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Trump and the Bomb

By Charles Pierson
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Donald Trump has nukes on the brain. During the course of a one hour foreign policy briefing the Republican Presidential candidate asked the same question three times: “If we have nukes, why can’t we use them?”

Joe Scarborough broke the story on August 3 on his MSNBC *Morning Joe* program. Scarborough did not name his source.

Scarborough said that the briefing was “several months ago.” Scarborough did not say why he waited until now to tell us about it.

The Trump camp has denied the story. However, Trump has made similar remarks in the past. Chris Matthews discussed nuclear weapons with Trump during a March 30, 2016 town hall. Matthews argued that nuclear weapons should never be used. Then why do we have them, Trump asked? For deterrence, Matthews answered. Matthews was referring to the long standing strategic doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) under which the superpowers hold each other in a balance of terror. Any country which launches a nuclear attack will itself be destroyed.

John Noonan agrees that nukes must never be used. Noonan, a Jeb! Bush foreign policy adviser, has first-hand knowledge of nuclear deterrence. As a U.S. Air Force officer, Noonan served in a nuclear missile silo 100 feet beneath Wyoming. The same day as Scarborough’s revelation, Noonan launched a barrage of twenty tweets. Noonan tweeted: “[T]he whole idea behind nuclear deterrence is that you don’t use the damn things.” Noonan said that a President Trump “would be undoing 6 decades of proven deterrence theory. The purpose of nukes is that they are never used. Trump disagrees?”

Well, yes, Trump disagrees. So has every US Administration since Harry Truman. Max Fisher comments in the New York *Times* that:

Tellingly, though Mr. Trump drew outrage when he said in the March interview that he would not rule out using nuclear weapons in Europe, his comments reflect current nuclear doctrine. The United States reserves the right to use nuclear weapons under certain conditions, such as retaliation for a nuclear attack, anywhere it deems necessary.

During the Cold War, when NATO forces were vastly outnumbered by the Warsaw Pact, the United States openly declared that a Soviet invasion of Western Europe would be met with nuclear weapons. People like Matthews and Noonan who delude themselves that the use of nuclear weapons has always been unthinkable, had better think again.

Another problem: to listen to Matthews and Noonan you would think that the only function of nuclear arms is deterrence. Not so. The US has announced that it will spend \$1 trillion over the next 30 years to upgrade the US nuclear arsenal. Much of that \$1 trillion will go towards the design and production of tactical nuclear weapons. Unlike strategic nuclear weapons whose function is, yes, deterrence, tactical nukes are smaller, lower yield weapons designed to be used on the battlefield.

Since tactical nukes are less destructive than strategic weapons there is more of a temptation to use them. Using tactical nukes may escalate to full scale nuclear war.

These tactical nukes will join the approximately 1,750 strategic nuclear warheads the US maintains, according to the Washington DC-based Arms Control Association. As the US launches on its \$1 trillion nuclear shopping spree we should not expect Russia and China to simply sit back and watch. What we can anticipate is a new arms race.

Around now, some of you are thinking:

“You’re missing the point. Trump’s comments to Matthews and what Joe Scarborough revealed about Trump prove that Trump is trigger happy. Other politicians can be trusted to use the Bomb only as a last resort, not Trump. Trump is mentally unbalanced and spiteful. Put Trump in the Oval Office and nuclear war is virtually certain to follow.”

Ah, yes, dat ole Mad Bomber Trump. How do I answer this accusation? I don’t have to. Set aside the question whether Donald Trump is any more irresponsible than other presidents (a lineup which has included Nixon and Reagan and George W. Bush). The only way Donald Trump will ever see the inside of the Oval Office is if he pays to take a White House tour. There is no point in speculating how bonkers Trump would be if he got his finger on the nuclear trigger. That is not going to happen.

Are Trump’s views scary? Sure. Trump’s indifference toward nuclear proliferation is particularly disturbing. But Trump is not the real problem. Trump’s views are mostly defense establishment orthodoxy. Trump will be defeated, but humanity will not be out of danger.

If you don’t like Trump’s stance on nuclear weapons, there is not much reason you should feel more comfortable with the defense Establishment. And who is more a part of the Establishment than Hillary Clinton? The neocons are flocking to her. Of the two major party candidates, it is Hillary Clinton, who as Senator voted for the Iraq war and as Secretary of State backed the bombing of Libya, who has a history of aggression.

Ask Hillary what she would do with nuclear weapons. Trump at least will give you an honest, albeit terrifying, answer.