

The New York Times

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After reading this excellent editorial opposing the “Reliable Replacement Warhead” Program, please send a copy of it to your members of Congress along with a short note from you.

Busywork for Nuclear Scientists

The Bush administration is eager to start work on a new nuclear warhead with all sorts of admirable qualities: sturdy, reliable and secure from terrorists. To sweeten the deal, officials say that if they can replace the current arsenal with Reliable Replacement Warheads (what could sound more comforting?), they probably won't have to keep so many extra warheads to hedge against technical failure. If you're still not sold, the warhead comes with something of a guarantee - that scientists can build the new bombs without ever testing them.

Let the buyer beware. While the program has gotten very little attention here, it is a public-relations disaster in the making overseas. Suspicions that the United States is actually trying to build up its nuclear capabilities are undercutting Washington's arguments for restraining the nuclear appetites of Iran and North Korea.

Then there's the tens of billions it is likely to cost. And the most important question: Nearly two decades after the country stopped building nuclear weapons, does it really need a new one? The answer, emphatically, is no. This is a make-work program championed by the weapons laboratories and belatedly by the Pentagon, which hasn't been able to get Congress to pay for its other nuclear fantasies.

The Rumsfeld team's first choice was for a nuclear “bunker buster” to go after deeply buried targets. The Pentagon got concerned about “aging” warheads only after it was clear that even the Republican-led Congress, or at least one intrepid House subcommittee chairman, considered the bunker buster too Strangelovian to finance.

One crucial argument for the new program took a major hit in November when the Jason - a prestigious panel of scientists that advises the government on weapons - reported that most of the plutonium triggers in the current arsenal can be expected to last for 100 years. Since the oldest weapons are less than 50 years old, supporters of the new warhead have fallen back on warnings that other bomb components are also aging, and that the nuclear labs need the work to attract and train the best scientists. But the labs are already spending billions on studying and preserving the current arsenal.

Then there's that guarantee that there will be no need for testing - one of the few arms-control taboos President Bush hasn't broken yet. While experts debate whether the labs can really build a weapon without testing it, the more important question is whether any president would stake America's security on an untested arsenal.

America would be much safer if the president focused on reducing the number of old nuclear weapons still deployed by the United States and the other nuclear powers. The new Congress should stop this program before any more dollars are wasted, or more damage is done to America's credibility.