

Curb Nuclear Weapons Excess

May 4, 2004

Dear Senator/Representative:

We are writing to urge you to cut funds for three proposals contained in the President's FY05 defense authorization request. It asks Congress to approve nearly \$28 million for funding continued research on modifying existing types of nuclear weapons designed to destroy deeply buried and hardened targets (the **Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator**, or RNEP, also known as the nuclear bunker buster). It also seeks another \$9 million for unspecified research on new nuclear weapons concepts (**Advanced Concepts Initiative**).

In addition to the fiscal costs, the diplomatic and security costs of developing, testing, and producing new types of nuclear weapons far outweigh any marginal benefits of such arms. As our nation tries to turn back the tide of nuclear proliferation worldwide, we should not take actions that unnecessarily suggest that nuclear weapons can or should be used as any other weapon might be used.

Proponents of such nuclear capabilities contend that by reducing the yield and enhancing earth penetrating capabilities, the weapons' collateral damage can be minimized to the point that they become "usable." However, the notion that a nuclear weapon could be developed to destroy a deeply buried target, yet cause little collateral damage, is highly misleading and dangerous.

A nuclear weapon exploded just beneath the earth's surface would actually create more fallout than one detonated above the target because the former casts more radioactive dirt and particles into the air. To ensure that a five-kiloton nuclear explosion produces no fallout, it would have to be detonated about 350 feet deep--a depth far beyond what existing materials and force capabilities allow.

But even a lower-yield, one-kiloton nuclear warhead (1/13 the size of the Hiroshima bomb) detonated at a depth of 20-50 feet would eject more than one million cubic feet of radioactive debris, forming a crater about the size of ground zero at the World Trade Center. The result would be a highly contaminated zone and atmospheric fallout that would endanger civilians, as well as military personnel who might be ordered into the area.

The Department of Energy has asserted that it does not now have plans to move these weapons beyond the research phase and into design engineering and development. But the budget request makes the Energy Department's intentions quite clear. Its five-year budget plan outlines a schedule and budget for further research and, if Congress allows, development of the RNEP at a cost of \$485 million. Production and deployment of such a weapon would cost billions of dollars more.

New research and development leading to the production of nuclear warheads could lead to resuming U.S. nuclear testing to confirm the performance of new or modified weapons, and a destabilizing round of renewed nuclear testing by other states. Such weapons, whether designed to defeat hardened bunkers or destroy chemical or biological targets, also threaten to break down the long-standing firewall between conventional arms and nuclear weapons and jeopardize what has become an international norm of the non-use of nuclear weapons. Development of new nuclear weapons also undermines the United States' ability to dissuade others from improving or pursuing nuclear weapons capabilities.

The budget also requests approximately \$30 million for FY05 to begin development of a **Modern Pit Facility** to produce the plutonium cores, or "pits," for new or remanufactured nuclear warheads. The facility, estimated to cost \$2-4 billion, would produce 125 to 450 pits per year on a single shift, with operations beginning around 2020. These projections are based on outdated estimates of maintaining a Cold War-sized nuclear arsenal and fail to acknowledge new laboratory studies suggesting plutonium pits last longer than previously believed. This proposed facility is unnecessary and wasteful.

As Congress debates these proposals in committee and, possibly on the floor, we urge you to support any amendments that may be offered that would

- Cut funding for research on new nuclear weapons capabilities, including the nuclear bunker buster, and/or
- Cut funding for the proposed Modern Pit Facility.

In light of our ballooning national debt and the questionable necessity of these projects, we should not be squandering taxpayer dollars on them.

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David Culp, **Friends Committee on National Legislation**
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Kathleen Gwynn, **Steven and Michele Kirsch Foundation**
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