



U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy: What Next?

America's nuclear arsenal and the policies that govern its size and contents are at a critical crossroads as the Bush Administration reaches its final months. The U.S. Energy Department and its semi-autonomous weapons division, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), have pushed hard in recent years for the go-ahead to produce new kinds of nuclear weapons, and for expensive new facilities in which to manufacture them.

COMPLEX TRANSFORMATION: WHAT IS IT?

In recent months, the weapons designers have trumpeted their hoped-for "Complex Transformation," which purports to shrink the footprint of the nation's nuclear weapons complex. In fact, the \$500 billion plan makes facility and stockpile reductions contingent on costly new factories and new H-bomb designs in the name of keeping our arsenal "reliable." NNSA even hired a big PR firm to promote their new vision during recent public hearings.

Congress so far has refused to fund the centerpiece of NNSA's Complex Transformation, the so-called Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW), citing a lack of demonstrated need or clear mission for the new weapon.

Nuclear weapons policies are due for review by the incoming Administration, and also by a special Congressional Strategic Posture Commission. Logic dictates that the huge expenditures and programs proposed in "Complex Transformation" should be put on hold until a new Administration takes office.

PLUTONIUM PIT PRODUCTION

While claiming the stockpile "needs" RRW, NNSA also says it needs greater plutonium pit manufacturing capability. Grapefruit-sized plutonium pits (with high explosives) are the "triggers" for modern thermonuclear

weapons. The U.S. made pits at Rocky Flats near Denver until 1989, when the FBI raided that facility for environmental crimes, ending Cold War-era pit production. Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) in northern New Mexico began "interim" pit production in 1998, and can make up to 20 pits a year without the costly new construction NNSA now seeks.

Since 2002, NNSA has pushed first for a "Modern Pit Facility" to produce 450 or more pits per year, then a "Consolidated Plutonium Center" to produce 125 pits per year. These failed to gain Congressional support. The new "Transformation" is the same old agenda--new factories, new designs, new bombs.

PIT LIFETIMES

For years, bomb-makers cited aging plutonium pits as a rationale for making new weapons. In 2006, independent scientists released their review of NNSA's plutonium aging studies. They concluded that pits last a century or more. The oldest weapons in NNSA's planned future stockpile are only 30 years old.

THE U.S. ALREADY HAS TOO MANY PITS

The U.S. has about 25,000 plutonium pits--nearly 10,000 of them in existing warheads. Some 5,000 are in "strategic reserve" and more than 10,000 "surplus" pits are stored at the Pantex Plant near Amarillo, TX. The 2002 Moscow Treaty requires America and Russia each to reduce their arsenals to 2,200 (or fewer) deployed warheads by 2012, but it fails to mandate irreversible dismantlement. Pantex, where nukes are assembled and disassembled, is authorized to "reuse" up to 350 existing pits per year, strengthening the argument that we don't need to manufacture any pits. Pantex boasts that reuse is far less expensive and environmentally damaging than making new pits.

What's more, a recent report by the Government Accountability Office cites an internal NNSA memo recognizing a total of only 31 new pits needed--not annually, but over an unspecified foreseeable time frame. LANL could easily meet that need under "interim" capabilities. Yet NNSA seeks some 80 new pits a year, at a cost of billions.

U.S. NUKES ARE ALREADY RELIABLE

Before the 1992 testing moratorium, more than a thousand full-scale nuclear weapons tests were conducted, building up a huge base of data. Since 1992, all three nuclear weapons labs have annually certified the arsenal's reliability under the Stockpile Stewardship Program. Now, despite the investment of over \$70 billion, the labs claim Stockpile Stewardship is no longer sustainable.

NEW NUKES DRAIN THE TREASURY

As the preferred pit-building site under Complex Transformation, Los Alamos would be asked to produce some 50-80 pits per year. NNSA claims the buildings that now house "interim" production are inadequate for the increased manufacturing. Requested new facilities would cost billions. After they're built, pit production will cost more than a half-billion dollars annually--not including decontamination or cleanup costs. How many people know that we currently spend one-and-a-half times as much on nuclear weapons as we did at the height of the Cold War?

PLAN COULD LEAD TO NEW NUKE TESTS

If it gets the green light to proceed, the Reliable Replacement Warhead will not be a single design. NNSA envisions a "continuous design/deployment cycle" for up to four types of RRWs. Changing delivery systems to accommodate the RRW program could cost hundreds of billions of dollars. Any new warhead designs, either RRWs or other types, could heighten internal pressure to test them before the military accepts them. If the U.S. resumes testing, other countries would likely follow suit. The costs of a new nuclear arms race would be incalculable.

NEW BOMBS ENCOURAGE PROLIFERATION

The U.S. is setting a terrible global example even as it pressures other countries to eliminate or forgo nuclear weapons. RRW, expanded pit production, adding new military capabilities to existing weapons during refurbishment--these initiatives all constitute a "nukes forever" policy, breaking promises the U.S. made as a party to the 1970 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. This aggressive agenda threatens to derail diplomatic efforts with Iran and North Korea. For a real Complex Transformation, NNSA should focus on curatorship, dismantlement, non-proliferation and cleanup instead of Cold War levels of bomb manufacturing.

NUKES TARGET OUR ENVIRONMENT

The proposed Complex Transformation threatens the air, land, water, and health of communities around DOE's nuclear weapons facilities. Enormous volumes of plutonium-contaminated, chemical, and "low-level" radioactive wastes would be produced under Complex Transformation. Huge quantities of water would be consumed to manufacture weapons in the new plutonium facilities.

All of the research and production sites in the nation's weapons complex are polluted. Accidents, spills and leaks are common. Workers across the complex suffer from a range of illnesses and cancers. Many have already died while awaiting compensation from the government.

How much will it cost to clean up the existing environmental legacy from nuclear weapons production? The current estimate exceeds \$300 billion. It's the largest environmental cleanup program in the history of the world. Protecting resources and communities from contamination should be the priority, not designing new nuclear weapons.

