May 1, 2007

Dear friends and colleagues –

I am writing to request your support for the work of the Los Alamos Study Group. We have never been more effective, and our work has never been more important. Yet we have never been quite so poor!

It’s a very eerie moment in U.S. nuclear history. Policy teeters on a knife-edge between disarmament and rearmament, but largely relies on the press, public relations, and on the public’s almost media, the nonprofit community, and the major foundations have not quite caught up with events – and no wonder, given the smokescreen in which they are occurring – leaving too many decisions chiefly in the hands of autonomous, largely unconscious, nuclear bureaucracies.

The National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) hopes to begin producing plutonium warhead cores (“pits”) a little before Christmas of this year at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL). If that happens, it will be the first time the U.S. has produced pits in 18 years. With new pits, the production of whole new warheads can also restart, lighting up all ten warhead factories, labs, and NNSA administrative centers with new work and a fresh sense of importance and legitimacy. It remains to be seen if this will happen – and if it does, whether it will – or can be sustained.

Of course these events would echo around the world, reinforcing those who say their nation too should have nuclear weapons. Security would decline for everyone.

Without new pits, new warheads, and new production, the warhead enterprise faces very serious internal crises related to an aging workforce, declining practical skills, poor morale, aging facilities, and a fading ideological commitment to nuclear weapons, among other problems.

The apparent social consensus that once supported U.S. WMD in the face of domestic moral values and sound safety, fiscal, and environmental practices has long since evaporated.

Make no mistake: pit production, and the new factories needed to provide it, isn’t needed to maintain the very large, diverse, nuclear arsenal of today. It is needed for the novel arsenal of tomorrow. (For more on this point, see the text box to the right and the talking points at http://www.lasg.org/PU_talking_points1.htm.)

All is far from lost. The nuclear weapons proposals of the Bush Administration are being subjected to withering criticism. They can be defeated regionally, nationally, or internationally – or as it usually happens, through a combination of all three. At the Study Group we work in all three ways, working with colleagues across the country and around the world. We know how to win.

It won’t be easy, but if we work together creatively, firmly, and with constant purpose, we can’t fail.

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It is critical to stop pit production, and we can (continued)

- Adding renewed U.S. warhead design and production would make many other powerful negative factors already present would make it likely that all efforts by all parties to strengthen the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) would fail, further weakening restraint over nuclear anarchy.
- Making a new generation of U.S. warheads and bombs would help legitimate nuclear weapons worldwide and stimulate a variety of responses in other countries, all driven or protected by U.S. hypocrisy. Fresh U.S. commitments to nuclear weapons would poison restraint and empower hard-liners worldwide in a complex manner very hard to control.
- Russia in particular would continue to modernize and invest in its nuclear forces for this and other potent reasons.

Pit production would have big implications for New Mexico – some new, some continuing.
- LANL would become primarily a production site and the exigencies of pit production take over lab funding and culture. Its reputation would reflect that. Even without accidents, a “plutonium” identity and reputation would come to be shared to some extent throughout the Santa Fe metropolitan area and Northern New Mexico. Already the Santa Fe metro area is home to a growing, unregulated nuclear waste dump, the largest in New Mexico and the largest in a four-state area. Most of the new waste is generated by pit production and related programs.
- This would affect the area’s culture and quality of life directly and it would harm the area’s economic development potential, currently based in substantial part on perceptions of environmental amenity.
- These impacts would combine with the regional impacts of global warming (including long-term drought, dramatic ecological changes triggered by drought spikes, significant loss of stream flow and water supplies, and the loss of most ski business) as well as with the effects of social problems, almost certain to increase for other reasons. All these problems would be negatively synergistic. (continued, p. 4)