"Modernization" of Cold War-Era B61 Proceeding Over Broad Objections

The Obama administration has approved, and Congress in January 2014 fully funded, production of a new thermonuclear warhead under a program dubbed "Life Extension"—the latest version of the B61 known as the B61-12. If completed, it is to be used in war plans involving gravity bombs, as Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris reported in the May 2, 2014 *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.

The $537 million 2014 authorization is only a down-payment on the new B61. With a projected cost of $12.2 billion (up from $4 billion in 2010, and $8 billion in 2012), the authors note, the B61-12 is probably the most expensive nuclear bomb in US history. At approximately $25 million apiece, and weighing 700 pounds, each one is estimated to cost more than if it were made of solid gold ($14.6 million).

Reportedly a 300-to-500 kiloton "variable yield" thermonuclear device, the B61-12 will have 24 to 40 times the destructive power of the bomb that turned seven square miles of Hiroshima into powder and ash in 1945. Yet in the jargon of today's nuclear war planners, the B61 is called a "low yield" nuclear weapon.

For 50 years the B61 has been a reliable federal jobs program for the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, which has engineered 15 different versions. Five B61 types are still in the US arsenal: the B61-3, -4, -10 and -7; along with the B61-11 "earth-penetrating" bomb. The administration has announced plans to retire three of these and "convert" the B61-4 into the B61-12.

Of the roughly 820 B61s still in use today, the *Bulletin* reports, 300 are kept at bases with B61-capable aircraft, "including 184 B61s deployed in Europe." About 250 B61-7 and 50 B61-11 bombs are stored at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri and at Kirtland Air Force Base in New Mexico.

The B61-12 has been in an engineering phase since 2013, and the first production bombs are set to roll out in 2020. About 480 could be built through the mid-2020s.

The US Air Force 's B61-3s and -4s are deployed at European NATO bases in Belgium, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, and Turkey—the United States being the only state in the world to deploy its nuclear weapons in other countries.

Storage depots at Büchel Air Base in west-central Germany where up to 20 US Air Force B61 thermo-nuclear gravity bombs are stored for use on German Tornado jet fighter/bombers. The base has been the object of nuclear weapons protests for 20 years.

In their July/Aug. 2014 *Foreign Affairs* article "Bombs Away: The Case for Phasing Out US Tactical Nukes in Europe," Barry Blechman and Russell Rumbaugh point out that "One NATO exercise in 1962 estimated that 10-15 million German civilians would be killed in a tactical nuclear exchange." This self-destructiveness of nuclear war plans helps explain why the US European Command (EUCOM) has given up "advocating for maintaining nuclear weapons in Europe," the authors report. EUCOM leaders told an oversight task force in 2008 there would be "no military downside to the unilateral withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Europe." Indeed, "prominent critics … have long argued that the military rationale for keeping nuclear weapons in Europe is an anachronism," they wrote. In its 2012 posture review, NATO's ministers pledged to work for a world without nuclear weapons.

In "The Problem With NATO's Nukes," in the Feb. 9, 2016 *Foreign Affairs*, Richard Sokolsky and Gordon Adams report that Gen. James Cartwright, former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has called the B61s "redundant," and that Gen. Colin Powell favored eliminating them in the 1990s when he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

Rush to Deploy Before Critics Kill Program

Opposition to the rebuild program is gaining depth and breadth in the US and Europe. US Senator Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., Rep. Mike Quigley, D-Ill., and Rep. Jared Polis, D-Colo., tried to curtail the program in 2013. In 2010, five of the US's NATO partners (Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, The Netherlands and Norway) asked that the B61s be permanently removed from Europe. In Germany, every major political party has been forced by popular demands to formally call for the permanent withdrawal of the 20 bombs still in Germany.

Major US allies in Europe and high-level European politicians have said that the B61s are "militarily useless." In a widely published op/ed in 2010, former NATO secretary-general Willy Claes and three senior Belgian politicians wrote, "The US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe have lost all military importance."

Another reason for the push to deploy rather than retire is that Germany is planning to replace its fleet of Tornado jet fighter/bombers. The enormous expense of building in a B61-12 capacity for the new replacement jet is not lost on the German parliament.

As *Der Spiegel* online reported Dec. 9, 2016: "By becoming a signatory to the Non-Proliferaton Treaty in 1975, the Germans committed 'not to receive the transfer of nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or of control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly.'

"During negotiations over German reunification in 1990, then-Chancellor Kohl also affirmed Germany's 'renunciation' of the manufacture, possession and control of nuclear weapons.'"

Nuclear abolitionists in Germany are organizing 20 weeks of nonviolent resistance actions at Büchel air base next year, March 26 - August 9, to demand that US nuclear weapons there be sent home—not modernized as NATO plans—and that Germany support the UN effort to ban nuclear weapons. US abolitionists are invited to endorse the campaign and to join the demand to bring the US nukes home for disarmament. A delegation in formation from the US has taken responsibility for nonviolent resistance at the base gates from July 12-18, 2017. Support actions in the US are also invited. For more information visit buechel-atombombenfrei.de and atomwaffenfrei.de (click on International, & English). For information about joining the US group, contact John LaForge at Nukewatch, nukewatch1@lakeland.ws, 715-472-4185.

Follow the Money: Obama's $1 Trillion Arms Race

In 2009, President Obama promised to pursue a "world without nuclear weapons"—but that was then. By 2014, the administration had announced plans for a decade-long, $355 billion nuclear weapons production program to last 30 years and ultimately cost a cool $1 trillion.[1] The eye-popping expenditure has since been generally adopted by the House and Senate in military authorization bills.

One of three new weapons production sites has already opened—the $700 million non-nuclear parts complex run by Honeywell in Kansas City, Missouri. The other two include a uranium fabrication complex at the Y-12 site in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and a plutonium processing works at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) in New Mexico. The latter two programs have run up such enormous cost increases that even the White House has blinked.

Plans for LANL's plutonium "pit" factory—originally expected to cost $660 million—expanded into a $5.8 billion complex. The project was suspended in 2012 and engineers went to work at cost cutting. At Oak Ridge, the cost of the uranium processing "canyon" rocketed from a $6.5 billion to $19 billion. The White House halted the scheme in 2014 and the lab is reworking its plans.

New H-bomb production is advertised as "revitalization," "modernization," "refurbishment" and "improvement." The terms are used by major arms contractors and their congressional representatives who speak of the "40-year-old submarine warhead" (known as the W-76), or who voice concern over factory "fires, explosions and workplace injuries" at existing facilities that are "deplorable" because the equipment "breaks down on a daily basis," the *New York Times* reported.

Rebuild proponents neglect to mention that 15,000 plutonium warheads are currently maintained at Pantex, Texas, and are good for 50 years, according to a report in *The Guardian*.[2] The $1 trillion proposal is said to re-establish enough H-bomb building infrastructure to produce up to 80 new warheads every year by 2030.

The military currently deploys almost 5,000 nuclear warheads—on submarines, land-based missiles, and heavy bombers (the *Guardian* reported exactly 4,804)—even though former Pentagon chief Chuck Hagel signed a 2012 report that concluded that no more than 900 nuclear warheads were "necessary." The report recommended abolishing 3,500 warheads now in ready reserve, saying warhead numbers are much larger than required.

Independent observers, watchdogs and think tanks have argued for decades that the arsenal can be drastically reduced and made less dangerous: a) by not replacing retired warheads; b) by taking deployed warheads off "alert" status; and c) by separating warheads from missiles and bombs. This separation would lengthen warning-to-launch times, ease international tensions and reduce the likelihood of accidental or unauthorized launches.

Greg Mello of the Los Alamos Study Group, which watchdogs the LANL, told *The Guardian* the reason that new H-bomb production is even being considered is simply "private greed." Ever since they were privatized in 2006, for-profit corporations now run all the government's nuclear weapons labs. Mello said, "The nuclear weapons labs are sized for the Cold War, and they need a Cold War to keep that size."

Additionally, in a report leaked in 2013, the Navy itself questioned the need for producing new warheads. (The Navy controls at least 1,152 warheads spread across its 14 Trident ballistic missile submarines.) And James Doyle, a 17-year veteran scientist at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (who was fired in July 2014 for independently publishing a scholarly article defending nuclear disarmament), told *The Guardian*, "I've never seen the justification articulated for the 50-to-80 pits per year by 2030."

The $1 trillion estimate does not include a few hundred billion dollars more for new nuclear war-fighting machinery, often called "delivery systems" or "platforms," such as:

• The $80 billion cost of building 12 new ballistic missile submarines to replace the Navy's Trident fleet. Sen. Richard Blumenthall, D-CT, told New London's *The Day* Sept. 23, "The essence here is this boat will be the strongest, stealthiest, most sustainable of any in the history of the world."[3]

• The Air Force's $81 billion plans for a new nuclear bomber called the Long-Range Strike Bomber Program. The Air Force reportedly wants 80-100 of them at roughly $550 million apiece. The chilling rationale for these bombers was provided by Lt. Gen. Stephen Wilson, chief of Global Strike Command, who said Sept. 16, 2014, "It will be essential as we move forward to have a bomber force that can penetrate any place on the globe and hold any target on the planet at risk."[4]

• A planned replacement of 450 Minuteman III ICBMs known as the "Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent" that a Feb. 4, 2014 study by RAND said would cost between $84 and $219 billion[5]—set to be deployed in existing silos after 2030.

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[1] William Broad and David Sanger, "US Ramping Up Major Renewal In Nuclear Arms," *New York Times*, Sept. 21, 2014
[2] Caty Enders, "Congress pushes nuclear expansion despite accidents at weapons lab," *Guardian,* Sept. 29, 2014
[3] Scott Ritter, "Blumenthal, Courtney tout program for Trident sub successor," *The Day*, Sept. 23, 2014
[4] Joseph Raatz, "Air Force leaders discuss nuclear enterprise," Air Force Global Strike Command Public Affairs, Sept, 16, 2014
[5] Stephen Young, "The End of the New ICBM," DefenseOne.com, Feb. 18, 2014; & Joseph Raatz, "Modernization of US nuclear forces not optional," Global Strike Command Public Affairs, Sept. 19, 2014