

For immediate release 6/15/05

Three U.S. Nuclear Weapons Labs Seek Ambitious Program To Redesign, Replace Weapons in Nuclear Stockpile

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ALBUQUERQUE, NM – On May 20, four staff members of the three U.S. nuclear weapons laboratories authored a white paper advocating a “new approach” to “sustaining the nuclear enterprise.” Unusually, the paper was endorsed by each of the three chiefs of the labs’ nuclear weapons programs.

The paper was made available to the Study Group through the courtesy of reporter John Fleck of the *Albuquerque Journal*.

The paper advocates using the current so-called “life extension program” – a misnamed program which actually does far more than extend the working lifetimes of nuclear weapons – as a vehicle to incorporate novel, untested nuclear components into the stockpile. The authors argue that it is only by changing the entire arsenal to new and untested kinds of nuclear weapons that its reliability can be assured, stockpile reductions achieved, or new weapons for “tomorrow’s nuclear weapons requirements” be built confidently and affordably.

These novel and as yet unspecified weapons components are to be built in unspecified locations. In one important case (plutonium warhead cores or “pits”), a working factory to build them does not exist and funding for detailed design has been denied so far by Congress.

A plutonium pit manufacturing facility does exist at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), although LANL has not yet made a single pit for the stockpile and is not expected to do so until 2007, when the total incurred by that date likely will, according to LANL, exceed \$1.7 billion.¹ LANL also has been targeted by the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) in recent congressional testimony as having long-standing and intractable problems even after “epochal” efforts to improve the safety, efficiency, and security of its operations.²

The authors of the present paper also argue that while the so-called “stockpile stewardship” program is working, it must be augmented or replaced with this “new” paradigm (p. 3), while at the same continuing to support and advance the existing program (p. 9) in order to achieve the expected cost savings (p. 8). The plan would protect against common-mode failures (p. 5), while relying on common-mode design to save money (p. 8).

The “stockpile stewardship” which the three weapons laboratories now find to be inadequate – “unsustainable” is the precise word, sustainability being the exact purpose of the program – is the same plan they invented in 1994 over the technical objections of many former and independent scientists. The laboratories consistently have been quite upbeat about the stewardship program in testimony, and their budgets have risen substantially under its auspices.

¹ Jonathan Medalia, “Nuclear Warhead ‘Pit’ Production Issues,” Congressional Research Service, RS20956, July 26, 2001.

² Testimony of Mr. Jerry Paul, Principal Deputy Administrator, NNSA, before the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, May 5, 2005

“The present report is an attempt to “spin” the muted congressional debate occurring in this year’s budget cycle regarding the future of the weapons program in order to maximize funding and lock in an aggressive design, testing, and production program if possible,” said Study Group Director Greg Mello.

“It is conceivable that the authors of this report, whom I do not know, labor under misconceptions about the stockpile stewardship program. They may have been subject to career pressure or intensive “groupthink,” resulting in the present garbled report. The endorsers know better than this, however – or should. This report is a standing indictment against management at all three weapons labs, because no coherent program could ever be run successfully along these lines.

“The problems run deeper than this, however. The U.S. has a schizophrenic and contradictory policy toward nuclear weapons. The federal government says it wishes to keep them, although it also says it is abiding, and will continue to abide, by the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), which requires complete nuclear disarmament.

“More fundamentally, this and other lab reports refer these nuclear ambitions back to the “U.S. National Security Policy.” There is a profound and long-standing chasm between the policy preferred and practiced by the U.S. government and the one preferred by its citizens.³ Which is the real ‘United States?’ Despite binding legal obligations and profound public disapproval, is the “nuclear weapon enterprise” referred to here – plainly a tangled web of self-interest, secrecy, and a chameleon-like mendacity varied to suit every occasion – still allowed to say, like Louis XIV, ‘L’Etat, c’est moi’ – ‘the State, it is I?’”

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³ Even without knowing that the U.S. has binding treaty obligations to achieve complete nuclear disarmament, fully 61% of Americans want their country to eliminate its nuclear arsenal, either unilaterally (6%) or multilaterally (55%). Only 9% prefer keeping a large nuclear stockpile, our current policy. When they hear about U.S. disarmament obligations, 84% agree with them. See http://www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/WMD/WMDreport_04_15_04.pdf, Americans on WMD Proliferation, April 15, 2004. See also Associated Press, March 30, 2005, “Poll Finds Most Americans Believe No Country Should Have Nuclear Weapons, Not Even U.S.,” at <http://www.ap-ipsosresults.com/>, which found that over four times as many Americans choose complete mutual nuclear disarmament over other commonly-discussed policy options.