

Publication: Jnl Legacy 1995 to July 2005; Date: Jan 6, 2001; Section: Journal North; Page: 59



# Edition--Journal North Date--01/06/2001

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### Nuke Report Vexes Activists

Jennifer McKee Journal Staff Writer

#### Group Fears LANL Will Become Warhead Producer

Local activists fear Los Alamos National Laboratory could be the new home for a potential warhead plant alluded to in a State Department report released Friday.

Retired Gen. John Shalikashvili, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was tapped last year to review the failed Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty by President Clinton and Secretary of State Madeline Albright. He released his report Friday.

While much of his findings centered around the global spread of nuclear weapons, a small portion of the report focused on maintaining the nation's existing and aging supply of nuclear weapons, also known as "the stockpile."

"The National Nuclear Security Administration (a semi-autonomous arm of the Department of Energy) should make a decision as soon as possible about the need for a large scale plutonium pit remanufacturing facility," the general wrote.

Plutonium pits are the nuclear guts of a warhead and contain radioactive plutonium, which is known to decay over time. The United States currently has no manufacturing plant for nuclear bombs. Los Alamos National Lab has been designated as the official source of new or remanufactured pits, said lab spokesman Jim Danneskiold, although the lab hasn't built a weapons-ready pit in the four years since DOE officials christened it the nation's new pit center.

Greg Mello, of the Santa Fe-based Los Alamos Study Group, said the report all but points to Los Alamos as the site of any new larger-scale pit plant.

"That's been DOE's constant plan for the last eight years," said Mello, chairman of the lab watchdog group.

He pointed to reports from the DOE's Albuquerque Operations Office that call for an additional \$500 million over the next 15 years for new buildings and facilities earmarked for expanded pit production.

He's vowed to oppose the growth tooth and nail.

"We will fight pit production at any level, other than simple maintenance of the technology, with all means at our disposal," Mello said. "The northern New Mexico community has fought this in the past."

But according to Danneskiold, Mello needn't arm himself just yet. True, Danneskiold said, Los Alamos is the only source of new pits in the country right now. But the lab was charged only with maintaining the know-how and technology to make new nuclear weapons, not the full-scale rebuilding of the nation's

nuclear weapons. Under the grandest projections, Los Alamos scientists will only be making 50 new pits a year, he said, and so far they haven't made a single one fit to be implanted in the nose of a warhead.

"There have never been any plans for large-scale pit manufacturing at Los Alamos," Danneskiold said.

Another anti-nuclear activist agreed.

Jay Coghlan of Nuclear Watch of Northern New Mexico, also based in Santa Fe, said Friday a pit plant on the mesa is the least of his fears.

More upsetting in Shalikashvili's report, Coghlan said, was the general's argument for both the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which would forbid nuclear testing among member nations, and the need for new or remanufactured pits, which are part of the national Stockpile Stewardship Program. Stockpile stewardship, by rebuilding and making slight changes to the weapons, violates the 30-year-old Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, Coghlan said.

# Proposed Budget Protested

## Domenici Vows To Up Lab Funds

BY JENNIFER MCKEE  
Journal Staff Writer

4/10/01

The White House's proposed federal budget ignited both head scratching and criticism in northern New Mexico on Monday as officials and activists waded through the tome to see what President Bush wants to spend on federal projects here.

"The budget request is wholly inadequate," said Sen. Pete Domenici.

R.N.M., referring to a cut in funding for plutonium pits at Los Alamos National Laboratory. "Quite frankly, I'll work to see that it does not stand. It simply does not come close to supporting the requirements

for pit production and certification work at LANL."

Domenici estimated the program needs another \$150 million above the Bush administration's proposal.

Bush sent his \$1.96 trillion budget spending plan to Congress on Monday. The document outlines his administration's proposed spending for every federal agency. In northern New Mexico, that means funding for everything from the Santa Fe Indian School to Los Alamos lab.

The document is far from written in stone. Both houses of Congress will likely produce compromise budget resolutions after the spring recess.

Nonetheless, Bush's plan attracted much attention in northern New Mexico.

On the less contentious side, the plan calls for \$4.5 million for the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, \$375,000 more than last year. The plan also allocates money to purchase 860 acres on the Taos

### More or less

President Bush's \$1.96 trillion federal budget proposal has some positives and negatives for New Mexico.

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# Budget Draws Protests

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Valley Overlook as part of the Bureau of Land Management's \$4 million Land Acquisition Program.

It slates \$23.2 million for the first phase of rebuilding the Santa Fe Indian School, a boarding and day school for about 1,000 Native American students run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The plan also calls for transferring the existing school — a smattering of historic adobe buildings on Cerrillos Road — to the 19 Pueblos of New Mexico, according to Hal Schultz, assistant superintendent of the Indian school.

An independent study finished last spring showed that fixing up the aging building would cost more than \$50 million, while building the campus anew would cost roughly \$38 million.

Bush's proposed spending for the school falls far short of that, but according to Domenici, this is only the first phase of rebuilding.

"We've built plenty of schools for this kind of money and they're pretty good schools," said Nedra Darling, a BIA spokeswoman.

Perhaps the most heated part of the budget was the Department of Energy's roll-out.

New Mexico's senators attacked the proposal, which calls for an estimated \$312 million less spending in New Mexico than last year and cuts at various programs throughout the agency.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., said the budget "sends a very disturbing message about how the president views" the labs.

Domenici said the budget has "some serious deficiencies" and has already co-sponsored two amendments to the Senate budget resolution that would tack on an additional \$900 million for DOE defense program spending and \$469 million for science research at national labs.

The budget calls for little over \$1.4 billion for Los Alamos lab, a decrease of \$281 million from last year. That number may be deceiving. The budget also beefs up funding of the National Nuclear Security Administration by \$281 million. The administration is a semiautonomous arm of the DOE that now oversees some work at the Los Alamos lab.

Lab spokesman John Gustafson said it's too early in the budget process and too soon after Bush's enormous budget volume was released to say exactly how the lab might end up financially next year.

"There's a long process ahead and it's too premature to speculate on any of that," he said.

Activists didn't hesitate.

According to Jay Coghlan of Nuclear Watch of New Mexico, the budget is long on weapons and short on environmental cleanup.

"It's basically a budget for the weaponeers of Los Alamos," he said, pointing out that DOE calls for spending an extra \$230 million for weapons with almost half of that to be spent at Los Alamos, while the lab's environmental cleanup budget was cut by \$15 million to just over \$75 million. In explaining the cut, the DOE's budget reads, the "net decrease reflects a shift toward higher priority activities."

"To me, that's weapons," Coghlan said.

Joni Arends, waste program manager for Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety, also zeroed in on the cleanup cuts.

"For every dollar increase in stockpile stewardship, there should be a similar dollar for cleanup," she said. "What is national security if we don't have our health."

Similarly, Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group said the budget focuses sharply on weapons.

"More weapons, less science," he said.

# Sen. Seeks To Restore Funding for Nuke Pits

4/24/01

BY JENNIFER MCKEE  
Journal Staff Writer

The Bush administration's federal budget will leave our country out of pits, not in the pits, according to Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M.

And that's a bad thing.

A pit, in this case, is the softball-sized plutonium orb inside every nuclear weapon in the nation's stockpile. Pits cause a nuclear explosion; without them, no nuclear weapon would work.

The United States has not built a new pit since 1989, and some scientists fear the aging pits may not work as planned. To ensure the reliability of nuclear weapons as well as maintain a work force with the knowledge to build a pit, the Energy Department launched a campaign

several years ago of building replacement pits in small quantities.

Los Alamos National Lab was designated the nation's new pit production facility.

So far, scientists at the lab have yet to build a certified pit, one that passes rigorous standards and can be placed in an existing weapon.

Thanks to cuts in the latest DOE budget, Domenici said the lab never will.

"This budget puts off the certification and delivery of a pit to the military indefinitely," the senator said last week.

The proposed DOE budget cuts funding for pit production at Los Alamos to \$129 million, down from

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## Domenici Urges Funding for Nuke Pits

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\$145 million this fiscal year.

Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham, during a visit to the lab last week, said the cuts will not throw the department off its goal of building a certifiable pit by 2003, DOE's self-imposed pit deadline.

According to Domenici, there's a difference between a "certifiable pit," one that is built and could be certified, and a "certified pit," or one that is ready to be delivered to the military and placed into a

nuclear weapon.

While the department may produce a certifiable pit by 2003, the DOE's proposed budget cuts render any real-life usable pits a pipe dream for the foreseeable future.

"The budget request is totally inadequate," the senator said. "Under an earlier plan, a new, certified pit was to be delivered to the military in 2001."

That obviously didn't happen, and according to Domenici, the DOE's proposed budget, released earlier this month, "includes no commit-

ment on certification."

He estimates Congress must add another \$148 million to the pit budget if DOE expects to have a certified, ready-to-use pit delivered to the military by 2009.

Abraham said during his Los Alamos visit last week that he takes seriously the importance of pit production, but added that while Domenici was one of his best friends when the two served in the Senate together, Domenici "needs to give us a little time" to figure out the Energy Department ropes.

Domenici is already pushing to expand the DOE budget, by almost \$1.4 billion.

Some say DOE doesn't need all that money to make a pit. Greg Mello, of the Los Alamos Study Group, a lab watchdog organization based in Santa Fe, said many countries routinely crank out pits for a fraction of what the United States has already spent with little result.

"Ask the North Koreans," Mello said, referring to that nation's young nuclear weapons program. "I bet they can make a pit."

Paper: Seattle Times, The (WA)  
Title: Modernizing U.S. nuclear weapons to cost millions  
Author: Jonathan S. Landay  
Date: June 1, 2001  
Section: News  
Page: A8

THE ENERGY Department says that unless it gets more money to renovate the nation's aging nuclear-weapons facilities, it may not be able to certify the U.S. arsenal without resuming underground tests.

WASHINGTON--Although President Bush is promising deep cuts in the U.S. nuclear arsenal, his administration also is considering a six-year plan that could exceed \$2 billion to renovate and improve the nation's aging nuclear-weapons laboratories, assembly plants and testing facilities.

Officials who manage the Department of Energy's (DOE) Stockpile Stewardship Program, which maintains the country's estimated 10,500 nuclear weapons, say they need the money to fix crumbling buildings, install modern equipment and attract a new generation of nuclear scientists.

Critics oppose the new spending, charging the program is bloated by mismanagement and cost overruns and is really intended to design new nuclear weapons. DOE and laboratory officials deny those allegations.

Stockpile Stewardship uses computer simulation and other experimental methods to monitor nuclear weapons to make sure they remain safe and will still work as designed as they age.

Warheads periodically are taken apart and checked for corrosion and other problems, and defective parts are replaced. U.S. nuclear warheads usually last about 18 years. The oldest is 30.

#### Instead of underground testing

The program is used in place of underground nuclear testing. The United States declared a moratorium on nuclear-test explosions in 1992. Every year since then, the DOE has certified the nuclear arsenal as reliable, but its managers say unless they get more money for renovations, they may not be able to continue certifying the arsenal without resuming underground tests.

"My confidence in our ability to maintain the reliability of the weapons in our stockpile without nuclear testing is being impacted by several trends that we see," John Browne, the director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, told Congress in April.

The weapons are "not aging gracefully," and the government doesn't have the modern facilities and equipment it needs to renovate them and make replacement parts, he said.

DOE officials who oversee Stockpile Stewardship refused to reveal the overall cost of their six-year plan to renovate the nuclear-weapons complex, but they said it would cost \$300 million the first year and \$500 million a year for the last several years.

It's costing \$5 billion to maintain U.S. nuclear weapons this year, \$1 billion more than originally estimated because of cost overruns and delays. The administration is seeking \$5.3 billion for 2002.

#### Mounting problems

In congressional testimony and in interviews, DOE and laboratory officials said the stockpile program is threatened by mounting problems at three national laboratories, Los Alamos and Sandia in New Mexico and Lawrence Livermore in California.

They also said the nation's underground nuclear-test site in Nevada and the four plants where U.S. nuclear warheads are assembled and serviced or components are made--Pantex near Amarillo, Texas; the Savannah River Site near

Augusta, Ga.; the Kansas City Plant in Kansas City, Mo.; and the Y-12 plant at Oak Ridge, Tenn.--need to replace old buildings, unsafe work spaces and obsolete or inoperative equipment.

For example:

\*\* At the Pantex Plant, where nuclear warheads are assembled and disassembled, leaks in roofs sometimes have forced technicians to stop work and cover some warheads with plastic bags, said Dennis Ruddy, president of BWXT Pantex, the contractor that runs the plant.

\*\* At the Y-12 plant, built during World War II as part of the Manhattan Project, which produced the world's first atomic bomb, chunks of roof fall out so often that workers wear hard hats, said John Mitchell of BWXT, which also runs the Tennessee plant.

\*\* At Los Alamos, the birthplace of the world's first nuclear weapons, radioactive waste pipes leak and must be wrapped in plastic to prevent spills and contamination, said Gen. John Gordon, the head of the National Nuclear Security Administration, the DOE agency that oversees U.S. nuclear-weapons programs.

The United States already is spending more every year on average to maintain its nuclear arsenal than it did during the Cold War, according to a study by the Brookings Institution, an independent Washington think tank.

The United States spent an average of \$4 billion a year in 2001 dollars throughout the 50-year Cold War to build and maintain a much larger nuclear arsenal, according to the Brookings study, "Atomic Audit."

Warheads contain as many as 6,000 parts--made of metal, plastic and other materials--and must be monitored for corrosion, decay and problems caused by age and exposure to radioactivity.

Moreover, plutonium, the warheads' explosive fuel, grows brittle with age, raising concerns that aging explosive assemblies may not perform as expected.

Some experts, such as Greg Mello of the **Los Alamos Study Project**, a private group that monitors the nuclear-weapons programs, say plutonium remains effective for more than 100 years. Others say the DOE's own studies suggest it lasts for 60 to 100 years.

The annual cost of the Stockpile Stewardship Program is probably twice what's needed, said Robert Civiak, a physicist who worked in the White House budget office for 10 years monitoring nuclear-weapons spending.

"If you want to maintain existing weapons, then all you need to do is focus on the existing stockpile program, in which they take apart 10 to 12 weapons a year and fix problems that they find," Civiak said. "They are not focusing on their program. They are focusing on pushing the envelope on the development of nuclear weapons."

Author: Jonathan S. Landay

Section: News

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# ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL

NEW MEXICO'S  
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HOME-OWNED AND HOME-OPERATED ■ MADE IN THE U.S.A.  
121ST YEAR, No. 211 ■ 62 PAGES IN 6 SECTIONS

MONDAY MORNING, JULY 30, 2001

NORTH ★★★★★

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## Aging Nuclear Weapons Get New Lease on Life

**LINK DESIGNER:** Sandia National Laboratories nuclear weapon designer Carl Vanecek holds an example of a "strong link," part of a nuclear weapon designed to keep it from going off accidentally. Vanecek is working on designs for new strong links, part of a long-term effort to refurbish weapons in the U.S. stockpile.

AARON WILSON/JOURNAL



■ *Stockpile program examines arms to see what components need replacing*

BY JOHN FLECK  
*Journal Staff Writer*

The little metal box Carl Vanecek holds in his hand is no ordinary combination lock.

Since the 1970s, devices like these have stood between a safely stored U.S. nuclear weapon and accidental Armageddon.

As long as there are nuclear weapons in the stockpile, Vanecek, a Sandia National Laboratories nuclear weapons designer, is committed to making sure they are safe.

"We take our job of developing safety components, particularly seriously," Vanecek said in a recent interview.

But the weapons are aging, and the U.S. government has no plans to build new bombs and warheads.

They are like a garage full of old cars, parked for 20 or more years but expected to run the first time they are called upon.

Now, instead of their 20-year design lifetime, military planners are talking about keeping them around for another 25 or more years.

"The stockpile we have is the stockpile we're going to continue to have indefinitely," said Larry Witt, director of Los Alamos National Laboratory's stockpile systems program.

So Vanecek and his colleagues at U.S.

nuclear weapons laboratories are redesigning weapons from the inside out.

Piece by piece, they are examining every component inside U.S. warheads, figuring out what pieces are aging unacceptably, and designing replacements.

They are part of the Department of Energy's Stockpile Life Extension Program. Working with the Pentagon and teams at U.S. nuclear weapons plants, they plan to gradually rebuild the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

Key nuclear parts, like the plutonium at the weapons' hearts, are not likely to change, the weaponers say. But many other components, from electronic systems to plastic parts, might

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# Aging Nuclear Weapons Get New Lease on Life

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eed to be replaced as their materials decay.

"Nuclear weapons do age," said Steve Goodrum, who is heading the effort for the Energy Department's Albuquerque Operations Office. They're aging gracefully, but at some point in time refurbishment is required."

Lab and energy department officials say no serious problems caused by aging have yet been found. But they nevertheless believe they have to start the refurbishment work now for two reasons. First, the cadre of weapons designers with the expertise needed to start working on the job is aging.

Officials would like to begin work now on redesigning components so the veterans who designed the original parts can pass on their accumulated wisdom to new recruits.

"The newest weapons are 20 years old," said Dave Larson, one of the senior managers of Sandia's weapons program. "These people are approaching retirement."

Second, it is a massive job. "That's going to be an effort that's going to require decades," Witt said.

## A tinkerer's dream

Carl Vanecek is the sort of tinker-

er who likes to take apart toys to see how they work.

That makes his little metal box a tinkerer's dream.

Called a "strong link," it is one piece of a chain of components used to detonate a nuclear weapon.

Its purpose is simple: Feed in the correct firing code, and it starts the sequence of steps required to explode the bomb.

Feed it the wrong code, or damage it in an accident, and it blocks the bomb from going off.

"A weapon never goes off when it's not supposed to," Larson said.

In testing, Sandia engineers burn them in horrendous fires and smash them in vicious crashes to make sure that in an accident the circuit needed to fire the bomb will not be completed.

Inside, the device is the most complex combination lock imaginable, 458 stainless steel parts tightly packed in a space the size of a cigarette pack.

Its parts are all mechanical, rather than electronic, to avoid the risks that an electronic system poses in a fire or crash.

In an age where electronics have taken the place of mechanical systems in most of the manufactured devices in our everyday world, Vanecek said, "I believe it's a mechanical engineer's dream to

work on strong links."

So Vanecek and his colleagues are starting from scratch, trying to think about how to make a better, more reliable strong link for two of the most important weapons in the U.S. stockpile — the W80 and W76 missile warheads.

When they are done, they hope to have a design that is simpler to manufacture and more reliable than the first generation of strong links designed more than two decades ago.

Said Larson, "We've had 25 years to think about this."

## Stockpile stewardship

Since the early 1990s, researchers at the nation's three nuclear weapons labs — Los Alamos, Sandia and Lawrence Livermore — have been working on a project called "Science-Based Stockpile Stewardship."

The program was launched after the last U.S. underground nuclear test blast, to find ways to maintain U.S. nuclear weapons without actually blowing them up.

They tear apart aging weapons to look for defects, conduct non-nuclear experiments to understand the materials inside the weapons, and use supercomputers to simulate the complex physics of a weapon's performance.

Stockpile Life Extension takes the

product of that research and converts it to real-life weapon components, said Tom Hunter, head of Sandia's nuclear weapons program.

"This is a natural extension, a natural evolution of the Science-Based Stockpile Stewardship program," he said in a recent interview.

Piece by piece, Hunter said, lab scientists are methodically studying every single component in the weapons — how each is aging, and if any needs to be rebuilt, how they could be made better.

Sandia has responsibility for the weapon's non-nuclear parts — the electronic circuits and firing and safety systems. Los Alamos weaponeers, meanwhile, are focused on the nuclear parts — the explosives and uranium and plutonium parts.

Critics have suggested the scientists should just try to build exact replicas of any component that needs to be replaced. But Hunter said in many cases that is not possible because available manufacturing technologies change.

Imagine, he said, the problems facing someone trying to build an 8-track tape today.

"We can't build many of the things that we could before," he said.

The idea, Hunter explained, is to make new weapon components that perform exactly the same as the

piece they are replacing.

## Same old weapons

The program has its critics.

Early efforts were criticized by the U.S. General Accounting Office as being wasteful, a problem program officials say they believe they have corrected.

Antinuclear activists charge it is a ruse for improving the military capabilities of U.S. nuclear weapons under the guise of refurbishing them and extending their lives.

Where changes are possible to make the warheads more potent, the labs are pursuing them, said Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group, a Santa Fe peace group.

Hunter disagreed. "These are not new weapons," he said. "The functionality is basically the same."

The goal, Los Alamos' Witt said, is to make the refurbished weapon match as closely as possible the original tested underground before the test moratorium was put in place.

"We're trying to put the weapon back to an as-tested state," Witt said.

Work is under way at the labs on the W76, carried by submarine-launched missiles, and the W80, carried by cruise missiles launched from Air Force bombers.

Extensive modifications also are

planned for the B61, a multiuse nuclear bomb that uses antiquated electronic tubes in its firing radar. And schedules have been laid out for refurbishment of other weapons in the U.S. stockpile over the next 20 or more years.

It is a long process.

The first of the refurbished weapons, the B61, will not roll off of the assembly line until 2004, with the first W80s scheduled for 2006 and the first W76 in 2007, according to Goodrum.

For the labs, the Stockpile Life Extension Program has been rejuvenating.

Before the end of testing, designing new weapons was a big part of the workload. "That was kind of the basis of how we kept the engine running," Hunter said.

With the end of testing in 1992, much of the effort shifted to non-nuclear experiments and weapon surveillance, but the practical work of designing real weapon components was not there.

The Stockpile Life Extension Program has replaced some of that focus, with designers working on real components for real stockpile weapons, lab officials say.

"Now they have put that paradigm back," Hunter said.

"What you've got in this is a sense of mission," Witt said.




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## Featured Views

Published in the October 1, 2001 issue of [In These Times](#)

### Test Anxiety

#### Bush Flirts With Resuming Nuclear Testing

by Jeffrey St. Clair

In the first few months of the Bush administration, international treaties have been falling faster than old-growth trees. The rebuke of the Kyoto global warming accord grabbed the headlines, but there have been a slate of others: the convention on small arms trade, the chemical and biological weapons treaty, the international ban on whaling, and the [Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty](#). Now the Bush administration wants to end the moratorium on testing nuclear weapons and junk the [Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty](#).

Bush fumed against the test ban treaty repeatedly during his campaign, alleging that it undermined national security. Since the election, Bush has remained stubbornly mute on his personal position on resuming nuclear tests. (The current moratorium on nuclear testing was put into place as a pre-election ploy by his father in 1992.) But Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney have been less coy. Both have argued that the United States needs to resume nuclear testing to ensure the reliability of the Pentagon's nuclear weapons cache.

This is an old canard. The only parts of the nuclear stockpile likely to deteriorate are the non-nuclear components, which already are regularly tested and evaluated by the weapons teams without encroaching on the terms of the treaty. "All non-nuclear parts to a weapon can be extensively lab tested and replaced as needed--if needed at all," says Jay Coghlan, director of [NukeWatch](#). "The nuclear parts, specifically plutonium and surrounding high explosives, have been found to actually achieve greater stability with age."

The purported rationale for the U.S. nuclear stockpile, which now totals some 12,000 nukes and 10,000 plutonium pits (or triggers), is deterrence. Coghlan suggests that the real interest of the testing faction isn't to assure reliability, but to shift to more tactical uses. "U.S. nuclear weapons are certainly reliable in the sense that they are sure to go off," he says. "The concern that the military has with reliability is that weapons are not only guaranteed to go off, but explode close to design yield. This is important not for mere deterrence, but for nuclear warfighting."

One of the great myths of the Clinton era was that Clinton supported total abolition of nuclear testing. In fact, Clinton authorized a series of so-called subcritical nuclear tests and a number of other nuclear programs that quietly flouted the test ban treaty--which he simultaneously heckled the Senate for failing to approve. The Bush administration, of course, has no intention of seeking approval for the test ban treaty from the Senate, where it has languished for more than two years. But its top arms control negotiator, John Bolton, undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, has determined that the administration can't unilaterally withdraw the treaty from consideration. The Senate has two options: It can approve the treaty by a two-thirds vote, or it can send it back to the president for renegotiation through a simple resolution, which requires only a majority.

Currently, 161 nations have signed onto the treaty, and 77 nations have ratified it, including the rest of NATO. For the treaty to go into effect, it must be approved by 13 other nations. The other holdouts include China, India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel. But this renegade status doesn't seem to have deterred Bush in the least. Indeed, the president has loaded the top levels of his administration with full-blooded nuclear hawks, including Defense Department flacks Douglas Feith, Richard Armitage and Paul Wolfowitz, all of whom have railed against the limitations of the test ban treaty.

The most fanatical of the brood may well be Jack Crouch, Bush's pick for assistant secretary of defense for international security policy. In the mid-'90s, Crouch, then a professor at Southwest Missouri State, wrote a series of articles attacking the test ban treaty and the testing moratorium. He also argued that the United States should deploy nuclear weapons in South Korea and consider using them against North Korea if they did not accede to U.S. demands to drop their nuclear and biological warfare programs. Crouch reiterated his support for nuclear testing and his opposition to the test ban treaty during his confirmation hearings before the Senate Armed Services Committee. "I think that considering the resumption of testing is something that the administration ought to consider," Crouch said.

Consider it they are. Shortly after taking office, the Bush crowd heard from an advisory committee that had just completed a study on the "reliability, safety and security" of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. The panel was headed by John Foster, former director of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, who now serves as an adviser to TRW, one of the nation's top defense contractors. The Foster group urged the administration to begin taking steps to resume testing as quickly as possible and to begin training a new crop of weapons designers who could develop "robust, alternative warheads that will provide a hedge if problems occur in the future."

Even though most other nuclear scientists disagree, Foster, a protégé of Edward Teller, dismissed computer modeling as a substitute for real nuclear explosions. "There are a number of underground tests we can't reproduce," Foster told a gathering of weapons designers at the National Defense University in June. "We have these enigmas."

For Foster the answer to every enigma seems to be a nuclear explosion. He argues that the U.S. nuclear arsenal is aging and growing ever more unreliable. The average age of nukes in the U.S. weapons stockpile is 18 years, which Foster claims is six years older than their intended design life. "They will be many times their design life before they are replaced," Foster said. "We have opened some of the warheads and found some defects that are worrisome."

Using the Foster report as an excuse, in June the Bush administration instructed the Department of Energy to study how to shorten the time it takes to prepare nuclear tests at the Nevada Test Site, the 1,350-square-mile bombing range 65 miles northwest of Las Vegas. Currently, the DOE says it will take at least 36 months to resume testing. But hard-liners in the Bush administration, such as Gen. John A. Gordon—director of the National Nuclear Security Administration, a shadowy wing of the DOE that manages nuclear weapons research, development and testing—want this time reduced to less than four months. "We are conducting an internal review on how we can improve significantly our readiness posture to conduct a nuclear test, should we ever be so directed," Gordon testified before the House. "This is not a proposal to conduct a test, but I am not comfortable with not being able to conduct a test within three years."

The move to truncate the readiness period for tests exposes yet another double-standard in the Bush administration's foreign policy. As the Pentagon moves ever closer toward resumption of testing, Secretary of State Colin Powell continues to chide India and Pakistan about dire consequences if either nation conducts new nuclear tests. "The Nuclear Security Agency's site readiness effort will unfortunately send exactly the wrong message to other would-be testers and test ban treaty hold-out states, including India, Pakistan and China," says Daryl Kimball of the Coalition to Reduce Nuclear Dangers. "It leaves the door open to a global chain reaction of nuclear testing, instability and confrontation in the future."

However, the rising anxiety over the Bush administration's frank talk about resuming live testing of nuclear weapons may serve to distract attention from a more ominous venture: the development of a new class of nuclear weapons systems. Most of the action these days is in the innocuous sounding Stockpile Stewardship Program. The stated intent of the program was to maintain an "enduring" arsenal of nuclear weapons and components. But that mission has discreetly changed. Now the Pentagon and the DOE talk about the "evolving" nature of the stockpile. Evolving is a code word for improving. The nuclear labs are busy turning old nukes into new ones.

During testimony before the House, Gordon grouched that for the past decade the Pentagon had not been able to actively pursue new weapons designs. He said he wanted to "reinvigorate" planning for a new generation of "advanced nuclear warheads." "This is not a proposal to develop new weapons in the absence of requirements," Gordon told the committee in a gem of Pentagon doublespeak. "But I am now not exercising design capabilities, and because of that, I believe this capacity and capability is atrophying rapidly."

Gordon wasn't being entirely truthful. The Pentagon and its weapons designers have been busy quietly crafting a variety of new weapons over the past decade. In 1997, they unveiled and deployed the B61-11, described as a mere modification of the old B61-7 gravity bomb. In reality, it was the prototype for the "low-yield" bunker blasting nuke that the weaponeers see as the future of the U.S. arsenal.

The testing issue may be a kind of political bait-and-switch designed to garner more money for the Stockpile Stewardship Program. The gambit goes like this: If you won't let us test the weapons, you've got to appropriate more money. Lots more. "The nuclear testing issue is a kind of red herring," says Greg Mello, director of the Los Alamos Study Group. "All discussion of possible 'nuclear testing' as the problem distracts attention from the real work of the complex, which does not need nuclear testing for 80 to 90 percent of its work. It is a form of blackmail."

Instead of pursuing disarmament, the big prize for the weapons labs has been the lavishly funded Stockpile Life Extension Program, an array of projects designed to stretch out the operational life of existing weapons for at least another 30 years. Currently, four major nuclear weapons are undergoing major upgrading under SLEP: the B61, known as a "dial-a-yield" bomb with a yield of 10 to 500 megatons; W76, the warhead for the Minuteman III ICBM with an explosive power of 170 kilotons; the W80, a warhead for cruise missiles; and the W87, a warhead for the Peacekeeper ICBM. The Pentagon wants another 11 systems modified.

These developments subvert the Pentagon's own official policy, signed by President Clinton in 1994, calling for "no new nuclear weapons production." The weaponeers at the Pentagon and the DOE are very touchy about the way they talk about these new bombs, being careful to speak in euphemisms like "reliability" and "safety" and "stewardship" of the "stockpile." "Energy Department managers have been sensitive to the hypocrisy in this program," Mello says. "The DOE honchos have even suggested that, given the political environment, the use of the word 'warhead' may not be acceptable."

There's a reason that the Pentagon and the labs have fixated on the idea of producing a new line of low-yield nukes: They can be redesigned and deployed without a new round of underground tests. And that may be a big part of the bait-and-switch approach, with the Pentagon arguing that since they were prohibited from testing new weapons, they were forced to retool old ones into the new mini-nukes favored by the Bushies--nukes that are geared not for deterrence, but for use against recalcitrant regimes.

But just because there's a push to build mini-nukes doesn't mean that the hawks have forgotten the big ones. According to the Bush squad, Russia still remains a threat and a justification for maintaining a robust strategic arsenal of bombs capable of leveling large cities. In this spirit, the Navy is teaming up with the Los Alamos and Sandia labs on a project called the Submarine Warhead Protection Plan. The labs and the Pentagon are desperate to protect their bomb-making mission, and they've done a good job of keeping

the new schemes funded, including upgrades of several of the nuclear packages for Trident submarines. Los Alamos is also working on the development of new systems that will allow older "air-burst" weapons to be converted into bombs that explode close to the ground, thus becoming what Rear Adm. George P. Nanos delicately refers to as "hard-target killers."

Beyond these pursuits, a host of other weapons design programs are up and running coast-to-coast, including: the insanely expensive National Ignition Facility at Lawrence Livermore; plutonium pit factories; pulsed power plants; dynamic radiography facilities; tritium production plants; magnetized-target fusion research; an advanced facility designed to generate 3-D movies of imploding nuclear pits. These are the multibillion-dollar research toys of the modern weapons designer.

In the end, the nuclear game always comes down to one overriding obsession: money. For the past 50 years, the nuclear programs of the Pentagon and allied agencies have been among the most extravagantly funded and sacrosanct items in the federal budget. During the height of the Cold War, annual federal spending on nuclear weapons programs averaged about \$4 billion in today's money. The fiscal year 2002 budget proposed by Bush earmarks \$5.3 billion for DOE nuclear programs, a figure that will almost certainly be generously boosted by Congress. Indeed, New Mexico Sen. Pete Dominici, the Republican guardian of the Los Alamos and Sandia labs, vowed in July to hold the entire federal appropriations bill hostage unless spending on military programs, including nuclear weapons research, was substantially hiked.

In the political economy of nuclear weapons, enough is never enough. Endless expansion is the relentless logic of a monopoly protected by secrecy. "The nuclear weaponeers want it all," says Marylia Kelley, director of Tri-County Cares, a Livermore watchdog group. "This remains true regardless of who is president."

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