



U.S. Ignores Its Legal Commitment to Dismantle Nuclear Weapons



The United States is obligated to dismantle its nuclear weapons under the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which it signed and ratified. The essential rationale of the NPT is that nations, which do not have nuclear weapons, agree to forego acquiring them so long as the nuclear weapons states, including the U.S., eliminate theirs.

Some U.S nuclear weapons were dismantled during the final years of the Cold War due to obsolescence, changing requirements and occasional safety concerns. Many more have been dismantled since the 1990s as a result of unilateral or bilateral arms reduction measures. Although not required by international agreements such as SALT I and II (Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty) or START I and II (Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty), the United States dismantled many nuclear warheads that had been mounted on delivery vehicles limited by these treaties.

In May 2002, the Bush Administration signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) with Russia, pledging to bring deployed strategic nuclear warheads down to about 2000. SORT does not, however, require a single warhead to be dismantled.

From 1975 through 1996, about 1,000 warheads a year, on average, were completely dismantled by the Department of Energy (DOE). However, in 1997 DOE's Pantex Plant in Texas dismantled only about

half of its scheduled warheads due to accidents and other problems. As of mid-1998, approximately 1,500 warheads awaited dismantlement. That work was scheduled to be completed by September 2002. Since that date, DOE has kept its dismantlement timetable secret. Outside experts believe dismantlement at Pantex has slowed to a trickle of ten or fewer a year, barely enough to handle those being taken apart to be closely examined for deterioration.

During recent years Pantex and the Oak Ridge, Tennessee facility, have shifted away from dismantlement to focus on the refurbishment and modification of existing weapons through the Stockpile Life Extension Program (SLEP). At Oak Ridge, DOE acknowledges a seven to ten year backlog of weapons awaiting uranium component disassembly. Storage capacity for these dangerous materials is a critical problem at Oak Ridge.

Despite these problems, the Bush Administration designated only \$37.7 million for dismantlement in Fiscal Year 2004. This is a mere fraction of the \$6.38 billion slated to be spent on research and development for DOE's ambitious nuclear weapons modernization program. Major projects scheduled for Oak Ridge are intended to upgrade nuclear weapons, not to dismantle them. A Modern Pit Facility is being designed to produce an additional 125-450 of these warhead cores a year.

Current and Projected Nuclear Forces

Category of Forces	2002 Actual	2007 Bush Plan	2012 Bush Plan
Operationally deployed strategic warheads	6,200	3800	1,700-2,200
Strategic warheads for submarines in overhaul	300	300	200
Deployed "non-strategic" warheads	800	800	800
Responsive force and spares	700	2000	1,800-2,300
Warheads maintained in the inactive stockpile	2700	3800	5,700
Total warheads in U.S. nuclear stockpile	10,700	10,700	10,700

Sources: Dr. Robert Civiak, *More Work for the Weapons Labs, Less Security for the Nation*, May 2002



Department of Energy Photograph

Dismantlement workers at the Pantex site in Texas.

Pushing Dismantlement... Elsewhere

More than thirty years have passed since the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty entered into force in 1970. The Cold War ended more than a decade ago. The U.S. is currently moving to block nations such as Iran and North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons and to assist Russia in dismantling and securing its nuclear stockpile for fear of terrorist theft. Yet the Bush Administration remains intent on putting most of its retired weapons into bunkers, saving them for some unknown future use.

As of December, 2003, the Bush Administration had still not delivered its Stockpile Memorandum to Congress detailing plans for implementing the Moscow Treaty. Until there is a commitment to dismantle the weapons taken out of deployment, the Department of Energy is required to maintain the current arsenal of an estimated 10,000 nuclear weapons. Under this posture, Russia may be less willing to dismantle the warheads it takes out of deployment, leading to a greater risk of theft and potential terrorist use. A U.S. commitment to dismantlement would also help demonstrate good faith adherence to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, making it harder for other nations to rationalize their own nuclear aspirations.

Reductions in the stockpile would also enable DOE to cancel many of its modernization programs. For example, tritium gas from retired warheads could be recycled into still-deployed warheads, postponing any need for tritium production for several decades. Only the newest warheads would be deployed, countering DOE's premise for a Modern Pit Facility. A reduced need for refurbishments at Pantex would go hand-in-hand with an increased tempo for dismantlement.

Reductions in the stockpile would enable the United States to begin multilateral negotiations with China and other nuclear powers to seek even deeper cuts in nuclear arsenals, consistent with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. This would strengthen the international coalition opposed to the emergence of new nuclear weapons states.

An increased pace of dismantlement will help make the world a safer place for this and future generations. To move forward, the Bush Administration should announce a schedule of arsenal reductions under the SORT Treaty and commit to dismantling the vast majority of warheads taken out of operation. Absent Administration action, Congress should require dismantlement of warheads no longer needed for deployment, slow the pace of refurbishments and modifications, suspend tritium production, and halt spending for new nuclear weapons production facilities such as the plutonium bomb plant.

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