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Wednesday, Aug. 17, 2002

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Thursday, June 27, 2002

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Dirty nukes: Nuclear proliferation is a neglected threat

News-Journal editorial

Editor's note: This is the second in a series of three.



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In the old world order, the nuclear triad referred to nuclear arsenals: Sea-launched ballistic missiles, intercontinental ballistic missiles, and nukes dropped from bombers. Cold War diehards may wish it still were so, but the new world order's triad more accurately refers to something else: Commercial nuclear energy, nuclear waste and nuclear weapons proliferation. If the world escaped annihilation from the first triad, it has yet to figure out how to escape localized annihilation from the second.

Far from a plot line in a Tom Clancy novel, nuclear trafficking is getting insidious. It just hasn't reached critical mass to yield a disaster.

Since 1993, the United Nation's International Atomic Energy Agency has reported more than 500 seizures of nuclear materials. Six of those seizures since 1999 involved weapons-grade nuclear materials. In late 1998, Russia's equivalent of the FBI busted an insiders' heist that would have netted 35 pounds of enriched uranium from a weapons lab. That would have been enough to build a bomb.

Those are the lucky few instances when seizures were possible. Officials at the agency and the Department of Defense believe most trafficking slips through, beginning on a "nuclear silk route" that leads to 600 metric tons of enriched uranium and plutonium stockpiled in Russian weapons labs. Those stockpiles are Klondike gold to terrorists. Sooner or later, al-Qaida-grade terrorists could strike a vein.

Through the 1990s, the United States took the threat of that kind of nuclear proliferation seriously, investing billions of dollars to improve nuclear security in Russia, to retrain Russian nuclear scientists (who could otherwise be blackmailed into working for bad guys), and to fund the International Atomic Energy Agency, which monitors stockpiles and chases after nuclear thieves.

Then came President Bush. Just before Sept. 11, his proposed budget included a \$100 million cut in America's nonproliferation spending. You'd think Sept. 11 would have changed the president's view. But only Congress did, barely: Instead of cutting non-proliferation programs \$100 million, they were cut \$69 million. Bush wanted to kill the separate program designed to keep nuclear scientists from free-lancing for rogue states. Congress saved that one, too, but many wanted it increased from its current \$27 million budget. They failed.

Cutting nuclear non-proliferation money is like cutting foreign aid. The effect won't be felt immediately, maybe not even for years. But it will be felt eventually. And when it hits, the consequences could be disastrous.

Of course, a badly guarded stockpile of plutonium somewhere in Russia's Ural Mountains isn't likely to get American constituents jamming their congressional representatives' e-mail accounts with petition drives to do something about the problem. Yet that's exactly what constituents -- whether in Holly Hill, Bismark, N.D., or Midland, Texas -- ought to be doing if they don't want the wrong kind of bang for their "homeland security" bucks.

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