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Analysis: The nuclear threat — it could happen here

Sunday, July 14, 2002

By DAVID WESTPHAL, Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune

Four decades after American schoolchildren hid under their desks, practicing for the day when an atomic bomb might fall nearby, the horrific prospect of a mushroom cloud rising above an American city has returned.

Once again, the government is starting to prepare the country for a possible nuclear attack — this time by militants looking for a single bomb to explode in the United States.

"People have asked whether we should worry now about a nuclear explosion happening in the U.S.," said Gary Milhollin, an expert on nuclear weapons. "The answer is yes."

Although it is far from clear that any group will gain access to a nuclear weapon anytime soon, experts say a calamitous atomic blast, detonated by a terrorist group and claiming tens or hundreds of thousands of lives, is within the realm of possibility.

"The clock is ticking," former Defense Secretary William Cohen said at a Senate hearing earlier this year. "It is one minute before midnight. And every moment that we hesitate we come closer to that kind of Armageddon that we all want to avoid."

Asked about his biggest worry among all the threats the United States faces, homeland security adviser Tom Ridge responded in one word: nuclear.

The new threat packs an emotional punch, in part because many Americans thought this was a nightmare that had been all but buried with the Cold War.

Then came Sept. 11.

Vice Adm. Thomas Wilson, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, says that the suicide attacks on the United States "showed the way" for groups that want to destroy the country.

Opening the door wider to the possibility of a massive attack, he says, is the absence of the deterrent that helped keep U.S. and Soviet missiles in their silos for 50 years — the near certainty that neither country could destroy the other without being destroyed itself.

That principle of mutually assured destruction doesn't work with a small militant group, Wilson said. "Non-state adversaries are not likely to be



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deterred by our overwhelming military superiority."

That doesn't mean nuclear weapons are the most probable means of attack by anti-U.S. militants. Many analysts say groups wishing to harm the nation more likely would turn to chemical or biological agents, or to a "dirty bomb" that uses conventional explosives to spread harmful fallout from a radiological element. Others say the difficulty of producing or obtaining a nuclear warhead is so high that a successful detonation is unlikely.

Yet the government's biggest nightmare is that, somehow, a group like al Qaeda succeeds in its quest to secure a nuclear weapon.

According to the Washington Post, President Bush ordered his national security team last October to make the prevention of nuclear terrorism its top priority.

Some experts say the country needs to act more aggressively and speed planning for a possible nuclear attack — not only by disrupting militant groups abroad but also by implementing a civil-defense plan at home.

"We tend not to think about the consequences," said Harry Vantine, a counterterrorism expert at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California, "because it's not a very pleasant thing to think about.

"The effects are tremendous, and loss of life is just enormous," he said in recent testimony to Congress. "We really have to think about that. There have to be emergency plans in place."

So far, Bush, Ridge and other top administration officials have been reluctant to say much about the nuclear threat.

Doing so, of course, could dramatically raise anxieties at a time when no one really knows whether a nuclear attack is likely or how it ranks in comparison to other threats.

While it's impossible to predict a precise scenario in which the United States would find itself under nuclear attack, history provides a disquieting model: the August 1945 nuclear bombs dropped by the United States over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The bombs wrought a maelstrom of heat, pressure, wind and radiation such as the planet had never seen.

At Hiroshima, the 15-kiloton bomb "Little Boy," dropped by the crew of the Enola Gay on Aug. 6, 1945, killed as many as 200,000 people with the bomb's blast or the longer-term effects of radiation, according to some estimates.

Three days later, the 22-kiloton "Fat Man" was dropped over Nagasaki. The casualty toll was somewhat lower because the contours of the hilly city absorbed some of the blast.

Five days after the Nagasaki explosion, Japan unconditionally surrendered.

Today's nuclear weapons are many times more potent. And even if militants constructed only a crude bomb, the results could be devastating.

