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The Billboard Campaign: The Los Alamos Study Group and the Nuclear Public Sphere

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In the domestic realm of U.S. politics, the nuclear weapons complex has always maintained two extreme attributes: phenomenal cost and social invisibility. While seemingly opposed, these aspects are actually reinforcing, a structural effect of compartmentalized secrecy, patronage networks, and an implicit nuclear security consensus among policy makers. Stephen Schwartz (1998) has documented that between 1940 and 1996 the United States spent *at least* \$5.8 trillion on nuclear weapons. This makes the bomb the third largest federal expenditure since 1940, ranking just after nonnuclear military spending and Social Security—accounting for roughly eleven cents out of every federal dollar spent (Schwartz 1998: 3). Yet despite this colossal investment and the widespread distribution of nuclear production, testing, and waste sites across the continental United States, most Americans have little or no knowledge of the historical or continuing investments in weapons of mass destruction *by* the United States. It remains a disturbing truth that today most Americans can say more about Iraq's nuclear ambitions (which, in 2003, were the target of the first explicit policy of preemptive warfare in U.S. history) than those of the United States. Most would be surprised to learn that the 1990s witnessed not a post-Cold War movement away from nuclear weapons but rather the establishment of a new nuclear status quo in the United States, one requiring a massive reinvestment in the nuclear program. Nuclear weapons budgets at the national laboratories, for example, have exceeded their Cold War averages since 1995 and have doubled since 1998. In



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Figure 1

short, the most active nuclear weapons program on the planet is in the United States, and much of that nuclear infrastructure is located in New Mexico. For New Mexicans committed to disarmament and peace activism, the dilemma of the post-Cold War period has thus been how to engage this resurgent U.S. nuclear project in a way that breaks the structures of silencing and patronage that keep America's investments in weapons of mass destruction from public view.

Beginning in 1998, visitors to New Mexico could encounter one of the most direct and imaginative efforts to engage New Mexico's nuclear economy simply by driving out of the Albuquerque International Airport. Positioned on the main exit route from the airport, a large billboard confronted motorists with an image of a rainbow-enhanced desert and the words (see fig. 1): "Welcome to New Mexico: America's Nuclear Weapons Colony." Seeking to defamiliarize the desert landscape through shock, the billboard both evokes and inverts the familiar portrait of New Mexico as the "Land of Enchantment," a zone of pristine nature and exotic culture. A Web site address on the billboard—www.lasg.org—serves as both a signature and an invitation for viewers to learn more about the scale of the U.S.

nuclear project in New Mexico (which includes two of the three national weapons laboratories, the largest missile testing range in the continental United States, the largest arsenal of U.S. nuclear weapons, and the most active U.S. nuclear waste dumps). By recontextualizing a centrally located commercial space, the billboard challenges residents and visitors alike to recognize an invisible presence in New Mexico, one that colonizes the austere beauty of the landscape with the nuclear science, toxicity, and militarism of a global superpower (see Masco 1999, 2004).

The “Welcome” sign was merely the first salvo in an ongoing billboard campaign orchestrated by the Los Alamos Study Group (LASG), a nonproliferation and peace activism group formed in the waning days of the Cold War. As one of the most vocal nuclear watchdog groups in New Mexico, the LASG has vigorously challenged the post–Cold War consolidation of nuclear weapons science at Los Alamos National Laboratory while promoting public education about the accruing environmental effects of the nuclear complex. In a December 2003 discussion in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Greg Mello, the cofounder and director of the LASG, explained to me that the billboards started as a response to a lack of public conversation about the evolution of the nuclear complex in New Mexico at the end of the 1990s. They were also a reaction to the high cost and episodic nature of newspapers, radio, and television. Billboards could make a long-term, highly visible statement at, as Mello calculates it, “one-tenth of a cent per viewer.” Billboards thus offered a new kind of political space that could perform a complex set of ideological tasks in an economical manner. From the start, the goals of the LASG billboard project have been to puncture the normality of the nuclear economy by linking New Mexico’s two leading industries—tourism and nuclear weapons—and to present a stable and highly visible space for political dissent and nuclear critique. For Mello, the project is also intended to “slow down” the media space in order to encourage public contemplation in a largely commuter and tourist economy, thereby transforming New Mexico’s road culture into a new conceptual space for political critique. As part of a larger activist effort in New Mexico to “use the tourists to get rid of the plutonium, or the plutonium to get rid of the tourists,” the LASG project, as described by Mello, is interested in provoking a “more enlightened form of tourism,” one that could ultimately contribute to the LASG’s environmental and nonproliferation efforts.

Placed for maximum visibility along the main thoroughfares and highways that connect Albuquerque to Santa Fe and ultimately Los Alamos, the LASG billboards speak directly to occupants of the twenty-five thousand cars that travel Interstate 25 daily. Mello told me that the LASG initially had specific audiences in mind for the billboard campaign, namely, laboratory management (Los Alamos National Laboratory is a Department of Energy institution managed by the Uni-

versity of California), state and federal politicians, and particularly new recruits to the weapons program who might be visiting on job interviews. By visually disrupting the assumed social consensus on the role of the nuclear economy in New Mexico, the LASG seeks to document for policy makers and employees evidence of local resistance and hope for an alternative nuclear future. The billboard project is also a direct response to decreasing access to policy makers and laboratory personnel after a brief period of post-Cold War openness. After a series of security scandals at Los Alamos (see Masco 2002), expanding secrecy within the nuclear complex has forced activists to seek an alternative public sphere to mobilize for change.

Pursuing the LASG's political agenda in visual statements that are forty-eight feet wide by eighteen feet high, the billboard campaign has raised a wide range of provocative issues since 1998. The first billboards provided a direct counterdiscourse to the U.S. nuclear project in New Mexico, while more recent efforts have responded to the expanding forms of U.S. militarism under the Bush administration's "war on terror." Evoking the 1930s WPA (Works Progress Administration) aesthetic that is featured in much of the tourist literature about New Mexico, the second LASG billboard asks (see fig. 2): "New Mexico: #1 in Nuclear Weapons, #1 in Poverty—Coincidence?" Here, the LASG challenges the primary local justification for the nuclear weapons complex—that it provides jobs for New Mexicans. But while Los Alamos National Laboratory currently maintains an annual budget of over \$2 billion, New Mexico has for decades competed for the title of poorest state in America. Marshaling equally alarming statistics about violent crime, drug abuse, suicide, alcoholism, and the condition of the public school system in New Mexico, the LASG has argued that the nuclear economy has actually prevented other sustainable industries from developing, creating a highly distorted regional economy dangerously reliant on external investments. For Mello, New Mexico is "held hostage" to Washington, D.C., because of its poverty. Consequently, New Mexico is part of that rural American economic space that relies on toxicity, vice, security, and industrial livestock or, as Mello puts it, the "four Ps—plutonium, poker, prisons, and pigs." By arguing that the nuclear complex prevents the development of a sustainable regional economy, the "Coincidence" billboard also moves the discussion of what constitutes security from the realm of geopolitics to the terms of everyday life.

The LASG billboard campaign has sought to reveal the links between global and local economies and to provoke motorists to consider how the nuclear project participates in a larger political and moral sphere. For example, one billboard presented a color image of a mushroom cloud on a stark black background, declar-



Figure 2

ing in bright orange letters: “New Mexico: World Capital of Weapons of Mass Destruction.” By identifying New Mexico as the center of the U.S. (and thus the global) nuclear complex, the billboard challenged the tourist portrait of the region as idyllic desert landscape and multicultural paradise. The LASG has also sought to link the local nuclear economy to the global nonproliferation project through direct actions. Sponsoring a “citizens’ inspection team” modeled on the United Nations arms inspectors who worked in Iraq in the 1990s, the group has repeatedly demanded entrance to U.S. nuclear facilities in New Mexico in order to certify that the United States was living up to the terms of the 1968 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (in which all signatories agreed to pursue the end of the arms race and work for global nuclear disarmament). By drawing attention to the expanding U.S. commitment to nuclear weapons in the post–Cold War period, the LASG has argued for a coherent global policy for nuclear disarmament, one that begins by rejecting the assumptions of American exceptionalism that currently support the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

The LASG billboard campaign has sought not only to provide basic information about the status of the U.S. nuclear project in New Mexico but also to ground that knowledge in a broader moral economy. Another early billboard presented a large white dove on a bloodred background alongside text declaring: “Nuclear Weapons are Incompatible with the Peace We Seek For the 21st Century—The Vatican.” By quoting the Vatican, the LASG sought to mobilize the largely Catholic population of northern New Mexico to consider the moral implications of



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Figure 3

participating in the production of weapons of mass destruction. Similarly, the LASG has sought to make New Mexicans uniquely responsible for the nuclear age itself. Another billboard, which quickly became a popular bumper sticker in New Mexico, declared on a blue sky beside a mushroom cloud: “It Started Here, Let’s Stop It Here.” In each case, the call is for New Mexicans to take responsibility for their participation in the U.S. nuclear economy—to replace the status quo logics of “national security” with an ethical investment in a nonnuclear future. The billboard campaign has also, at times, appealed directly to residents’ fear of nuclear hazards. In 2002, a bright red billboard presented a leaking barrel of nuclear waste and declared in large white letters (see fig. 3): “Close Los Alamos Nuclear Waste Dump Now.” Here, the LASG provokes viewers to see Los Alamos National Laboratory as not only a high-tech research facility that supports America’s military power but also an environmental hazard that is colonizing both the land and the region’s future with nuclear waste.

In linking the global with the local, the tourist with the military-industrial, and



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Figures 4 and 5

the environmental with the social, the billboard campaign has turned a purely capitalist and largely banal space—the stuff of accident lawyers, casinos, and car lots in the desert west—into a space of political mobilization and subversive critique, one literally integrated into the New Mexican landscape. In January of 2003, the LASG expanded its efforts to provide a direct counterdiscourse to the Bush administration's "war on terror." The first billboard presented a terrifying image of an Air Force bomber releasing a load of cluster bombs beside the text (see figs. 4 and 5): "Do unto Others . . . ?" Mello told me that this sign was directed at the conservative Christian coalition supporting the Bush administration. Seeking to remind the administration of biblical doctrine, the billboard asks



© Greg Mello. Photo courtesy of Los Alamos Study Group.

Figure 6

whether the “golden rule” is compatible with the evolving global military logic of the United States as a counterterrorist state. A second billboard challenged an implicit rationale for the war, declaring “No Blood for Oil” in white letters on a red background. Within weeks of the 2003 Iraq war, the sign was vandalized, the heavy vinyl torn so that the previously posted advertisement was visible, adding an ironic “Cool Summer Idea” to the antiwar message (see fig. 6).

In May of 2003, the first post–Iraq war billboard went up on the northern edge of Albuquerque asking provocatively (see fig. 7): “Weapons of Mass Destruction? Look Closer to Home.” This billboard was not simply a reply to the official rationale for the war with Iraq (that Saddam Hussein was stockpiling nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons) or to the inability of U.S. authorities to find those weapons after occupying Iraq; the billboard was also a statement about the evolving shape of U.S. nuclear policy. In its most recent Nuclear Posture Review, the U.S. Department of Defense (2002) expressed a desire for several new types of nuclear weapons and projected an increasing role for nuclear weapons in U.S. military planning. Conse-

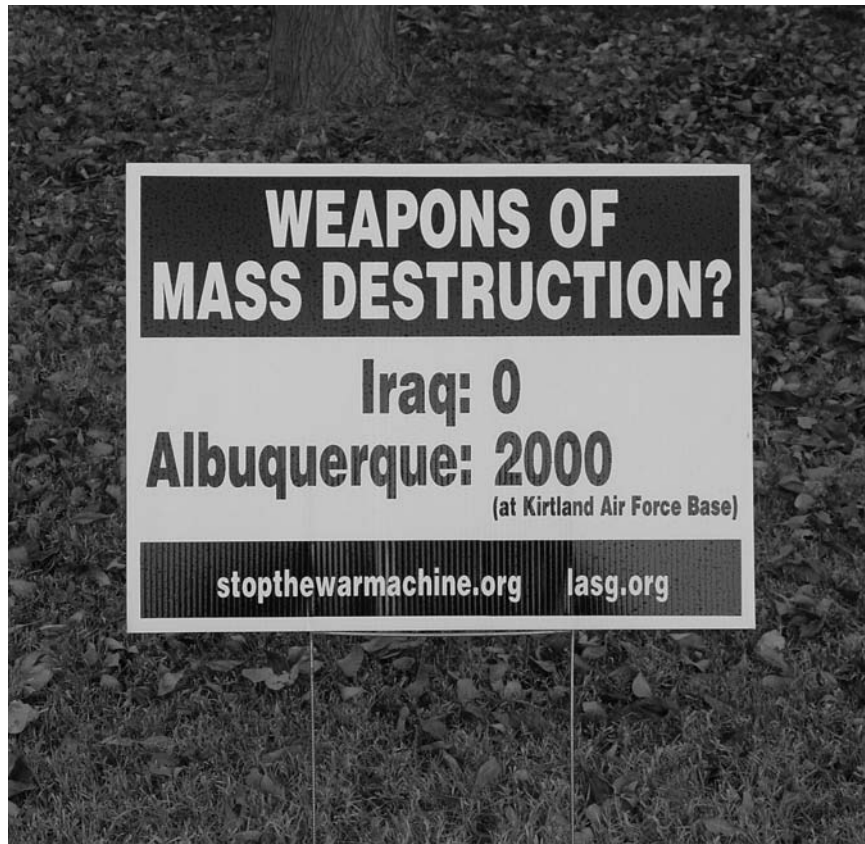


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Figure 7

quently, U.S. weapons laboratories have been authorized to begin conceptual design work on a new generation of nuclear weapons for the first time since the 1980s and are preparing for a return to underground nuclear testing.

The war on terror, which has been largely structured around fear of the foreign bomb, has been coterminous with increased U.S. nuclear investments and a massive increase in U.S. military spending: in 2003, the United States was responsible for half of all global military expenditures. The nearly half-trillion dollars the United States now spends annually on its defense budget will likely support New Mexico's weapons scientists for another generation—reproducing the structures that the LASG has been mobilizing to critique. However, as the billboard campaign has argued from the start, escalating U.S. militarism can be answered only by a clear accounting of its social, environmental, economical, and geopolitical costs. It is not surprising, then, that the billboard campaign has recently taken on a more intimate form, as house signs began surreptitiously appearing throughout northern New Mexico in the fall of 2003, asking rhetorically (see fig. 8): “Weapons of Mass Destruction? Iraq: 0, Albuquerque: 2000 (at Kirtland



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Figure 8

Air Force Base).” Consistent with their long-term antinuclear critique, the LASG underscores that for those pursuing nuclear nonproliferation, New Mexico is as good a place to start as any.

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