IS NORTH KOREA FAKING IT?

Last January, a team of US scientists, led by former Los Alamos lab director Sig Heckler, was allowed to visit the Yongbyon nuclear facility in North Korea.

The North Koreans produced a heavy glass jar containing a funnel-shaped piece of metal that was “blackish with a rough surface,” according to Heckler. The jar was warm -- plutonium generates heat -- and “seemed about right in terms of weight” for Heckler. A Geiger counter registered radiation.

At a subsequent press conference in Beijing, the scientists announced North Korea has reprocessed enough plutonium for at least four bombs. A few days later, the North Korean government offered to freeze its nuclear weapons program in exchange for massive aid and the lifting of sanctions.

The question arises: is this all a con?

The stuff in the jar may well have been plutonium, but was it *weapons-grade*? That is, P-239.

If it was, then the North Koreans would have let the scientists take a q-tip swab of the stuff in the bottle, collecting a few micrograms for mass spectrometer analysis back in the US.

That would have confirmed it was the real deal. That they didn’t, and refused the scientists’ request to do so, shows that the stuff in the bottle is fake.

Here’s what most likely happened. The North Koreans don’t really know what they are doing, were pushed too hard to reprocess uranium fuel rods into plutonium, and left the rods in too long.

The longer you leave the rods in the reactor, the more uranium will be converted into plutonium -- but the ratio of isotopes changes.

You need plutonium that is more than 90% of the 239 isotope (ideally 95%) to get the reaction to assemble fast enough for a nuclear explosion. 10% of the 240 or 242 isotopes and the reaction “fizzles.”

If, as seems likely, the stuff in the bottle was P-240/242 and not P-239, then the North Koreans are running an extortion racket. It’s a bluff.

It’s usually not a good idea to play poker with a Texas cowboy and try to bluff him into thinking you have a winning hand. Which is why George Bush hasn’t been suckered by the Pyongyang con.

His demands remain the same: no one-on-one negotiations, no aid or concessions of any kind until Pyongyang unconditionally destroys its nuke facilities and allows fully transparent inspections.

Which is why Kim Jong-il's only hope is that Americans will be crazy enough to elect Hanoi John in November. [See "North Korea Looks To Ouster of Bush," Washington Times, March 6, 2004 http://www.washtimes.com/world/20040305-100452-9131r.htm]