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Kennedy warns on nuclear tests

Julian Borger in Washington

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[The Guardian](#)

Senator Edward Kennedy yesterday warned that the Bush administration was preparing to restart the testing of nuclear weapons so it could develop a new generation of bunker-busting bombs and tactical "mini-nukes", potentially triggering a new arms race.

The veteran Democrat from Massachusetts was speaking before a congressional debate on an administration proposal to lift the legal restrictions on research into "mini-nukes" with an explosive force of less than five kilotons.

The proposal is the latest in a series of steps taken by the White House to reduce the hurdles to producing the new nuclear weapons it says may be necessary to confront threats from "rogue states" or terrorist groups.

Mr Kennedy said the Congress and the American public had not fully realised the scale of the changes under way in US nuclear policy. "They have been eclipsed for too long by the war on terrorism and the war against Iraq. We can ignore them no longer."

The administration has repeatedly said it has no current plans to resume nuclear testing, after an 11-year moratorium, but Mr Kennedy said the details of the defence budget suggested that such plans were quietly under way.

"The best way to get the indication of the seriousness of the administration is to follow the request of the money in the defence authorisation," he said. "We budgeted \$700m for fiscal year 2004 [for special projects related to the nuclear arsenal], including funds that could be used to prepare for new tests and cut in half the time needed to conduct them."

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In the next few days, congressional committees will debate a proposal by the departments of defence and energy to repeal a 1994 ban on the research and development on low-yield nuclear bombs.

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Justifying the repeal, the Pentagon said it was necessary to "train the next generation of nuclear weapons scientists and engineers and restore a nuclear weapons enterprise able to respond rapidly and decisively to changes in the international security environment, or unforeseen technical problems in the stockpile."

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Under the Pentagon's classified nuclear posture review, late last year, nuclear weapons could be used against rogue states such as North Korea, Iran, Syria and Libya, and to pre-empt an attack with chemical and biological weapons.

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The defence department is also planning a conference at the strategic command headquarters in Nebraska to rewrite nuclear policy. On the agenda are a new generation of weapons, including mini-nukes and a "robust nuclear earth penetrator" that will burrow into the earth before detonating, destroying command bunkers and arsenals.

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Advocates of the "bunker-busters" argue that the fallout would be contained in the underground cavern hollowed out by the blast. But Matthew McKinzie, a scientist at the Natural Resources Defence Council, said yesterday that calculations based on the Pentagon's own computer modelling suggested that a 0.5 kiloton nuclear warhead would have to burrow 55 metres to eliminate atmospheric fallout.

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Sidney Drell, a nuclear control campaigner and former Stanford University physics professor, said a nuclear warhead which only burrowed 16 metres down would throw a million cubic feet of radioactive dust into the atmosphere.

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