

Pyongyang's bomb and media hype

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THE main thing we've learnt so far about the Bush administration's self-proclaimed ambitions to curb nuclear proliferation is its all too obvious ability to influence how the press treats the issue. If it wanted to whip up hysteria on Iraq's "weapons of mass destruction" the press was a willing, if now rueful, victim.

If it wants to blow hot about North Korea's ambitions to have a nuclear-armed rocket that can strike Alaska it can do that too. It can also do cold. Watch it right now as it moves, after three years of outright hostility to North Korea, to start using the soft touch in time to meet the imperatives of the electoral calendar when it wants to be crisis-free.

Too much of the media (European too) follows its given cues as meekly as a well trained circus dog. The latest round of talks with North Korea, when for the first time the Bush administration offered negotiating concessions, was thriftily covered. Yet the North Korean bomb has not gone away. And North Korea's bomb research is much more advanced than it was when Bush first characterized the regime as part of the "axis of evil".

Nuclear bombs are a good scare story—when the administration wants it to be. It plays on fears we all have. I'm embarrassed to say that years ago I wrote a column saying if North Korea got a nuclear weapon it should be bombed. When the CIA first spooked president Bill Clinton with its carefully leaked revelation that North Korea had a nuclear weapon he had Henry Kissinger, Brent Scowcroft and Robert Gates on his back telling the press loudly that the North's stock of spent fuel rods should be bombed before they were reprocessed into plutonium.

But none of them could provide an answer what to do if in retaliation North Korea made use of the nuclear bombs they said it already possessed. And when Clinton, all wound up and ready to order an invasion of North Korea, consulted the Pentagon he found that war might lead to the deaths of 50,000 American soldiers and the obliteration of Seoul, he too pulled back.

its plutonium-based bomb producing line they had opened up an alternative uranium-enriched one.

In fact the trust — that precious ingredient of all deals — was broken long ago. The 1994 agreement was clear: the North agreed to close its plutonium plant and seal up the cooling rods from which weapons grade plutonium could be extracted. In return the US with Japan and South Korea agreed to build two modern, non-plutonium producing nuclear power stations to be in production by 2003.

Also the US agreed that it would end its economic embargo and help the North with food, oil and electricity. Militant Republicans in the Congress managed to sabotage the implementation of the American side of the bargain, pushing the administration to slow food supplies and oil deliveries on a number of occasions.

There was a successful effort in the Congress to break the promise of ending sanctions, delaying action on this until 1999 when they were finally but only partially lifted. Not least, was the slowdown on the building of the new reactors, with the prospect of them being completed five years behind schedule in 2008.

Then when George Bush came to power the US leant on South Korea to slow down its so-called "Sunshine" policy of reconciliation. It also refused to talk about other sources of electricity supplies and prohibited South Korea

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Then ex-president Jimmy Carter, briefly seizing the headlines, bravely ventured into Pyongyang and mapped out with the old dictator Kim Il Sung a trade-off between nuclear armaments and economic aid. Clinton happily grabbed the deal, and then the press largely went quiet until when, years later, Bush ratcheted up the rhetoric and confrontation.

And today the press seems content to be spoon-fed the lie pushed by the Bush administration that it was the North Koreans who broke the trust of Washington when they reneged on the undertakings made to Carter/Clinton and admitted (in 2002) that whilst they closed down

from honouring a promise to send electricity to the North. Later, after the North's "confession", it froze both oil supplies and reactor building.

Given the reflex hostility of both the American government and media it should not surprise us that North Korea returned to its "bad old ways."

Confrontation, Pyongyang reasoned, was the only way to get results. And, after three years of it, it is indeed producing results. Bush is ready to negotiate, but quietly. And the press has gone quiet in lockstep. Yet still North Korea has the weapons of mass destruction that Iraq didn't.—*Copyright Jonathan Power*
