

The Independent Newspaper

Editorial Section

Little To Celebrate

March 8, 2007

The Bush Administration announced last week that a design team from Lawrence Livermore and Sandia National Laboratories has been selected for a project to upgrade the nation's nuclear arsenal. The goal is to develop warheads whose reliability can be assured without underground testing. LLNL/Sandia and Los Alamos competed for the work.

Not everyone celebrated. Though the project will create jobs in Livermore, many believe it will make the world less safe. Among the critics was Senator Dianne Feinstein, who observed that new nuclear weapons will essentially be created. It will encourage other countries to follow the same path, she said.

We share the concerns. The U.S. is currently engaged in delicate negotiations with Iran and North Korea to curb the spread of nuclear technology. How can we with any credibility ask others to surrender their ambitions when our own development of nuclear bombs continues?

New York Times

Editorial Section

Busywork for Nuclear Scientists

January 15, 2007

The Bush administration is eager to start work on a new nuclear warhead with all sorts of admirable qualities: sturdy, reliable and secure from terrorists. To sweeten the deal, officials say that if they can replace the current arsenal with Reliable Replacement Warheads (what could sound more comforting?), they probably won't have to keep so many extra warheads to hedge against technical failure. If you're still not sold, the warhead comes with something of a guarantee — that scientists can build the new bombs without ever testing them.

Let the buyer beware. While the program has gotten very little attention here, it is a public-relations disaster in the making overseas. Suspicion that the United States is actually trying to build up its nuclear capabilities are undercutting Washington's arguments for restraining the nuclear appetites of Iran and North Korea.

Then there's the tens of billions it is likely to cost. And the most important question: Nearly two decades after the country stopped building nuclear weapons, does it really need a new one? The answer, emphatically, is no. This is a make-work program championed by the weapons laboratories and belatedly by the Pentagon, which hasn't been able to get Congress to pay for its other nuclear fantasies.

The Rumsfeld team's first choice was for a nuclear "bunker buster" to go after deeply buried targets. The Pentagon got concerned about "aging" warheads only after it was clear that even the Republican-led Congress, or at least one intrepid House subcommittee chairman, considered the bunker buster too Strangelovian to finance.

One crucial argument for the new program took a major hit in November when the Jason — a prestigious panel of scientists that advises the government on weapons — reported that most of the plutonium triggers in the current arsenal can be expected to last for 100 years. Since the oldest weapons are less than 50 years old, supporters of the new warhead have fallen back on warnings that other bomb components are also aging, and that the nuclear labs need the work to attract and train the best scientists. But the labs are already spending billions on studying and preserving the current arsenal.

Then there's that guarantee that there will be no need for testing — one of the few arms-control taboos President Bush hasn't broken yet. While experts debate whether the labs can really build a weapon without testing it, the more important question is whether any president would stake America's security on an untested arsenal.

America would be much safer if the president focused on reducing the number of old nuclear weapons still deployed by the United States and the other nuclear powers. The new Congress should stop this program before any more dollars are wasted, or more damage is done to America's credibility.

Tri-Valley Herald

Editorial Section

Right place, wrong time for new nuclear weapons WE're in a position similar to that of Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and Rep. Ellen Tauscher, D-Alamo: We applaud the Bush administration's selection of scientists at Lawrence Livermore and Sandia National laboratories to design nuclear Reliable Replacement Warheads - or RRWs - but wonder whether they're necessary and doubt they should be pursued at this time.

Given what's happened in Iraq and Afghanistan, we might be better off reassessing our military structure, purpose and goals before investing billions of dollars in a new nuclear arsenal.

The RRWs would replace the most common warhead in our nuclear cache — the W76 mounted on Trident missiles aboard submarines. It also would be the first U.S. nuclear warhead developed since the end of the Cold War. Intriguing but unclear scientific and political debates also have been triggered by the push to build projectiles that won't be physically tested before being put to use.

Being the architects of such warheads, however, is a major victory for Lawrence Livermore, which had lost two previous competitions to its sibling, the Los Alamos complex in New Mexico.

Proponents say our current stockpile of some 6,000 nuclear warheads is aging, growing more difficult to maintain and should be replaced. The new weapons would arguably be hardier, could reduce the likelihood of our resuming nuclear testing, might eliminate thousands of warheads we keep in reserve, and would enable younger weapons designers to work with veterans still at the labs.

Critics counter that the current nuclear arsenal is reliable, safe and secure. A November review by a panel of experts found that the warheads' most sensitive components have a life span of 85 years to more than a century — longer than scientists expected. One dissenter is C. Bruce Tarter, former head of Lawrence Livermore who also headed an outside scientific team that reviewed the designs. A few weeks ago, he said there is no empirical evidence showing the old weapons are deteriorating and need to be replaced.

Developing RRWs would take at least six years and cost more than \$700 million - and could range into the billions. There also are political and foreign policy implications.

Feinstein fears "pursuing new warheads" could encourage the very proliferation we are trying to discourage in Iran and North Korea. She is "100 percent opposed" to Bush administration efforts to revive nuclear weapons development, although "flattered" that Lawrence Livermore won the competition.

Rep. Pete Visclosky, D-Ind., head of the House Energy and Water Appropriations Committee, said naming LLNL "puts the cart before the horse. .. There appears to have been little thought given to the question of why the U.S. needs to build new nuclear warheads at this time."

Tauscher, whose district is home to LLNL, acknowledges that it's unclear if such weapons should be built, but says Congress can control the process by scrutinizing budgets and keeping the weapons complex on a short fiscal leash.

So there are plenty of reasons to question proceeding with the warheads.

Though we're also glad Lawrence Livermore prevailed, is building new nuclear warheads the best and wisest use of our national resources at this time? The scientific community indicates that the need for new warheads is not imminent. It's an issue that could - and probably should - be addressed in the future, after we determine how fallout from the war on terror affects our military structure and strategy.

We do, after all, have plenty of old warheads. We're also currently toting the biggest debt in U.S. history, engaged in two wars overseas, in the early stages of grappling with global warming and have a long list of domestic issues that have been shelved because of war and security concerns.

Proceeding with the development of RRWs is a decision that should be put off until another time.