
Documentation

Defense Secretary Weinberger on the neutron bomb and its implications

Excerpts from an Aug. 10 press conference given by Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger:

Q: Would you give us your views on the cost-effectiveness and military applications of the neutron bomb?

A: The enhanced radiation weapon, the low-blast weapon—whatever you want to call it—has an ability to do two things. To really neutralize or pretty well balance by its very presence what I know now is a tremendous preponderance of armor and men that is definitely on the side of the Soviets in the central front, and potentially on other fronts. There seems to be some feeling that this is only usable in Europe—which is not true.

Q: What is the price that is paid by stockpiling in the U.S. versus having these weapons actually deployed in Europe. How much time?

A: Oh, a few hours.

Q: A few hours is all?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you think you could block, say, Soviet armor by using it?

A: Well, we would certainly have high hopes that we would be able to make it at such an enormously high cost that it would be considered unacceptable to the Soviets. My hope about all of these things is that by having them in place or ready to be put in place, that we'll never have to use them.

And I think that we have very much more reason to hope for that if we have it. If we don't have it—if this very large imbalance of tanks, 44 or 46,000 to 11 or 12,000, continues—we certainly are inviting a conventional war, which would be very difficult for us to win with conventional means. But with this we can, in a very much shorter time, and at far less cost than other means in all ways, help redress that balance.

I had a question today from one of the German

representatives, who said we were lowering the threshold of nuclear war by going to this and making it therefore easier to use nuclear war, and it would be far better if we would build up our conventional forces. And I asked him, how were we going to do that, when the German government was cutting its defense expenditures?

Q: If what you say is all true about the warhead, why not deploy it immediately? Why not consult with the allies immediately and deploy it immediately?

A: Well, as we mentioned in the answer to the previous question, it is only a few hours away, should the occasion arise and should deployment discussions result in favorable decisions.

And I think that you accomplish very much the same thing by leaving it here and having it ready to be deployed without getting perhaps unnecessary, lengthily prolonged, inconclusive debates.

Q: That's one of the problems with NATO many people have raised over the years—the question of consultation before action in time of crisis.

A: Well, it's one of its problems—one of its strengths if all of these things work well, but we've been up against a concerted Soviet campaign which continues and has been continuing in one form or another ever since NATO was formed—to try to drive wedges into it. And we certainly don't think that kind of campaign should succeed in denying the opportunity—should they decide to do so—to use one of the strongest weapons of deterrence that we have.

Q: On the timing of this decision, was production of the components of this weapon at a point where you really could not avoid your decision?

A: The production process was at that point, and we had a directive from the Congress.

Q: It seems to me the burden of all you say about the use

of this weapon in breaking or blocking an offensive undermines your contention that it does not lower the threshold.

I'm getting the impression that what you're saying is that on Day One the Soviet Union could expect to be hit by neutron weapons; is that wrong?

A: No, but what I think is the—I won't use the word fallacy—but what I think is the problem in the assumption is that there will be a Day One; my point is that if we have this weapon, and they know the cost of coming up against it, we may very well have a much more effective way of preventing Day One from occurring: that's the whole object of the exercise.

Q: I understand that, but you yourself have spoken of war-fighting strategy and in the context of deterring war, but I have to assume that when you talk about war-fighting strategy, you're talking about war-fighting strategy.

What I'm asking you is, will you engage in a first use of atomic weapons or thermonuclear weapons? And will you use them faster than you would have used the 6,000 nuclear weapons you already have in Europe?

Q: Any answer to that would have to be hypothetical. That I wouldn't want to give it. We have to look at each battlefield situation as it exists at the moment that we're talking about and respond to it in the way that seems most appropriate at that given time, whatever circumstances might prevail, and I'm not wise enough to be able to imagine all of the hypotheses and give answers for every one that occurs. But the principal thing we have in mind is, that if you have a force in being that can either sufficiently approximate the force on the other side, or can make the use of the other side's force cost unacceptably high to them, that you may very well have the opportunity of deterring it at all. And that is one of the great values that I hope the acquisition of this weapon will have. . . .

I'm quite content that the neutron warhead has an enormously effective ability to destroy armor that is massed in very large numbers, as is the Soviet military—and precisely that it gives us an advantage which we do not now have, and that, therefore, as I said earlier, it adds greatly to our military capability to do that. Now you are talking about the details of deployment and who can use it when and other tactical matters. It's roughly comparable to saying—in my mind—that a man armed with a rifle has a military advantage over someone who isn't armed with a rifle, and I don't think it particularly useful to talk about whether or not you have to pull a safety, or other things of that kind.

I think it gives you that advantage—that is the ability to counter, very quickly and without adding 40,000 tanks to our inventory, an advantage which the Soviets now have.

Q: I get the impression that the symbolic effect of this action you're taking is as important as. . . .

A: Well, I am not all that much excited about symbols as I am with the reality behind them. It seems to me that if you are talking whether or not a neutron weapon which is quite usable and has immense destructive power in the areas that it is most needed, is also a symbol or not, why I wouldn't particularly argue.

Q: When will we ask for talks with our NATO allies which would outline when we would deploy. . . .

A: I don't think there's any desire to do it. We've notified the allies that we are manufacturing it, that it is going into our stockpile, and that we do not plan to deploy it at home or abroad, and that we would do so on consultation only. And that we don't have any plan to do anything else.

A: Just prior to deployment?

A: Oh, I don't think there's any desire to talk about any contingency.

A: Would you say what a few hours means in this sense?

A: Yes.

Q: Well, could you move them in a few hours from right now?

A: Yes, those that are manufactured could be, yes.

And that is the important thing, and if the deterrence works—as I believe it has a very reasonable chance of doing—we will infinitely increase our chances for peace.

Q: You have been extraordinarily vague today in outlining to the American people the incentives for this decision, other than telling us that—is this over. . . .

A: Excuse me, but I cannot really agree to that word "vague." I have been exactly as specific. . . .

Q: But you have used words like "enormous national advantage," "massive deterrence"; do you expect to be more specific when you announce and promulgate your decision on the MX and the B-1 versus. . . .

A: Oh, I think I have been very specific today, and I think we have made a substantial and major advantage—major increase—in our capacity to deterring war on the central front, and other fronts where massed armor and massed infantry or massed troops may be used. I don't have any quantitative way of measuring it on a scale of 1 to 100.

I don't think you do, I don't think anybody does, but I think that when you don't have a rifle, and you acquire a rifle, you have made a substantial advantage—an increase in your capability. And I don't think that's vague at all, and I would hope to be similarly specific at subsequent events.