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As Trump Seeks to Expand U.S. Nuclear Weapons Capabilities New Sandia Labs Director Argued for Expanded Use of Nuclear Weapons

Santa Fe, NM – On December 22, 2016 president-elect Donald Trump upended four decades of U.S. policy to reduce nuclear weapons by tweeting “the United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes.” The next morning he doubled down by declaring, "Let it be an arms race. We will outmatch them at every pass and outlast them all."

That same day Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that his country’s nuclear weapons are fully capable of penetrating any American missile defense system, and observed "It's not us who have been speeding up the arms race." Earlier Trump had suggested that Japan, South Korea and Saudi Arabia should perhaps obtain nuclear weapons, and reportedly asked a foreign policy advisor why the U.S. couldn’t use nuclear weapons if it already had them. Further, Trump refused to rule out using nuclear weapons in Europe or against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Underlying all this is a trillion dollar effort begun under the Obama Administration to upgrade U.S. nuclear forces, including new nuclear weapons production plants, and new missiles, submarines and bombers, all expected to be operational until around the year 2080.

One of the most important players in the trillion dollar nuclear weapons upgrade is the Sandia National Laboratories, with its newly appointed director Stephen Younger. Long before Trump, Younger argued for the expanded use of nuclear weapons, writing in his June 2000 paper *Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* "[i]t is often, but not universally, thought that nuclear weapons would only be used *in extremis*, when the nation is in the gravest danger.....This may not be true in the future." (P. 2)

Although generally the least publicly recognized of the three American nuclear weapons labs, Sandia is the largest by both budget and number of personnel (the other two nuclear weapons labs are the Los Alamos and the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories). Sandia has multiple sites (hence is called “Labs” in the plural), but its main facility is on Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque, NM. Nearby is the Kirtland Underground Munitions Maintenance and Storage Complex, likely the largest storage facility for nuclear weapons in the nation, with up to 2,500 warheads. Kirtland AFB also sites the Air Force’s national Nuclear Weapons Center, which describes itself as the "The Nucleus of America's Deterrent", whose stated mission is to “Deliver nuclear capabilities Warfighters use every day to deter and assure.”

Although “deterrence” has been sold to the American taxpayer for decades as the rationale for nuclear weapons, in reality the U.S. (and Russian) arsenal is for nuclear warfighting, as a 2013 top-level Pentagon document explicitly states:

The new guidance requires the United States to maintain significant counterforce capabilities against potential adversaries. The new guidance does not rely on a “counter-value” or “minimum deterrence” strategy.

As one source explains

Counterforce doctrine, in nuclear strategy, [is] the targeting of an opponent’s military infrastructure with a nuclear strike. The counterforce doctrine is differentiated from the countervalue doctrine, which targets the enemy’s cities, destroying its civilian population and economic base. The counterforce doctrine asserts that a nuclear war can be limited and that it can be fought and won.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/counterforce-doctrine>

In turn, counterforce requires thousands of nuclear weapons for nuclear warfighting, instead of the few hundred needed for only deterrence. But as President Ronald Reagan famously put it in his 1984 State of the Union address:

A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. The only value in our two nations possessing nuclear weapons is to make sure they will never be used. But then would it not be better to do away with them entirely?

In 1988 Reagan nearly reached agreement with Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev to ban nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, relying on false promises made by then-Livermore Lab Director Edward Teller, Reagan insisted on pursuing ballistic missile defenses (or “Star Wars”), which killed any possible deal. Thus, sadly, counterforce and the capability to wage a nuclear war remain the operative national security policy as we face today’s very real risk of entering into a new nuclear arms race with Russia.

Stephen Younger already foreshadowed this in his 2000 paper when he wrote, “The United States employs a counterforce strategy that targets military assets that could inflict damage to our national interests.” (P. 9) He is now in a prime position to implement that counterforce policy as Sandia Labs Director.

Sandia’s main mission is design of the thousands of nonnuclear components (such as fuzes, radars, etc.) that weaponize the nuclear designs of the Los Alamos and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories into deliverable weapons of mass destruction. However, Sandia’s secondary mission is studying nuclear weapons “effects,” which are not the horrific effects of nuclear weapons on humans and the environment. Instead, this concerns the effects of nuclear weapons on nuclear weapons, to make sure that they are radiation hardened so that they will operate in the severe environments of a nuclear war. This is aimed at mostly the fratricidal effects of our own weapons, since any single target might be hit with multiple warheads. This has every thing to do with nuclear warfighting and first strike capabilities, rather than mere “deterrence.”

Younger's appointment as director is also indicative of Sandia's growing focus on nuclear weapons, principally due to Life Extension Programs (LEPs) that not only seek to indefinitely preserve existing nuclear weapons, but to also give them new military capabilities (Sandia is currently the lead lab for the B61-12 LEP, which is transforming a “dumb” bomb into the world’s first nuclear smart bomb). A decade ago Sandia Labs fell below 50% funded by nuclear weapons programs, which was publicly touted by the New Mexican congressional delegation as successful mission diversification leading to possible greater regional economic development. However, that trend is now reversed. In the FY 2017 federal budget request Sandia is 56% funded by nuclear weapons programs. In terms of gross funding for nuclear weapons programs Sandia is tied with the Los Alamos Lab at \$1.58 billion for FY 2017, while Lawrence Livermore Lab's nuclear weapons program is \$1.07 billion. Sandia's total annual budget is around \$2.8 billion, the largest of the three nuclear weapons labs.

Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch New Mexico Director, commented, “Americans can’t allow an unpredictable president and a greedy nuclear weapons complex to fool us into a new nuclear arms race. Reagan said it best that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” We need to make sure that Trump gets that message as well. He says he wants to both rebuild the nation’s infrastructure and expand nuclear weapons capabilities. But it’s one or the other – Trump will find out the hard way that the country can’t afford to have it both ways.”

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Stephen Younger's June 2000 paper "Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century" is available at <https://www.nukewatch.org/importantdocs/resources/NuclearWeaponsIn21stCentury.pdf>

For more on the Kirtland Air Force Base, the nuclear weapons complex within the nuclear weapons complex, please see <https://nukewatch.org/Kirtland.html>

The quote on U.S. nuclear weapons counterforce policy is from:
Report on Nuclear Implementation Strategy of the United States Specified in Section 491 of 10.
U.S.C.

Department of Defense, June 2013, page 4 (quotation marks in the original)
<http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/us-nuclear-employment-strategy.pdf>