

Greed, not national security, drives LANL's failing plutonium bomb factory

LANL's unnecessary, ultra-expensive factory is years behind schedule. Costs are 6x what was promised. Production? Still MIA, thankfully.

Many people think Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) is too politically powerful for citizen opinion to affect. We think so too, but more than opinion is involved. In trying to build and operate a plutonium warhead core ("pit") manufacturing plant at LANL, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) and its LANL contractor Triad, LLC face a formidable number of factual obstacles.

These real obstacles make NNSA's poorly conceived pit experiment at LANL fragile. For fundamental reasons rooted in LANL's location, geology, and institutional character, LANL's efforts to build pit production capacity have failed five times already.

At present LANL appears to be failing again. In fiscal years 2023 and 2024, statutory pit production requirements were not met. There is every indication that 2025 was a failure also. LANL was supposed to build 20 pits. Where are they? Meanwhile NNSA expects pit-related construction to be complete 6 to 8 years later, with costs 6 times greater, than what was promised 8 years ago.

By all objective measures, pit success at LANL is far from inevitable. Likewise (and related), the \$2 trillion-plus nuclear arms race of which this is an important part is not inevitable. Neither is a complete political takeover of this state and its resources by nuclear-military-AI institutions inevitable. Much is possible if we remain awake.

The decade-long story of how LANL's previous big plutonium initiative went down may be useful in this regard, even if too long to tell here. It ended like this...

After what seemed like a year of setbacks, over Thanksgiving 2011 the Study Group received a phone call from someone in the White House. He said, "You won. We are going to cancel CMRR-NF. There will be no public notice. You must keep this decision completely secret, especially from Congress. We may just quietly put a zero for CMRR-NF in the 2013 funding request."

CMRR-NF, the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Nuclear Facility, was a large LANL plutonium facility that had been under development for a decade. Excavation had already begun but was halted during our litigation. According to the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, CMRR-NF was the nation's single most important infrastructure project for nuclear warheads. Congressional hawks demanded it.

When the 2013 funding request dropped in February 2012, no funds were requested for CMRR-NF. It was "deferred," NNSA said, for at least five years. Memorably, we then got a congratulatory call from a senior committee staff member who said, "You did it! You guys are rock stars!"

We were a necessary catalyst, but geology was what doomed the project – that and the integrity of some people in government.



Nuclear warhead showing pit

It can take time for inherent project weaknesses to become obvious to any of us – workers, citizens, and government officials alike. We are getting close to that point again in LANL's misguided, multi-decade quest to become a nuclear factory.

There are at least six government studies underway of NNSA's troubled pit program. The combined cost of its two proposed factories has skyrocketed to about \$50 billion, prior to actual production. NNSA and LANL have simply bitten off more than they can chew. As a result, the Department of Energy (DOE) is now searching for some kind of "reset."

Background
(for more: <https://lasg.org/LASG-ads.html>)

Every U.S. nuclear warhead and bomb contains a plutonium-containing pit, which when compressed causes a nuclear explosion. Pits are not in general interchangeable between weapons, and they slowly age. Right now, there is no place to make new pits. The vast U.S. nuclear arsenal does not need any new pits in this decade or the next, but to the extent the U.S. retains nuclear weapons, new pits will eventually be needed.

NNSA is building two factories to do this. Each will cost more than \$20 billion. Both will be done in the 2032-2035 timeframe, NNSA says. LANL is supposed to make a few dozen war-ready pits in the meantime, but so far that hasn't happened.

The smaller of the two factories is centered in LANL's 50-year-old main plutonium building, which is being remodeled for this purpose while remaining in operation for other missions. Many other new and upgraded buildings are also required. LANL's 24/7 pit operations, which have already started, are expected to require over 4,100 full-time staff.

A larger and more permanent factory, able to produce all the pits that might be "needed" in future decades with about half the staff LANL needs, is being built at the 310 square-mile Savannah River Site (SRS) in South Carolina.

NNSA believes it can operate the LANL factory at least until the SRS factory comes online in the 2035-2040 timeframe.

The two-factory plan was hatched in early 2018 because of pressure from the New Mexico delegation and other congressional hawks. Just the year before, NNSA had decided against building two factories and against using LANL's old plutonium facility as a factory. Reliable LANL production would require a brand-new factory, NNSA said in 2017. The cost of that would be off the charts.

A few key talking points

- The U.S. has a huge, diverse nuclear arsenal, with 3,700 warheads and bombs in active service. LANL pit production is not necessary to maintain and deploy every current weapon or its planned replacement. LANL production is only needed to make the nuclear arsenal bigger – and to give billions of dollars to NNSA's contractors.
- Contrary to its own regulations, DOE has no analysis of alternatives supporting either a) pit production at LANL, or b) a two-site production plan. None.
- LANL pits are needed *solely* for the purpose of augmenting the number of warheads available on the proposed "Sentinel" silo-based missile by building new warheads. The Air Force already has approximately 534 long-lasting,

highly accurate warheads of a kind it plans to use on the 400 Sentinel missiles to be deployed between the late 2030s and the early 2050s. These existing warheads are currently being upgraded to be even more accurate and will be deployed on Sentinel – if that much-delayed, vastly expensive, redundant, "use or lose it" weapon is even built.

- **LANL pit production is an extreme waste of money.** If all goes "well," LANL's \$25 billion factory will reach full production in 2032 or 2033, only a few years before the larger SRS factory – which is being built to do the whole pit mission without LANL's help – is slated to begin production.
- **LANL pits are going to be extremely expensive, but right now most of the costs are "off the books."** LANL pits will cost roughly \$100 million apiece, if we include the cost to convert LANL's facilities into a gerry-rigged factory.
- **LANL pit production alone will not be adequate to sustain any politically foreseeable stockpile at this time. If SRS is a pit factory it alone will suffice. The SRS factory will therefore be built. Why build LANL's as well?**
- **The regional impacts of LANL growth, largely driven by pit production, are tremendous:** impacts on housing markets, road congestion, water resources, labor markets, and electricity supply. Realistically, most of these impacts can't be mitigated. LANL weapons jobs create nothing of value for the region, while bidding up labor and housing costs for everybody. LANL is a potent inequality engine. Severe inequality (which we have) kills societies (as we see). LANL has not and will not produce economic or social development. Quite the reverse.



"A House of Dynamite" is a new Netflix film about the very real danger of nuclear war, from Academy Award winning director Katherine Bigelow. The film's tagline: "Not if. When." We find the film highly realistic and very well acted.

Showings with discussions afterwards, sponsored by the Los Alamos Study Group:

- Sun, Oct 26, 6pm, Santa Fe Friends Meeting (co-sponsor of this showing), 505 Camino de Los Marquez
- Wed, Oct 29, 6pm, Los Alamos SALA, 2551 Central Ave
- Thu, Oct 30, 1pm, Taos Public Library, 402 Camino de la Placita
- Sun, Nov 30, 12:30pm, Albuquerque, Guild Cinema, 3405 Central Ave

Join in discussion, meet new and old friends, and explore some of the issues!
There is no charge for admission.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **First (and easiest!), join the more than 1,200 individual and 260 business and organizational endorsers of the "Call for Sanity, not Nuclear Production" by scanning the QR code below (or typing stopthebomb.org into your browser) and filling in a short form.**
- **Recruit more organizations, businesses, religious organizations and individuals.** Start with your friends and contacts. Show them this ad (or previous ads, at <https://lasg.org/LASG-ads.html>). It is easy to recruit sign-ons if you are enthusiastic.
- **Write succinct letters expressing your opposition to LANL's wasteful and destructive pit factory to newspaper editors, elected officials, and community leaders of all kinds.** Get the word out and be as public as possible! Use the talking points in this and previous SFR ads.
- **Write similar letters to Office of Management and Budget Director Russell Vought (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/contact/>), Secretary of Energy Chris Wright (The.Secretary@hq.doe.gov), and NNSA Administrator Brandon Williams (NNSAAdministrator@NNSA.Doe.Gov).** Normally this would be futile but in the present situation it may not be, in our judgment.
- **Sign up for email bulletins by sending a blank email to lasg-subscribe@lists.riseup.net.** Learn about upcoming on-line trainings, local meetings, and special events.
- **Volunteer!** Call us at 505-265-1200 to get started.
- **Help support our work financially.** Mail a check to our address below or securely contribute on-line at <https://lasg.org/contribute.htm>.



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Thank you for your support!
It really makes a difference!



U.S. "Typhon" launcher with Tomahawk missile. Last week, Trump appeared to be considering basing some of these in Ukraine.

Such an escalation could easily lead to nuclear war.