

John McCain Discovers Nuclear Arms Control and Disarmament

Written by Lawrence Wittner

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LAWRENCE WITTNER, JUN 10 2008

On May 27, in a major public address delivered at the University of Denver, Republican presidential candidate John McCain took what appeared to be a strong stand in favor of nuclear arms control and disarmament.

In the speech, McCain argued that "it is our responsibility to build" a world in which there are "far fewer" nuclear weapons "than there are today." Therefore, he said, "the time has come to take further measures to reduce dramatically the number of nuclear weapons in the world's arsenals." Among the nuclear arms control and disarmament actions he suggested were "taking another look at the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty" (which would ban all nuclear test explosions), canceling "all further work on the so-called Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator" (better known as the nuclear bunker-buster), and negotiating "a new arms control agreement with Russia."

Citing former President's Ronald Reagan's statement that his "dream" was "to see the day when nuclear weapons will be banished from the face of the Earth," McCain stated: "That is my dream, too."

It was certainly a very impressive speech, if it is to be taken seriously. But is it?

McCain, it should be noted, voted against the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1999, thus helping to block its ratification and to ensure that it became the first U.S. security-related treaty to go down to defeat in 80 years. Furthermore, even now, after its ratification by numerous other U.S. allies (including Britain, Germany, and France), he has not said that he will support it—only that he will take "another look" at the treaty "to see what can be done to overcome the shortcomings that prevented it from entering into force." (What, one wonders, are these "shortcomings"?)

McCain's opposition to the nuclear bunker-buster also rings rather hollow. The bunker-buster project has been dead for some time, as Congress blocked funding for it three years ago. Moreover, at that time, McCain stuck with the Bush administration insistence on building this new nuclear weapon and voted to fund it.

Opponents of nuclear weapons can certainly take heart at McCain's call for a new nuclear arms control treaty with Russia. After all, Russia and the United States possess more than 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons. But these opponents might question the treaty's feasibility, given McCain's consistently belligerent stance toward Russia. Contemptuous of the Kremlin's criticism of installing a U.S. missile defense system on Russia's borders, McCain pontificated in October 2007, during the GOP presidential candidates' debate: "The first thing I would do is make sure that we have a missile defense system in place in Czechoslovakia [sic] and Poland, and I don't care what his [Vladimir Putin's] objections are to it." In addition, McCain has proposed expelling Russia from the G-8 and creating a rival body to the United Nations from which Russia would be excluded. Taken together, these items do not provide a promising terrain for future nuclear arms control negotiations.

Nor can nuclear critics take much comfort in the fact that one of McCain's top foreign policy advisors is John Bolton. As U.S. Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and Disarmament and as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Bolton probably did more than any other government official to see to it that the Bush administration blocked

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progress toward nuclear arms control and disarmament.

Why, then, did McCain make his nuclear disarmament speech a few days ago? The answer, it seems, is that he is now in a hot race for the presidency.

McCain's campaign strategists must be aware of the fact that, for years, a large majority of the U.S. public has regarded nuclear weapons with distaste. Surveyed in late 2007, 74 percent of Americans reported that they supported "eliminating all nuclear weapons in the world through an enforceable agreement." The backing is even more overwhelming when it comes to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. A recent poll found that 80 percent of Americans thought their country "should participate in the treaty that would prohibit nuclear test explosions worldwide."

Moreover, the Democrats seem poised to reap the political benefits of this sentiment. Barack Obama has called for the building of a nuclear-free world, while Hillary Clinton has championed sharp reductions in nuclear arsenals. Both Democrats strongly back the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and have promised to work at gaining its ratification by the U.S. Senate.

In this political context, McCain stands to lose badly-needed votes by clinging to the pro-nuclear policies of the Bush administration. As a Washington Post article pointed out, McCain's Denver speech "appears to be an effort to sketch out a nonproliferation policy that was distinct from both President Bush and the leading Democrats."

Of course, it's too bad that Americans have to wait until a presidential election campaign before a candidate discovers the virtues of supporting nuclear arms control and disarmament. But some would-be power wielders are slow learners.

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