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## **Bush Pushes Nuclear Weapons Development in US**

By Sarah Olson

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In the face of increased Congressional opposition to US nuclear weapons development, the Bush administration appears to be making an end run around governmental checks and balances. The bizarrely named Divine Strake project is a 700-ton explosive experiment, first scheduled to detonate at the Nevada Test Site in June of this year. Thanks to furious grass-roots opposition to the proposal, Divine Strake has been twice delayed, and is currently projecting a detonation date of no sooner than early 2007.

But as the Department of Defense attempts to justify this explosion, many say the government is simply obfuscating and delaying: the blast, they say, is a simulated nuclear explosion designed to provide important test and calibration data for existing and possibly new nuclear weapons. It will happen at the Nevada Test Site after the elections, and it will kick up a 10,000-foot mushroom cloud potentially full of Cold War-era radioactive dust.

Further, as the UN Security Council deadline for Iran to halt its uranium enrichment program passes, and hostilities throughout the Middle East increase, many find the possible threat of US nuclear weapons development to be an unnecessary exacerbation of hostilities. The Bush administration, they say, is engaging belligerent nuclear swashbuckling, and as a result, it is putting US citizens in danger.

### **What Is Divine Strake and Why Should We Care?**

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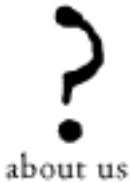
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Divine Strake is a planned test explosion managed by the Department of Defense's combat support organization, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA). According to DTRA spokesperson Irene Smith, "Divine Strake would consist of a surface detonation of 700 tons of ammonium nitrate-fuel oil, or ANFO, above a tunnel, constructed for multiple research efforts. The amount of explosive was selected to produce the energy needed to cause differing levels of ground shock - severe to light - along the length of the tunnel."



Divine Strake is not a nuclear weapons test; it's also not a conventional weapons test. It is simply 700 tons of explosives deposited into the ground and detonated. According to Smith "Divine Strake would not use a nuclear device or nuclear weapon materials, and would not test a weapon." Perhaps it is the uncertainty of precisely what Divine Strake is all about that has local activists so concerned; that, and the threat of a 700-ton explosive disturbing the Cold War-era radioactive dust.

In addition to postponing the Divine Strake test after activists protested, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), which manages the Nevada Test Site, was also forced to withdraw its finding of no significant impact regarding the environmental impact of the explosion at the Nevada Test Site. In a May 26th press release, NNSA announced: "This action is being taken to clarify and provide further information regarding background levels of radiation from global fallout in the vicinity of the Divine Strake experiment. Atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons by several countries in the 1950s and 1960s resulted in the dispersion of radioactive fallout throughout the northern hemisphere. The efforts of the Nevada Site Office are focused on explaining, in a means clearly understandable to all, what background radiation from this fallout means with respect to the contemplated Divine Strake experiment."

According to DTRA's Irene Smith, "NNSA and DTRA are developing a plan that would permit the experiment if it is determined that Divine Strake can be conducted safely, in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, and there is a favorable court ruling on legal proceedings regarding the experiment. DTRA is also assessing other possible sites for the experiment."

Bedford, Indiana was one of those sites until Wednesday when DTRA confirmed it would not seek to detonate Divine Strake in a limestone quarry there. John Blair is the director of the Indiana-based environmental group Valley Watch. "When I learned about Divine Strake coming to Indiana, I sent out an email and I said something kind

of bold - that this will only happen over my dead body. And I kind of meant it." With the risk to Indiana averted, Blair says he and other activists will turn some of their attention to helping west coast activists defeat Divine Strake.

There are two largely interconnected types of objection to the Divine Strake explosion. The first is that Divine Strake appears to be a test to simulate a nuclear weapons explosion, and as such it puts the United States on a path towards a new generation of nuclear weapons. The second is that if Divine Strake were to be detonated at the Nevada Test Site, the blast is likely to unsettle radioactive dust from the Cold War-era nuclear tests.

### **"Slippery Slope"**

Utah Congressman Jim Matheson wrote DTRA's director that he was greatly concerned that Divine Strake was an attempt to build low-yield nuclear devices. The DTRA budget, Matheson writes, "states that the demonstration 'will develop a planning tool that will improve the warfighter's confidence in selecting the smallest proper nuclear yield necessary to destroy underground facilities while minimizing collateral damage.' That sounds like preparation for a low-yield nuclear weapon to me."

While DTRA's Irene Smith declined to comment on whether Divine Strake would provide information for nuclear weapons, she did say that it "is part of the Hard Target Defeat program that develops and demonstrates new weapons, delivery concepts and planning capabilities to defeat hard and deeply buried targets. The improved computer model planning tools that are expected from the Divine Strake experiment could eventually help give combatant commanders greater operational flexibility and confidence in their ability to defeat hardened and deeply buried targets."

In general, DTRA has been reticent on whether they were testing for the effects of nuclear weapons, but they officially declined to rule it out. Hans Kristensen, at the Federation of American Scientists, reported that on April 3rd, DTRA acknowledged in written correspondence that Divine Strake was "a low-yield nuclear weapons calibration simulation against an underground target."

This confirmation alarmed peace and environmental activists. "The reason you want to see the effect of the impact of a weapon is to see if the weapon works," says Vanessa Pierce, director of the environmental advocacy group HEAL Utah.

"This really does represent a slippery slope to creating a new generation of nuclear weapons," says Pierce. She says the Bush administration has consistently pushed for a nuclear weapons program, and Congress has consistently said no.

According to Pierce, Divine Strake represents a thwarting of Congressional will. Traditionally, funding for nuclear weapons goes through the Department of Energy. However, Pierce explains, funding for Divine Strake was obtained through the Department of Defense. By wrapping Divine Strake funding inside the defense budget and decoupling it from traditional nuclear funding sources, the Bush administration succeeded in funding a program that neither Congress nor the public wants.

And this is done in the face of increased global tension regarding nuclear weapons development programs. "The hypocrisy is incredible. You cannot preach temperance from a barstool. And that's precisely what the Bush administration is doing," says Pierce. "Divine Strake sends a message to other nations. It escalates the value of nuclear weapons in the eyes of those who seek to attack this country."

### **"Children of the Bomb"**

J. Truman is the director of Downwinders, an organization advocating for the rights of those downwind from Cold War-era atomic testing at the Nevada Test Site. He was born in 1951, the year the atomic testing started. "It was like a big carnival," Truman says. "We were encouraged to go watch history being made. The government said there was no danger."

First the sheep in the area started dying. Then people began to die too. A 1997 National Cancer Institute Study - the most comprehensive study of the effects of atomic testing at the Nevada Test Site to date - estimated fallout from nuclear weapons testing generated anywhere from 10,000 to 75,000 cases of thyroid cancer. Political activism in the 1980s revealed documents admitting the government knew the danger to downwind populations, even at the time of the tests.

According to Truman, this disaster is easily repeatable. "Divine Strake is just a steady step toward resuming testing. Another round of nuclear weapons development could make us all downwinders."

A lawsuit filed on behalf of two Western Shoshone tribes and downwinders from Nevada and Utah is attempting to stop Divine Strake based on these same health concerns. Attorney Robert Hager accused

the Department of Defense and Bechtel of Nevada of "junk science" and intentionally failing to conduct proper soil samples.

Toxic exposure expert Richard Miller and Physicians for Social Responsibility both filed papers in support of the lawsuit. Miller wrote that "insufficient research [has been done] regarding the health effects of many of the potential radio isotopes possibly buried in the soil that may be entrained in the dust cloud as a result of the Divine Strake event."

Dr. Thomas Fasy is with the executive committee of the New York chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility. Fasy argues: "to a reasonable degree of medical and scientific certainty ... the 'Divine Strake' explosion would disperse large amounts of radioactive particles into the atmosphere ... millions of citizens living downwind ... are at risk of inhaling particles." Fasy also believes "it is virtually certain that this inhalation of radioactive particles would result in an increased frequency of a variety of cancers in the exposed populations. Moreover, the increased risk of developing cancers would be borne disproportionately by the children living downwind."

Opposition to nuclear testing and nuclear weapons development isn't a radical issue for people in the southwest, according to J. Truman. Nearly everyone knows someone who has cancer. Nearly everyone in his generation has been affected by the tests. "Those of us who were children of the bomb are in charge now. We said, 'You're not going to do this to our children. To our grandchildren. No more downwinders. Enough.'"

HEAL Utah's Vanessa Pierce agrees this is an issue shared by many in the west. "When you lose a part of yourself because the federal government put you in harm's way, that's not a transgression you can ever forgive or forget. This goes to the very core of human survival."

### **"Divine Strake Is an Important Wake-Up Call"**

Jacqueline Cabasso is the executive director of the Western States Legal Foundation. She says it's important to understand that Divine Strake is not a nuclear weapons test; it's a test to evaluate the effect of existing nuclear weapons. This distinction should not mollify concern about nuclear weapons use. To the contrary.

"Operationally, nuclear weapons are more fully integrated into the US defense plan than ever before," Cabasso says. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) was previously in charge of all US nuclear weapons;

its arsenal has been streamlined to include both nuclear and conventional weapons under the same roof.

Worse still, she says, the US public doesn't fully understand the reality of US nuclear position. "There is no public discussion or debate about US nuclear weapons. Their existence, their purpose, or their future. Yet they are integrally related to our wars."

"In every aspect, the nuclear weapons program is moving forward. Billions of dollars have been spent. This Divine Strake test is a tiny point of this program that has become visible. But there are many interconnected programs also happening just below the radar of public scrutiny." For example, on Wednesday, even as we discussed Divine Strake, the Nevada Test Site was conducting a subcritical nuclear test.

Divine Strake has a certain symbolic importance. The more the US appears to be considering nuclear weapons use - appears to be moving forward with nuclear weapons development and testing - the more other countries will consider themselves in danger. But, Cabasso says, it's important to consider Divine Strake within the context of the existing nuclear arsenal and the ongoing conventional weapons testing. "This is just one of many, many ongoing tests. Divine Strake should be seen as a wake-up call."

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