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# O'Brien's talk should re-energize church disarmament drive

Dave Robinson | Jul. 30, 2009

In a bold move to reenergize the U.S. Catholic church?s decades-old quest for a nuclear weapons free world, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops sent an unlikely messenger [1] into the very heart of the U.S. nuclear weapons complex?Strategic Command?s (STRATCOM) Omaha headquarters.

The venue was the ?2009 Deterrence Symposium? organized by STRATCOM Commander General Kevin Chilton. STRATCOM oversees the operational end of the U.S. nuclear deterrent?thousands of nuclear bombs on missiles, bombers and submarines, poised on hair trigger alert, and capable of bringing cataclysmic destruction anywhere on the planet. The messenger was Baltimore Archbishop Edwin O?Brien, a Vietnam Veteran and formerly the Archbishop of the Military Services.

O?Brien?s unique familiarity and credibility with the military signals the seriousness the U.S. Catholic church is bringing to the complex and urgent matter of nuclear disarmament.

The speech entitled, Nuclear Weapons and Moral Questions: The Path to Zero, was the concluding keynote of the first day of the Symposium, a gathering of the key civilian and military leaders charged with developing and implementing U.S. policy on the use and future of U.S. nuclear weapons.

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Catholics in Alliance adds its voice of praise for O'Brien speech
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?I have been asked to offer more challenge than comfort,? stated O?Brien, opening his remarks by acknowledging that ?this is not an easy role for me? as he reaffirmed his deep respect and support for the role of the military, as well as the complex and serious nature of questions regarding nuclear weapons policy. And challenge he did. ?In Catholic teaching,? he said, ?the task is not to make the world safer through the threat of nuclear weapons, but rather to make the world safer from nuclear weapons through mutual and verifiable nuclear disarmament?. Every nuclear weapons system and every nuclear weapons policy should be judged by the ultimate goal of protecting human life and dignity and the related goal of ridding the world of these weapons in mutually verifiable ways.?

Under the Bush Administration, STRATCOM?s role was recast from anchoring the U.S. effort to deter a massive nuclear exchange with the former Soviet Union to operationalizing Global Strike, a greatly enhanced mission that many analysts have condemned as a dangerous blurring of the morally unique nature of nuclear weapons. In his testimony before Congress in March 2009, General Chilton admitted that ?we have a prompt

global strike delivery capability on alert today, but it is configured only with nuclear weapons?? The mission that this capability aims to support is clearly stated in the Department of Defense?s 2006 Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept:

?Nuclear weapons provide the President with the ultimate means to terminate conflict promptly on terms favorable to the U.S. They cast a lengthy shadow over rational adversaries? decision calculus when considering coercion, aggression, WMD employment, and escalatory courses of action.? The Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept further states that ?nuclear weapons allow the U.S. to rapidly accomplish the wholesale disruption of an adversary nation-state with limited U.S. national resources.?

These statements, and many others buried in the shadowy sectors of U.S. Defense planning, clearly indicate that the current roles of U.S. nuclear weapons have expanded well beyond the very limited role of deterring the use of nuclear weapons against the U.S. In an unpublished briefing paper prepared for the Vatican in 2007, Pax Christi USA warned that nuclear weapons had been ?conventionalized,? obliterating the distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons in complete contradiction of the Catholic church?s long-held position. Indeed, in September 2008 the Department of Defense?s Report on the Air Force?s Nuclear Mission stated clearly that ?the nuclear deterrent is ?used? every day by assuring friends and allies, dissuading opponents from seeking peer capabilities to the United States, deterring attacks on the United States and its allies from potential adversaries, and providing the potential to defeat adversaries if deterrence fails.?

It was with this expanded vision of the role of nuclear weapons that the Bush Administration embarked on a $150 billion effort to modernize the entire nuclear weapons complex, upgrade every warhead and delivery system, and fully integrate nuclear weapons into the strategies and policies guiding U.S. war-fighting. To all of this, O?Brien offered a clear and compelling ?No!?

?In Catholic moral teaching,? the archbishop said, ?the only morally legitimate purpose of nuclear deterrence is to deter the use of nuclear weapons by others. This means that ?not all forms of deterrence are morally acceptable.? It is not morally acceptable to aim for nuclear superiority instead of sufficiency. It is not morally legitimate to develop new nuclear weapons for new missions such as to counter non-nuclear threats or to make them smaller and more ?usable? as ?bunker busters.? Why? Because these policies and actions lead us further away from the goal of a world without nuclear weapons. They lead us toward a world more likely to rely on nuclear weapons for security.?

The Vatican, in its statement at the 2005 Review Conference of the Nonproliferation Treaty was clear on this. ?When the Holy See expressed its limited acceptance of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War, it was with the clearly stated condition that deterrence was only a step on the way towards progressive nuclear disarmament. The Holy See has never countenanced nuclear deterrence as a permanent measure, nor does it today when it is evident that nuclear deterrence drives the development of ever newer nuclear arms, thus preventing genuine nuclear disarmament.?

O?Brien?s speech puts a fine point on the church?s teaching and calls for concrete efforts now to substantially change U.S. nuclear weapons policy. In his Prague speech, President Obama committed the United States to leading the effort to rid the world of nuclear weapons starting with the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. O?Brien echoed this call: ?For us in the United States, this means that public opinion makers, including religious leaders, should help build public dialogue and support for ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. And leaders of both political parties should build a strong bipartisan consensus to support the Treaty as an important step on the road to zero.?

He called for a Fissile Materials Cut-Off Treaty to end the production of weapons grade material: ?The United States should provide robust leadership for negotiations on this Treaty. A world moving to rid itself of nuclear weapons is a world that stops producing weapons-grade materials and secures those stockpiles that exist.?

And O?Brien went directly to the heart of U.S. policy and challenged the Obama Administration to actualize the vision presented in Prague:

?The Congressionally mandated Nuclear Posture Review provides an opportunity for the United States to move toward reducing its reliance on nuclear weapons. To build international confidence in our nation?s commitment to working for a world without nuclear weapons, our nation should renounce the first use of nuclear weapons, declare that they will not be used against non-nuclear threats, and confine our nation?s nuclear doctrine to deterring the use of nuclear weapons by others. These actions will strengthen the moral credibility of our nation as we seek to persuade other nations to forego development of weapons of mass destruction.?

As one who has worked for the elimination of nuclear weapons for more than 20 years, I view the archbishop?s address to STRATCOM as a vital contribution to the current debate over the future of U.S. nuclear weapons policy and the unfolding efforts by the new administration in Washington to realize the vision laid out in Prague by President Obama. The task is as urgent as it is complex. But as the archbishop stated last night: ?Religious leaders, prominent officials, and other people of goodwill who support a nuclear-weapons-free world are not naïve about the task ahead. They know the path will be difficult and will require determined political leadership, strong public support, and the dedicated skills of many capable leaders and technical experts. But difficult is not impossible.?

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