

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 24, 2024

The Honorable Lloyd Austin
Secretary of Defense
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Austin,

We write to express our concern that the Department of Defense (DoD) is not completing a comprehensive, thorough, and unbiased assessment of the Sentinel Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) program, the replacement to our nation's current ICBM the Minuteman III, as required by the Nunn-McCurdy Act. Recent comments, particularly by Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment William LaPlante, who is overseeing the process, stating "Nunn-McCurdy or not"¹ that the program must proceed, suggest that the review is being prepared with an end-state in mind. Given the imperative of advancing nuclear policies that promote stability and prevent escalation, we demand a thorough review of *all* alternatives. At this critical juncture, we must not allow momentum and preconceived notions to cloud our judgment in reviewing whether this program provides for our national security or is wasting U.S. taxpayer dollars. The American people have a right to know how their money is being spent and to what end, *particularly* for our nation's nuclear policy.

Congress enacted the Nunn-McCurdy Act to identify and enhance oversight for major weapons programs that greatly exceed baseline cost estimates.² As you are aware, the recent critical breach of the Nunn-McCurdy Act was triggered by a 37% cost overrun on the \$96 billion Sentinel program.³ This is almost 211% higher than the Air Force's first cost estimate in 2015.⁴ From the beginning, the Air Force has relied on a budget projection that underestimated costs, made poor assumptions, and relied on incomplete data to gain Congressional approval for the program's authorization. It's unacceptable that such flawed assumptions were the basis for a project of this magnitude and that these types of errors persist to this day.

¹ Air and Space Forces Magazine, "LaPlante: 'Nunn-McCurdy Or Not,' US Must Have ICBM Leg of Triad," John Tirpak, May 15, 2024, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/laplante-nunn-mccurdy-or-not-icbm-leg-triad/>.

² Congressional Research Service, "The Nunn-McCurdy Act: Background, Analysis, and Issues for Congress", May 12, 2016, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R41293>.

³ Bloomberg, "New ICBM Is Seen Going 37% Over \$96 Billion Cost, Forcing a US Review," Anthony Capaccio, January 18, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-01-18/new-icbm-is-seen-going-37-over-96-billion-cost-forcing-a-us-review>.

⁴ Federation of American Scientists, "Critical Overrun Of Sentinel ICBM Program Demands Government Transparency," Mackenzie Knight, February 2, 2024, <https://fas.org/publication/critical-sentinel-overrun/>.

Shortly after he was confirmed, Under Secretary LaPlante identified the Sentinel program as having the most significant risk of all the Department's nuclear programs.⁵ That risk is amplified by the fact that there is still no integrated master schedule encompassing the full scope of work, anticipated timelines, and resource phasing for all government and contractor lines of effort. Unfortunately, this trend of escalating costs and unstructured schedules is likely far from over.

The DoD must take this opportunity to pause. As the Air Force and DoD work through the Nunn-McCurdy process and its inputs, we strongly urge you to take a step back and consider a holistic approach to our nuclear strategy. The DoD should evaluate the objectives of our nuclear strategy and how we are using technological advancements over the last 70 years to reassess what is required to meet those objectives. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the investment in Sentinel may not be a strategic decision at all.

This critical breach of the Nunn-McCurdy Act by the Sentinel Program requires it be terminated unless you, as the Secretary of Defense, certify in writing that: 1) The program is essential to national security; 2) There are no alternatives to the program which will provide acceptable capability; 3) The new cost estimates have been determined to be reasonable; 4) The program is a higher priority than programs whose funding will be reduced to cover the increased cost of this program; and 5) The management structure is sufficient to control additional cost growth.⁶

For each of these provisions, there are concerning signs that past preferences prejudiced the outcome of this new review. From the failure to accurately assess the service life extension program of the program to an unwillingness to review whether a full-scale replacement is necessary or most cost-effective, the program appears more an effort to continue an old model rather than to look for opportunities for a more modern nuclear strategy.

In addition to these holistic questions, the continuous delays and cost growth of the Sentinel program also reveals a persistent failure in program management. Unsurprisingly, there is plenty of blame to go around when a project goes \$35 billion over budget, whether in the DoD establishment of the requirements, the Air Force implementation, or the single-bid contract being (mis)-managed by Northrop Grumman. The assumptions that undergird this program have clearly been proven erroneous and before lawmakers are asked to provide additional funding, the DoD must realistically identify the route forward.

Furthermore, public statements by DoD officials have not provided confidence that this review is being conducted in the manner required by law. Senior Air Force leaders have doubled down on the Sentinel program, saying the program "will continue"⁷ and that the service "will find money."⁸ This steadfast support for a program plagued by poor assumptions and riddled with errors is disheartening. Given that the Air Force has already made publicly clear that they are entering this process with biased

⁵ Air and Space Forces Magazine, "New Pentagon Acquisition Boss Plans Deep Dive Into Sentinel ICBM: 'Still a Significant Risk'," Greg Hadley, May 5, 2022, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/new-pentagon-acquisition-boss-deep-dive-sentinel-icbm-significant-risk/>.

⁶ 10 U.S. Code § 4376

⁷ Defense News, "Air Force's next nuclear missile at risk after costs spike," Stephen Losey, January 19, 2024, <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2024/01/19/air-forces-next-nuclear-missile-at-risk-after-costs-spike/>.

⁸ Breaking Defense, "'We will have to find the money': After cost breach, Air Force doubles down on Sentinel ICBM," Michael Marrow, January 24, 2024, <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/01/we-will-have-to-find-the-money-after-cost-breach-air-force-doubles-down-on-sentinel-icbm/>.

and pre-conceived notions, it is imperative that DoD carefully consider each of the Nunn-McCurdy requirements in your review and dispassionately assess them.

Every program has a threshold at which the costs outweigh the benefits. In our current national defense, a blank check to a program of dubious utility would be a questionable decision, particularly given the billions of dollars in unfunded “priorities” that the military continues to ask for on top of the trillions of dollars our nation spends on national security. There must be an honest evaluation of the necessity of proceeding with this program now and at what cost we are willing to continue. Inevitably, this means making hard decisions about how and where to spend taxpayer dollars. Billions of dollars and at least a decade have been spent justifying the \$130 billion Sentinel program. This requires re-evaluation.

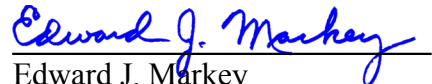
Given the cost and importance of this program it is essential that the DoD is as transparent as possible with Congress and the public. While some details may merit classification, it is imperative that DoD officials transparently share details of this determination to ensure proper oversight, given that a Pentagon official will be determining the fate of a defense program. Without clear explanations and justification, there is no reason that Congress should continue to fund this program at ever-increasing levels, especially given the trade-offs it imposes on other “critical” programs. We therefore demand a public response to these concerns, outlining how the Department is ensuring that it is conducting a fair and fulsome review.

We write this letter as concerned lawmakers to remind the DoD that the American people have not granted them a blank check to pursue wasteful, unnecessary programs. As a varied group, our positions on the overall nuclear posture may vary, but we all share a common commitment to preventing government waste, avoiding dangerous nuclear escalation, and promoting peace. We look forward to hearing how your evaluation will provide essential oversight to this program and, if it is not terminated, begin applying the necessary scrutiny to this project.

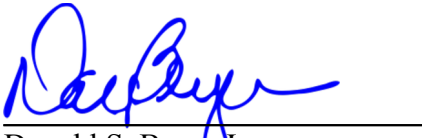
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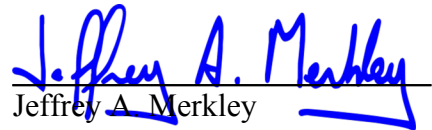
John Garamendi
Member of Congress



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Donald S. Beyer Jr.
Member of Congress




Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



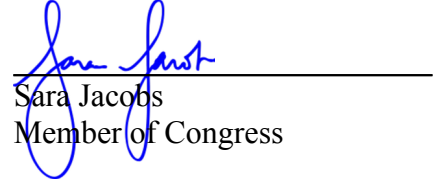
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



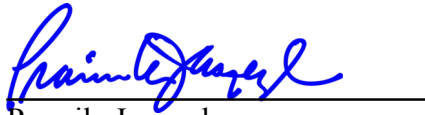
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Sara Jacobs
Member of Congress



Pramila Jayapal
Member of Congress



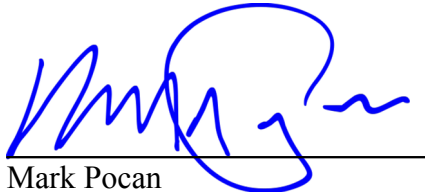
Barbara Lee
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



Jerrold Nadler
Member of Congress



Mark Pocan
Member of Congress