

Treaty wreckers

In just a few months, Bush and Blair have destroyed global restraint on the development of nuclear weapons

Saturday is the 60th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. The nuclear powers are commemorating it in their own special way: by seeking to ensure that the experiment is repeated.

As Robin Cook showed in his Guardian column last week, the British government appears to have decided to replace our Trident nuclear weapons, without consulting parliament or informing the public. It could be worse than he thinks. He pointed out that the atomic weapons establishment at Aldermaston has been re-equipped to build a new generation of bombs. But when this news was first leaked in 2002 a spokesman for the plant insisted the equipment was being installed not to replace Trident but to build either mini-nukes or warheads that could be used on cruise missiles.

If this is true it means the government is replacing Trident and developing a new category of boil-in-the-bag weapons. As if to ensure we got the point, Geoff Hoon, then the defence secretary, announced before the leak that Britain would be prepared to use small nukes in a pre-emptive strike against a non-nuclear state. This put us in the hallowed company of North Korea.

The Times, helpful as ever, explains why Trident should be replaced. "A decision to leave the club of nuclear powers," it says, "would diminish Britain's international standing and influence." This is true, and it accounts for why almost everyone wants the bomb. Two weeks ago, on concluding their new nuclear treaty, George Bush and the Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh announced that "international institutions

MONBIOT | TREATY WRECKERS

must fully reflect changes in the global scenario that have taken place since 1945. The president reiterated his view that international institutions are going to have to adapt to reflect India's central and growing role." This translates as follows: "Now that India has the bomb it should join the UN security council."

It is because nuclear weapons confer power and status on the states that possess them that the non-proliferation treaty, of which the UK was a founding signatory, determines two things: that the non-nuclear powers should not acquire nuclear weapons, and that the nuclear powers should "pursue negotiations in good faith on ... general and complete disarmament". Blair has unilaterally decided to rip it up.

But in helping to wreck the treaty we are only keeping up with our friends across the water. In May the US government launched a systematic assault on the agreement. The summit in New York was supposed to strengthen it, but the US, led by John Bolton – the undersecretary for arms control (someone had a good laugh over that one) – refused even to allow the other nations to draw up an agenda for discussion. The talks collapsed, and the treaty may now be all but dead. Needless to say, Bolton has been promoted: to the post of US ambassador to the UN. Yesterday Bush pushed his nomination through by means of a "recess appointment", an undemocratic power that allows him to override Congress when its members are on holiday.

Bush wanted to destroy the treaty because it couldn't be reconciled with his new plans. Last month the Senate approved an initial \$4m for research into a "robust nuclear earth penetrator" (RNEP). This is a bomb with a yield about 10 times that of the Hiroshima device, designed to blow up underground bunkers that might contain weapons of mass destruction. (You've spotted the contradiction.) Congress rejected funding for it in November, but Bush twisted enough arms this year to get it restarted. You see what a wonderful world he inhabits when you discover that the RNEP idea was conceived in 1991 as a means of dealing with Saddam Hussein's biological and chemical weapons. Saddam is pacing his cell, but the Bushites, like the Japanese soldiers lost in Malaysia, march on. To pursue his war against the phantom of the phantom of Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, Bush has destroyed the treaty that prevents the use of real ones.

It gets worse. Last year Congress allocated funding for something called the "reliable replacement warhead". The government's story is that the existing warheads might be deteriorating. When they show signs of ageing they can be dismantled and rebuilt to a "safer and more reliable" design. It's a pretty feeble excuse for building a new generation of nukes, but it worked. The development of the new bombs probably means the US will also breach the comprehensive test ban treaty – so we can kiss goodbye to another means of preventing proliferation.

But the biggest disaster was Bush's meeting with Manmohan Singh a fortnight ago. India is one of three states that possess nuclear weapons and refuse to sign the non-proliferation treaty (NPT). The treaty says India should be denied access to civil nuclear materials. But on July 18 Bush announced that "as a responsible state with advanced nuclear technology, India should acquire the same benefits and advantages as other such states". He would "work to achieve full civil nuclear energy cooperation with India" and "seek agreement from Congress to adjust US laws and policies". Four months before the meeting the US lifted its south Asian arms embargo, selling Pakistan a fleet of F-16 aircraft, capable of carrying a wide range of missiles, and India an anti-missile system. As a business plan, it's hard to fault.

Here then is how it works. If you acquire the bomb and threaten to use it you will qualify for American exceptionalism by proxy. Could there be a greater incentive for proliferation?

The implications have not been lost on other states. "India is looking after its own national interests," a spokesman for the Iranian government complained on Wednesday. "We cannot criticise them for this. But what the Americans are doing is a double standard. On the one hand they are depriving an NPT member from having peaceful technology, but at the same time they are cooperating with India, which is not a member of the NPT." North Korea (and this is the only good news around at the moment) is currently in its second week of talks with the US. While the Bush administration is doing the right thing by engaging with Pyongyang, the lesson is pretty clear. You could sketch it out as a Venn diagram. If you have oil and aren't developing a bomb (Iraq) you get invaded. If you have oil and are developing a bomb (Iran) you get threatened with invasion, but it probably won't happen. If you don't have oil, but have the bomb, the US representative will fly to your country and open negotiations.

The world of George Bush's imagination comes into being by government decree. As a result of his tail-chasing paranoia, assisted by Tony Blair's cowardice and Manmohan Singh's opportunism, the global restraint on the development of nuclear weapons has, in effect, been destroyed in a few months. The world could now be more vulnerable to the consequences of proliferation than it has been for 35 years. Thanks to Bush and Blair, we might not go out with a whimper after all.