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Talking to Serious Nuke Players

[Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al Qaeda](#) was the topic of the book forum today at the Cato Institute.

The title of the forum is the name of John Mueller's new book.

The forum featured the author, John Mueller, Woody Hayes Chair of National Security Studies, Ohio State University; Michael Krepon, Co-Founder, Henry L. Stimson Center; and Jeffrey G. Lewis, Director, Nuclear Strategy and Nonproliferation Initiative, New America Foundation. Moderated by Justin Logan, Associate Director of Foreign Policy Studies, Cato Institute.

In the book, Mueller argues that the nuclear threat is overblown. He says, for example, that a terrorist suitcase attack on New York City, if possible at all, would destroy no more than 1% of the city. The fear that a nuclear attack means total devastation of the planet doesn't hold at all, he points out, and the odds are slim that terrorists could launch any type of nuclear attack, or that most nations would want to, for that matter.

The discussion among the panelists was fascinating and I'm sure Cato will soon post the forum video, [here](#).

At the luncheon following the forum, I found myself next to an Air Force Lt Col and a State Department woman. I looked at the uniform of the Air Force Lt Col and said, "It looks like you know something about nukes. How much damage would a suitcase nuke do in New York City?"

He didn't seem to have an exact answer. In his defense, the State Dept. gal said they were more involved with long term. I wondered how long-term had anything to do with the impact of a suitcase nuke. Was something coming down the road that would change things? Then she made things clear. For nuke people, long-term is not about time, but about time and space. "We deal more with ICBMs," she said.

I then asked the Air Force Lt Col what he thought of Mueller's view. He said he was a centrist, not leaning at either extreme, but that they all hold some good points.

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With this remark, I immediately categorized him as belonging to the economist Greg Mankiw school of holding views. Never say or hold any kind of public view that will piss off anybody (with the exception of Paul Krugman).

I realized, I would have to go more direct with my questions to crank up this conversation. I asked him and the State Department gal, if they had thought there were WMD's in Iraq before the start of the second invasion. They both said, "Yes".

The State Dept. gal spoke in kind of State Departmentese that made it hard to understand what the hell she was saying. Her speech had an odd cadence to it and she used an unusual vocabulary.

She said something about working in some kind of department that monitors, 24/7, nuclear agreements. I took her at her word. I wanted to crank up the conversation.

I then said to the two of them that Ron Suskind, in his book about Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, [reported that O'Neill told him that during cabinet meetings, before the invasion, they would look at satellite photos of supposed Iraq nuclear facilities](#) and that when he headed Alcoa he had looked at many satellite photos, knew how to read them, and it was obvious those weren't nuclear facilities.

The State Department gal gave me a very cold scare and responded, "There have been many Monday morning quarterbacks." And then went on to defend, in that strange State Departmentese cadence, the belief that there were weapons of mass destruction.

At this point, the Air Force Lt Col handed me his business card. It read, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Global Strategic Affairs. Then in bold, Nuclear Posture Review Staff. "Wow," I said, "I have never gotten a business card from anyone at the Nuclear Posture Review Staff, before."

This prompted the State Dept. gal to rush into her purse and grab a card for me. I now read it for the first time. It reads, "U.S. State Department, Senior Operations Officer, U.S. Nuclear Risk Reduction Center".

It was getting late. The Air Force guy politely excused himself from the lunch, and the the State Dept. gal soon followed.

But there was something about the State Dept. gal that bothered me. Part was her manner of talk. The slow paced talk that you hear State Dept. officials use in the middle of a crisis. She had used it, but there was no crisis. We were eating sandwiches in the comfortable environment of the Cato Institute.

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I wondered if she was some kind of fanatic, addicted to her job, imitating the voice of State Dept. officials during a crisis, or do lots of State Dept. officials talk to each other in this manner?

Then there was that cold stare from her when I brought up what had been reported former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill said about the Iraqi satellite photos. This gal could push a nuke button in a minute, I thought.

I have no idea what most other State Dept. officials are like, maybe she is an outlier. Or, maybe, they are all so separated from the real world that they all act like her, which is a very, very scary thought.

posted by Robert Wenzel at 5:31 PM


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2 Comments:

At [October 29, 2009 7:38 PM](#),  [TAYLOR](#) said...
Wenzel,

Awesome. I love these Blogima-veritae type posts!

At [October 30, 2009 9:43 AM](#),  Anonymous said...

The effects of a nuclear detonation in a city are determined by many factors.

1. The type of blast: air, surface, subsurface. Air blast at an optimal altitude gives the most destruction, not much contamination, a large area of fires and is generally the best option overall. Surface blast leaves extreme local contamination, and a contamination "tail" at where the wind takes it. Subsurface blast gives as much local contamination and the largest crater, and smaller tail.
2. The type of a nuke. A simple fission device cannot fit into a suitcase. The smaller the nuke, the more advanced it is. A suitcase-sized one is a technological masterpiece only the oldest nuclear powers can create.
3. The yield. A small nuke has a small yield, and a suitcase-sized one is about half to one kiloton. It's still a lot of bang, but enough to level only a few blocks.

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[October 2006](#)

[February 2007](#)

[March 2007](#)

[April 2007](#)

[May 2007](#)

[October 2007](#)

[April 2008](#)

[May 2008](#)

[June 2008](#)

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