Trump budget increases nuclear weapons spending

ON MARCH 11, THE PRESIDENT sent a “skinny” budget to Congress outlining the Administration’s spending priorities for the 2020 fiscal year that begins in October of this year.

It’s not called a skinny budget because the budget has been slimmed down; it’s because it is only the skeleton of the budget, with topline numbers and few details. The rest of the budget will be released in the coming weeks.

Bob Alvarez took a look at the Department of Energy’s $31.7 billion part of the budget. Here’s what he found: 73% of the DOE budget, or $23 billion, goes to military nuclear programs. 17% goes to science; 8% goes for other energy activities; and 2%—$700 million—goes to energy efficiency and renewables.

Nuclear weapons get an 8.9% raise in the Trump budget request, up more than a billion dollars over this year to $16.5 billion. The rest of the Energy Department takes a 25% cut, Trump wants to spend nearly $5 billion less on the nation’s energy and science programs.

While Democrats in the House were quick to read from their annual “Dead on Arrival” skit, the fact is the Nuclear Weapons establishment usually gets just about everything it asks for because it is protected in Congress by powerful people, including Tennessee’s Senator Lamar Alexander who chairs the Appropriations Energy and Water subcommittee. He is “Mr. Pursestrings” for nuclear weapons.

What we don’t know, as Congress begins to debate the 2020 budget, is whether the House will be able to place limits on spending to rein in the most dangerous nuclear proposals—for new nuclear weapons. There are signs that they will at least try.

STAY THE COURSE

The Trump budget request should come as no surprise to anyone paying attention. It is part and parcel of what the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists called “the new abnormal” as they unveiled the 2019 version of the Doomsday Clock. The hands remain set at 2 minutes to midnight, the closest they have ever been.

Rachel Bronson, Bulletin President, told reporters the setting “should not be taken as a sign of stability, but as a stark warning.”

The Bulletin cited several factors for its assessment, including the “deteriorating arms-control architecture” and programs of “nuclear modernization” that reflect a worldwide nuclear arms race.

That modernization starts with major construction projects in the US to expand our capacity to produce new nuclear weapons—the Uranium Processing Facility bomb plant in Oak Ridge, and, now, plans for a Plutonium Pit bomb plant in Los Alamos and/or Savannah River.

At the almost the same time the Bulletin was holding its press conference, the Congressional Budget Office released an estimate of the cost of nuclear forces over the next ten years. The estimate, prepared every two years, says nuclear weapons will cost taxpayers $494 billion over the next ten years—an increase of $94 billion (23%) over the 2017 estimate. This is the first CBO estimate to take into account the Trump Administration’s Nuclear Posture Review that proposed new weapons systems and increased production capacity.

The bottom line is an affirmation, sadly, of the Bulletin’s invocation of a “new abnormal.” Half a trillion dollars for nuclear weapons, including a massive cost increase, is business as usual.

MEDIA YAWNS

Neither of the January events inspired reporters for the country’s major news media. The Washington Post web site had an article on the Doomsday Clock posted for a few hours before it faded into the archival ether. It didn’t cover the CBO report. Articles on the Trump budget found a lot of focal points—the increase in nuclear weapons spending was not one of them.

It is little wonder people are sleepwalking toward the unthinkable. The national media silence underscores the importance of grassroots education and resistance. We have to teach each other, and we have to take action.
WHY WORRY?

On February 1, less than a week after the Bulletin press conference, the Trump administration announced it is suspending the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and intends to terminate it in six months.

Beatrice Fihn, director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), called the US move irresponsible and said President Trump has "fired the starting pistol on Cold War II. Only this one could be bigger, more dangerous, and the world may not be so lucky this time around."

ICAN noted that the breakdown of existing arms control agreements only underscores the need for nations to embrace the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

In response to the US announcement, Russia has also suspended the INF Treaty. President Vladimir Putin escalated the rhetoric, declaring that Russia has new weapons capable of hitting Washington, DC and targets in Europe with nuclear strikes in five minutes.

Both the US and Russia have credibly claimed the other is cheating on the terms of the INF Treaty; still, the Treaty served to constrain some of the most dire threats.

One possible impact of the Treaty’s demise will be a new burst of campaigning against nuclear weapons in Europe, especially in the five countries that currently host US nuclear weapons under the NATO banner.

DON’T MOURN—ORGANIZE!

Thanks to Mother Jones for a mantra that continues to prove spot on.

The outlook is not entirely dire. One ray of hope—Adam Smith, new chair of the House Armed Services Committee, a key cog in the funding machine, released a statement on the CBO report. “The current US plans to replace and upgrade the nuclear weapons enterprise are unaffordable.” For at least the next two years, the HASC is likely to be the place where lines are drawn—or not.

OREPA will once again be taking a delegation to Washington, DC, to meet with key decision makers in Congress and the Administration during the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability’s DC Days. You can join us and seventy other activists in May—there is an article on page 5 with details on how to get involved.

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Making nuclear weapons illegal

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, known as the Ban Treaty, was passed by 120 countries at the United Nations in July 2017. In order to enter into force, the Treaty needs 50 countries to sign and ratify it.

The process differs from country to country. Some countries have a one-step process, but most separate signing and ratification. In the United States, a President can sign a treaty, but the Senate must ratify it before the country is formally committed to the terms of the agreement.

So far, the US has chosen to ignore the Ban Treaty, as have other states that possess nuclear weapons and most states under the “nuclear umbrella”—protection agreements with nuclear weapons states.

Still the Treaty moves forward. South Africa brought the ratification total to 22 in February. Seventy nations have signed the Treaty.

ICAN organizers around the globe are working to build support for the Treaty and developing strategies to press governments to sign and ratify the Treaty.

Getting the US to sign the Treaty will require a combination of efforts—US citizens need to build support for the Treaty through education, organizing and mobilizing. It is a challenge the US anti-nuclear-weapons community must rise to if we are to succeed; we will need to rebuild the Freeze coalition that worked so hard to reverse the nuclear arms race in the 1980s—a lot of the old campaigners are no longer here, but the institutions and constituencies are around.

When the Treaty goes into effect, the development, testing, production, manufacture, possession or stockpiling of nuclear weapons will be illegal.

The US and other nuclear weapons states will try to ignore the Treaty, saying that it does not apply to them because they have not acceded to its terms.

Technically, this may be true. But morally, the entry into force of the Treaty finally and unequivocally brands the nuclear weapons states as outlaws.

Pressure can also be brought to bear on the US externally. OREPA and others are already collaborating with allies in Europe and other places to leverage the power of grassroots discontent with the status quo (US missiles deployed on air bases in their countries) and the invigorating energy of empowered youth who are demanding an end to the nuclear threat.

This summer, activists will gather again at the Büchel air base in Germany, where US B61 nuclear weapons are deployed. An international peace camp in July will offer another opportunity for global networking. Each time we come together, we gain strength.

It will not likely be a quick struggle, and there is no guarantee we will achieve our goal. But we can guarantee failure if we don’t try.
The deep sea of discontent that washes across the landscape these days has a corrosive effect on our personal and our communal health and well-being. It is charged and re-charged on a daily basis, it seems, with attacks on refugees and immigrants, abandonment of security treaties, policies that place clean air and water at risk, the denial of science, suppression of voting rights, and disrespect for women and vulnerable populations.

Sometimes, the tide is so deep and comes so fast, it feels almost impossible to withstand it. It threatens to wash away everything, including our core values as human beings and US citizens. It is understandable that many people feel overwhelmed, ready to check out. Not knowing what to do can be paralyzing.

But there are some whose response is to step up and take action to change things, and the 2019 Peacemaker Awards celebrated four Women Making Change at St. James Episcopal Church on Saturday, March 2.

Renee Hoyos ran for Congress in 2018, and while she did not pull off a miracle upset in the second District, she managed to garner support and build a constituency for core values that embrace dignity and rights for all people and offer hope to generations young and old.

Tory Mills’s work at Planned Parenthood reaches young women at a critical age and provides information and training that enables and empowers them not only to make their own good choices, but to be a source of information and guidance to peers.

Drocella Mugorewera, director of BRIDGE Refugee Services, not only tells the story of immigrants/refugees coming to the United States to rebuild lives in ways that enrich their local communities, she is living the story.

And Seema Singh Perez serves on Knoxville’s City Council, elected in a grassroots oriented campaign that brought her experience in the fields of health and wellness and justice and anti-violence to local government.

The four were honored at a fun and festive evening, with music provided by The Emancipators, and great food from a host of donors, including local businesses The Tomato Head, Three Rivers Market, and Magpies.

In making the presentations, OREPA coordinator Ralph Hutchison noted that too often we find little reason for hope in these difficult times. “But then,” he said, “I remember that there are people who not only believe in justice and peace and dignity and rights, but they are fighting for, working for, living for these ideals. They are the light that shines before us. And in the process they invite all of us, young and old, to step into that light and to walk in that light toward the future we create, against all odds.”

The Peacemaker Award celebration was also a successful fundraiser, providing resources for OREPA’s ongoing work, and supporting the Next Generation Fund.
On the second Sunday in March, eight vigilers met across from the main entrance to the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex in Oak Ridge, Tennessee for our weekly vigil. One benefit of the change to Daylight Savings Time early that morning was the presence of the sun which, since mid-November, had been avoiding us, dropping down below the cap of the ridge shortly after we gathered. It was a balmy 72 degrees.

It was a welcome departure from the week before, when we gathered in chilly rain, five of us drawn in a close circle as the sky turned from an overcast gray to night.

“Nonviolence,” said Nate Williams, leader of the vigils for the month of March. He asked each of us to reflect on when we first made a commitment to be nonviolent, and whether we ever had doubts about its effectiveness. Thus began an hour of lively conversation. When it was over, we folded our chairs, packed them into our cars, and headed for Marese Nephew’s home for the monthly potluck.

On the last Sunday in November, we celebrated the completion of 19 years of a weekly presence for peace at the gates of the bomb plant. In mid-February, we gathered for the 1,000th Sunday vigil.

What difference does it make?

On the anniversary vigil, we often reminisce about memorable vigils, and it is clear that, for us at least, it has made a difference. A community formed over the course of those first four vigils in 1999; the original plan was to meet at the gates of Y-12 for the four Sundays of Advent.

And those Sundays turned into four more, and four more, and four more. The members of the community have changed, but a constant core continues the presence.

If you asked Erik Johnson, who first proposed the vigils, why we were doing them back then, he would have talked about the need to have a witness to peace and life in the face of the bomb plant that threatens the destruction of the planet.

On OREPA’s strategic plan, “Have a persistent peace presence in Oak Ridge” was near the top of the list, and the vigils were a way to do that.

Anyone who has maintained a peace witness over time has no doubt heard of the lone vigiler confronted by a skeptic who asks, “What good are you doing out here? You’ll never change them by standing out here with your sign.” The vigiler answers, “I’m not out here to change them. I’m out here to keep them from changing me.”

That’s part of it, too. And keeping it going, no matter the weather or the schedule conflicts, week after week, has a power of its own. One Sunday some friends from out of town joined us; they had been on a peace pilgrimage. Jun-san, from the Grafton, NY, peace pagoda, led us drumming and chanting around the perimeter of the vigil site—that was before they put up a fence to dissuade us. When we finished, we gathered in a circle, and she said, “What you do here is important. We know you are doing it. We think of you often.”

After the security forces at Y-12 were embarrassed in 2012 by the Transform Now Plowshares break-in, DOE spent $88,000 to put up a “security fence.” It stands about four and a half feet tall and is easily scalable—the idea that it offered security was laughable; it was put up to push us off the land we had been meeting on for years.

We tried to challenge them in court, but the judge refused to accept jurisdiction. In the meantime, we carved out a small roadside slice across Scarboro Road and continued the vigils. We’re not as safe as we used to be—the vigils are no longer kid-friendly. We’re also subjected to a bit more harassment from monster trucks with their amplifying “mufflers” as they roar out of the bomb plant at shift change. But once in a while we get a friendly honk.

The vigil last Sunday ended the way scores of Sunday vigils have. Whenever we have friends in jail or prison, like the Kings Bay Plowshares peace activists are now, we stand in a circle and sing Keep Your Eyes on the Prize. As we reach the seventh verse hands reach out to find a neighbor: The only chain that we can stand/is the chain of hand in hand… and as the chorus reaches the final Hold on! arms raise toward the sky, sending our energy across the miles in solidarity with those behind bars.

It may be that someday we discontinue the Sunday vigils. But that day has not yet arrived. So if you are in the area at 5:00pm on a Sunday afternoon and get a hankering for a taste of community with peace-loving folks, stop by and become part of the tradition!
Making a difference

Everybody says they're against nuclear weapons.
You can be one of the ones who are doing something about it.

I go a little bit crazy in my head when I hear the UPF budget is going up, probably over $800 million, next year. Huge budget cuts to social programs, the complete evisceration of environmental regulations, but plenty of money for nuclear bomb plants—it's enough to make anyone a little crazy.

Whoa! Hold on there! Stop yelling at the newsletter, please. It might make you feel better for a second, but reality is waiting for you when you run out of breath.

I am here to tell you that you can actually do something about the craziness. That something is called DC Days. It’s organized every year by the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability, and it’s a chance to talk to decision-makers about the decisions they are making.

How many hundreds of millions of dollars will be spent on useless “Life Extension Upgrades?” Will Congress fund new nuclear weapons? New small nuclear power reactors? A waste dump in Nevada?

Will the voices of industry lobbyists and corporate profiteers be the only voices heard as Congress debates these questions and writes next year’s budget?

Not if you join us in Washington! Scores of activists from across the country will come to Washington for an intensive training day on Sunday, May 19 followed by three days of visits to Congressional and Executive branch offices.

This is the thirty-first year ANA has held DC Days, and OREPA has been a long-time participant, taking delegations of six or more for the last five years. OREPA Board member Flo Paquet is on the committee that plans the event.

ANA’s DC Days is open to everyone. Past participants have given the training rave reviews; one long-time DC insider said, “I’ve been to dozens of these things and nobody does this as well as ANA does.”

“But I don’t know enough”

Maybe not, but you will. You don’t have to be an expert. The training offers a broad overview and then in-depth workshops on the key issues and talking points we will be using in our visits. You’ll have a chance to practice. By the end of the training day you’ll know more than 90% of the staffers you talk with. And then we sign up for our meetings.

During the week you will have three or four meetings a day, armed with the latest ANA Fact Sheets and your talking points. You go to meetings in teams of five or six people, and the meetings are set up so each person has only one topic to cover. And if even that seems daunting, you can volunteer to be note-taker for the first couple of meetings!

This year, like last, ANA is working to recruit a new generation of activists by offering scholarships through ANA groups to under-30’s. If you fall in that category, or know someone who does, please contact us right away. We can cover virtually all of your costs.

“Sounds like a lot of walking”

Please don’t be spooked by how well I can read your mind. Yes, it is a lot of walking. "Wear comfortable shoes" is the first rule of a successful week. You’ll find there is lots of support for all the rest of the activities, but your feet are up to you.

The other activities include a pizza party with your fellow activists on Monday evening, a chance to relax and make connections with activists from all across the country. And on Tuesday there is a reception to honor key lawmakers and activists who have made a difference in the last year. OREPA has its own traditions, like Saturday night at the Ethiopian restaurant, but you’ll have to come along to learn them all.

How many meetings you go to is up to you—sign-ups happen at the training on Sunday afternoon, and you can pace yourself however you need to. You can also employ a veteran’s trick of scheduling a slate of meetings on the House or Senate side instead of traipsing back and forth all day.

How can I get involved?

I knew it! I knew you’d be interested! So this part is easy. Registration is on-line. Go to ananuclear.org and follow the links to DC Days registration. Register by April 15 to save $100. If you have problems or want more information, you can call OREPA at 865 776 5050 or email Ralph at orep@earthlink.net.

If you live in East Tennessee, OREPA will have its own orientation and prep session in early May. We’ll be talking about how to take our message to Senators Alexander and Blackburn as well as Representatives Burchett, Cooper and Fleischmann and going over logistics. Please contact us immediately if you think you might want to go so we can arrange enough transportation and housing.
OREPA will celebrate its thirtieth birthday on Saturday, June 1, 2019 at St. James Episcopal Church in Knoxville. The evening will spend some time looking back, of course, but most of our energy will be looking to the future. **Our Nuclear Future** will be the topic of the evening, and Joseph Rodgers, who holds a graduate degree in Nonproliferation and Terrorism studies from the Middlebury Institute for International Studies in Monterey, California, will be the guest speaker.

Rodgers represents the next generation of nuclear abolitionists; in the course of his studies he has completed research internships at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, the Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Tri-Valley CAREs, and the Arms Control Association. He has also served as coordinator for the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability's DC Days.

Rodgers is well versed in the current state of nuclear nonproliferation efforts. His research applies a variety of emerging technologies to verify ongoing activities at global nuclear weapons facilities. He also has direct experience with grassroots activism, having worked closely with OREPA's sister group, Tri-Valley CAREs. What OREPA does in Oak Ridge, Tri-Valley CAREs does at Lawrence Livermore Lab in California—only moreso.

**Back in the Day...**

Back then, we took slides, reducing life-size images to a rectangle the size of a postage stamp. One of those slides records the first official OREPA moment, a press conference. On the slide, Terri and Steve sit at a plain table; behind them a pastel violet sheet hangs on the wall with four rings—a black and yellow radiation symbol morphing into a green peace sign. The pair announced plans for a demonstration against nuclear weapons production at the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Plant in Oak Ridge on August 6, 1988. The action would include, they said, the first-ever act of civil disobedience against nuclear weapons in Oak Ridge history.

The collaborative of activists that made up OREPA back then delivered. Nearly two hundred people came out to protest nuclear weapons, and Myra Zeller, Chris Irwin, Doug Mason, Jeff Werner, and Judith Hallock crossed the blue line that marked the bomb plant boundary and were promptly arrested.

Thirty years later, OREPA continues to pursue an end to nuclear weapons production in Oak Ridge. Much of our work is local, but we do it in a global context. While we continue to believe that we who live in the shadow of the bomb plant have a special obligation to speak and act, we know that nuclear weapons are a threat to all the world; nuclear abolition is a global aspiration.

**Watch this space**

Okay, don't watch this space. It's not going to change. Watch OREPA's web site, though, for more details about the evening. We expect to celebrate properly, with a meal catered by Yassin's Falafel House, and other bells and whistles, along with one or two trips down memory lane. A slide show of thirty years of OREPA will remind us all how we have aged.

The evening will be free, but be forewarned—we will talk about OREPA's Next Generation campaign, and you will have an opportunity to become a significant part of that effort. Please mark your calendar now and join us. And thirty years from now, you can watch the holographic projection of the next thirty years as it is projected onto your retina when you log-in to the OREPA archival portal and say, “Hey, I was there!”

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**Alexander’s APRIL MADNESS!**

**Monday, April 15, 2019**

**Market Square**  
**Downtown Knoxville**  
**11:30AM - 1:00PM**

**TAX DAY ACTION**

How do you want your tax dollars spent?  
Come help us send a message to Senator Lamar “UPF” Alexander.

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**Remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki**

**Tuesday, August 6, 2019**

**Names and Remembrance Ceremony**  
6:00 - 9:00am  
Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex  
Oak Ridge, Tennessee

**Friday, August 9, 2019**

**Peace Lantern Ceremony**  
8:00pm  
Sequoyah Park, Cherokee Blvd, west end  
Knoxville, Tennessee

**Support the Ban Treaty**