

Nuclear Power Lobbyist Learns to “Love the Bomb”

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Decades of deceit have been thrown overboard with the new nuclear sales pitch, argues JIM GREEN. The new sales pitch openly links nuclear power to weapons and argues that weapons programs will be jeopardised unless greater subsidies are provided for the civil nuclear industry.

In 2015, Nuclear Monitor published a detailed [analysis](#) of the many ways nuclear industry insiders and lobbyists trivialise and deny the connections between nuclear power – and the broader nuclear fuel cycle – and nuclear weapons proliferation.

Since then, the arguments have been turned upside down with prominent industry insiders and lobbyists openly acknowledging power-weapons connections. This remarkable about-turn has clear [origins in the crisis facing nuclear power](#) and the perceived need to secure increased subsidies to prevent reactors closing and to build new ones.

The new sales pitch openly links nuclear power to weapons and [argues](#) that weapons programs will be jeopardised unless greater subsidies are provided for the civil nuclear industry. The [US Nuclear Energy Institute](#), for example, tried in mid-2017 to convince politicians in Washington that if the only reactor construction projects in the US – in South Carolina and Georgia – weren't completed, it would stunt development of the nation's nuclear weapons complex.

The Nuclear Energy Institute paper wasn't publicly released. But in the second half of 2017, numerous nuclear insiders and lobbyists openly acknowledged power-weapons connections and called for additional subsidies for nuclear power. The most important of these initiatives was a [paper by the Energy Futures Initiative](#) – a creation of Ernest Moniz, who served as energy secretary under President Barack Obama.

The uranium industry jumps on the bandwagon

Even the uranium industry has jumped on the bandwagon, with two US companies [warning](#) that reliance on foreign sources threatens national security and lodging a petition with the Department of Commerce calling for US utilities to be required to purchase a minimum 25 percent of their requirements from domestic mines.

Decades of deceit have been thrown overboard with the new sales pitch linking nuclear power and weapons. However there are still some [hold-outs](#). Until recently, one nuclear lobbyist continuing to deny power-weapons connections was Michael Shellenberger from the 'Environmental Progress' pro-nuclear lobby group in the US.

Shellenberger [told](#) an IAEA conference last year that “nuclear energy prevents the spread of nuclear weapons”. And he [claimed](#) last year that “one of FOE-Greenpeace’s biggest lies about nuclear energy is that it leads to weapons” and that there is an “inverse relationship between energy and weapons”.

Shellenberger’s backflip

In [two articles](#) published in August, Shellenberger has done a 180-degree backflip on the power-weapons connections.

“[N]ational security, having a weapons option, is often the most important factor in a state pursuing peaceful nuclear energy”, Shellenberger now [believes](#).

A recent [analysis](#) from Environmental Progress finds that of the 26 nations that are building or are committed to build nuclear power plants, 23 have nuclear weapons, had weapons, or have shown interest in acquiring weapons.

“While those 23 nations clearly have motives other than national security for pursuing nuclear energy,” Shellenberger [writes](#), “gaining weapons latency appears to be the difference-maker. The flip side also appears true: nations that lack a need for weapons latency often decide not to build nuclear power plants ... Recently, Vietnam and South Africa, neither of which face a significant security threat, decided against building nuclear plants ...”

Here is the [break-down](#) of the 26 countries that are building or are committed to build nuclear power plants according to the Environmental Progress report:

- Thirteen nations had a weapons program, or have shown interest in acquiring a weapon: Argentina, Armenia, Bangladesh, Brazil, Egypt, Iran, Japan, Romania, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Taiwan, Turkey, UAE.
- Seven nations have weapons (France, US, Britain, China, Russia, India and Pakistan), two had weapons as part of the Soviet Union (Ukraine and Belarus), and one (Slovakia) was part of a nation (Czechoslovakia) that sought a weapon.
- Poland, Hungary, and Finland are the only three nations (of the 26) for which Environmental Progress could find no evidence of weapons latency as a motivation.

Current patterns connecting the pursuit of power and weapons stretch back across the 60 years of civilian nuclear power. Shellenberger [notes](#) that “at least 20 nations sought nuclear power at least in part to give themselves the option of creating a nuclear weapon” – Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Egypt, France, Italy, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Japan, Libya, Norway, Romania, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, West Germany, Yugoslavia.

Shellenberger points to [research by Fuhrmann and Tkach](#) which found that 31 nations had the capacity to enrich uranium or reprocess plutonium, and that 71% of them created that capacity to give themselves weapons latency.

Nuclear weapons – a force for peace?

So far, so good. The pursuit of nuclear power and weapons are often linked. That's a powerful reason to eschew nuclear power, to strengthen the [safeguards system](#), to tighten export controls, to restrict the spread of enrichment and reprocessing, and so on. But Shellenberger has a very different take on the issues.

Discussing the Fuhrmann and Tkach [article](#) (and studiously avoiding contrary literature), Shellenberger [writes](#):

"What was the relationship between nuclear latency and military conflict? It was negative. "Nuclear latency appears to provide states with deterrence-related benefits," they [Fuhrmann and Tkach] concluded, "that are distinct from actively pursuing nuclear bombs."

"Why might this be? Arriving at an ultimate cause is difficult if not impossible, the authors note. But one obvious possibility is that the "latent nuclear powers may be able to deter conflict by (implicitly) threatening to 'go nuclear' following an attack." ...

"After over 60 years of national security driving nuclear power into the international system, we can now add "preventing war" to the list of nuclear energy's superior characteristics. ...

"As a lifelong peace activist and pro-nuclear environmentalist, I almost fell out of my chair when I discovered the paper by Fuhrmann and Tkach. All that most nations will need to deter military threats is nuclear power – a bomb isn't even required? Why in the world, I wondered, is this fact not being promoted as one of nuclear powers many benefits?

"The answer is that the nuclear industry and scientific community have tried, since Atoms for Peace began 65 years ago, to downplay any connection between the two – and for an understandable reason: they don't want the public to associate nuclear power plants with nuclear war.

"But in seeking to deny the connection between nuclear power and nuclear weapons, the nuclear community today finds itself in the increasingly untenable position of having to deny these real world connections – of motivations and means – between the two. Worse, in denying the connection between energy and weapons, the nuclear community reinforces the widespread belief that nuclear weapons have made the world a more dangerous place when the opposite is the case. ...

"Nuclear energy, without a doubt, is spreading and will continue to spread around the world, largely with national security as a motivation. The question is whether the nuclear industry will, alongside anti-nuclear activists, persist in stigmatizing weapons latency as a nuclear power "bug" rather than tout it as the epochal, peace-making feature it is."

Deterrent effects

Shellenberger asks why the deterrent effect of nuclear power isn't being promoted as one of its many benefits. Nuclear weapons can have a deterrent effect – in a uniquely dangerous and potentially uniquely counterproductive manner – but any correlation between latent nuclear weapons capabilities and reduced military conflict is just that, correlation not causation.

On the contrary, there is a history of military attacks on nuclear facilities to prevent their

use in weapons programs (e.g. Israel's attacks on nuclear facilities in Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007). Shellenberger points to the same problem, asking whether latency could "also be a threat to peace?" and noting Israeli and US threats to take pre-emptive action against Iran. He doesn't offer an answer or explore the issue further.

Shellenberger argues that Iran should be encouraged to develop nuclear weapons. He [cites](#) long-term nuclear weapons proliferation enthusiast Kenneth Waltz, who claims that the "decades-long Middle East nuclear crisis ... will end only when a balance of military power is restored". He [cites](#) a German academic who [argues](#) that a nuclear-armed Germany "would stabilize NATO and the security of the Western World". We "should be glad that North Korea acquired the bomb" [according to Shellenberger](#). And on it goes – his enthusiasm for nuclear weapons proliferation knows no bounds.

'Shellenberger has gone down a rabbit hole'

Nuclear Monitor has previously [exposed](#) the litany of falsehoods in Shellenberger's writings on nuclear and energy issues. In his most recent articles he exposes himself as an intellectual lightweight prepared to swing from one extreme of a debate to the other if that's what it takes to build the case for additional subsidies for nuclear power.

A dangerous intellectual lightweight. Environmental Progress attorney Frank Jablonski [writes](#):

"From Shellenberger's [article](#) you would conclude that, for any "weak nation", or for the "poor or weak" persons within such nations, things are bound to improve with acquisition of nuclear weapons. So, for humanitarian reasons, the imperialistic nations and hypocritical people standing in the way of that acquisition should get out of the way. No. The article's contentions are falsified by ... logical untenability, things it got wrong, and things it left out. While Shellenberger's willingness to take controversial positions has often been valuable, a "contrarian" view is not always right just because it is contrarian."

Sam Seitz, a student at Georgetown's Walsh School of Foreign Service, [argues](#) that Shellenberger's argument is "almost Trumpian in its incoherence". He takes issue with Shellenberger's claims that no nuclear powers have been invaded ("a pretty misleading statistic" and "wrong"); that battle deaths worldwide have declined by 95% ("fails to prove that nuclear weapons are responsible for this trend ... as we are frequently reminded, correlation and causation are not equivalent"); that Indian and Pakistani deaths in two disputed territories declined sharply after Pakistan's first nuclear weapons test in 1998 ("doesn't account for non-nuclear factors like the role of outside mediation and domestic politics"); and that Nazi Germany invaded France because the French lacked a credible deterrent ("makes very little sense and conflates several things ... also silly").

Hostile response

Responding to Shellenberger's more-the-merrier attitude towards nuclear weapons proliferation, pro-nuclear commentator Dan Yurman [puts it bluntly](#):

"Here's the problem. The more nations have nuclear weapons, the more dangerous the world will be. Sooner or later some tin pot dictator or religious zealot is likely to push a button and send us all to eternity."

Shellenberger's about-turn on power-weapons connections provoked a [hostile response](#) from Yurman:

"Shellenberger has crossed a red line for the global commercial nuclear industry, which has done everything in its power to avoid having the public conflate nuclear weapons with commercial nuclear energy. Worse, he's given opponents of nuclear energy, like Greenpeace, a ready-made tool to attack the industry. ...

"In the end he may have painted himself into a corner. Not only has he alienated some of his supporters on the commercial nuclear side of the house, but he also has energized the nonproliferation establishment, within governments and among NGOs, offering them a rich opportunity promote critical reviews of the risks of expanding nuclear energy as a solution to the challenge of climate change. ...

"Shellenberger has gone down a rabbit hole with his two essays promoting the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Given all the great things he has done to promote commercial nuclear energy, it is a perplexing and disturbing development.

"It's ok to be contrarian, but I fear he will pay a price for it with reduced support from some of his current supporters and he will face critical reviews from detractors of these essays. In the end public support and perception of the safety of nuclear energy may be diminished by these essays since they will lead to increased conflating of commercial nuclear energy with nuclear weapons. The fatal attraction of the power of nuclear weapons has lured another victim. It's an ill-fated step backwards."

Power-weapons connections

No doubt there will be more acknowledgements of power-weapons connections by nuclear industry insiders and lobbyists. As Shellenberger [notes](#), the nuclear 'community' today finds itself in an increasingly untenable position denying the connections.

There is a degree of domestic support for nuclear weapons programs in weapons states ... but few people support generalised nuclear weapons proliferation and few would swallow Shellenberger's arguments including his call to shred the non-proliferation and disarmament system and to encourage weapons proliferation.

Understanding of the power-weapons connections, combined with opposition to nuclear weapons, is one of the motivations driving opposition to nuclear power. [According to Shellenberger](#), the only two US states forcing the closure of nuclear plants, California and New York, also had the strongest nuclear disarmament movements.

There is some concern that claims that the civil nuclear industry is an important (or even necessary) underpinning of a weapons program will be successfully used to secure additional subsidies for troubled nuclear power programs (e.g. in the US, France and the UK). After all, nuclear insiders and lobbyists wouldn't abandon their decades-long deceit about power-weapons connections if not for the possibility that their new argument will gain traction, among politicians if not the public.

The growing acknowledgement – and public understanding – of power-weapons connections might have consequences for nuclear power newcomer countries such as Saudi Arabia.

Assuming that the starting point is opposition to a Saudi nuclear weapons program, heightened sensitivity might constrain nuclear exporters who would otherwise export to Saudi Arabia with minimalist safeguards and no serious attempt to check the regime's weapons ambitions. Or it might not lead to that outcome – as things stand, numerous nuclear exporters are scrambling for a share of the Saudi nuclear power program regardless of proliferation concerns.

More generally, a growing understanding of power-weapons connections might lead to a strengthening of the safeguards system along with other measures to firewall nuclear power from weapons. But again, that's hypothetical and it is at best some way down the track – there is no momentum in that direction.

And another hypothetical arising from the growing awareness about power-weapons connections: proliferation risks might be (and ought to be) factored in as a significant negative in comparative assessments of power generation options.

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Dr Jim Green is the national nuclear campaigner with Friends of the Earth Australia and editor of the [Nuclear Monitor](#) newsletter, where a longer version of this article was originally published.

Featured image: The Osirak research reactor site in Iraq after it was bombed by Israel in 1981. (Source: Creative Commons)

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