

Nuclear Money Pit

America's atomic arsenal is stuck in the Cold War era.

by KELLEY BEAUCAR VLAHOS

These days superpower nuclear-weapons controversies hardly elicit the excitement that once inspired such bumper-sticker slogans as, “you can’t hug children with nuclear arms.” The “no nukes!” movement has gone the way of the Cold War and MTV playing music videos, right?

In the 21st century, the 2002 Treaty of Moscow and 2010’s New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) were supposed set the clock on bilateral warhead reduction, and there are no plans for the production of more nuclear weapons. Pretty cut and dried, one would think. But like everything radiating out of Washington, the atomic drawdown is not what it seems.

Despite a deficit reduction plan to cut \$1.2 trillion in federal spending over 10 years and ongoing negotiations by the so-called supercommittee to identify cuts of \$1.5 trillion more, members of Congress are pushing an expanded plutonium storage and production assistance facility at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. Critics say the facility is unnecessary, poorly designed, and dangerous—there are fault lines throughout the Los Alamos property—and its cost has ballooned from \$375 million in 2001 to an estimated \$5.5 billion today.

It hasn’t been built yet—in fact, the designs aren’t even finished after 10 years. But the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Nuclear Facility (CMRR-NF) has been soaking up taxpayer money all the same as the scope of the project has metastasized.

“The country doesn’t have money to pour into an unnecessary, giant boondoggle that has grown beyond all original expectations,” charges Greg Mello, executive director of the Los Alamos Study Group, probably the toughest grassroots opposition the CMRR-NF project faces right now. “When the cost

of a facility increases by more than a factor of ten, even as the fundamental purposes are evaporating, it’s important to stop, to pause and to question whether this is the right thing to do.”

There is no doubt that the budget-cutting imperative is clashing with the old way of doing business on Capitol Hill, as pet projects and earmarks come under more scrutiny than ever. Bureaucratic institutions used to getting their way by easing expensive, potentially controversial programs under the radar are finding themselves squarely in critics’ sights.

That includes CMRR-NF, which has never been the subject of a public congressional hearing or passionate floor speech—much less a heated debate on cable TV or talk radio—but has been controversial nonetheless.

“I think the key is, it appears to be a huge waste of money and particularly in our current fiscal situation there is no need to hurry this thing at all,” says Peter Stockton, senior investigator for the Project on Government Oversight, which is currently working on its own CMRR-NF report.

The mission of National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), which is a semi-autonomous agency of the U.S. Department of Energy, is to “improve national security through the military application of nuclear energy.” It oversees Los Alamos and is in charge of the CMRR project.

Initially, the NNSA was merely focused on renovating the parts of Los Alamos’s old Chemistry and Metallurgy Research (CMR) building that were outmoded and deteriorating by the late 1990s. Tests had found faults running under the property that could cause dangerous earthquakes.

After President George W. Bush was elected, plans

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos is a Washington, D.C.-based freelance reporter and a columnist for Antiwar.com.

to improve and upgrade salvageable portions of the nearly 60-year-old CMR were scrapped, and NNSA set about designing a “simple” replacement facility with two buildings about a mile away. One, the Radiological Laboratory Utility Office Building, is not controversial and almost complete. The other—the NF in CMRR-NF—is a new nuclear facility that would support Los Alamos’s nuclear-weapons mission, including plutonium storage, and assist in the production of plutonium-based “pits,” the fissile cores of nuclear weapons. This currently takes place at the existing TA-55/PF-4 nuclear facility next to the proposed site.

The nuclear facility, according to its critics, has become a monster. Aside from the runaway cost estimates, according to Mello the envisioned facility would give TA-55/PF-4 the capacity to double the number of pits Los Alamos produces each year and could store up to six metric tons of plutonium, “enough to rebuild the entire U.S. strategic arsenal.” This when there are thousands of pits already in storage and a treaty with the Russians sharply limits the nuclear arsenal.

Even if the increase in pit production were necessary—and as Mello and others point out, with much of the information classified or otherwise unavailable to the public, it is hard to know—the existing lab could be upgraded to carry out Los Alamos’s publicly stated mission to refurbish the current stockpile. NNSA, critics complain, has so far refused to seriously consider any alternative.

“We think there are simpler, cheaper, faster alternatives to accomplishing their stated mission, though their stated missions are aggrandized to begin with,” says Los Alamos Study Group President Peter Neils, who was on Capitol Hill in late October to get the word out about CMRR-NF. He blames the out-of-control designs and spiraling cost on a mix of Cold War ideology, over-reliance on contractors, and the self-sustaining mentality of all bureaucracies.

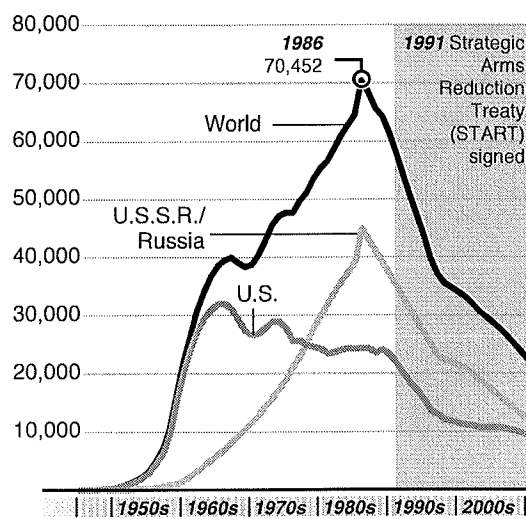
Simply put, says Mello, “the warhead establishment and the Cold War hawks cannot let go of designing and building new kinds of warheads, to create what they call ‘end-to-end’ work for the weapons complex.”

As of June, the Federation of American Scientists reports, the U.S. had 1,950 operational strategic nuclear warheads, plus approximately 200 deployed on behalf of allied countries—Belgium, Turkey, Netherlands, Italy and Germany—and 2,850 in reserve. In addition, some 3,500 retired warheads are awaiting dismantlement. This

all jibes with numbers issued by the State Department in 2010. START demands that the U.S. bring those deployed numbers down closer to 1,550 by 2018.

At its peak in 1967 during the Cold War, the nuclear stockpile was at 31,225 warheads. America had 22,217 when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. If the Cold War were still on, say critics, we might need additional capacity to build pits. But as it is there are thousands of usable pits already in reserve, and the scientific consensus says the plutonium parts of the pits have a lifespan of at least 100 years. The U.S. arsenal is well stocked in this regard.

Nuclear warhead stockpiles



SOURCE: Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists

The new CMRR-NF would help Los Alamos’s TA-55/PF4 site boost production to a conservative estimate of 125 pits a year on a double shift, according to observers.

This is as outrageous as it is unnecessary, claims Frank von Hippel, a professor and principal investigator at Princeton University’s Program on Science and Global Security, in an affidavit for the Los Alamos Study Group, which is trying to force NNSA’s hand in court.

“There is no anticipated need to produce new pits for U.S. nuclear weapons for several decades,” he writes. The oldest pit produced in the U.S. is 32 years old, he added, noting the current TA-55/PF-4’s production rate of 10 pits per year would be adequate for any replacements necessary during the modernization and maintenance that is already going on under the auspices of NNSA.



Critics say the entire landscape of nuclear-weapons production has changed since CMRR-NF was conceived—all in the direction of reducing the nuclear stockpile—yet every adjustment in the facility’s blueprints has resulted in more capacity to store plutonium and build additional pits.

Most notably, the Reliable Replacement Warhead, a new family of warheads conceived in 2004 and used as a chief justification for modernizing Los Alamos’s nuclear-weapons complex, was defunded by Congress and cancelled by the Obama Administration in 2009.

CMRR-NF “is being built to increase capacity for

pit production, even though pit production is not what we need,” the Project on Government Oversight’s Stockton charges. NNSA did not respond to several phone calls for comment on these and other charges lobbed by the opposition.

A three-page “Questions and Answers Regarding the CMRR Project” issued by NNSA before the Reliable Replacement Warhead was canceled maintains that the “primary mission of CMRR will be to support the current nuclear weapons stockpile through surveillance and life-extension programs necessary for the nuclear weapons complex” and “the size of CMRR remains the same.” It blames the soaring expense on poor initial estimates, cost increases in “the construction industry worldwide,” and requirements relating to the seismic risks, nuclear quality assurance, and security. The words “fissile core” or “pit” are never mentioned.

NNSA also contends it has put alternatives up for public comment, most recently when it amended the plans under its Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, which the agency says has incorporated “updated seismic safety design information.” (The Los Alamos Study Group disagrees and has filed a second lawsuit against NNSA, contending that it’s relying on outdated feasibility and impact studies, among other charges.)

Critics say that if the new facility’s mission is merely to help maintain the stockpile, the job could be handled at an improved and upgraded TF-22/P4 facility or elsewhere at a fraction of the cost. As for size, Mello says NNSA can no longer say the facility is “the same”—the square footage might be, but the installation’s scope has certainly grown since 2001.

CMRR-NF is not without detractors on Capitol Hill. Over the years, its budget and plans have been questioned for all of the reasons already cited and more. Indeed, today’s fiscal environment has bolstered the criticism, with results that can be seen in competing House and Senate appropriations bills. (Some \$450 million has been appropriated to CMRR since 2002.)

Calling it a “cost reduction strategy,” the House in July cut \$100 million from NNSA’s \$300 million request for CMRR-NF as part of the overall \$30.6 billion Fiscal Year 2012 Water and Energy Appropriations package. “The [House and Water and Energy Subcommittee] fully supports the Administration’s plans to modernize the infrastructure, but intends to closely review the funding request for new investment to ensure those plans adhere to good project management practices,” the final bill reads.

By trimming the agency's request by a third, the House is refusing to provide "the additional funding to support early construction" and would not do so until NNSA resolves "major seismic issues with design" and tames CMRR's cost.

The Senate subcommittee, too, has expressed concerns. Pointing to the growing expense, its FY 2012 appropriations bill demands NNSA submit a contingency plan that would identify the cost and consequences of delaying the implementation of CMRR, as well as a planned Uranium Processing Facility at Oak Ridge, Tennessee—another project that has gone from an estimated \$1.5 billion to upwards of \$6.5 billion in the last five years. The committee also proposes to cut \$60 million from the NNSA's \$300 million request for CMRR, but allows for preliminary "site preparation"—in other words, construction may begin on a project whose designs are not yet finished.

Mello and Neils have tried to convince lawmakers to put a permanent stop to CMRR-NF. It's a difficult task, they say. Many legislators are hearing about the issue for the first time and might not be willing to plough through intimidating scientific and technical jargon to get at why this project is bad news.

And CMRR-NF already has momentum. Mike Lofgren, who spent 28 years on Capitol Hill as an aide on defense issues for the House and Senate Budget Committees, says this is bureaucracy in action, and anything relating to weapons systems is going to be expensive.

"It doesn't surprise me that after a requirement has gone away, or the need has been severely curtailed, they would just continue on with this thing," Lofgren tells *TAC*. "These projects get front-loaded by optimistic projections of their cost and overstatements of, 'hey, we really need this thing,' so you front-load them and politically engineer them by getting the local congressmen all hyped up by saying it's going to create new jobs."

When lawmakers start asking whether a particular project is really worth it, the response, Lofgren says, is always, "it's too early to tell or too late to stop" and the effort will go on until the money is gone, mission accomplished or not. One need look no further than the \$65 billion fleet of F-22 Raptors, which was grounded from May to August because of operational problems and has never seen a day of combat.

It's hard to get a firm handle on how CMRR-NF has come to be apparently unstoppable because no wants to talk—neither the detractors on the Energy and Water Development Subcommittees, nor the project's proponents, who have long been led by figures like Sen. John Kyl (R-Ariz.). In fact, reports at the time of Senate negotiations over New START indicate that as Republican Senate whip, Kyl was successful in obtaining additional funds for CMRR-NF in exchange for Senate GOP support for Obama's treaty with the Russians. Kyl's office did not return calls for comment.

A spokeswoman for Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), known as a longtime supporter of the CMRR proj-

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ect, responded with a statement from the senator that hardly sounded like a ringing endorsement.

"The CMRR is an important project for [Los Alamos National Laboratory] and for New Mexico, but it is also important to be sure environmental and cost issues are fully addressed," Bingaman said. "My top concern as the project has been developed continues to be safety and security of the proposed facility."

Contractors, post-Cold War ideologues, and bureaucracy may keep the CMRR-NF project going, but those interests appear to be clashing directly with the forces of fiscal restraint and new environmental concerns. After the earthquake-spawned Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster in Japan last spring, fears over seismic hazards at Los Alamos have only grown.

Meanwhile, the Los Alamos Study Group insists its goal is not to stop the U.S. nuclear program, but to make it safer, more efficient and less expensive.

The nuclear-weapons establishment "could do their job more efficiently and more cheaply if they didn't infuse their work with so much ideology and were just more practical and straightforward," says Mello. And CMRR-NF is not the only program that might demand additional scrutiny. According to the *New York Times*, the facility is just one of a host of modernization projects that could cost taxpayers over \$600 billion in the next decade. ■