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News media in the 60th year of the nuclear age

Top officials in Washington are now promoting jitters about Iran's nuclear activities, while media outlets amplify the message. A confrontation with Tehran is on the second-term Bush agenda. So, we're encouraged to obliquely think about the unthinkable.

But no one can get very far trying to comprehend the enormity of nuclear weapons. They've shadowed human consciousness for six decades. From the outset, deception has been key.

Lies from the White House have been part of the nuclear rationalizing process ever since August 1945. President Harry Truman spoke to the American public three days after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Calling the civilian-filled Japanese city a "military base," Truman said: "The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians."

Actually, U.S. planners had sought a large urban area for the nuclear crosshairs because — as Manhattan Project director Gen. Leslie Groves later acknowledged — it was "desirable that the first target be of such size that the damage would be confined within it, so that we could more definitely determine the power of the bomb." Thirty-five years later, when I looked at the U.S. Energy Department's official roster of "Announced United States Nuclear Tests," the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were on the list.

We're now six decades into the Nuclear Age. And we're farther than ever, it seems, from a momentarily difficult truth that Albert Einstein uttered during its first years, when the U.S. government still held a monopoly on the split atom. "This basic power of the universe cannot be fitted into the outmoded concept of narrow nationalisms," he wrote. "For there is no secret and there is no defense; there is no possibility of control except through the aroused understanding and insistence of the peoples of the world."

Today, no phrase could better describe U.S. foreign policies — or American media

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coverage — than “narrow nationalisms.” The officials keep putting on a proudly jingoistic show, and journalists report it without fundamental challenge.

So, any whiff of sanity is conspicuous. Just before Thanksgiving, when the House and Senate voted to cut funding of research for a new line of tactical nuclear weapons including “bunker buster” warheads, the decision was reported as the most significant victory for arms-control advocates since the early 1990s. That’s because the nuclear-weapons industry has been running amok for so long.

While Uncle Sam continues to maintain a nuclear arsenal capable of destroying life on Earth, the American finger-wagging at Iran is something righteous to behold.

Current alarms, wailing about an alleged Iranian program to develop nuclear weapons, are being set off by the same Bush administration officials who declared that an invasion of Iraq was imperative because Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. As we now know, he didn’t. But that hasn’t stopped the Bush team from launching the same kind of media campaign against Iran — based on unverified claims by Iranian exiles with a track record of inaccuracy and a clear motive to pull Washington into military action. Sound familiar?

We ought to be able to recognize what’s wrong with U.S. officials who lecture Iran about the evils of nuclear-arms proliferation while winking at Israel’s arsenal, estimated to include 200 nuclear weapons.

When Einstein called for “the aroused understanding and insistence of the peoples of the world,” he was describing a need that news media ought to help fill. But instead, mostly we get the official stories: dumbed-down, simplistic, and — yes — narrowly nationalistic. The themes are those of Washington’s powerful: our nukes good, our allies’ nukes pretty good, unauthorized nukes very bad.

That sort of propaganda drumbeat won’t be convincing to people who doubt that a Christian Bomb is good and a Jewish Bomb is good but an Islamic Bomb is bad. You don’t have to be an Einstein to understand that people are rarely persuaded by hypocritical messages along the lines of “Do as we say, not as we do.”

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“Killing Our Own: The Disaster of America’s Experience With Atomic Radiation” (Delacorte Press, 1982), a book by Harvey Wasserman and Norman Solomon, is online at: <http://www.ratical.org/radiation/KillingOurOwn>