

U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policies and Programs

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Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here at Heritage, where so much sound thinking on so many subjects has occurred. Today you will hear from some important thinkers who have helped shape American thinking on security matters. As keynote speaker, it is my job to provide a context for their presentations and your discussion. To do so, I want to describe the Administration's approach to the role of nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War era.

Our policy has been frequently mischaracterized in the press and by some in Congress. Some of these mischaracterizations are simple partisan politics. But others arise from a misunderstanding of what our policy actually is and what its implications are. We've allowed this misunderstanding to arise by not being clear about our policy. That's what I want to rectify today. I'd love to convince you that we're right. I'd settle for convincing you that we've thought through the problem and have a coherent rationale for what we are doing.

Overview of the Nuclear Posture Review

The President made his position clear from the very start. On 1 May 2001, at the National Defense University, he said:

“We can, and will, change the size, the composition, the character of our nuclear forces in a way that reflects the reality that the Cold War is over. I am committed to achieving a credible deterrent with the lowest-possible number of nuclear weapons consistent with our national security needs, including our obligations to our allies. My goal is to move quickly to reduce nuclear forces.”

But when that speech was made, we had not yet articulated the conceptual basis for implementing reductions. For over a decade, we'd spoken of the post-Cold war world. Now it was time to conduct a fundamental examination of the role of nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War world. The results of that reexamination were described in the December 2001 Nuclear Posture Review which set forth the direction for American nuclear forces over the next decade and beyond. In my view, this was the most sweeping conceptual change in nuclear thinking since the Sloss study in the late 1970s.

The Nuclear Posture Review reaffirmed that nuclear weapons remain a crucial element of U.S. national security strategy. But, consistent with the changed international environment, the Nuclear Posture Review represented a radical departure from the past and a fundamental rethinking of the roles and purposes of nuclear weapons. Among the many changes, three are the most important:

- Instead of focusing on deterring the nuclear threat posed by a single, specific enemy, as in the Cold War, it established the need for a capabilities-based force to accomplish four distinct defense policy goals.
- Instead of treating nuclear weapons in isolation, it considered them as an integrated component of American military power, thus allowing us to achieve national security objectives through other means that previously could only have been addressed with nuclear weapons.
- Instead of treating the future as static and predictable, it recognized that requirements could change and that U.S. nuclear forces must be prepared to respond to those changes.

Let me discuss each of these in turn.

The Policy Goals of U.S. Nuclear Forces

Under the new thinking of the Nuclear Posture Review, our nuclear forces serve four goals:

- To *assure* allies of our commitment to them and our ability to make good on that commitment. The implications of this goal are that forces must be effective, reliable, and clearly designed to respond to a broad range of contingencies, not just to a nuclear attack on the United States. Assurance serves our non-proliferation objectives because those allies with the capability to develop nuclear weapons can continue to forego doing so, safe in the knowledge of the reliability of the U.S. nuclear umbrella.
- To *dissuade* potential adversaries from trying to match our capabilities or from engaging in strategic competition. This requires that we maintain a combination of forces and infrastructure so that no potential power can have any hope of matching our capability and thus will be dissuaded from attempting to do so.
- To *deter* any threats that do emerge. This implies an ability to hold at risk those elements of power that a potential adversary values.
- To *defend* against and *defeat* those threats that, for whatever reason, we do not deter.

The first two policy goals help determine the size of our nuclear forces, while the second two govern the nature of those forces.

The New Triad

If I had spoken here a few years ago, I would have spoken of a “triad” of bombers, ICBMs and Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles, each with unique strengths that operated synergistically to ensure our ability to retaliate under any condition of war initiation. The Nuclear Posture Review broadens our thinking to encompass a New Triad of flexible response capabilities consisting of:

- Non-nuclear and nuclear strike capabilities including systems for command and control,

- Active and passive defenses including ballistic missile defenses,
- R&D and industrial infrastructure needed to develop, build, and maintain nuclear offensive forces and defensive systems.

To provide a practical means to implement this new, integrated approach, the President established a new Strategic Command, with responsibility for global strike—both nuclear and non-nuclear—and for integrating missile defenses with offenses.

Contrary to some press reports, this new triad—and the Nuclear Posture Review generally—was not intended to lower the nuclear threshold, but continued the trend of the past decade towards a reduced reliance on nuclear forces. The new emphasis on ballistic missile defenses means that the U.S. will no longer be as heavily dependent on offensive strike forces to enforce deterrence as it was during the Cold War. The strengthening of non-nuclear strike forces—including precision conventional strike and information operations—means that the U.S. will be less dependent than it has been in the past on nuclear forces to provide offensive deterrent capabilities.

Present and Future Nuclear Stockpiles

Our new approach, coupled with the judgment that we no longer need to plan our forces as if Russia presented an immediate threat to the United States, was the basis for the reductions—codified in the Moscow Treaty—in operationally deployed strategic nuclear forces. Over the next eight years, the United States will cut the number of deployed warheads by approximately two-thirds from today's level. By 2012, we will have between 1700 and 2200 operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads. But the experience of the past decade and a half makes it clear that it is unwise for us to base our security on the false belief that we can predict the future. Thus, while dramatically reducing the number of deployed weapons, we must plan against an uncertain future.

Specifically, the United States needs to be prepared to respond to both unforeseen technical problems and unanticipated geopolitical change. One element of our strategy is a responsive nuclear weapons infrastructure, which I will discuss in a moment. But another component of such a response is the non-deployed nuclear weapons stockpile.

In hindsight, the Administration took much longer than we expected to define the required size of the non-deployed stockpile. The Nuclear Posture Review simply said there would be such a hedge. But we were slow to move to an understanding of just how big a hedge was needed. We thus allowed the perception that we were keeping the entire Cold War stockpile. We're now just completing an assessment that will clarify the long-term requirements for non-deployed warheads. As a result of that assessment, it is clear that the total 2012 nuclear stockpile will be substantially reduced from current levels. But reductions will not lower the stockpile to 1700-2200 total warheads. Additional strategic warheads over and above the operationally deployed strategic warheads will be needed for three purposes:

- To support routine maintenance of the stockpile including logistics spares and replacing warheads eliminated during destructive surveillance testing.

- To hedge against geopolitical changes, such as a return to an arms race mentality in Russia.
- To guard against technical failures.

In regard to this last point, we plan to preserve the traditional diversity of warhead types in the overall stockpile in order to mitigate technical risks. Although we are making progress in restoring a responsive nuclear weapons production infrastructure, we are not yet able to produce replacement warheads in sufficient quantity to respond if a technical problem called into question the safety or reliability of one or more warhead types. Thus, for example, we are planning to deploy two types of ICBM warheads—the W87 and W78—and will retain sufficient numbers of these two types in reserve so that if a technical failure occurred in one type, there would be enough warheads of the other type to restore operationally-deployed ICBM force levels. We seek to apply this approach, where appropriate, to other nuclear delivery means.

In addition to strategic forces, a small number of warheads (greatly reduced from Cold War levels) for U.S. non-strategic nuclear forces will be retained, among other things, to meet commitments to allies.

Responsive Nuclear Weapons Infrastructure

Of the many new concepts in the Nuclear Posture Review, one of the most important is formal recognition that a robust defense R&D and industrial base—a key element of which is a *responsive nuclear weapons infrastructure*—is as important as strike forces or defenses in achieving our overall defense goals. Right now, the responsive infrastructure is only a concept. But we are beginning to understand what it would look like. A truly responsive infrastructure would let us do the following:

- ***Fix stockpile problems:*** For a relatively minor problem, our goal is to be able to deploy warheads modified to overcome the problem within one year.
- ***Adapt weapons:*** Our goal is to achieve a capability to modify or repackage existing warheads within 18 months of a decision to enter engineering development.
- ***New warhead design, development and initial production:*** Our goal is to be able to design, develop, and begin production of a new warhead within 3-4 years of a decision to do so. While there are no current plans to develop new weapons, gaining the capability is an important pre-requisite to deep reductions in the nuclear stockpile.
- ***Quantity production of new warheads:*** Our goal is to restore sufficient production capacity to produce new warheads in sufficient quantities to meet any defense needs that arise without disrupting ongoing refurbishments.
- ***Support for force augmentation:*** We must assure that services such as warhead transportation, tritium support, etc., are capable of being carried out on a time scale consistent with the Department of Defense’s ability to deploy weapons.

- ***Underground nuclear test readiness:*** We have no plan to resume testing; our efforts to improve test readiness are a prudent hedge against the possibility of a problem arising in the stockpile that cannot be confirmed, or a fix certified, without a nuclear test. Our goal of an 18-month test readiness posture is appropriate because that is a typical time to diagnose a problem and design a test to confirm the problem or certify the fix.

If we can employ this infrastructure to produce new or replacement warheads on a timescale in which geopolitical threats could emerge, or in response to stockpile “surprise”, then we can go much further in reducing the standing stockpile. Our vision is this: the reductions in non-deployed weapons free up money from life extension starting in a few years. That money is plowed into a responsive infrastructure. By late next decade, we can then drastically reduce non-deployed weapons, depending on the new infrastructure for our hedge.

Near Term Implications

I’ve talked about numbers, but the Nuclear Posture Review has implications for qualitative aspects as well. Let me turn to two specific elements of our nuclear weapons program and how they relate to the principles we have been discussing. The Nuclear Posture Review highlighted the importance of being able to adjust to changing deterrence requirements. We have two efforts in this regard. First, we have a modest research effort on advanced concepts to meet potential new or emerging requirements. We also are seeking to continue the feasibility and cost study for a Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (RNEP).

We intend to use advanced concepts funds to investigate new ideas, not necessarily new weapons. For example, we are beginning a study examining the feasibility of adapting an existing nuclear warhead to provide a cruise missile capability that incorporates enhanced safety and use control. Some additional work is underway to examine the feasibility of improving warhead design margins in order to ensure continued high confidence in warhead reliability without nuclear testing. We are also in discussion with the Air Force on examining the utility of nuclear weapons to destroy chemical and biological agents.

Perhaps the single most contentious issue in our budget request is continued funding for the RNEP study. This study is to determine whether existing warheads – the B61 and the B83— could be adapted without nuclear testing to improve our ability to hold at risk hardened, deeply buried facilities that may be important to a future adversary.

Public and Congressional Perceptions

The possibility of developing an earth-penetrating weapon is a good bridge to the final topic I want to discuss: public and Congressional perceptions. There is a clear military utility to such a weapon, which is why the Defense Department asked for it to be studied. The requirement dates back several years. Outside studies always come up with engaging hardened and deeply buried targets as the most important new nuclear requirement. Despite this utility, for now all we want to do is study the issue. We will move beyond the study stage only if the President approves and funds are authorized and appropriated by the Congress. No decision will be made until the study is completed. The law is clear: Congressional approval would be required to move to engineering development and additional Congressional approval would be required if the President were to approve production.

What we are doing is almost identical to what the last Administration did (they adapted the B61-11 to penetrate a few meters into soil; we want to do the same thing into rock). So why has this become so contentious? After all, even if deployed, this weapon does not represent a change from our policy goal of deterrence. Deterrence requires we be able to hold at risk that which an adversary values. Since more and more we see a move toward putting things underground, our efforts to determine the potential effectiveness of an earth-penetrating weapon reflect a continued emphasis on enhancing deterrence.

One possible reason is that we haven't told a coherent overall nuclear policy story. Last year, several unrelated things happened:

- The Administration's National Security Strategy reaffirmed a previous policy of preemption in rare circumstances; that is, the United States would not necessarily wait to be attacked with WMD before it could address real threats.
- We sought repeal of the Prohibition on Low-Yield Warhead Development, which banned research that "could lead to" designs of less than five kilotons. We did so to get the freedom to explore new concepts without the chilling effect on scientific inquiry that the law represented.
- We asked for very modest funding for some advanced concepts work and for RNEP.

From this set of circumstances, two perceptions developed. First, it became part of the conventional wisdom that there were Administration plans to develop new, low yield weapons. There are no such plans. Second, people saw these separate things as part of an overall strategy; that we were emphasizing "nuclear preemption" in U.S. military doctrine. I have had a Committee chairman tell me we were planning on developing low-yield weapons to use preemptively against terrorists in places like Afghanistan.

I assume you all understand this is nonsense. While no one wants to constrain a President's options in advance, I've never met anyone in the Administration who would even consider nuclear preemption in connection with countering rogue state WMD threats. But we've allowed this misconception by not being clear about our policy.

While nuclear preemption with non-existent new weapons was fanciful, there were some more responsible critics who raised issues. Two are important: whether our efforts lowered the nuclear threshold and whether they hurt nonproliferation.

We have pretty good answers. U.S. R&D programs are not blurring the line between conventional and nuclear weapons or making nuclear use more likely. This is not simply an assertion, but is empirically based. You all know that from the 1950's and continuing through today, the U.S. nuclear stockpile has contained warheads capable of producing very low nuclear yields. At the height of the Cold War many thousands of these warheads were deployed, but never used—even in regional confrontations where their use would not necessarily have provoked a Soviet response. There is no evidence that the simple possession of these weapons

made nuclear use by the United States more likely. No President would be inclined to employ any nuclear weapon, irrespective of its explosive power, in anything but the gravest of circumstances. Simply put, the nuclear threshold for the United States has been, is, and always will be very high.

On nonproliferation, the major U.S. objective is to prevent rogue states and terrorist groups from acquiring weapons of mass destruction and systems for their delivery. Neither advanced concepts efforts nor studies of an earth-penetrating weapon will increase incentives for *terrorists* to acquire such weapons—those incentives are already high and are unrelated to U.S. capabilities. Nor are they likely to have any impact on *rogue states*, whose proliferation activities march forward independently of the U.S. nuclear program.

Over the past decade we have seen very significant reductions in the numbers of U.S. (and Russian) nuclear weapons, reductions in the alert levels of nuclear forces, and the abandonment of U.S. nuclear testing. No new warheads have been deployed and there has been little U.S. nuclear modernization. There is absolutely no evidence that these developments have caused North Korea or Iran to slow down covert programs to acquire capabilities to produce nuclear weapons. Rather it is plausible that North Korea and Iran are seeking WMD, in part, to deter the United States. In this regard, they may be reacting more to U.S. advanced conventional weapons than to anything the United States has done, or is doing, in the nuclear weapons arena. The one area where we should perhaps worry is in ensuring international support for our non-proliferation programs. But that's just another example of the need to have a coherent story.

I'm particularly bothered by the charge that our policy hurts nonproliferation because our non-proliferation record is quite good, better than many people give us credit for. Our nuclear posture and our non-proliferation policy are mutually supportive and entirely consistent with our obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. I think those who question the Administration's commitment to nonproliferation are wrong and haven't looked at the record. There is definitely more work to be done, but the Administration is proud of what it has accomplished, from the G-8 Global Partnership to the Proliferation Security Initiative, to the denuclearization of Libya, to the President's recent fuel cycle proposals. The American people should be equally proud.

Conclusion

So that's where we are. We will continue to lead the way to a safer world through the deep reductions in nuclear forces codified by the Moscow Treaty, through Nunn-Lugar and other cooperative threat reduction efforts, and through other actions. At the same time, although conventional forces will assume a larger share of the deterrent role, we will maintain an effective, reliable, and capable—though smaller—nuclear force as a hedge against a future that is uncertain and in a world in which substantial nuclear arsenals remain. Our ongoing efforts to reduce the current stockpile to the minimum consistent with national security requirements, to address options for transformation of this smaller stockpile, and to create a responsive nuclear weapons infrastructure are key elements of the Administration's national security strategy. Carrying out these efforts will pose no risk to critical U.S. nonproliferation objectives.

No responsibility of a President is more important than national security and no element of national security policy is more important than nuclear policy. Mischaracterizations by the uninformed should not blur the fact that our policy is—and will continue to be—what the President called for in 2001: achieving a credible deterrent with the lowest-possible number of nuclear weapons consistent with our national security needs.

Thank you.