

U.S. counters Vatican's anti-war stance

Ken Dilanian
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

ROME — In an unusual effort to counter increasingly fierce criticism by the Vatican against a possible war in Iraq, the U.S. government hosted a conservative theologian here Monday who argued that a military strike against Saddam Hussein would meet the definition of a "just war" in Catholic doctrine.

"Public authorities are responsible for one supreme duty: to protect the lives and the rights of their people," said Michael Novak, a Catholic thinker and a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, speaking to an international group of journalists invited by the U.S. Embassy.

"And no president of the United States is going to put the United

States at risk again, knowing full well that if there was something he could have done and didn't do, he would be blamed for it forever," he said.

Novak's visit, which included meetings with Vatican officials last week, was organized at the behest of Jim Nicholson, the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See and a Vietnam combat veteran who previously chaired the Republican National Committee.

Although both men took pains to say that Novak was not speaking for the U.S. government, his presence underscored the deep split between the Catholic Church and the Bush administration over military action against Iraq.

On Sunday, Pope John Paul II, who has spoken against a possible preemptive strike against Hussein's regime, dispatched an envoy to

Baghdad in a last-ditch effort to avert conflict. A Vatican spokesman said the trip was designed to "demonstrate to all the plea of the Holy Father in favor of peace and to help Iraqi authorities make a serious reflection on the duty of an effective international commitment based on justice and international rights."

Hussein's deputy prime minister, Tariq Aziz, is expected in Rome on Friday for a meeting with the Pope.

After the Sept. 11 attacks, the pontiff made a point of saying that nations have a right to defend themselves against terrorism, and he did not criticize the subsequent war to oust the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

But Iraq has been different. In a speech to diplomats to the Vatican last month, the Pope said, "No to

war!" His top aides have criticized U.S. policy in explicit terms.

Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Vatican's foreign minister, questioned why the United States would want to "irritate a billion Muslims."

The director of Vatican Radio, the Rev. Pasquale Borgomeo, accused the U.S. of wanting to impose "the hegemony of a superpower by force and not by law."

Official Vatican newspapers, the content of which is approved by top church officials, have gone further. One contended the United States wanted war to seize control of Iraq's oil supplies, and another said U.S. policy lacked "intelligence."

U.S. diplomats here have been frustrated by the tone of the comments, which they feel resembles the kind of knee-jerk anti-American-

ism that is common in some European intellectual circles.

However, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and most mainline Protestant denominations in the United States also have questioned the rationale for a preemptive strike on Iraq.

Into the debate waded Novak, a 1960s anti-Vietnam War activist who is now better known for his moral defense of capitalism and free trade. He argued that if Hussein does not agree to disarm, a preemptive strike against his regime fits the definition of a "just war," a concept first spelled out 1,600 years ago by St. Augustine and now enshrined in Catholic catechism.

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Shuttle foam repeatedly failed, inspectors say

David Kidwell, Manny Garcia and Curtis Morgan

Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

NEW ORLEANS — A half dozen current and former inspectors at the Louisiana plant that built Columbia's external fuel tank have told The Miami Herald that the equipment endured chronic problems with failed adhesion of the insulating foam — the very flaw that may have befallen the space shuttle or contributed to its collapse.

"Could it be safer? Of course it could," said one. "I can tell you I would never go into space under the current system — not until it's safer. There have been too many cutbacks."

Their warnings echo those detailed in studies that cite failings with the space shuttle's tank, foam

and tiles. At least two NASA reports describe debris from the sprayed-on foam insulation as the largest source of potential damage to the shuttle's life-saving heat armor.

"It is estimated that 90 percent of the Thermal Protection System damage on the orbiter's 'belly' results from de-bonded Sprayed-On Foam Insulation during ascent," the 1997 study summary says.

NASA, aware of such warnings, nevertheless believed the foam that shot off Columbia's fuel tank 81 seconds into flight Jan. 16 was not serious enough to cripple the craft.

NASA relied on assessments by Boeing Co. and its own engineers that concluded a "safe return — even with significant tile damage." Those reports — obtained by The Herald — did not take into account

the more dire possibility that the debris struck the vulnerable leading edge of the wing.

Now NASA and an outside investigative panel are exploring whether the space agency badly miscalculated.

NASA has made clear — and made clear again Monday — that it has come to no definitive conclusions as to what caused Columbia to collapse in the sky Feb. 1, killing seven astronauts.

"Everything is on the table," NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe told reporters. "There is no favored theory."

Yet from moments after the shuttle's demise, investigators have focused close scrutiny on the nearly 3-pound chunk of foam that catapulted off the 154-foot external fuel tank and into Columbia's life-

saving thermal tiles.

Those tiles are meant to protect the shuttle and its passengers from heat reaching 3,000 degrees. NASA's own analysis shows Columbia suffered escalating temperatures on its left side, where the debris could be seen thumping the shuttle. On Monday, NASA said it recovered part of Columbia's left wing, the suspect section.

Inspectors at the Michoud Space Center plant in Louisiana, where contractor Lockheed Martin made the fuel tank, are raising questions about the role foam may have played in the disaster.

"They used to lose foam, sometimes in significant amounts, with every flight," said one quality engineer who retired in 1997. "They would send teams out to walk up

and down the beach after a launch to pick up foam that came off. They were never able to resolve that issue."

Several inspectors — interviewed independently — said cutbacks in the number of quality inspectors may be linked to escalating foam failures.

"NASA's budget cuts have meant we lost inspectors," said a supervisor who oversaw the construction of the external tank for years. "Some things used to have 100 percent inspections. We just got limited, and I think it is very unhealthy."

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