

Prominent U.S. Physicists Send Letter to President Bush

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Thirteen of the nation's most prominent physicists have written a letter to President Bush, calling U.S. plans to reportedly use nuclear weapons against Iran "gravely irresponsible" and warning that such action would have "disastrous consequences for the security of the United States and the world."

The physicists include five Nobel laureates, a recipient of the National Medal of Science and three past presidents of the American Physical Society, the nation's preeminent professional society for physicists.

Their letter was prompted by recent articles in the Washington Post, New Yorker and other publications that one of the options being considered by Pentagon planners and the White House in a military confrontation with Iran includes the use of nuclear bunker busters against underground facilities. These reports were neither confirmed nor denied by White House and Pentagon officials.

The letter was initiated by Jorge Hirsch, a professor of physics at the University of California , San Diego , who last fall put together a petition signed by more than 1,800 physicists that repudiated new U.S. nuclear weapons policies that include preemptive use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear adversaries (<http://physics.ucsd.edu/petition/>). Hirsch has also published 15 articles in recent months (<http://antiwar.com/hirsch/>) documenting the dangers associated with a potential U.S. nuclear strike on Iran .

“We are members of the profession that brought nuclear weapons into existence, and we feel strongly that it is our professional duty to contribute our efforts to prevent their misuse,” says Hirsch. “Physicists know best about the devastating effects of the weapons they created, and these eminent physicists speak for thousands of our colleagues.”

“The fact that the existence of this plan has not been denied by the Administration should be a cause of great alarm, even if it is only one of several plans being considered,” he adds. “The public should join these eminent scientists in demanding that the Administration publicly renounces such a misbegotten option against a non-nuclear country like Iran .”

The letter, which is available at <http://physics.ucsd.edu/petition/physicistsletter.html>, points out that “nuclear weapons are unique among weapons of mass destruction,” and that nuclear weapons in today's arsenals have a total power of more than 200,000 times the explosive energy of the bomb that leveled Hiroshima, which caused the deaths of more than 100,000 people.

It notes that there are no sharp lines between small and large nuclear weapons, nor between nuclear weapons targeting facilities and those targeting armies or cities, and that the use by the United States of nuclear weapons after 60 years of non-use will make the use of nuclear weapons by others more likely.

“Once the U.S. uses a nuclear weapon again, it will heighten the probability that others will too,” the physicists write. “In a world with many more nuclear nations and no longer a ‘taboo’ against the use of nuclear weapons, there will be a greatly enhanced risk that regional conflicts could expand into global nuclear war, with the potential to destroy our civilization.”

The letter echoes the main objection of last fall's physicists' petition, stressing that the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty will be irreversibly damaged by the use or even the threat of use of nuclear weapons by a nuclear nation against a non-nuclear one, with disastrous consequences for the security of the United States and the world.

“It is gravely irresponsible for the U.S. as the greatest superpower to consider courses of action that could eventually lead to the widespread destruction of life on the planet. We urge the administration to announce publicly that it is taking the nuclear option off the table in the case of all non-nuclear adversaries, present or future, and we urge the American people to make their voices heard on this matter.”

The 13 physicists who coauthored the letter are: Philip Anderson, professor of physics at Princeton University and Nobel Laureate in Physics; Michael Fisher, professor of physics at the Institute for Physical Science and Technology, University of Maryland and Wolf Laureate in Physics; David Gross, professor of theoretical physics and director of the Kavli Institute of Physics at the University of California, Santa Barbara and Nobel Laureate in Physics; Jorge Hirsch, professor of physics at the University of California, San Diego; Leo Kadanoff, professor of physics and mathematics at the University of Chicago and recipient of the National Medal of Science; Joel Lebowitz, professor of mathematics and physics, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey and Boltzmann Medalist; Anthony Leggett, professor of physics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Nobel Laureate, Physics; Eugen Merzbacher, professor of physics, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and former president, American Physical Society; Douglas Osheroff, professor of physics and applied physics, Stanford University and Nobel Laureate, Physics; Andrew Sessler, former director of Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory and former president, American Physical Society; George Trilling, professor of physics, University of California, Berkeley, and former president, American

Physical Society; Frank Wilczek, professor of physics, MIT and Nobel Laureate, Physics; Edward Witten, professor of physics, Institute for Advanced Study and Fields Medalist.

The physicists are sending copies of their letter to their elected representatives, requesting that the issue be urgently addressed in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.

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