

The neutron bomb: preserving

by Bruce Cooley (*The Gauntlet*)

The question of the development and deployment of the neutron bomb is rapidly becoming one of the most crucial tests of detente in our times; particularly in view of recent shifts in U.S. nuclear strategies as announced by Presidential Directive 59. This issue does not exist in isolation; nor is it simply a matter of casual academics. It is a serious struggle between those who stand for a continuation of the arms race and a continuation of the policy of "balance of terror" politics on the one hand, and those who stand in favour of the lessening of world tensions through disarmament and the consolidation of the benefits of detente.

In a world supersaturated with enough atomic firepower to incinerate our planet many times over and where it has proven difficult to put into practice actions toward reduction of the nuclear arsenal, the deployment of another weapon of mass annihilation leads us further away from peace. The neutron bomb reaps no benefits to anyone except the arms merchants who produce these weapons and the generals who deploy them.

Those who argue for the neutron bomb claim that it is a more clean, more humane warhead than the atomic bombs already in position throughout the world. Proponents call the neutron bomb a "reduced-blast radiation device," and explain the weapon is more humane because it will, for the most part, leave buildings and machinery, unharmed while wiping out the population within the blast area.

According to General Alexander Haig, former NATO supreme commander and former U.S. Secretary of State, in the event of an enemy attack, it will allow defenders to defend their territory without having to destroy it, by allowing a more localized war without the use of more destructive atomic and hydrogen bombs.

In short, the basic concept behind the neutron bomb is well stated by one of the developers of the original atomic bomb when he said "only if the atomic bomb can be made usable in that it becomes a normal part of military operations will it really be of great help in fighting wars rather than simply warning mankind to avoid them".

Four major areas will be pursued here: *the effects of the neutron bomb; the bomb and its effects on the chances of an outbreak of nuclear war; the bomb as an element in the resurgence of the cold war and the arms race; and the fightback around the world against the arms race, to which the neutron bomb is the latest addition.*

The Neutron Bomb and its Effects

Firstly, what is the neutron bomb, what are its effects and what is its use in war? Generally speaking, the neutron bomb is a fusion weapon, in the same family as the hydrogen bomb. The main contrast is between the intense blast over a wide area produced by the hydrogen bomb with the accompanying searing heat wave and persistent fallout; and the much slower energy release of the neutron bomb. Additionally, the

neutron bomb is designed to be carried in the heads of standard artillery shells and by Lance missiles, and is therefore much cheaper to deploy.

The neutron bomb destroys life by means of the production of "fast" neutrons which are dispersed over roughly a two kilometre area from the centre of the blast area. Comparable quantities of radioactivity are produced both by hydrogen and neutron weapons, but the latter produces radiation over a longer time. The

and genetic damage to future generations per kiloton are actually increased. Strategists who maintain that the neutron bomb is the ultimate defensive weapon with which to wipe out enemy tanks in one's own territory consider the death of their own civilian population and the production of radio-active farmland within their boundaries to be of no real consequence.

To use the bomb in a defensive capacity would be considered by most countries to be suicidal, because it would kill far more defenders than aggressors.

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neutron radiation travels as far as that produced by the atomic and hydrogen bombs. But the hydrogen bomb explosion, because of its intensity and heat causes rapid death, while the neutron explosion causes lingering and painful death over a few weeks, months or even a year, depending on the victims' proximity to the blast.

Effects of the neutron radiation include, but are not confined to: vomiting, diarrhoea with blood, spontaneous internal bleeding, fever, delirium, destruction of white blood cells and the bone marrow which produces them, subsequent blood poisoning, and finally coma leading to death.

This is the nature of the so-called "humane" bomb offered to the world by the American arms merchants and generals.

To the Pentagon's argument that use of the neutron bomb is superior because it leaves factories, businesses and homes of the enemy intact for immediate occupation, western scientists reply that the argument is false and misleading. In the words of one of these scientists: "First of all, there is still appreciable fall-out from the fission trigger; nor can blast and heat be completely eliminated; since there must be sufficient fission energy released to raise the temperature of the thermonuclear materials to the level required to trigger the fusion reaction. Furthermore, the neutrons will eventually be absorbed in the ground and other materials in the vicinity of their release, and in the air as well, leaving behind appreciable long-lived radioactivity to render the use of the preserved property somewhat less convenient than is generally acknowledged by the weapon's proponents."

Proponents argue that the bomb's effects can be limited strictly to military personnel because of its localized blast effects and is therefore more acceptable for use in densely populated areas such as western Europe. While it is true that physical damage to cities can be reduced, the overall amount of death, disease,

bombs, what guarantee do we have that these nations would not use it? The manufacture and deployment of the bomb is a temptation for military leaders to use it. By contributing to the illusion that these weapons are useable; by eroding the barrier against their first use; by increasing reliance on them and lowering the threshold of their introduction into a conflict, the deployment of the neutron bomb could greatly increase the chances of nuclear war. This bomb has the fatal effect of blurring the distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons. Once the threshold is crossed there is no certainty of control.

Cold War Resurgence and The Arms Race

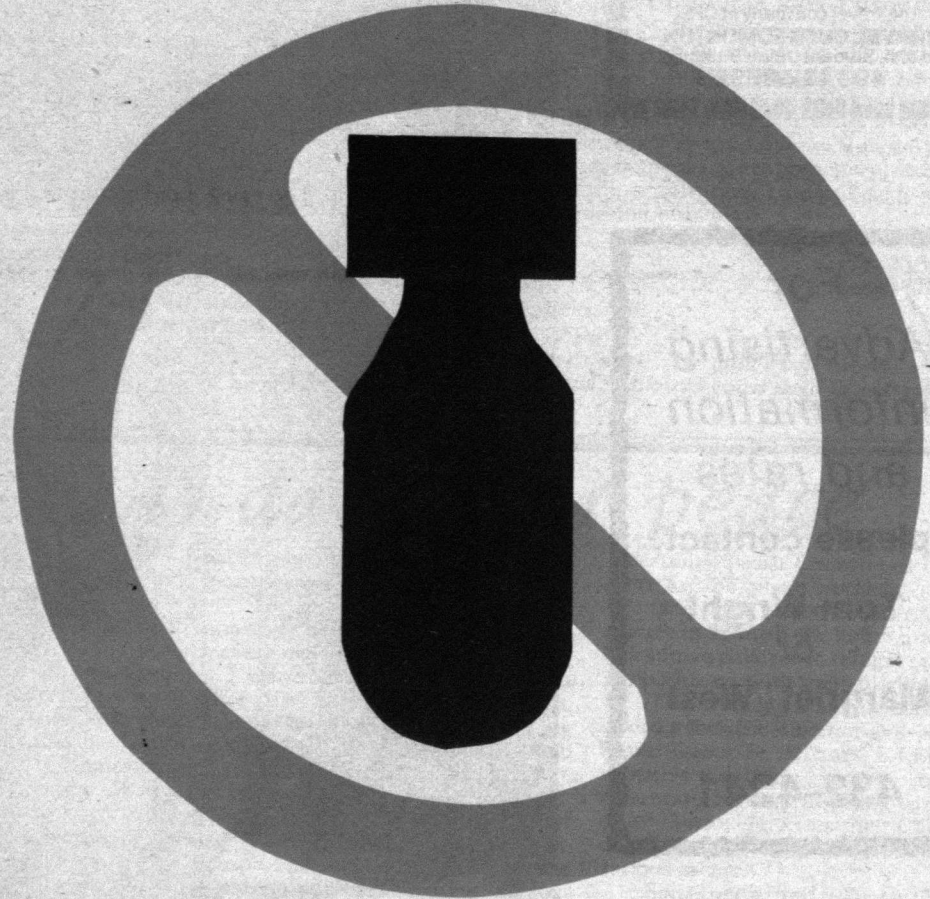
Development of the neutron bomb represents a dangerous spiraling of the already costly arms race. Its deployment is a violation of the provisions of the Helsinki Final Act on world peace and security. It represents a grave misuse of science; an area already regimented by war to form the foundation of a war state more completely than it has ever been regimented in a peace state.

The neutron bomb represents a grave threat to detente and disarmament at a time when certain circles are attempting to revive the cold war between NATO states and socialist nations.

Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev told the World Congress of Peace Forces that "it goes without saying that the further extension of the arms race...on the one hand, and the relaxation of international tension...on the other, are two processes running in opposite directions. The two cannot develop endlessly along what might be called parallel lines."

The Outbreak of Total Nuclear War?

The American electorate's swing to the Republican Party, while probably due to voters' perception that the Democrats are incapable of decisively dealing with economic woes rather than foreign policy, has nonetheless ushered in an era of foreign and military policy dominated by "peace through military superiority". It appears that the Reagan administration will continue, and perhaps even expand, plans to develop new threats such as the neutron bomb, the cruise missile, the MX missile system, the MK-12A nuclear warheads and the Trident submarine missile system.



Since the advent of the atomic and hydrogen bombs a school of thought exists on the premise that these bombs would never be used except in the apocalyptic event of a total world-wide outbreak of war. Common sense, they say, would prohibit a massive retaliatory strike of the same nature, resulting in as many deaths to your own population as to your enemy's population.

The neutron bomb, and its more localized nature, however, lower the nuclear threshold to the point of making its use thinkable. But atomic war is not like a global chess game in which all the potential players know the rules and will agree to abide by them. No guarantees show that an effective barrage of neutron warheads will not result in a retaliatory strike using atomic or hydrogen weapons. The bottom line is expressed by a Harvard University scientist when he says that "some military strategists argue that disciplined personnel (such as those exposed to neutron radiation but not immediately killed) would resume participation in battle...perhaps even more recklessly than others, because they would know that they are the walking dead."

Further, American development of this new weapon, will occur only a short time before other nations such as South Africa, Israel, and South Korea. With proliferation of neutron

Like the atomic and hydrogen bombs, post-war history of the arms race shows that whenever one world power gains a lead over the other, this advantage is lost again in a comparatively short time. The same will surely happen with the neutron bomb; the production of this weapon by the U.S. will force the U.S.S.R. to also develop the bomb out of self-defence. The net result is the re-establishment of the "balance of terror" on a higher plane than before, not to mention the diversion of funds desperately needed for socially-beneficial programs to wasteful military development. It represents a destabilizing element at a time when the majority of nations in the world are working for disarmament.

The ballyhoo dished up by some U.S. militarists that the development of the neutron bomb is necessary because of an immense increase in expenditures by the Soviet Union designed to tip the military scales in their favour is nothing but a big lie. Details published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute show that in 1974, for example, NATO expenditures exceeded Warsaw Pact expenditures by more than a third. NATO military spending over the past 21 years has exceeded that of the Warsaw Pact by 85 per cent.

Why this big lie? The answer to this can be seen in the ties between the leading arms monopolies and their influence on the

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