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US 'considering making smaller nuclear weapons'

THE US government is considering making new, smaller nuclear weapons that could be used to hit hard-to-reach targets like underground bunkers, according to a nuclear disarmament group.

The Los Alamos Study Group has published the minutes from a January 10 Pentagon meeting it said was called to plan a secret conference "to discuss what new nuclear weapons to build, how they might be tested... and how to sell the ideas to Congress and the American public".

According to the leaked documents, the summit of military officials and nuclear scientists would be held at US Strategic

Command headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska, possibly in early August.

The Santa Fe, New Mexico-based Los Alamos group did not say how it got the documents which it said showed the "bold sweep of nuclear weapons planning" going on at the White House. A spokeswoman for the Pentagon could not immediately confirm the meeting.

Critics of President George Bush have questioned whether his administration is considering lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons in a conflict.

"If the United States sends signals that we are considering new uses for nuclear weapons, isn't it more likely that other nations will also want to explore greater use or new uses for nuclear weapons?"

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Democrat Senator Carl Levin asked US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld last week.

Mr Rumsfeld said other countries had built underground tunnels to develop, manufacture and store weapons. He said "not having the ability to penetrate and reach them creates a serious obstacle to US national security.

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