

Calls to Scrap ICBMs Growing

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the Navy and personal advisor to President Ronald Reagan, Paul Nitze.

In a July 8, 2024, letter to President Biden, some 716 scientists, including ten Nobel laureates and 23 members of the National Academies called for the program to be cancelled. The scientists recommended eliminating the land-based missiles entirely, calling them “expensive, dangerous, and unnecessary.” It was the second time in three years that a large group of scientists urged the White House to eliminate ICBMs. On Dec. 17, 2021, more than 700 scientists and engineers urged Biden to “cancel the program to replace existing ICBMs,” adding “We also urge you to consider eliminating silo-based ICBMs.”

One such scientist, Robert Goldston, Professor of Astrophysical Sciences at Princeton University, put the enormous cost in perspective. Writing in *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* in 2020, Prof. Goldston wrote, “ICBMs would be too expensive even if they were free.... They have overwhelmingly negative value and therefore should be eliminated.” Sébastien Philippe, Sharon K. Weine, and Frank N. von Hippel, all with Princeton’s Program on Science & Global Security, wrote for Defense One online last June that termination of Sentinel “would make the country much safer while saving taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars.”

On December 1, 2023, *Scientific American* declared in an editorial, “Plans to modernize nuclear weapons are dangerous and unnecessary: The U.S. should back away from updating its obsolescent nuclear weapons, in particular silo-launched missiles that needlessly risk catastrophe.” The editors even asked: “Who today benefits from disinterring the arms race?” answering, “Only defense-industry shareholders and military contractors near silos in North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and Nebraska.”

The point amplifies one made in 2021 by the Federation of American Scientists in “Siloed Thinking: A closer look at the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent,” a report that argued the Sentinel program “is being driven by intense industry lobbying and politicians from states that will benefit most from it economically, rather than a clear assessment of the purpose of the new ICBM.” In March this year, Northrop Grumman claimed, “more than 10,000 people are employed on Sentinel across the country,” according to *The Hill*.

According to Responsible Statecraft online for July 31, 2024, “Northrop Grumman and its subsidiaries contributed \$1.2 million to members of the Senate ICBM Coalition between 2012 and 2020 and over \$15 million to members of the Senate and House Armed Services strategic forces subcommittees, and to the Senate and House Appropriations subcommittees on defense.”

Missile Force Personnel Scandals Ignored

Among the scores of critiques of the Sentinel and calls for its cancellation, Nukewatch hasn’t seen a single reference to the scandals that have rocked the ICBM system — embarrassments that we chronicled in our Revised Edition of *Nuclear Heartland* (2015). High-profile fraud and corruption among personnel of the missile system have resulted in hundreds of demotions, firings, courts martial, and forced retirements. Scores of Air Force missileers and several command officers from among the 9,600-strong Minuteman missile system have been punished or relieved of duty for distributing illegal drugs, ignoring safety and security rules, failing proficiency exercises, sleeping at the controls, and cheating on exams, as well as for “burnout,” sexual assaults, and spousal abuse. Some of the more well-reported crimes or misdemeanors include the following:

- In 2006, top-secret fuses made for Minuteman III missile warheads were mistakenly shipped to Taiwan from Hill Air Force Base in Utah.

- In 2008, three of four on-duty launch control officers at Minot AFB were discharged from the service after falling asleep at the controls that contained launch codes for ten missiles.

- In 2010, a computer glitch knocked fifty Minuteman III missiles off line at F.E. Warren AFB “for longer than an hour.” Five different Launch Control Centers lost all contact with the ten missiles they each control.

- An Air Force study obtained by the Associated Press in 2013 found that court-martial rates in the Minuteman missile fields in 2011 and 2012 were more than twice as high as in the overall Air Force. By June 2015, there were four active courts-martial underway at Minot AFB for drug use, rape, assault, sexual assault on an unconscious person, and larceny.

- In 2013, seventeen missile launch crew members were fired from Minot AFB along with Lt. Col. Randy Olson, after the finding of a long list of potential safety security code violations and protection errors.

- In 2013, Col. David Lynch, commander of Malmstrom AFB, was forced into retirement following a failed safety and security inspection of the 341st missile wing.

- In 2013, Brig. Gen. Michael Carey was demoted from Maj. Gen. and removed from his position as head of the 20th Air Force for drunken carousing, solicitation, and sexual harassment while on a presidential junket in Moscow.

- Missileers based in Minot, North Dakota and Malmstrom, Montana, were given possible career-ending reprimands in 2013 for leaving launch control center blast doors open, in violation of strict protocols.

- In 2014, two Malmstrom AFB missile launch crew administrators were accused of running a narcotics distribution system involving missile launch crews across six air bases. Messages they sent to 11 others concerned ecstasy and amphetamines.

- In 2014, nearly the entire chain of command, nine Colonels and Lt. Colonels, were relieved of duty at Malmstrom AFB over their failure to detect widespread cheating on proficiency exams by launch control officers. Earlier, 92 Malmstrom missileers were suspended, decertified, and barred from launch control duty for cheating on the tests.

- In 2018, the AP obtained transcripts of seven courts martial proceedings showing that service members entrusted with guarding the ICBMs bought, distributed, and used the hallucinogen LSD and other mind-altering illegal drugs. Fourteen airmen were disciplined, and six were convicted of LSD use, distribution or both.

Missile field duty, like launch center staffing and guard duty, involves numbing tedium, plagued with long hours of isolation and boredom and haunted by high-level discussions about eliminating the missiles. The work is understood by those assigned to it as a career cul-de-sac, always overshadowed for promotions and commendations by colleagues in war zones in the Middle East, Ukraine, and the South China Sea. *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* put it this way in 2015: “Given the significant number of ‘expert’ studies that have appeared over the past five years suggesting that the ICBM leg of the nuclear triad should be deactivated, it is no wonder that morale has been a persistent challenge in the missile force....”

*** Nukewatch has published (in 1988 and 2015) two editions of Nuclear Heartland, a guide to the history, locations, intended use, and recurring scandals of the archaic ICBMs. The Revised Edition is available discounted for \$10 plus postage.**



A uranium ore truck, with its discreet “radioactive” sign and travelling unlawfully, was escorted off reservation by Navajo Nation police. Image shared by Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren.

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While ignoring months of pressure and over 17,000 petitions from tribal members and environmental advocates, Arizona Governor Katie Hobbs responded to the Navajo Nation President and arranged to uphold the uranium transport ban temporarily while Navajo Nation and Energy Fuels negotiate terms for its safest possible transport. On August 29, Navajo Nation reaffirmed its opposition to radioactive transports by amending the 2012 ban. The new legislation extends the required notification time prior to transport from four to seven days, and authorizes the Navajo Nation EPA to create “reasonable license fees, bonding requirements, route restrictions, curfews and other terms.” It no longer acknowledges the Nation’s right to exclude non-Tribal members from entry onto Navajo Nation lands.

The transport pause remains in effect, so while a small battle has been won for now, the struggle against nuclear colonialism will continue. The land where the Pinyon Plain mine is located was stolen from the Havasupai people who oppose the mine. Under the 1872 mining law still in effect in many areas, lands such as Pinyon Plain, were taken from the original Indigenous owners and given to anyone who could prove there were minerals. The ore is transported through ancestral lands of the Diné People, Ute Mountain Utes, and other tribal communities, to the mill — without free, prior, or informed consent of any.

Over 500 abandoned uranium mines remain on Navajo Nation without remediation. The Navajo Birth Cohort Study has shown that at birth, babies are already carrying uranium in their bodies in areas uranium mining previously occurred. Thousands of Navajo have been killed or sickened with cancers, birth defects, and other terminal illnesses as a result of uranium mining and milling. Extraction at Pinyon Plain continues, and uranium ore is expected to be delivered to the mill as interstate commerce laws of the U.S. federal government protect industries in spite of other nations’ laws. Meanwhile, the Indigenous-led organization Haul No! continues to spread awareness while monitoring the mine and transportation route.

On both the national and global scale, the economic outlook for uranium is on the rise as it is necessary to fuel both the renewed arms race and push for new commercial reactors. The price of uranium reached a 17-year high in January after many had assumed the days of uranium mining in the United States were over. U.S. production hit a low at 21,000 pounds in 2021 with only three operating mines. However, during the first six months of 2024 (the U.S. Energy Information Administration reported) uranium ore production via in-situ leaching reached 180,242 pounds, putting it on track to be the highest since 2019. This does not include the astounding 9-million-pound stockpile stranded at the Pinyon Plain mine. Navajo Nation and Energy Fuels must negotiate an agreement on monitoring, fees, and regulations, prior to restarting transport. In addition to the five mines currently operating in Wyoming, Arizona, and Texas, new mines in Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming are projected to open or reopen in the coming years. — Sources: Grand Canyon Trust, Fall/Winter 2024; U.S. Energy Information Administration, Sept. 19 & May 23, 2024; 25th Navajo Nation Council, Aug. 26, 2024; and Navajo Birth Cohort Study Preliminary Results, Oct. 7, 2019



Routine Minuteman missile tests from Vandenberg AFB in California like this are called defensive, while if China, North Korea, or Iran test theirs it is called “provocative” and “threatening.” Photo: fas.org