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## Our Hidden WMD Program

### Why Bush is spending so much on nuclear weapons.

By Fred Kaplan

Posted Friday, April 23, 2004, at 3:41 PM PT

The budget is busted; American soldiers need more armor; they're running out of supplies. Yet the Department of Energy is spending an astonishing \$6.5 billion on nuclear weapons this year, and President Bush is requesting \$6.8 billion more for next year and a total of \$30 billion over the following four years. This does not include his much-cherished missile-defense program, by the way. This is simply for the maintenance, modernization, development, and production of nuclear bombs and warheads.

Measured in "real dollars" (that is, adjusting for inflation), this year's spending on nuclear activities is equal to what Ronald Reagan spent at the height of the U.S.-Soviet standoff. It exceeds by over 50 percent the average annual sum (\$4.2 billion) that the United States spent—again, in real dollars—throughout the four and a half decades of the Cold War.

There is no nuclear arms race going on now. The world no longer offers many suitable nuclear targets. President Bush is trying to persuade other nations—especially "rogue regimes"—to forgo their nuclear ambitions. Yet he is shoveling money to U.S. nuclear weapons laboratories as if the Soviet Union still existed and the Cold War still raged.

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These are the findings of a virtually unnoticed [report](#) written by weapons analyst Christopher Paine, based on data from official budget documents, and released earlier this month by the Natural Resources Defense Council.

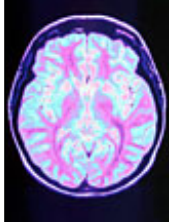
The report raises anew a question that always springs to mind after a close look at the U.S. military budget: What the hell is going on here? Specifically: Do we really need to be spending this kind of money on nuclear weapons? What role do nuclear weapons play in 21<sup>st</sup>-century military policy? How many weapons do we need, to deter what sort of attack or to hit what sorts of targets, with what level of confidence, for what strategic and tactical purposes?

These are questions that haven't been seriously addressed in this country for 30 years. It may be time for a new look.

Ten years ago, spending on nuclear activities amounted to \$3.4 billion, half of today's sum. In President Clinton's last budget, it totaled \$5.2 billion, still one-third less than this year's. (All figures are adjusted for inflation and expressed in 2004 dollars.) Have new threats emerged that can be handled only by a vast expansion or improvement of the U.S. nuclear arsenal? Has our nuclear stockpile deteriorated by a startling degree? There's no evidence


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that either is the case.

Yet Paine quotes a statement from the National Nuclear Security Administration—the quasi-independent agency of the Energy Department that's in charge of the atomic stockpile—declaring, as its goal, "to revitalize the nuclear weapons manufacturing infrastructure." Its guidance on this point is the Bush administration's [Nuclear Posture Review](#) of December 2001, which stated that U.S. strategic nuclear forces must provide "a range of options" not merely to deter but "to defeat any aggressor."

The one aspect of this reorientation that's attracted some attention is the development of a "robust nuclear earth-penetrator" (RNEP)—a warhead that can burrow deep into the earth before exploding, in order to destroy underground bunkers. The U.S. Air Force currently has some non-nuclear earth-penetrators, but they can't burrow deeply enough or explode powerfully enough to destroy some known bunkers. There's a legitimate [debate](#) over whether we would need to *destroy* such bunkers or whether it would be good enough to *disable* them—a feat that the conventional bunker-busters could accomplish. There's a broader question still over whether an American president really would, or should, be the first to fire nuclear weapons in wartime, no matter how tempting the tactical advantage.

The point here, however, is that this new nuclear weapon is fast becoming a reality.

As chronicled in a recent [report](#) by the Congressional Research Service, when Bush started the RNEP program two years ago, it was labeled as strictly a research project. Its budget was a mere \$6.1 million in Fiscal Year 2003 and \$7.1 million for FY 04. Now, all of a sudden, the administration has posted a five-year plan for the program amounting, from FY 2005-09, to \$485 million. The FY05 budget alone earmarks \$27.5 million to begin "development ground tests" on "candidate weapon designs." This isn't research; it's a real weapon in the works.

Paine's report cites other startlers that have eluded all notice outside the cognoscenti. For instance, the Energy Department is building a massive \$4 billion-\$6 billion proton accelerator in order to produce more tritium, the heavy hydrogen isotope that boosts the explosive yield of a nuclear weapon. (Tritium is the hydrogen that makes a hydrogen bomb.) Tritium does decay; eventually, it will have to be refurbished to ensure that, say, a 100-kiloton bomb really explodes with 100 kilotons of force. But Paine calculates that the current U.S. stockpile doesn't require any new tritium until at least 2012. If the stockpile is reduced to the level required under the terms of the most recent strategic arms treaty, none is needed until 2022.

Similar questions are raised about the Energy Department's plans to spend billions on new plutonium pits, high-energy fusion lasers, and supercomputer systems.

There is some debate within the administration over such matters, but it's a peculiar debate. For instance, some Pentagon officials favor spending \$2 billion over the next five years to do a complete makeover on the W-76 warhead inside the U.S. Navy's Trident I missile—giving it an option to explode on the surface, improving its accuracy so it could blow up a blast-hardened missile silo, and so forth. The Trident I is an old missile; it's scheduled to be warehoused in the next few years. But Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has advocated "modernizing" even the "reserve stockpile" of nukes. Opposing this view, many Energy Department officials want to spend less money on these "legacy" weapons and invest it instead on a new generation of smaller, more agile nukes.

The official inside debate, in other words, is whether to build new nuclear weapons that are more usable in modern warfare or whether to do that *and* make the old nuclear weapons more usable, too. A broader debate—over whether to go down this twisted road generally—has not yet begun.

*Fred Kaplan writes the "War Stories" column for **Slate**.*

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