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Bulletin #93

February 10, 2009

Dear colleagues –

1. Hey, where have you Study Group guys been?

It has been a long time since our last Bulletin ([#92, of 11/17/08](#)). We owe all of you an explanation and apology. And we owe you some Bulletins! [Inshallah](#), they will come.

Yes, we've been working right along as best we can – we just went silent, as far as most of you can tell. Those few of you who were intimately involved during these past few weeks have seen some of our work, but the great majority of you have not. We will be sending out Bulletins on a more frequent pace now to catch up. I hope you will not feel as if we are overburdening you. Much of the analysis and writing in the Bulletins to follow has been done for some time.

One reason we have been remiss in writing these Bulletins is that it is frankly difficult to write for a very large and very diverse mailing list that includes not just our closest supporters but also people from practically every other corner of the political and cultural universe. What we wish to say, and must, is not easy to say even to ourselves and our closest friends. It is an intellectual challenge for us, a spiritual and a moral challenge, not to mention a matter of skill and time.

Resources have played a part. Our hours are usually spoken for two or three times over, and we have mostly run out of money despite the great generosity of many people just as the need to engage with the new Administration and the transition in Congress is most acute. We haven't let up and we don't plan to. We have never had greater insight or capability to influence at least some events. Alas, the enormity of the problems we face is extreme and growing.

We at the Study Group are far from helpless but we do not have a complete answer to our historical crisis. That would be an absurd proposition – although by convention it seems to be implied more or less strongly in many nonprofit communications. We do have *an* answer – or more accurately, we *are* an answer. With your active participation, "we" – a *greater* we, with you – are *more* of an answer, qualitatively different and vastly more.

Our historical crisis is total – economic, ecological, political, moral, and spiritual – and our individual and collective response will have these and other dimensions, whether or not we are conscious of them. We aren't as strictly limited as appearances may suggest.

The risks each of us faces are existential in each of these ways too. They are in fact mortal risks, not just for us but for our children and grandchildren too. I would prefer not to say that and have been avoiding it, but we can't just talk like children about this situation any more. Right now, a billion people are hungry and another billion live close to the edge. A million tragedies unfold every month. In this fragile situation, nationalistic resource policies will be deadly – or perhaps more accurately, genocidal. We have some of those policies already.

This crisis will also stamp out forever a great many of our animal and plant brothers and sisters who have helped us along the way for

hundreds of thousands of years, helped us so long and with such intense beauty they are now a part of our minds and language, inseparable. We face something more than grief; we are being diminished.

How deeply and how terribly this crisis continues is something we are going to have to work out together, all of us. It is the main thing human beings with any agency, such as we, must do.

2. Economic Stimulus through Nuclear Warheads? ([back to contents](#))

Every recent year, Senate appropriators have sought more nuclear warhead spending than the House. Last week, Senate appropriators outdid themselves, tacking an extra billion dollars into the stimulus bill, a 16% increase in total warhead spending. The House rightly disagrees, and has approved no stimulus funds for nuclear weapons.

Traditionally, the House asks for a more focused, somewhat more modest, warhead program. House appropriators want fewer redundant facilities and programs, fewer big construction projects, and no new warheads. They want management accountability and fewer semi-abandoned buildings. They want a serious effort to dismantle the stockpile of obsolete, retired warheads.

Republican David Hobson, who until January was the ranking member of the panel that reviews warhead spending, described the warhead business as “a jobs program for Ph.D.s – the ultimate in white collar welfare.” In his view, the bomb labs and plants were places “where the federal oversight organization did not demand accountability and where the business practices were two decades behind the times.”

His just-retired counterpart in the Senate, Pete Domenici (R-NM), saw things differently. Or if he did see the bloat and redundancy seen by so many others, he found reasons to overlook them. For 36 years he shepherded nuclear appropriations through the Senate, with a special emphasis on his home state, which houses two of the three weapons labs. Now 43% of warhead spending occurs in New Mexico, a remarkable concentration of high-income jobs in a sparsely-populated, low-income state. Today’s Los Alamos budget of \$2.1 billion is more than two and a half times its 1946-1989 average, in constant dollars.

There are now eight labs and production plants, all run by the same few contractors in various combinations. The National Nuclear Security Administration hires these contractors, spending about 96% of its budget on them. The warhead stimulus proposed by the Senate is targeted at these few corporations. Average employee compensation is roughly \$100,000 per year, about 30% higher than the defense industry overall. Much of this stimulus is directed toward a single state, as if Senator Domenici’s spirit still hovers over the Senate.

The Senate says it would use these funds for “maintenance and general plant project backlogs” and, tellingly, “other construction activities.” Odd – senior NNSA officials have repeatedly assured me that there is no maintenance backlog urgent enough to warrant refocusing resources.

In fact these funds would be used to build new production facilities, and pay for cost overruns on some of NNSA’s badly-managed projects. Construction and maintenance are a single account. A dollar freed *here* is available *there*, and shifting money from one vague account to another is just a way of life at the nuclear labs. Realistically, Congress would have little or no control where this money goes.

The Senate’s nuclear Valentine’s Day present comes just when the Obama administration has announced its desire to begin nuclear arms reduction talks with the Russians, with a stated goal of bringing each nation’s arsenal down to about 1,000 warheads. Even President Bush aimed to cut the U.S. arsenal by 40%. The future involves fewer nuclear weapons, smaller facilities, and, most agree, lower budgets.

So why add this money now? Because right now the NNSA is still being run by Bush appointees, whose grandiose plans for new production facilities require these funds. Their plans include over \$3 billion for new plutonium processing and manufacturing facilities in Los Alamos, a comparably-expensive uranium component factory in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and more.

These big plans – the core of the Bush Administration’s grandiose warhead complex “transformation” plan – cost money, much more money than has been available. Hence this stimulus. To fund its plans, the Bush Administration indeed cut back on maintenance in a few places, creating the very excuse the Senate is offering. Don’t be deceived. There is plenty of money sloshing around the nuclear complex. Not enough to build every new factory the outgoing Administration wanted, but more than the nation needs.

3. More detailed comments ([click here](#)) (from 2-2-09) on three small parts of the Senate version of the proposed economic stimulus bill (S336, the “American Recovery and Reinvestment Plan”) ([back to contents](#))

This analysis was sent to selected members of Congress and non-profits. Since then a number of non-profits have sent out action alerts on the \$1 billion nuclear weapons bailout. This is wonderful, but in our state the efficacy of such alerts is highly questionable. They do not work – or at least they are not working enough to make the decisive changes we need.

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