

UPF UPDATE

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THE TAIL OF THE DRAGON

It may not be the dragon that gets us, it may be the tail. Think of the 1,600 active, deployed nuclear bombs and warheads the US has stationed around the world as a dragon we use to project our national resolve across the globe. The dragon sits quietly, not breathing fire, smoke lightly wafting from its nostrils, ready... Russia has a dragon, too, and at least seven other smaller dragons are out there, roaming, or sitting in caves.

THE TAIL

In addition to our dragon, we have nearly 5,000 more bombs and warheads in storage—we call it the strategic reserve. It is the dragon's tail, weapons ready to go, some of them said to be on a 48-hour activation schedule. What for?

Can one conceive a scenario in which the US has used 1,600 thermonuclear weapons, offensively or defensively, and received hundreds of strikes in return, and still has the capacity or the will to retrieve and launch thousands of additional warheads?

The problem with the nuclear tail is obviously not that we will use it. Nor is it that other countries will use it to justify their own nuclear ambitions; the dragon itself is sufficient justification for Iran and North Korea and future Irans and North Koreas.

The problem with the tail is two-fold: unnecessary risk, and mind-boggling expense.

THE RISK

The risk is obvious—every nuclear warhead represents a vulnerability, a target. Damaged, they could spread hazardous and radioactive materials. Stolen, they would not likely be used as thermonuclear bombs, but could provide materials for weapons—dirty bombs or smaller, crude nukes. Two years ago a flight crew in North Dakota took off for Louisiana not realizing

they were carrying six AGM-129 cruise missiles each armed with a W80-1 variable yield nuclear warhead. For 36 hours, the missiles were unaccounted for. Rightly or wrongly, though, we persuade ourselves that we can manage the risk and remain safe.

THE COST

The bigger problem is less obvious—expense. The implications of maintaining an extra 5,000 warheads are evident on the ground, where it is increasingly evident that we can not manage the cost and, in fact, are at risk of being crushed under the weight of the huge tail.

Right now, at the Y12 Nuclear Weapons Complex in Oak Ridge, TN, workers are performing Life Extension Upgrades on every W-76 warhead in the US stockpile—the hundreds that are part of the active, deployed arsenal, and hundreds more that are in the strategic reserve. By the time the W-76 life extension program is complete, two thousand W-76s will have been modi-

fied, equipped with new arming, fusing and firing mechanisms, older compo-

nents refurbished or replaced. Two thousand W-76s, even though the TOTAL number of warheads of all designs in the current active stockpile is 1,600.

Even if a third of our current force is W-76s, we are refurbishing four times as many as we need to.

But that's not the worst of it. The facility that performs these life extension upgrades in Oak Ridge is slated to be replaced by a new weapons manufacturing facility, the Uranium Processing Facility, with a pricetag of

\$11.5 billion. The UPF will have a production capacity of 80 warheads/year. And if the weapons establishment has its way, the US will eventually rebuild the B61 and W78/88 warheads at a cost of additional tens of billions of dollars

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contact: Ralph Hutchison
Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance
www.orepa.org • orep@earthlink.net

even though most of the warheads will sit in the strategic reserve and never be deployed.

When it was planning the UPF, the National Nuclear Security Administration reported it could meet mission requirements—to perform surveillance and maintenance and limited life extension on the current stockpile—with a production capacity of 5 warheads/year. Imagine a small, streamlined facility and a modest workforce executing careful work plans to assure the US nuclear stockpile was safe, secure and operational while we pursue arms reductions toward a world free of nuclear weapons. This is, after all, our official national policy, codified in the Non-proliferation Treaty and the policies set out by President Obama.

Contrast that with the facility needed to maintain the tail—an \$11.5 billion facility, grossly oversized with a production capacity of 80 warheads/year.

The dragon's tail is costing taxpayers billions of dollars today and will cost hundreds of billions over the next

two decades. And it is completely useless.

LOSING THE TAIL

Making smart, forward looking decisions today can save billions. Downsizing or eliminating the strategic reserve can save dollars immediately—the W-76 upgrades could be suspended now. And it can save even more dollars—billions more—in the long run; with production capacity downsized in the UPF, there would be room for dismantlement operations in the new facility (originally planned as part of the UPF, dismantlement was dropped last year to make room for production operations).

Icing on the cake—at absolutely no cost to us (in fact, at great savings!), the US could announce dramatic reductions in overall stockpile numbers, likely provoking a similar action from Russia and, if played right, maybe even setting the stage for serious multilateral talks on global nuclear arms reductions. That's a win/win/win.

THE UPF

The UPF was proposed in 2005 as a replacement for aging production facilities, Building 9212, at Y12 in Oak Ridge.

The original plan for the UPF included modernized dismantlement operations; that mission was dropped in October 2012 when designers realized the facility was too small to hold all the equipment planned for it.

In 2014, the UPF gets a name change—the Uranium Capabilities Replacement Project—obfuscating the fact that the UPF is the flagship of the next generation of nuclear weapons production facilities in the US.

LIFE EXTENSION PROGRAM

The NNSA's Life Extension Program seeks to refurbish and replace aging parts of weapons in the US nuclear stockpile to extend their useful life for 60-80 years.

In some cases, life extension modifications significantly change the military capabilities of the warhead being "LEPped," effectively creating a new nuclear weapon.

In 2013, the US is performing LEPs on the W-76 Trident warhead; plans to perform LEPs on the B61 bomb are undergoing scrutiny; initial studies on LEPs for the W78/88 warhead are also beginning.