

Critical Mass

The Dangerous Race for Superweapons in a Fragmenting World

by William E. Burrows and Robert Windrem

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Review by James Ryerson

Those of us considering the post-Cold War superweapons race do so beneath an overarching confusion: why did we herald the Cold War's end as a harbinger of peace when it seems to have necessitated a new world disorder?

Granted, resolving long-standing antagonisms between the United States and the Soviet Union constituted more than trivial diplomacy; however, the conflicts uncaged by this resolution have proven more complex and less tempered than the simple bipolarity of the Cold War. Elements of religious fanaticism, widespread availability of nuclear technology, and

multinational tensions have made porous the division between international instability and potential nuclear war. Gone is the awkwardly comforting stalemate of Mutually Assured Destruction. Today's competing nuclear nations vie for dominance without the omnipresence of patron supernations or the calculus of secular politics. And there seems no way to check them.

Present complexity, however, leads to more than mere confusion and anxiety; it also spawns attempts at explanation. *Critical Mass* is such an attempt. Burrows and Windrem tell a tale of the current nuclear nations,

their rise to nuclear status, and their future as such; it is an interesting, if frightening, account. It carries with it an underlying pessimism, authorial attempts to put on optimistic airs notwithstanding. With international and intranational dynamics taken into account, and realistic attempts to reduce availability of nuclear technology considered, the efficacy of proposed solutions appears limited. *Critical Mass* provides not a panacea, but a clear view of the current situation—hardly kitsch, given the complexities of the current super-weapons race.

So what are these complexities? Reading *Critical Mass*, one can discern two basic categories: complexities deriving from the international and intranational characteristics of the nations concerned, and the complexities of legislative efforts to reduce superweapons proliferation.

The most volatile element in the current nuclear picture—and an element unfamiliar to the Cold

War—is that of non-secular politics. While the Cold War stemmed from inimical political philosophies and socio-economic differences, current nuclear nations such as India and Pakistan display inveterate antagonisms hitherto repressed—on a nuclear scale, at least—by Cold War-related concerns.

Unchecked ethnic and religious hatred is a new element in the nuclear world. Mikhail Gorbachev and James Baker ended the Cold War over a handshake; 300 years of Muslim rule in India and the ensuing Hindu revenge may require a more stringent palliative. Notably, even Mutual Assured Destruction does not play a role in Israel's nuclear picture, where a favorable balance of Israeli arms translates to salvaging partial national survival in return for the complete annihilation of Israeli enemies. Here, justifying nuclear weapons use for defense purposes conjoins a less pragmatic, genocidal goal. As continuing tensions in the Gaza strip make clear, Rabin-Arafat-

like handshakes only mean so much in spheres of religiously charged politics.

Aside from non-secularism, two closely related international concerns lend instability. First, the Cold War's holism is gone, and possibilities lie open for regional domination. Second, independence has become inextricably linked, for reasons both sound and unsound, to military self-sufficiency. As Burrows and Windrem note, nations see self-sufficiency primarily in the possession of nuclear weapons.

The complexities of regional domination are most obvious in East Asia. Japan fears North Korea's every move to further Korean nuclear research. The Japanese certainly possess the resources and technology needed to develop their own nuclear arsenal, which makes Australia—still aware of having been on Japan's hit list in World War II—uneasy. South Korea, with U.S. support, attempted joint resolve with North Korea, hoping to prevent nuclear prolifera-

tion. However, subsequent U.S. withdrawal from South Korea, coupled with North Korea's nuclear capabilities and vow to reunite the peninsula, precipitated South Korea's alliance with China, hardly a straight player of the superweapons race. Open positions for regional dominance provide numerous opportunities for nuclear conflict, and multinational involvement only furthers the situation's delicacy.

Such involved regionalism explains the close association often drawn between national independence and nuclear self-sufficiency.

Up to the present, Japan has refrained from developing nuclear weapons; however, given the activity of its neighbors, Japan may deem faith in its U.S. alliance insufficient for assured security. Israel, as a prime example, concedes a twenty-five-to-one population advantage to the Arabs. Its back to the sea, surrounded by hostile nations, Israel equates independence

with nuclear capability. The bomb has, in many ways, provided this. Until nations stop equating independence with possession of nuclear weapons, acquiring the bomb will always be a temptation. And until nations with the bomb stop gaining international leverage, this equation will hold true.

Two curious examples bespeak the fundamental problems with non-proliferation efforts.

When scientists developing Iraq's nuclear weapons program were baffled by a technical question, they would post it on the Internet electronic bulletin board—coded in benign terms—and often receive an answer from an American counterpart.

Israel received 53 billion dollars in U.S. loans and grants between 1949 and 1991, most of which appeared in the form of military aid; Israel then proceeded to develop its nuclear weapons program by conveniently and methodically transgressing the Non-Proliferation Treaty and Missile Technology Control

Regime. Both restrictions were backed by the United States.

Both examples stress the prodigious availability of nuclear weapons technology and know-how, as well as the impotence of restrictive legislation and treaties. These examples are not anomalous.

Iraq not only used the Freedom of Information Act to acquire CIA data, but engaged in negotiations with a French-Belgian consortium, the Soviet Union, China, Brazil, and small foreign firms. China has sold technology to both Iran and Iraq, India and Pakistan. German firms have done the same.

Jafar Dhia Jafar, the father of the Iraqi nuclear efforts, emphasized the importance and ease of current technological access: "You can bomb our buildings. You can destroy our technology, but you cannot take it out of our heads. We now have the capability."

Even easier than obtaining technology is breaking the rules designed to

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prevent technology from being converted into super-weapons.

Not only Israel, but Iraq and China—among other notables—have found their efforts unhampered by their repudiation of, or selective adherence to, the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Missile Technology Control Regime, and Biological Weapons Convention. The rules simply fail to deter, and nothing promises increased efficacy.

Burrows and Windrem make clear that the Cold War was not the final word in nuclear conflict. In fact, it predated a succession of more complex conflicts. Though the Cold War presented a simpler dynamic than those of present day, Burrows and Windrem exonerate neither the United States nor the Soviet Union from the current crises. Nuclear potentials in the Ukraine, Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea are the devil-spawn of Cold War events. In striving to reduce communist influence, the United States appears to have helped create greater

dangers than those it set out to prevent.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the war between Iran and Iraq led to Pakistan and Iraq's acquaintance with U.S. largesse in the form of military aid and selective overlooking of their clandestine nuclear efforts. United States assistance was instrumental in the creation of Israel's nuclear program—the United States understanding that Israel shared its fear of communist influence in the Middle East. Israel, in turn, has sold nuclear technology to Iran, South Africa, Chile, and China. Before aiding Pakistan, the United States subsidized loans and grants to India in the 1950's.

At present, the United States points to nuclear conflicts and questions why no one listens when it demands competing nations to stop. No nation appreciates being patronized, and when the United States demands eradicating nuclear arsenals, its existing, though reduced, nuclear capabilities do not go unnoticed. Alongside

issues of the current super-weapons race must run parallel consideration for the nations that bore it, and to what degree they must take responsibility for their action.

So far as it goes, Burrows and Windrem's explanation is a convincing, if unattractive, portrayal of the current superweapons race—unattractive because it seems to bode so poorly for the future.

What makes it less than satisfying, though, is that the authors fail to listen to their own tale. Their story is presented detail by detail; the discouraging state of the current superweapons race becomes apparent as example after example lends greater difficulties to the larger nuclear picture. Yet, in their conclusion, Burrows and Windrem foster the same suggestions and solutions others have ineffectively put forth. They propose international agreements to cut technology critical to superweapons development, though they note that these seem improb-

able. They also state the need for something close to universal political resolve for non-proliferation.

Such optimism is understandable; fatalist resignation certainly provides no better. However, if proliferation is fact, our efforts should be directed towards considering the issues of living in a nuclear world, not towards fancying its disappearance.

Detailing effective coexistence presents no simple task, and Burrows and Windrem should not be singled out as credulous and unrealistic; most of us face similar bewilderment and share an inclination for the ease of optimism. But such optimism is also ungrounded, unrealistic, and unprovided for. Perhaps the modern pugilists, having their Cold War-gloves removed, may discover that fighting bare-fisted proves a far bloodier sport, but forfeit does not look likely.

There is a proper place for constructive pessimism, and Burrows and Windrem should not have been loath

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to recognize it here. Optimism about the current superweapons race, while ostensibly comforting, impedes the careful, honest consideration for the future that the truth provides, and that the issue of global security deserves. ●