

SPECIAL REPORT

Interview With

Congressman Richard Ottinger (D-NY)

On The Dangers Of Nuclear War

Rep. Richard Ottinger (D-NY) has been the leading Congressional opponent of the military doctrine espoused by former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, the doctrine of limited nuclear war. He has introduced legislation into Congress that would force the U.S. to adhere to a military policy of no first use of nuclear weapons. Ottinger has also severely and continually criticized defense spending for conventional forces.

Testifying before the House International Relations subcommittee on International Security and Scientific Affairs March 16, Rep. Ottinger completely reversed his opposition to conventional arms buildup. Ottinger told the committee that a conventional force buildup in Europe would serve that purpose. "The ideal weapons deployment would be to inform the Russians that we have decided that tactical nuclear weapons use would be mutually suicidal and that we therefore intend to build up our conventional forces and those of our allies to the point at which they can meet the Russian threat: This represents a major policy departure for me."

Rep. Ottinger was interviewed in Washington yesterday about his recent statements by a freelance journalist. IPS has obtained rights to the interview and reprints it below:

Question: Congressman, why have you reversed your position on conventional force buildup?

Rep. Ottinger: Europeans are subject to the threats of a far superior Russian armaments conventional threat. We could never get the Europeans to agree to our withdrawing conventional forces. We can get conventional parity with the Russians. It is the view of such experts as Ikle (Fred Ikle head of Arms Control and Disarmament Agency — ed) that the Russians are really concerned about the dangers of nuclear proliferation and are really interested in reducing nuclear terror incidents. But it is the attitude of many here, the attitude of the International Relations Committee, men like (Rep) Jack Bingham (D-NY), that an international arrangement for the reduction of nuclear weapons is too big a thing to arrange. This attitude prevents us from reducing nuclear weapons. So we have a trade off; we can increase our troop strength if we and the Russians reduced nuclear strength.

Question: Wouldn't the Russians see a conventional force buildup as a threat, a move against them?

Ottinger: Well, it wouldn't be done in a vacuum. We would tell the Russians what we are thinking is really how to reduce the likelihood of nuclear war. Show them we are really interested in reducing nuclear weapons.

Question: Who helped persuade you to change your ideas on this question?

Ottinger: Well, James Wade of the Defense Department. The central revelation he told me was with respect to Soviet superiority of conventional weapons. (Former Defense Secretary) James Schlesinger was here speaking to members of Congress through Peace and Law (a group of dovish Congressmen). Come to think of it he was the one who really turned me around. I have spent a lot of time with Schlesinger. He was the one I was after heavily last year for brandishing weapons all over. Schlesinger said that he thinks we should get the bulk of our nuclear weapons out of Europe. I have had the Appropriations Committee do a classified study looking at the protection of nuclear sites, and if people knew how badly protected they are they would know the dangers. Schlesinger has become anxious of the dangers.

Question: Do you believe that Schlesinger has actually changed his thinking. Doesn't his doctrine of limited nuclear war include a first reliance on conventional forces?

Ottinger: Yes, Schlesinger is coming to believe we should substitute conventional forces for nuclear weapons reliance. He's worried that we have no option. Can you really have a limited nuclear war? You don't know what the Russians will do. I think that Schlesinger has some doubts on whether you can have such a war.

Question: What do other Congressmen think about the strategy of building up conventional forces to reduce nuclear danger?

Ottinger: The Members of Congress Through Peace and Law have had and will have a series of discussions on all aspects of this. It meets weekly, this is where Schlesinger spoke. Rep. Seiberling (D-Ohio) is the chairman of it and he has done some thinking on it. Bingham would also support an increase in conventional forces.

Question: What does Defense Secretary Rumsfeld think about conventional buildup to reduce nuclear dangers?

Ottinger: I have talked to him. I know him from his days here. I briefed him on the study the Appropriations Committee did and told him of the dangers. He sent a note saying he is concerned and pursuing this question. There are limitations on what he can do publicly. I know that Rumsfeld is crashing around this question. I think he would agree that conventional buildup reduces the nuclear dangers. I can't quote him because it is a sensitive issue, but I think he agrees. He is supplying every fool thing the Pentagon is pushing. Some he believes in, some he doesn't, but he is looking over his shoulder at Ronald Reagan, who wants a military state.

Question: What could cause a war between the U.S. and the Soviets now?

Ottinger: At the moment, there are no impending dangers. What makes me terribly nervous is having nuclear weapons in unstable hands like India. They (the Indians) might use nuclear weapons against Pakistan or in their own country if there was a revolution in India.

Question: The possibility that European governments may be bolting from the U.S. orbit has been in the news recently and was a focus of Secretary of State Kissinger's speech last week in Boston. Is there the danger that this situation could cause a war?

Ottinger: Confrontation is not in the offing. Italy and France could go communist and this could present problems.

Question: The possibility that Italy, if the communists went into the government, could become another Chile has been mentioned.

Ottinger: Yep, it could. If you add nuclear capability to these countries it increases the dangers. Europe is critical. The European subcommittee of the International Relations Committee is focusing on these questions, but the problem is that Congress has not been able to really study this because there is one man State Department. Only Kissinger makes decisions.

Congressman Ottinger reiterated his warnings of the

danger and the destruction that a nuclear war would bring. He declared it his aim to bring out the point at the hearings in the International Relations subcommittee that the U.S. is not protected against unauthorized use of nuclear weapons.

Ottinger: Rep. Zablocki (D-Wisc) and I want to bring out three points — First, in our country the president has delegated authority. Admiral Miller admitted this yesterday, to the Norad Commander, that under certain circumstances he could fire nuclear weapons without a President's order. We understand the delegated authority is broader than just to the Norad Commander.

Second, that we are not protected against unauthorized use (of nuclear weapons). The mechanics are not set up. Combinations of people, Miller admitted, could decide themselves that a situation requires use of nuclear weapons and do it themselves.

Third, that there have been four alerts in which the Joint Chiefs of Staff had requested the use of nuclear weapons for a particular situation. One was the Quemoy-Matsu crisis and another was the 1962 Laotian crisis. The case I am making is that the command and control is not adequate. This is a tremendous danger. Every president including and since Eisenhower had delegated authority. We're going to get this out. Yesterday, a case was cited where the Early Warning System went off because there was a cloud over Greenland.