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Charles Sheehan

Former Air Force Commander Criticizes U.S. Bunker-Buster Program

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WASHINGTON — A former top U.S. Air Force commander yesterday criticized Bush administration directed programs for developing new nuclear weapons for destroying bunkers and chemical and biological weapons (see *GSN*, Nov. 24, 2003).

Retired Gen. Charles Horner, who commanded the North American Aerospace Defense Command and the U.S. Space Command and was in charge of all allied air assets during the 1991 Gulf War, said nuclear weapons are only useful as city-destroying war deterrents, and otherwise have "little utility." He spoke at a conference here sponsored by the Nuclear Policy Research Institute.

Horner expressed concern that plans for researching and developing such weapons could help legitimize them and potentially lead to a president considering their use.

"Even thinking about doing such [using them in war fighting] legitimizes the use of nuclear weapons," which undermines efforts to discourage their proliferation globally, he said.

Horner said he is concerned that current policies may be legitimizing the weapons in the eyes of young U.S. military officers today.

"The problem for me is young people thinking nuclear weapons are a usable form of force," he said.

"Insane"

Horner, who once commanded all U.S. land-based ballistic missiles, is no pacifist. Many of his views are not aligned with the arms control "peace" community. He favors, for instance, aggressively developing national ballistic missile defenses as well as establishing a U.S. ability to dominate space militarily, both controversial initiatives of the Bush administration.

Horner began his career as a fighter pilot with the Air Force when fighter aircraft had a prominent nuclear role.

"I'll tell you, as I sat alert with a nuclear weapon, I always wondered whether I would carry out my mission or not, because, I thought it was quite frankly insane," he said.

On the other hand, he said, he understood the importance of having the capability ready "in order to deter war."

Horner said his thinking was solidified during the 1991 war. He noted U.S. officials had suggested to Iraq that the United States would use nuclear weapons in response to an Iraqi chemical or biological weapons attack.

"We used ambiguity with regard to the use of our Cold War arsenal as to what our response would be," he said.

"I knew that we had no such plans to do so nor would we do so, because that would be dysfunctional," he said.

At the time, he said, Horner called in a targeting expert to demonstrate for him how many nuclear weapons would be needed to destroy an Iraqi armored division in the desert and how many to destroy Baghdad.

In the first case, "it took a huge amount of nuclear weapons," in the latter, it would be "much easier."

"And then I realized that nuclear weapons are only good for taking out cities, they're not good for war fighting. They have little or no utility for war fighting" and would bring a "horrible political cost" for any U.S. president ordering their use in that way, he said.

"So from the inside, I discovered nuclear weapons are very dysfunctional for the things we are trying to do," he said.

The Danger of Options

Also appearing on a panel with Horner was Bruce Blair, president of the Center for Defense Information, who said that since the Cold War, at least on paper, conditions appear to have loosened for possible U.S. or Russian use of nuclear weapons in combat. He said that has made the possibility of their use more likely.

"Over time, during the Bush and Clinton administrations there has been an erosion of restraint in the policy arena, on paper, and I think that does have a significant operational effect on the likelihood of a president considering their use," he said.

Horner said that that "danger" exists, but so far remains more possibility than reality.

"I don't believe it's the case, but I do believe it's the danger. See, I'm on the inside, I see no evidence of operationalizing nuclear weapons, but there is discussion about their utility and their legitimacy and I think that is exactly the wrong way to go," he said.

Conventional Weapons Were Used Against WMD Sites in 1991

During the Gulf War, allied pilots attacked Iraqi nuclear, biological and chemical facilities with conventional weapons and struck about half of Iraq's research, development and production capabilities, Horner said.

Inspectors found the rest after the war, he said.

Iraq's chemical weapons themselves were "just too widespread to attack," he said, so attacks focused on storage areas near front-line forces to prevent their potential use.

He said officials learned later that Iraq was unwilling to use such weapons because U.S. troops had better protective equipment than Iraqi forces did and that they were likely to suffer more.

"Deterrence against weapons of mass destruction in large measure comes down to how much money you are willing to put into your military defenses," he said.

U.S. military officials were faced with a more difficult challenge of what to do about Iraq's suspected stores of biological agents, including anthrax and botulism, he said.

"Little was known about it because our CIA was keeping those secrets very closely held," he said.

At issue was whether to attack the stores and "risk of annihilation of everything on the Arabian Peninsula or allow the Iraqis the option to use them against U.S. forces."

"There was no good answer," Horner said, but the decision was made to attack them. After the war, he said he concluded the Iraqis had unilaterally destroyed their stockpiles out of concern that they would be attacked and dispersed.

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