



Reliable Replacement Warhead

Another Unneeded Nuclear Weapon

Reliable Replacement Warhead: Another Unneeded Nuclear Weapon

Stymied by Congress' refusal to fund the nuclear "bunker buster," the Bush administration remains intent on developing another class of new nuclear weapons, the so-called Reliable Replacement Warhead, or RRW.

The administration has requested \$10 million for fiscal year 2009 to enable the Energy Department to continue development of RRW. If allowed to proceed, the program would replace most of the U.S.'s current nuclear warheads.

Researching and developing a new generation of "reliable" nuclear weapons could undermine arms control and nonproliferation objectives by setting off a nuclear arms race. It sends the wrong message to other would-be nuclear powers around the world. It could prompt Russia and China to modernize their nuclear arsenals. The program could also lead to the resumption of U.S. nuclear testing and end the current international testing moratorium.

Sea-launched ballistic missile
Photo from U.S. Department of Navy



Despite the "reliable" label of the proposed new program, the current U.S. arsenal is extremely reliable. The secretaries of Energy and Defense have certified to the president for the past 11 years that the present U.S. nuclear stockpile is safe, secure—and reliable.

The keystone of the Energy Department's argument for RRW has been the aging of plutonium pits, an essential element of new nuclear weapons. Department officials had estimated that some pits in existing weapons would become "unreliable" in less than a decade and needed to be replaced. Yet, a congressionally mandated report by a scientific panel found that pits will remain "reliable" for more than twice the time originally estimated, with most pits having lifetimes of over 100 years.

The program would require new nuclear weapons plants that the Energy Department estimates will cost tens of billions of dollars. As a former White House budget official in the first Bush and Clinton administrations stated, "The weapons labs are more interested in job security than national security."¹

Some congressional leaders believe they can keep the RRW program within tight constraints, but the history of previous limits on the nuclear weapons program is not promising.

RRW and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

Developing new nuclear weapons is at odds with the U.S. commitment to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. It undermines the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), an international agreement signed by 188 countries that has significantly limited the number of states that have nuclear weapons.

¹Robert Civiak, "Rumblings over the Bomb: Slippery Slope to New Nukes," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 24, 2006.

In 1970 as part of the NPT, the United States agreed “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament” (Article VI). As the Vatican remarked at the United Nations in 2005, “In essence, the NPT promised a world in which nuclear weapons would be eliminated...” However, “it is evident that nuclear deterrence drives the development of ever newer nuclear arms, thus preventing genuine nuclear disarmament.”²

The administration claims that new nuclear weapons are needed for some future “new threat.” However, such U.S. weapons programs make it easier for nuclear “hawks” in Moscow and Beijing to argue for new nuclear weapons for their own nuclear arsenals, undermining the process of disarmament.

Developing new nuclear weapons also undermines U.S. nonproliferation goals. As Rep. Ed Markey (MA), a leading congressional critic of new nuclear weapons, has stated, “America cannot credibly preach nuclear temperance from a barstool.” At a time when the United States is urging restraint in Iran and North Korea’s nuclear programs, the U.S. administration is intent on developing its own new nuclear weapons against an undefined, future threat.

Rather than building new nuclear weapons, it is time to honor the NPT and work towards, in the words of President Reagan, the elimination of “all nuclear weapons.” As former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and other senior statesmen recently affirmed, “Reassertion of the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons and practical measures toward achieving that goal would be, and would be perceived as, a bold initiative consistent with America’s moral heritage.”³

²Archbishop Celestino Migliore, Statement to the Review Conference on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, United Nations, May 4, 2005.

³George Shultz, William Perry, Henry A. Kissinger, Sam Nunn and others, A World Free of Nuclear Weapons, *The Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007; Page A15. Article can be found at http://www.fcnl.org/issues/item.php?item_id=2252&issue_id=2.

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Where Are We Now and What Can I Do?

The administration is seeking \$10 million to directly fund RRW in its fiscal year 2009 (FY09) budget request. The amount of money for the program will increase significantly in future years as funds are requested for engineering and construction.

Concerned citizens have played a central role in the past in curbing the nuclear arms race and preventing nuclear war. A similar movement is needed today. Here is what you can do:

- Communicate with your members of Congress. Urge them to eliminate funding for RRW in the FY09 budget. Funding could be included in three annual budget bills: the military authorization bill, military appropriations bill, and the energy and water appropriations bill. The members of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, and the House and Senate Energy and Water Appropriations Subcommittees will play a key role in decisions on the future of RRW. If your representative or senators sit on these committees, it is particularly important that they know of your concerns about RRW.
- Write a letter to the editor of your local paper explaining the dangers of producing new nuclear weapons.
- Educate your friends and family. Numbers do make a difference, and legislators will be more inclined to vote your way if they feel that a groundswell of support exists for a particular measure or issue. Help create that momentum by educating your community.

Let FCNL help you take action to stop RRW

FCNL has many resources to assist you. Visit FCNL’s website at www.fcnl.org/nuclear to view current congressional action and background information, send emails to your members of Congress, and read about new nuclear weapons, and nonproliferation initiatives.

You can also see the presidential candidates’ stances on Iraq, Iran, and nuclear weapons at www.fcnl.org/candidates.

