

The Continuing Challenge of Nuclear Weapons

By Andy Blackadar

October 11, 2001. Exactly one month after the terrorist attacks on the United States, the White House received a report that a nuclear weapon had been smuggled into New York City. The news came from a CIA source, code-named Dragonfire, who said that al Qaeda terrorists had stolen a ten-kiloton nuclear weapon from Russia and brought it into New York.

No nuclear weapon had been used against people since the United States had dropped two on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki some sixty years earlier. The weapon that Dragonfire reported had slightly less explosive power than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, but experts knew the potential consequences would dwarf what had happened on 9/11 at the Twin Towers. A nuclear weapon detonated in the heart of New York City would kill half a million people instantly and completely flatten every building within one third of a mile from the blast site. Buildings up to three-quarters of a mile would be damaged and destroyed, and hundreds of thousands more people would die as these buildings collapsed or burned. Radiation and more fires would initially extend out to 1-½ miles from the blast site.

The National Security Council staff at the White House worried that al Qaeda could have smuggled it into New York City. The CIA knew that Osama bin Laden had a long-standing interest in acquiring nuclear weapons. They also believed that he would attempt something more dramatic and horrific than the attacks of September 11.

Specially-trained government teams secretly went to New York to search for the weapon. No one in New York, including Mayor Rudy Giuliani, was informed of the threat for fear of setting off a panic. In Washington, Vice-President Cheney and hundreds of other government officials went into hiding outside of the city. They would form the core of a new government in case terrorists had also managed to smuggle a weapon into Washington D.C.

Dragonfire's report turned out to be wrong, but government officials had taken it very seriously.

Nuclear weapons have remained unused for sixty years, but many experts believe that nuclear weapons are the greatest threat to national security. Some believe that they are simply too dangerous and that countries should agree to give them up. Others believe that they are essential for our defense. Some also worry that it is simply a matter of time before one is used against the United States. This story of Dragonfire highlights the newest threat posed by nuclear weapons.

The arguments that surround nuclear weapons are often heated. Understanding these arguments involves confronting consequences and questions that can seem overwhelming.

It is the destructive power of these weapons that requires us to learn about their risks and confront these moral dilemmas and questions. How dangerous are nuclear weapons? Who has them and how many are there? Do they make the world safer or less safe? How do we know? What needs to be done about them? Should we continue to rely on weapons that can kill millions to preserve our security?

Nuclear weapons pose many risks and challenges for the United States and the world. Nuclear weapons are linked to our most complex and challenging foreign policy problems. For example, the United States went to war against Iraq in 2003, arguing that Iraq was trying to build a nuclear weapon. Preventing the proliferation (spread) of nuclear weapons remains a top priority for the United States. The United States has identified Iran and North Korea as two states that represent a threat to U.S. security because of their nuclear weapons programs. Tensions with Iran and North Korea are high.

Finally, the tens of thousands of weapons produced during the Cold War remain ready for use in the United States and Russia—an issue that some experts worry more about than the threat of nuclear terrorism. Russia and the United States have approximately 26,300 warheads of the some 27,600 nuclear weapons in the world. Both the U.S. and Russian arsenals are capable of destroying humanity.

Why is this a topic for the classroom?

In spite of their importance, nuclear weapons seem at times to be far from the public's mind. And even when we do turn our attention to them, our consideration is largely uninformed.

While proliferation of nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons is not traditionally addressed within the high school curriculum, it is on students' minds. In the Choices Program's extensive online ballot on America's role in the world, high school students cite proliferation as their number one concern. [As this article goes to print, 45 percent of almost thirteen thousand students participating in the ballot chose proliferation of WMD as one of their top three concerns from a list of thirteen. This concern went well beyond any other issue.] Despite the high level of concern, little is being done to help American youth to understand the issues and engage in informed deliberation on the choices before us. The school curriculum offers a place to do this substantively and responsibly.

Resources for teaching about nuclear weapons:

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace—This site provides extensive resources on the issues surrounding nuclear weapons. Their maps are a particularly useful resource in the classroom. www.carnegieendowment.org/npp/weapons

Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies—This site provides tutorials on a range of issues related to proliferation. cns.miis.edu/cns/resources.htm

The Challenge of Nuclear Weapons, Choices Education Program, Brown University—This is a one-week curriculum unit that introduces students to the history of nuclear weapons and the concept of deterrence. It examines arguments for and against nuclear weapons and then looks at three challenges: the leftover arsenals of the Cold War, proliferation, and the threat of nuclear terrorism. www.choices.edu

Controlling the Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, United States Institute of Peace—The 2006 USIP Peace Essay Contest was focused on this topic. This is a resource that was provided for teachers at that time. www.usip.org/ed/npec/topic.html

North Korea and Nuclear Weapons, Choices Education Program, Brown University—This is an online 2-day lesson plan found in the Choices Program's *Teaching with the News* web site www.choices.edu/twtn.cfm.

An annotated list of additional resources for teachers and students is available online at www.choices.edu/nukes_resources.cfm.

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