

The cost of nukes

Jacqueline Cabasso

It was recently reported that funding for the so-called ‘reliable replacement warhead’ (RRW) had been zeroed out in the fiscal year 2008 budget passed by the United States Congress. This may be an important symbolic ‘victory’ – time will tell, especially following the rejection of the robust nuclear earth penetrator. It seems to signal that Congress is uncomfortable with the idea of funding new nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, it is a very small thing.

Over the years since the end of the Cold War, nuclear weapon types specifically named in budget line items have been zeroed out several times, reappearing under different names or buried in more vaguely identified budget categories. Remember, also, that there is an officially acknowledged ‘black budget’ about which we know nothing. And, bear in mind that even with a few million cut from the reliable replacement warhead, the overall nuclear weapons research and development budget is enormous, and still higher than during the average Cold War years. Most importantly, zeroing out the reliable replacement warhead this year doesn’t fundamentally change anything about US nuclear weapons policy, posture, readiness, capability, threat or lethality. Here are a few examples.

First, the Stockpile Life Extension Program is going forward. The last time I checked, the Labs were working on the W-76 warhead, giving it an enhanced ground burst capability, which would improve its first strike capability. ‘Life extensions’ are planned for other warhead models. This begs the question of what ‘new’ means, when talking about a nuclear warhead.

Second, despite the claim made by the US representative to the First Committee of the United Nations in October 2007, that US nuclear weapons are not now and have never been on ‘hair trigger’ alert, they do, in fact, remain on high alert status, and have taken on an

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even more central role in US ‘Global Strike’ planning, which has as much or more to do with the delivery systems than the warheads. According to Bruce Blair’s rebuttal: ‘Both the United States and Russia today maintain about one-third of their total strategic arsenals on launch-ready alert. Hundreds of missiles armed with thousands of nuclear warheads the equivalent of about 100,000 Hiroshima bombs – can be launched within a very few minutes. *The end of the Cold War did not lead the United States and Russia to significantly change their nuclear strategies or the way they operate their nuclear forces.*’

Third, the United States is the only nuclear weapon state that deploys nuclear weapons on foreign territory. It is reliably estimated that 350 US B-61 nuclear bombs are deployed at the following Nato bases in Europe: Aviano, Italy (50); Ghedi, Italy (40); Peer, Belgium (20); Uden, The Netherlands (20); Vulkaneiffel, Germany (20); Incirlik, Turkey (90); Lakenheath, UK (110).

Fourth, in response to the article signed by European mayors who want the US nukes removed from their territories, the Nato Chief announced that there are no plans to change Nato’s nuclear policy.

Fifth, almost nobody talks about the delivery systems or the long planning horizons always in place for nuclear weapons systems. Consider the following: ‘Advisers to US Strategic Command this month urged the Defense Department to begin research and development soon for a new nuclear-weapons submarine, according to the Navy ... The Review anticipated that a new program would have to begin around 2016 for the first submarine to be fielded in 2002. However, defense sources have told *Global Security Newswire* that it now appears initial funding would be sought by 2010.’ Note the reliance on the 2002 Nuclear Posture Review, widely dismissed by the arms control community at the time as a mere ‘wish list.’)

Sixth, the details are in the fine print. With everyone continuing to sing the praises of Kissinger, Shultz, Perry and Nunn for their call for a ‘nuclear weapon free world’, Kissinger and Shultz have endorsed Sidney Drell’s position that ‘research work on new reliable replacement warhead designs should certainly go ahead’. The history of military research and development strongly suggests that such efforts are not necessarily limited to specific weapon designs, and that even if a particular design is terminated, research and development may very well lead to new weapons concepts or modifications. It’s not over till its over.

Seventh, the draft environmental impact statement for the nuclear weapons ‘Complex Transformation’ (formerly Complex 2030) is expected. I predict with a high degree of confidence that it will not include a plan for closing down the nuclear weapons infrastructure because the reliable replacement warhead isn’t currently funded. So what are they planning to spend that \$150 billion on over the next 25 years?

Eighth, The reliable replacement warhead vote notwithstanding, the United States is not in any way, shape or form acting in good faith with regard to its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Article VI obligation to negotiate ‘in good faith’ the end of the arms race ‘at an early date’ and ‘nuclear disarmament in all its aspects’.

Finally, the *Encarta Encyclopaedia* describes militarism as ‘advocacy of an ever-stronger military as a primary goal of society, even at the cost of other social priorities and liberties’. It relates militarism to chauvinism, fascism, and national socialism. As uncomfortable as it may be for many, this chilling definition accurately describes the historical trajectory and current reality of US national security policy. The threatened first use of nuclear weapons remains at the heart of that policy. While it’s important to celebrate small ‘victories’, we need to keep our eyes on the prize.

It is not at all certain that removal of funding for the reliable replacement warhead is the result of efforts by anti-nuclear activists. There are a couple of Congress members, Hobson and Visclosky, who didn’t like the reliable replacement warhead from the beginning, for reasons of their own. I believe it would be intellectually dishonest to proclaim this a major victory. After I wrote my initial response, I read the summary and explanatory statement that accompany the joint House-Senate omnibus appropriations bill, the fiscal year 2008 Consolidated Appropriations Act. I found no surprises. According to the official summary, the nuclear weapons budget is the same as fiscal year 2007, and the reliable replacement warhead isn’t even gone, it’s just on hold:

‘Weapons Programs: \$6.3 billion, the same as 2007 and \$214 million below the President’s request.

Reliable Replacement Warhead: Prohibits the development of a reliable replacement warhead until the President develops a strategic nuclear weapons plan to guide transformation and downsizing of the stockpile and nuclear weapons complex.’

The explanatory statement provides a detailed breakdown of the funded nuclear weapons activities, including further description of the reliable replacement warhead and a new science campaign called ‘Advanced Certification’, and goes on to talk about the Stockpile Life Extension Program. Under ‘Warhead Dismantlement’ you will find funding for the Device Assembly Facility at the Nevada Test Site, for ‘additional missions’. Read on to discover funding for the ‘enhanced test readiness program’, Inertial Confinement Fusion including the National Ignition Facility at the Livermore Lab and the Z machine at Sandia, Advanced Simulation and Computing, including academic partnerships, and pit manufacturing and certification. And it goes on.

To sum up, one small line item was cut, the fiscal year 2007 funding level was maintained, and the deck chairs were rearranged on the *Titanic*.

I believe that it is imperative to broaden our approach, and to educate ourselves and the public about the profound historical and economic underpinnings of the military-industrial-academic complex. Imagine a scenario in which tens or hundreds of thousands of people around the country were calling unambiguously for the abolition of nuclear weapons and war and demanding meaningful leadership from the United States. What kind of political space might be opened up, and what kind of results might one expect? Certainly, not less than eliminating three letters (reliable replacement warhead) from the National Nuclear Security

Administration's vocabulary. We might actually get more and, in the process, begin to generate a real national debate on the purpose of, and therefore the future of, nuclear weapons, and the requirements for genuine human and ecological security.