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U.S. ICBM Test Launch from CA Base Draws Opposition

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The U.S. Air Force has announced it will test an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) between 11 p.m. PT on February 18 and 5 a.m. PT February 19. During such tests, which occur several times a year, the missiles are launched from the Vandenberg Space Force Base near Lompoc, Calif., and aimed at Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands. Activists with the [Defuse Nuclear War](#) coalition, which includes Tri-Valley CAREs in Livermore, CA, will gather at Vandenberg's gate to witness and protest the test.

The protesters have issued the following statement:

These launches are wasteful and dangerous. Rather than promoting peace, they further normalize ICBMs as a permanent feature of global politics, rather than a tremendous political and security liability. We ask that the upcoming ICBM test, and all future scheduled tests, be canceled.

ICBMs have been sold to the public as the ultimate insurance policy, when in fact they are an immediate threat to public safety. In the words of the late Daniel Ellsberg, author of *The Doomsday Machine*, these weapons increase “the danger that any armed conflict between major nuclear states can escalate to all-out war.”

Once launched, an ICBM cannot be recalled, virtually guaranteeing a strike on the country that launches them and placing impossible pressure on decision makers to verify that reports of incoming ICBM attacks are accurate. As long as ICBMs exist, we live with the constant risk that misinterpreted intelligence, human error, or a single rash decision could end civilization as we know it within an hour.

Maintaining these weapons is a huge waste of resources. The U.S. has committed to spending hundreds of billions of dollars to replace its ICBM force under the mandate of modernization. The ICBM program is now at least [81% over budget and years behind schedule](#), with parts of the program now [paused](#) entirely. Yet the U.S. Secretary of Defense has [certified](#), through a “comprehensive, unbiased review” not shared with the public, that the program will proceed.

The test will be a Minuteman III missile with an empty “Multiple Independent Re-entry Vehicle” at its head, which is capable of carrying two city-destroying nuclear warheads. What’s more, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, also in California, is busy at work developing the new W87-1 warhead, which will set on top of the next generation ICBM, known as the Sentinel. Still in development, the Sentinel and its W87-1 will cost many billions and are at least 5 years away from entering the stockpile. However, Sentinel missiles will also need testing, which will be ramped up at Vandenberg in the coming years. Minuteman III’s will continue to be tested while the new Sentinel missiles are also being tested, at least doubling Vandenberg’s test missile launches, as it will be 10+ years until all 400 Minuteman III’s are replaced by new Sentinels.

“The amount of taxpayer dollars our government is spending on the new Sentinel missile and its new W87-1 nuclear warhead is simply staggering,” said Scott Yundt, Executive Director at Tri-Valley CAREs, a nuclear weapons complex watchdog group based in Livermore, CA. “The fact that California is both the home of the Lab that is developing the warhead for the program, and the missile test launch site at Vandenberg, gives Californians an especially meaningful voice when it comes to opposing these activities. We at Tri-Valley CAREs support the test launch protestors and urge members of the public to speak out against the development of the proliferation provocative Sentinel ICBM and the test launches from our coast to the already traumatized Marshall Islands where we exploded 67 full scale nuclear weapons in the 1950’s and 60’s.”

Test launches damage human communities and ecosystems. The Marshall Islands, already forced to bear the overwhelming environmental costs of U.S. nuclear weapons testing, are still used as a target test area. And, when tensions among nuclear-armed states are high, each test launch carries an added risk of misinterpretation. The U.S. military has acknowledged as much by pausing these launches at high points of tension during the war in Ukraine. Yet the risk of nuclear escalation remains too high to introduce the possibility of misinterpretation of a test into the mix.

President Trump has stated his interest in pursuing arms control with China and Russia. Halting tests explicitly designed to demonstrate the United States’ ability to attack these countries with nuclear weapons, and ending a troubled weapons program

that experts agree destabilizes these relationships, would be real, practical steps to facilitate that goal.

Organizers MacGregor Eddy and Leah Yantanon are available for interviews and comments. They can be contacted at info@defusenuclearwar.org. Scott Yundt is also available at scott@trivalleycares.org