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FURTHER COMMENT Ruth Conniff

Proliferation Tango

U.S. policy on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is schizophrenic. The government blesses sales of dangerous technology to some countries even as it threatens war against others for possessing the same stuff. There is a constant tug-of-war going on between people worried about these weapons (including members of the national security establishment as well as peace activists) and those who want to protect dangerous exports (U.S. businesses and the Commerce Department).

In the middle of this dizzying dance is Gary Milhollin, founder of the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control. Milhollin himself is a complicated character. One of the main advocates dedicated to exposing and stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction, he is respected by colleagues in the anti-nuclear movement for his groundbreaking work. At the same time, with his hawkish views on U.S. foreign policy, he is friendly with the national security establishment.

Sitting in his eighth-floor office on K Street in Washington, D.C., with a dramatic view of the Washington Monument in the background, Milhollin is looking at pictures of weapons on his computer screen. A missile pops into view, then a plutonium reactor, then a production line that manufactures gas guns. The pictures come from brochures that companies send to Milhollin, advertising their wares. He puts them into a database to monitor weapons proliferation and the companies that profit by it. "We write to companies requesting information, and we tell them we're doing research on behalf of U.S. exporters," he says, smiling, "which is true."

If a U.S. company knows that one of its clients is trying to make weapons of mass destruction, it can't sell any of the necessary technology to that country without applying for an export license from the Commerce Department. The Wisconsin Project's database makes it harder for companies to claim ignorance.

The Commerce Department can reject applications to export items that might pose a threat. But, says Milhollin, "the Commerce Department doesn't ever want to turn down anything."

Here, too, the database helps—as do the Wisconsin Project's aggressive media campaigns. "If you put out an open list of what the bad guys are up to, it makes it more embarrassing for the government to approve these sales," says Milhollin.



In the weird world of global weapons sales, Milhollin maintains a cordial relationship with many of the players. Subscribers to his database include the CIA, the Pentagon, the Commerce Department, the government of Japan, and various multinational corporations.

Despite its modest size, with a \$700,000 annual budget and a staff of five, the Wisconsin Project has managed to make some very big business deals involving high-tech weapons go sour. One of Milhollin's first victories was his successful crusade to shut down heavy-water exports from Norway's nuclear industry to Israel, which still officially denies it wanted the material to build a nuclear bomb. He also exposed the German and U.S. companies that helped Iraq with its weapons programs.

Recently, the Wisconsin Project fought industry and its advocates in Congress and the Commerce Department to get legislation passed renewing export controls on supercomputers, a crucial component of nuclear weapons systems.

"It's very hard to convince people not to make money. It's one of the hardest things there is to do," Milhollin says. "It's like anti-trust law. Until there were pictures on TV of executives going to jail for price-fixing, people weren't taking the law seriously. My job would be a lot easier if the government were more aggressive, and willing to put people in jail."

Despite this combative attitude toward businesses that help foreign nations build weapons programs, Milhollin is no subversive. He supports sanctions and the threat of force against Iraq as long as Saddam Hussein refuses to comply with weapons inspectors. And he takes a laissez-faire attitude toward the NATO countries' weapons, focusing his

monitoring efforts only on budding military powers the U.S. calls "rogues."

"There's an inconsistency there," Milhollin concedes. But, he says, "What we're worried about is proliferation. The farther these weapons spread, the harder it is to get the genie back in the bottle."

To his credit, Milhollin has managed to get a few genies back in.

David Cortright, a veteran of the nuclear freeze movement and president of the Fourth Freedom Forum, a foundation specializing in disarmament and nonproliferation issues, admires Milhollin's work. "I think it's very useful to focus on the supply-side aspect of weapons proliferation, and Gary's work has uncovered many of the shadiest dealings of private firms in the U.S., Britain, and Germany."

But Cortright is troubled by what he calls Milhollin's "blunt-instrument approach."

"I attended a talk he gave on India, and the title was 'Bombs or Breakfast,'" Cortright recalls. "The idea was, if they don't comply with our rules and stop making bombs, we'll cut off all aid to them. But the more we tighten export restrictions on India, the more we've aroused their nationalist indignation."

Michael Klare, professor of peace and world security studies at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, respects Milhollin's work but criticizes him for fanning the flames of animosity toward so-called rogue states. "Anti-rogueism is now the defense policy of the United States, and it often involves an exaggerated assessment of the military capabilities of the so-called rogues. People concerned about proliferation have to worry that by continually making these charges, they feed U.S. militarism," Klare says.

To anyone appalled by the prospect of the United States killing civilians in its stand-off with Iraq, Milhollin's answers to the moral questions of war are unsatisfying, if not downright gruesome. "There are different ways of fighting wars," he says. "It would be better for the world if the next Iran-Iraq war were not fought with weapons of mass destruction. . . . If we inflict casualties now to prevent more later, people in those countries might be ultimately better off."

That's a pretty abstract point from the perspective of the people who lose their lives in the first war.

Still, Milhollin simply follows the money, which is what drives the worldwide war machine. And he's one of the few people slowing it down. ■

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