

Arms Control and Terrorism

Dear Mr. President,

The continuing rounds of generalized slaughter in the world, and the recent failed terrorist attempt, should suggest to us that something has to be done to control the availability of arms and explosives, that is, to focus on the tools of war and terror as much as on the warriors and terrorists themselves. Much attention has been paid lately, deservedly, to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction – nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. But we mustn't overlook conventional weapons and technology.

It can hardly be denied that the easy availability of weapons and materials for the fabrication of bombs itself fuels warfare and terrorist activity. Such materials must be restricted on both national and international levels. It is bad enough that an international arms market supplies countries all over the world with whatever they can pay for, thus fueling war between neighboring nations as well as enabling the armed repression of a government's own citizens and the arming of murderous proxy militia. It is even worse that the same arms are available, through secret and illegal channels, to terrorist organizations that answer to no one.

Many countries – the U.S. foremost – produce arms and war materiel, whether in state-operated or privately-run facilities, and deal them all over the world. Who is keeping an eye on this traffic? If these things were not available it would be much harder to terrorize, repress, and kill. In some countries the aftermath of war leaves millions of mines, some undetectable, that cost as little as a dollar or two to produce. In very poor countries we see expensive and deadly weaponry in the hands of regular armed forces and rebel organizations alike.

It would be great to go back to clubs and stones. War has always been savage, but in the days before mechanized and scientific warfare – automatic weapons, advanced chemistry, and electronics – it was not nearly as bloody. Technology and mass production make possible mass destruction. You can manufacture a gun in any good machinist's shop and even smuggle it, but you can't produce knock-off Kalashnikovs by the thousands and ship them out without a noticeable operation. By simple means one can poison a water supply, but not produce chemical or biological weapons. It is possible to make explosives with common household materials, but nothing with the destructive power of modern, sophisticated explosives.

It should be possible to control, to a considerable degree, whoever has access to crucial materials or possesses the technology required to produce any sort of weapon. The U.N. should impose regulations and controls of such production on a world-wide basis, and not permit the free market in arms that exists now. A complex job, enormous in scope, unfortunately made more difficult politically by the resistance of many countries which are complicit in this activity, but a beginning must be made. (It may well be that such initiatives already exist, but if so, it is clear how little effect they have had up until now.) Another occasion for the nations of the world to unite to act in the general interest instead of on the basis of narrow political and economic interests. To you in particular I would say it would be a very worthy issue for you to press.

If we can shrink the scale of weapons production we will reduce the bloodshed that follows. Too bad for those who are in the business – they will suffer – but to make money like this is nothing to be proud of; their cynicism is detestable. If arms must be made it should only be because they are necessary, not because it's good business.

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