees what the consequences are of violating provisions concerning the release of information about the

nuclear capabilities of U.S. forces. Why right now, for the [first time in 12 years](#) ? Because it is well aware of moral choices that its members may face, and it hopes to deter certain actions. But courageous men and women are not easily deterred.

To disobey orders and laws and to leak information are difficult actions that entail risks. Still, many [principled individuals have done it in the past](#) and will continue to do it in the future (see [\[1\]](#), [\[2\]](#), [\[3\]](#), [\[4\]](#), [\[5\]](#), [\[6\]](#), [\[7\]](#), [\[8\]](#), [\[9\]](#).) Conscientious objection to the threat and use of nuclear weapons [is a moral choice](#) .

Once the American public becomes fully aware that military action against Iran will include the planned use of nuclear weapons, [public support for military action will quickly disappear](#). Anything could get the ball rolling. A great catastrophe will have been averted.

Even U.S. military law recognizes that there is no requirement to [obey orders that are unlawful](#) . The use of nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear country can be argued to be [in violation of international law](#) , the principle of [just war](#) , the [principle of proportionality](#) , common standards of morality ([\[1\]](#), [\[2\]](#), [\[3\]](#), [\[4\]](#), [\[5\]](#)), and customs that make up the [law of armed conflict](#) . Even if the nuclear weapons used are small, because they are likely to cause escalation of the conflict they violate the principle of proportionality and will cause [unnecessary suffering](#) .

The [Nuremberg Tribunal](#) , which the United States helped to create, established that “The fact that a person acted pursuant to order of his government or of a superior does not relieve him from responsibility under international law, provided a moral choice was in fact possible to him.”

To follow orders or to disobey orders, to keep information secret or to leak it, are choices for each individual to make ? extremely difficult choices that have consequences. But not choosing is not an option.

America’s Collective Responsibility

Blaming the administration or the military for crossing the nuclear threshold is easy, but responsibility will be shared by all Americans.

All [Americans knew](#) , or [should have known](#) , that using nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear country like Iran was a possibility given the [Bush administration’s new policies](#) . All Americans could have voiced their opposition to these policies and demand that they be reversed.

The media will carry a heavy burden of responsibility. The mainstream media could have effectively raised public awareness of the possibility that the U.S. would use nuclear weapons against Iran. So far, they have chosen to [almost](#) completely hide the issue, which is being increasingly [addressed in non-mainstream media](#) .

Members of Congress could have raised the question forcefully, calling for public hearings, demanding public discussion of the administration’s plans, and passing new laws or [resolutions](#) . So far they have failed to do so and are derelict in their responsibility to their constituents. Letters to the president from some in Congress [\[1\]](#), [\[2\]](#) are a start, but are not likely to elicit a meaningful response or a change in plans and are a far cry from forceful action.

Scientific organizations and organizations dealing with arms control and nuclear weapons could have warned of the dangers associated with the Iran situation. So far, they have not done so ([\[1\]](#), [\[2\]](#), [\[3\]](#), [\[4\]](#), [\[5\]](#), [\[6\]](#), [\[7\]](#), [\[8\]](#)).

Scientists and engineers [responsible for the development of nuclear weapons](#) could have [voiced concern](#) [.pdf] when the new U.S. nuclear weapons policies became known, policies that directly involve the fruits of their labor. Their voices have not been heard.

Those who contribute their labor to the scientific and technical infrastructure that makes nuclear weapons and their means of delivery possible bear a [particularly heavy burden of moral responsibility](#) . Their voices have [barely](#) been heard.

The Nuclear Abyss

The United States is preparing to enter a new era: an era in which it will enforce nuclear nonproliferation by the threat and use of nuclear weapons. The use of tactical nuclear weapons against Iran will usher in a new world order. The ultimate goal is that no nation other than the U.S. should have a nuclear weapons arsenal.

A telltale sign that this is the plan is the recent change in the stated mission of Los Alamos National Laboratory, where nuclear weapons are developed. The mission of LANL used to be described officially as " [Los Alamos National Laboratory's central mission is to reduce the global nuclear danger](#) " [\[1\]](#) [.pdf], [\[2\]](#) [.pdf], [\[3\]](#) [.pdf]. That will sound ridiculous once the U.S. starts throwing mini-nukes around. In anticipation of it, the Los Alamos mission statement has been recently changed to " [prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction and to protect our homeland from terrorist attack.](#) " That is the present and future role of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, to be achieved through threat (deterrence) *and use* of nuclear weapons. References to the old mission are nowhere to be found in the current Los Alamos documents, indicating that the change was deliberate and thorough.

It is not impossible that the U.S. will succeed in its goal. But it is utterly improbable. This is a big world. Once the U.S. crosses the nuclear threshold against a non-nuclear country, many more countries will strive to acquire nuclear weapons, and many will succeed.

The [nuclear abyss](#) may turn out to be a steep precipice or a gentle slope. Either way, it will be a one-way downhill slide toward a bottomless pit. We will have entered a path of no return, leading in a few months or a few decades to global nuclear war and unimaginable destruction.

But there are still choices to be made. Up to the moment the first U.S. nuclear bomb explodes, the fall into the abyss can be averted by [choices made](#) by each and every one of us. We may never know which choices prevented it if it doesn't happen. But if we make the wrong choices, we will know what they were. And so will future generations, even in a world where [wars are fought with sticks and stones](#) .

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