



Nuclear Weapons Forever: The U.S. Plan to Rebuild the Nuclear Weapons Complex

by Andrew Lichterman

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March 19 marks the fifth anniversary of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, a war launched on the pretext of ending a nuclear weapons program that did not exist. That same day, the U.S. Department of Energy will hold public hearings in Livermore, California on its current plan to modernize the very real laboratories and factories where the U.S. designs, builds, and maintains nuclear weapons. This plan would allow the government to keep thousands of nuclear weapons for many decades to come, and to build thousands more should it choose to do so.

The focus for the March 19 hearings is an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for what now is called "Complex Transformation." This is the latest label for the ongoing work of rebuilding nuclear weapons research facilities and manufacturing plants worn out and heavily contaminated by the manufacture of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons over more than four decades, starting with the World War II Manhattan Project.

The purpose of an upgraded nuclear weapons complex is to retain U.S. dominance in nuclear weapons for many decades to come, with the ability to expand production capacity and to design and deploy new kinds of nuclear weapons if desired. Commander of U.S. Strategic Command General Kevin Chilton recently told reporters that "As we look to the future – and I believe we are going to need a nuclear deterrent for this country for the remainder of this century, the 21st century – I think what we need is a modernized nuclear weapon to go with our modernized delivery platforms." (*Agence France-Presse*, March 4, 2008) The EIS describes the "Complex Transformation strategy" as requiring "a responsive infrastructure to design, develop, and field new weapon systems if needed." At the same time, the missiles and aircraft that deliver nuclear weapons to their targets also are being modernized, and new generations of delivery systems are in development. The goal, as a 2002 Air Force planning document put it, is to "prepare the US for an uncertain future by maintaining US qualitative superiority in nuclear warfighting capabilities in the 2020–2040 time frame."

Today, the work of designing, building, and maintaining U.S. nuclear bombs and warheads is done at eight sites in seven states. The laboratories at Los Alamos, New Mexico and Livermore, California do weapons research and design and a variety of tasks to keep existing nuclear weapons ready to go. The Los Alamos Lab also makes the plutonium "pits" that are the atomic trigger for thermonuclear weapons. The Sandia laboratories, in Albuquerque, New Mexico and Livermore, California, do engineering work on nuclear

weapons and design and manufacture non-nuclear components. All three laboratories also conduct non-nuclear military research. The Nevada Test Site, where over a thousand nuclear weapons were exploded in the atmosphere and underground before the 1992 testing moratorium, continues to be used for underground experiments called "subcritical" tests that do not have a significant nuclear yield. These tests further develop nuclear weapons knowledge and help to keep the test site ready to resume full-scale nuclear testing if desired.

The remaining parts for nuclear weapons are manufactured at plants across the country. The Y-12 plant at Oak Ridge, Tennessee makes uranium parts and other components, including the "secondaries" that provide the fuel for the thermonuclear blast triggered by the explosion of the plutonium primary in most modern nuclear weapons. The Kansas City plant in Missouri makes and tests non-nuclear components. Georgia's Savannah River facility extracts tritium, a radioactive isotope of hydrogen used to increase nuclear weapons yield, and fills the tritium containers for nuclear weapons. The Pantex plant in Amarillo, Texas assembles, modifies, and dismantles nuclear weapons, and also makes high explosive components.

The most important decisions addressed by the Complex Transformation EIS concern the modernization or replacement of factories to make the core components for nuclear weapons: the plutonium pits and the secondaries. The government wants to build additional facilities at Los Alamos to provide an "interim capability" for pit production, whether or not a new, larger factory will be located there for the long term. Los Alamos is the first choice for a new plutonium pit factory, and the Y-12 plant at Oak Ridge the preferred option for production of secondaries and other uranium components. Other locations under consideration for both uranium and plutonium factory operations include Savannah River, Pantex, and the Nevada Test Site.

The Complex Transformation EIS considers alternatives that would allow from 50 to 200 plutonium pits to be produced every year. Fifty nuclear weapons are enough to drop the bomb on every American city with a population over 350,000, from New York and Los Angeles to Austin, Cleveland, and Colorado Springs.

The endless quest for nuclear superiority is part of the larger gamble that U.S. elites are making with all our futures: that the pursuit of global military dominance will allow them to shore up their slipping economic hegemony for a few decades more. Nuclear weapons ultimately back massive U.S. conventional forces and an aggressive military posture world wide. As the Air Force Strategic Planning Directive for Fiscal Years 2006–2023 made clear, nuclear weapons provide "... a credible deterrent umbrella under which conventional forces operate and, if deterrence fails, strike a wide variety of high-value targets with a highly reliable, responsive and lethal nuclear force... Desired effects include: Freedom for U.S. and Allied forces to operate, employ, and engage at will..."

All of this is taking place in a context where the United States has a policy – and a demonstrated practice – of preventive war-making, with the "proliferation" of nuclear weapons ranking first on the list of public rationales for war. While it ignores its own Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty obligation to negotiate the elimination of its nuclear arsenal, the U.S. government claims the right to attack any state it chooses to portray as a nuclear danger. With the Iraq war, we saw how easily that threat could be used as the core of a propaganda campaign for a war of aggression. With the relentless effort to

portray Iran as an imminent nuclear threat, we see the arrogance of violent, undemocratic elites who believe that they can get away with it again.

Nuclear weapons continue to pose fundamental threats to human security. They play a key role in sustaining the global climate of fear that justifies militarism and military industrial complexes everywhere. Their manufacture contaminates the earth with radioactive materials that can last for thousands of years. Their continued existence in a global context that increasingly resembles those that have brought major wars between rising and declining centers of economic power in the past poses a risk of nuclear catastrophe that may be greater than we faced during the Cold War. These hearings are an appropriate focus for bringing some of the forces that drive us to war to light, and to say no to this war, and the next.

San Francisco Bay Area hearings on Complex Transformation are:

Tracy/Tuesday March 18, 2008
Holiday Inn Express
3751 N. Tracy Blvd.
6–10 pm

Livermore/Wednesday March 19, 2008
Robert Livermore Community Center
4444 East Avenue
11 am–3 pm and 6pm–10 pm

For a schedule of other hearings on Complex Transformation around the country:
<http://www.nnsa.doe.gov/docs/ComplexTrans/PublicHearings.pdf>.

For additional information: <http://www.wslfweb.org/whatsnew.htm>.

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