

# Executive Memorandum

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## Congress's Critical Role in the Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW) Program

*Baker Spring*

Post-Cold War security requires a new nuclear weapons policy, operational doctrine, arsenal, and infrastructure. The Bush Administration, which announced a new strategic policy with the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) in 2002 and issued a draft of the new Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations for the military in 2005, is now moving to construct a nuclear arsenal to meet the needs of the new policy and doctrine, which directs the fielding of both offensive and defensive strategic nuclear and conventional forces to reduce to an absolute minimum the possibility that any hostile state will be able to launch a successful strategic attack on the U.S. or its friends and allies.

While the Bush Administration does not use the term, this constitutes a damage-limitation strategy. In this context, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) announced on March 2, 2007, that a joint Department of Defense and NNSA Nuclear Weapons Council had selected a Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and Sandia National Laboratory design for the Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW). The RRW is to be provided to the Navy to replace existing warheads on a portion of its submarine-based nuclear-armed missiles.

The NNSA's description of the requirements behind the design and the design itself, however, seems to indicate that meeting the requirements for

military utility and effectiveness was not the most important consideration in the selection process. This should set off alarm bells on Capitol Hill. An effective nuclear deterrent force remains essential to the protection of U.S. security. An RRW design that fails to meet the requirements for the damage-limitation strategy, which is dramatically different from and more taxing in certain ways than the Cold War strategy for deterring the Soviet Union, would not only be of limited capability, but could also be counterproductive insofar as it bolsters a perception of effectiveness that is a delusion.

**A Question of Emphasis.** The NNSA's announcement listed seven attributes of the RRW program as important achievements reached through the design competition:

- Assuring long-term confidence in the reliability of the nuclear weapons stockpile,

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- Congress needs to accelerate the Reliable Replacement Warhead program and require a design that is accurate and effective against both hardened and mobile targets.
  - Congress should ensure that the RRW program is not limited by inadequate funding or unnecessary constraints on testing.
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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
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- Enhancing the security of U.S. nuclear weapons,
- Improving the safety of the stockpile,
- Developing a responsive infrastructure,
- Sustaining nuclear weapons design and production skills,
- Reducing the size of the weapons stockpile, and
- Decreasing the likelihood of the need for an explosive nuclear test.

All of these attributes are appropriate for a successful RRW program, and all but the last two are essential. None, however, speaks to the issue of how the RRW will meet the needs of the new damage-limitation strategy that presumably involves entirely new targeting requirements, more urgent timelines for conducting operations, and mating of the warhead with new delivery vehicles beyond the existing Navy missiles.

Acting NNSA Administrator Thomas P. D'Agostino, in testimony before the House Subcommittee on Strategic Forces on March 20, 2007, indicated that ensuring the utility of the RRW in meeting new military requirements has been all but ignored: "We are pursuing the RRW strategy to ensure the long-term sustainment of the military capabilities provided by warheads in the existing stockpile, not to develop warheads for new or different military missions."

**Need to Focus on Military Utility.** It appears that Congress needs to remind the NNSA Administrator that the NPR and the Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations have already designated new military missions for nuclear weapons and that it is the NNSA's responsibility to design and build the warheads needed to fulfill those missions.

This does not mean that Congress should withhold support for the RRW as was done by the House Armed Services Committee in its May 10 mark-up of the fiscal 2008 Defense Authorization bill. The Committee took the short-sighted action of reducing funding for the RRW program by 40 percent. Rather, Congress should accelerate the program and broaden its purpose. Specifically, Congress should:

- **Provide** the NNSA with the full \$6.5 billion requested for weapons activities in fiscal year 2008.
- **Direct** the NNSA to refine the RRW's design and build it to provide the military with the capabilities to hold at risk enemy targets that require nuclear weapons and that constitute the means to attack the U.S. and its friends and allies with nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. This includes both hardened and mobile targets.
- **Direct** the NNSA to design and build the RRW so that it can be mated to delivery systems that can strike enemy targets quickly and accurately enough to limit the damage that otherwise would be imposed on the U.S. and its friends and allies.
- **Give** the NNSA the explicit authority to pursue the RRW as a new warhead design and conduct explosive tests as necessary to field nuclear weapons with these capabilities.

**Conclusion.** Nuclear weapons are no less essential to the security of the U.S. and its friends and allies than they were during the Cold War, but the requirements are different. Current and projected circumstances will allow the U.S. to maintain a smaller active nuclear arsenal and stockpile of warheads, in part based on the deployment of effective conventionally armed strategic strike weapons and defenses. This smaller U.S. nuclear arsenal, however, makes it more important that the arsenal is fully modernized and tailored to meeting the demands of the damage-limitation strategy.

U.S. strategic forces should not be used to exact revenge on an enemy foolish enough to attack the U.S. or its friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction. They should be used to deter that enemy from attacking by making it clear that such an attack will fail.

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