

Mythic Weapons and State Propaganda

Critical Art Ensemble



The Super Secret Silent Soviet Sub

The first flicker of the neoconservative narrative revealed itself during the Ford administration. Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney had successfully undermined Henry Kissinger's influence in the executive branch. They immediately launched their fear narrative with the Soviets as the chosen enemy.

Rumsfeld set the tone with statements such as this:

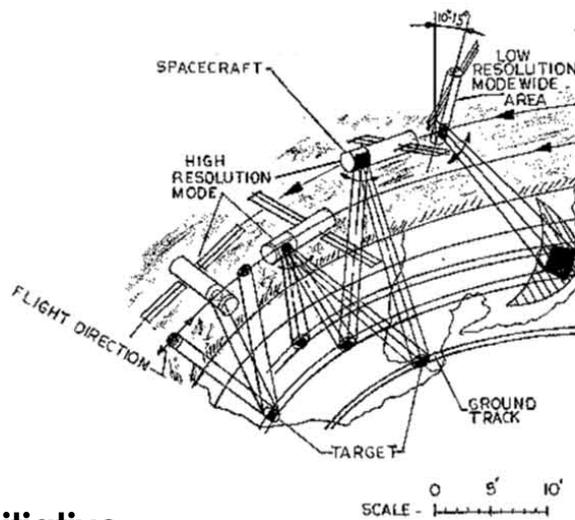
The Soviet Union has been busy. They've been busy in terms of their level of effort; they've been busy in terms of the actual weapons they've been producing; they've been busy in terms of expanding production rates; they've been busy in terms of expanding their institutional capability to produce additional weapons at additional rates; they've been busy in terms of expanding their capability to increasingly improve the sophistication of those weapons. Year after year after year, they've been demonstrating that they have steadiness of purpose. They're purposeful about what they're doing.

The problem was that none of this was true. CIA evidence indicated the USSR was unraveling from the inside, was weakening militarily, and was on the verge of collapse. The neoconservatives approached friend and ally Paul Wolfowitz to create a team whose objective would be finding evidence to contradict the CIA's findings. The result was Team B. The research team found no evidence for Rumsfeld's claims, but they knew how to spin, and they fanatically believed in the need for their vision of the world.

Among the team's interests were submarines capable of functioning as strategic underwater missile platforms. These weapons systems were critical in maintaining the policy of Mutually Assured Destruction. At this time, the Soviet subs were faster, but the Americans had better detection systems. Each had its own advantage. The neoconservatives were certain that the Soviets had produced a non-acoustic form of propulsion that confounded US sonar, thus upsetting the balance. This thesis took popular form in the book and film *The Hunt for Red October* with what the book's author called "caterpillar drive" (properly known as magnetohydrodynamic drive).

No evidence for this undetectable submarine ever emerged, but the neoconservatives were not unnerved and continued to make the claim. For justification, they used the argument from cryptozoologists that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Rumsfeld would echo this argument almost three decades later when WMDs were not found in Iraq. While there is a logic to the argument that might make sense were one searching for the Loch Ness monster, it is rather thin as a sole basis for the production of military policy.

In spite of the entrance of this weapons system into the American imagination, the campaign generally failed to make the neoconservative narrative hegemonic. However, it worked well enough within conservative culture to further fuel an already strong neoliberal desire for the expansion of the military, for covert violent interventions around the world, and for...



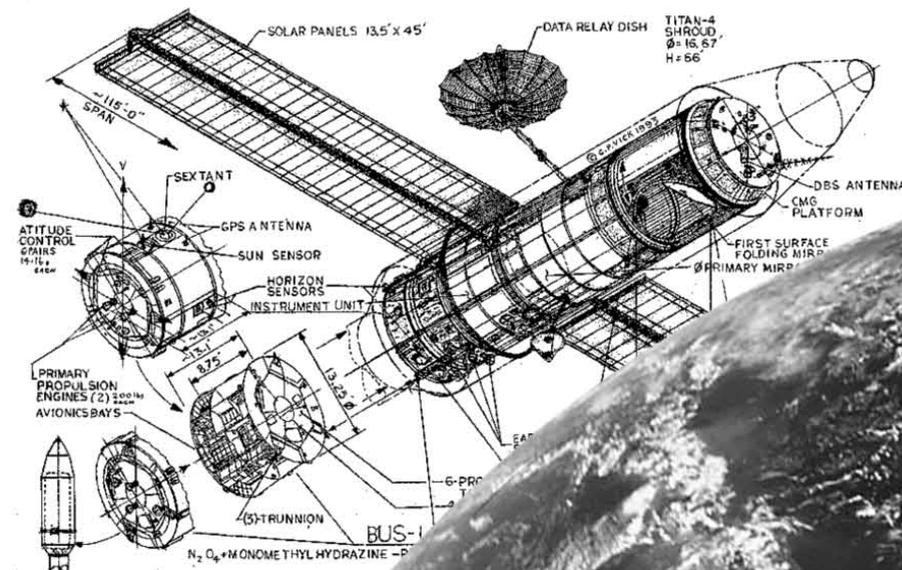
The Strategic Defense Initiative

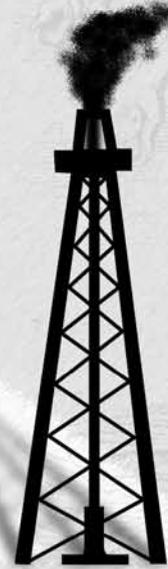
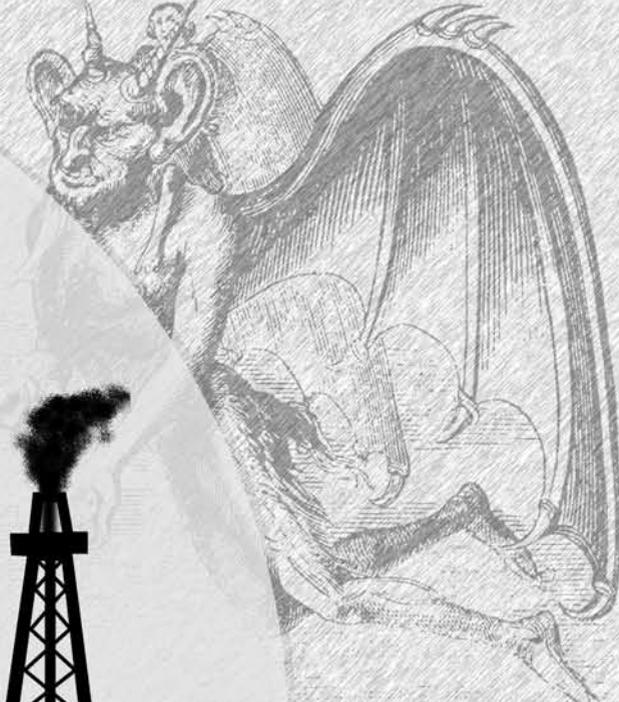
The Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars) was a neoliberal weapon system—a way to expand the military through the gentle reassurance that the world could be protected from the “Evil Empire” if only research into a nuclear explosion-powered X-ray laser were undertaken. Father of the hydrogen bomb Edward Teller alerted the Reagan administration that the prototype of such a weapon had been developed and flatly stated that Star Wars could be built to the size of an executive desk.

During the Reagan administration, the public fascination with the idea of a laser weapon system for peace was exploited to fund all types of related systems that might possibly be used for Star Wars—including ground systems, rail guns, chemical lasers, and “Brilliant Pebbles.” Unfortunately, none of these systems alone or in combination were capable of creating a web of protection for the US. Some, like the rail gun that would destroy itself after a single shot, would almost be funny if the waste weren’t so excessive.

While a few useful technological spin-offs may have come out of all this research (primarily for the military, but also one or two things like medical imaging devices that benefited the civilian sector), it was mostly tremendously expensive vaporware. Star Wars was equally absurd from a military perspective because the tactics necessary to confound the US defensive web were quite inexpensive. Moreover, the possibility that the Soviets could launch a preemptive attack before the system went on-line began to rise in probability. Even more absurdly, *Pere* Reagan attempted to assure the Soviets that he would share the technology. Only skepticism followed, with Gorbachev reasoning that since the US hadn’t shared any other technology, it seemed unlikely to share its best, cutting-edge technology.

One weapon system emerged out of SDI research that is still being used to this day, and it has certainly had its moment in the sun as a mythic weapon...





Sometimes I want to believe in transcendental evil.



Patriot Missile in ATK Thiokol Rocket Park - Corinne, Utah



Patriot PAC-2 missile found at Scrap All, an Ybor City scrap metal business in Tampa FL.

The Patriot Missile

After the disaster of Vietnam, the first neoliberals were reluctant to wage full-scale wars. For Reagan, “low intensity” interventions like the invasion of Grenada were fine, but his preference was to send money, arms, and advisors to nations he thought needed regime change. Bush Senior planned to follow this policy, and was also willing to fight small battles as long as they wouldn’t cost too many American lives. Unfortunately, Panama would not be his only military problem—the first Gulf War was going to require a major military commitment.

It was at least the kind of war Bush Senior liked: one that protected US corporate interests and (theoretically at least) promoted stability in the region. The area could be returned to the status quo, and the appearance of full withdrawal could follow. The neoliberals believed that most Americans, even those still bruised by the Vietnam quagmire, would go along with this—and they did. Bush received his highest approval ratings during and immediately after the Gulf War.

In the lead-up to the war and especially during the war, Americans needed some consolation, some proof that that everything would be OK. The Patriot Missile was there to do its part. Not as a weapon, but as a propaganda device, something that could be used to portray American military aggression as a defensive maneuver to protect Kuwait and Israel from the Iraqi invader. It was the perfect counter to Iraq’s SCUD missile, which represented illegitimate violence and arbitrary killing. Oddly enough, both of these weapon systems were more or less junk, but they made for a great Manichean narrative about the war that US media could not get enough of.

This strategy marked a slight change in the tactics of myth production used with Star Wars and the Soviet Sub: in this case there was an actual, deployed weapons system called the Patriot Missile. The videos were impressive and so were the claims. The US Army boasted an initial success rate of 80% in Saudi Arabia and 50% in Israel. Those claims were eventually scaled back to 70% and 40%. However, when President George H.W. Bush traveled to Raytheon’s Patriot manufacturing plant in Andover, Massachusetts during the Gulf War, he declared that the “Patriot is 41 for 42: 42 Scuds engaged, 41 intercepted!” The President’s claimed success rate was thus over 97% during the war. Yet on April 7, 1992, Theodore Postol of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Reuven Pedatzur of Tel Aviv University testified before a House Committee that, according to their independent analyses, the Patriot system had a success rate of below 10%, and perhaps even zero.

Once a weapon is in the military system it stays for years, no matter what the cost and no matter how useless it may be. The Comanche Helicopter, the Crusader Armored Vehicle, and the V-22 Osprey are all good examples of vaporware costing billions of dollars. The Patriot Missile is still screwing up in Iraq, but with much less fanfare—a fact which came to light again in 2007 when the family of a Navy pilot who was killed by a Patriot sued the systems manufacturer Raytheon. The “improvements” to the weapon system were apparently not good enough: the Patriot Missile still cannot distinguish between friendly and enemy aircraft.

And speaking of weapons that can’t distinguish friend from foe...

Anthrax

The Reagan/Bush/Clinton years of neoliberal rule came to a close at the end of the century, and with them the use of mythic weapons that made Americans feel good about themselves. The neoliberal era was characterized by the paternalism of a military state dedicated to making us feel that we were secure in our homes, that our investments were safe in a stable world, and that we could accept with modest ambivalence the many US-installed dictators protecting capitalist interests with an iron fist around the globe. That was all to change once the neoconservatives came to power and the 9/11 tragedies gave them the opening to launch a massive terror campaign on US residents and the world. Now, nowhere was safe, and everything and everyone should be feared. In the US, this was not the kind of agitation that leads to organized productive action or even raw fight-or-flight, but the kind that separates people and leads them to shut down rationally and surrender their agency. The neoconservatives could now push their agenda with minimal resistance and maintain a military state of perpetual war. To maintain this high level of popular catatonia they needed fresh, scary threats that could happen to anyone, anywhere, at any time.

The Bush administration realized very quickly that germs are really scary. We are socialized to have a nonrational fear of them from the time we are children. Parents, teachers, medical professionals, health and safety bureaucrats, and the multi-billion dollar sanitizing industry remind us again and again that germs are harmful. Moreover, on an experiential level, we all know how unpleasant it is just to have the flu, so anyone can easily imagine the horror of having inhalation anthrax.

When the anthrax attacks occurred in 2001 on the heels of 9/11, the Bush administration saw an opportunity to exploit a specific threat that everyone knew about. Panic could be encouraged, and with that panic, a new, mostly government-funded, multi-billion dollar “biodefense” industry could be launched. The anthrax attacks should have demonstrated what poor weapons germs actually are: of the thousands of people exposed, there were twenty-two infections and five deaths. This is far from an efficient weapon, let alone the Weapon of Mass Destruction it was made out to be. Yet the Bush administration encouraged panic, with both the White House and FEMA recommending that Americans buy duct tape and plastic sheeting to seal their homes in case of a large-scale attack. Despite immediate criticism from scientists and widespread ridicule, the White House and the Department of Homeland Security still feature this suggestion on their web sites. Of course plastic and tape will not stop bacteria, but what makes this even more amusing is that if anyone were actually successful in creating an airtight room, the occupants would suffocate. The Bush administration was in effect inviting everyone to their own suicide party.

Unfortunately, another propaganda victory for the Bush administration emerged out of this sad event: the belief that the military and civilian health agencies have the same interests, with biodefense being the top goal. But while the military’s interest is to focus on rare, scary diseases like the

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the Ready.gov website. The page title is "Ready.gov: Stay or Go - Shelter In Place". The browser address bar shows "http://www.ready.gov/america/makeaplan/shel...". The website header includes "Ready America" and "Prepare. Plan. Stay Informed." with a search bar and "Homeland Security" logo. The main navigation bar has "Home", "Get A Kit", "Make A Plan", and "Be Informed". The "Make A Plan" section is active, listing options like "Downloading and Ordering All Ready Publications", "Overview", "Deciding to Stay or Go", "School and Workplace", "Neighborhoods and Apartments", "In a High-Rise Building", and "In a Moving Vehicle". Below this is a "Here's Something To Think About..." section with advice on water supply. The main content area features a "Shelter-In-Place Diagram" showing a room with a door, window, vent, and fan. Callouts provide instructions: "Cover all doors, windows and vents with 2-4 mil. thick plastic sheeting", "Cut the plastic sheeting several inches wider than the openings and label each sheet", and "Duct tape plastic at corners first, then tape down all edges". A list of instructions is provided below the diagram: "Cover all doors, windows and vents with 2-4 mil. thick plastic sheeting.", "Cut the plastic sheeting several inches wider than the openings and label each sheet.", and "Duct tape plastic at corners first, then tape down all edges." The footer includes "Home | About Ready.gov | Publications | FAQs | Useful Links | Press Room | Site Map | Contact Ready.gov | Privacy Policy | Important Notices | FOIA | USA.GOV | En Español | National Preparedness Month 2008" and the "citizen corps" logo.

Ebola virus, smallpox, and anthrax, the focus of civilian interests could not be more different. The finite resources that once went to study and treat real public health crises that kill millions of people each year—illnesses like AIDS, malaria, hepatitis, and tuberculosis—are being redeployed to research military applications of exotic diseases. Gullibility has won out over skepticism, and fiction has overcome reality. As with...

The Dirty Bomb

The dirty bomb is another perfect neocon-style mythic weapon. First, it raises the fear level. Radioactivity is really scary. It produced Godzilla. It melts your skin, and you die a horrible cancerous death. Second, it appears to be such a plausible device: all one has to do is get some dynamite and a heaping helping of a radioactive substance, put it in a suitcase, and detonate it in a dense urban area. The radioactive substance is blown throughout the city and everyone gets radiation poisoning or cancer, just as with fallout from an atom bomb. Third, the materials are easy to acquire. Fourth, the bomb is portable and therefore impossible to stop. Finally, anyone could make it with minimal training. All the mostly fictional ingredients neoconservatives look for when constructing a mythic weapon are there to be abused. All it took was John Ashcroft to legitimize the dirty bomb with his claim that a “known terrorist,” Jose Padilla, was “exploring a plan” to build such a bomb. The fantasy became entrenched in the great American imagination where it would grow until it was the unquestioned fear-producing juggernaut it is today.

In fact, Padilla was never going to build a dirty bomb. Although the government’s claim that he might be planning to build one was used to justify his 3-year long illegal detention and torture, prosecutors never charged him with any plot involving a bomb, “dirty” or otherwise. The Department of Justice narrative about Padilla was as fictional as the bomb itself. Ashcroft was later reprimanded for it.

To clear the air, and for the benefit of frightened juries everywhere, the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s website states:

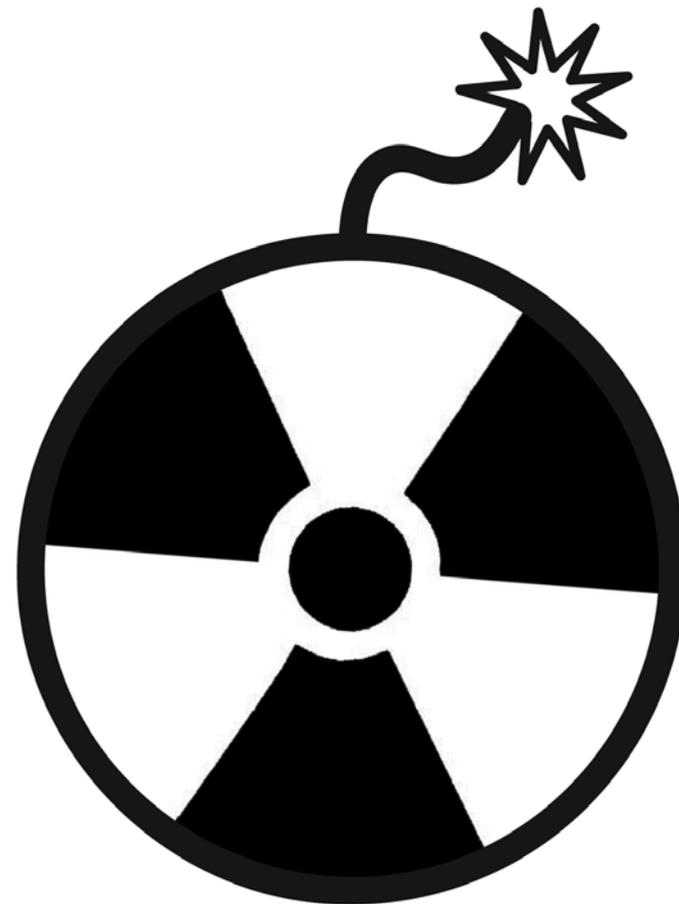
Most RDDs [Radiological Dispersal Devices] would not release enough radiation to kill people or cause severe illness— the conventional explosive itself would be more harmful to individuals than the radioactive material. However, depending on the scenario, an RDD explosion could cause fear and panic, contaminate property, and require potentially costly cleanup. Making prompt, accurate information available to the public could prevent the panic sought by terrorists.

[All said without irony.]

Continuing: *A dirty bomb is in no way similar to a nuclear weapon or nuclear bomb... A dirty bomb is not a ‘Weapon of Mass Destruction’...*

Manhattan Project nuclear scientist Theodore Rockwell has this to say:

[I]t is well documented by all our official agencies that the radioactivity in dirty bombs is unlikely to seriously hurt anyone. People not injured by the conventional explosion itself could walk away and be out of danger. If concerned about possible contamination, they could remove their clothes and take a shower.



The bottom line here is that in order to make a dirty bomb that is actually more than just a conventional explosive, it would take massive amounts of radioactive material that would never fit into a cargo container, much less a suitcase. Compounding the problem is the fact that the more radioactive material is spread out, as it would in the bomb’s explosion, the weaker it becomes. The logistics of making, placing and detonating such a weapon are far beyond the resources of a terrorist like bin Laden, let alone a jihadist dreamer like Padilla.

We need to focus on the real problem—which is not so much the fictions that mythic weapons promote, but the realities they cover up. What all mythic weapons have in common is their role in the production of cultural/ideological conditions in which it is easier for the ruling class to concentrate wealth in their own hands, to create a police state that makes sure they keep it, and to fortify a system in which it is increasingly harder for people to push back. The real narrative, as opposed to the very complex fictional one, is actually quite simple.

This pamphlet is the first of the Artists & Activists series.

Published by Printed Matter, Inc., New York City, 2008. www.printedmatter.org

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Printed Matter's Artists & Activists series is made possible by generous funding from the Gesso Foundation.

ISBN 978-0-89439-029-6