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Contact: Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch, 505.989.7342, c. 505.920.7118, jay@nukewatch.org

Defense Sec. Robert Gates Declares Reducing Nuclear Weapons Not Possible Without Building New Design Weapons

Santa Fe, NM: Today, exactly one week before the November 4 presidential elections, Defense Secretary Robert Gates made a strong pitch for new-design nuclear weapons, the so-called Reliable Replacement Warheads (RRWs), which the Bush Administration has repeatedly pushed for. In August 2007 the projected frontrunner for the presidency Barack Obama declared, **“I believe the United States should lead the international effort to deemphasize the role of nuclear weapons around the world. I also believe that our policy towards the Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW) affects this leadership position. We can maintain a strong nuclear deterrent to protect our security without rushing to produce a new generation of warheads. I do not support a premature decision to produce the RRW.”**

In contrast, Secretary Gates claimed today that because of inevitable aging the long-term outlook for the safety, security and reliability of the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal was “bleak” without RRW. Further, he claimed there is **“absolutely no way we can maintain a credible deterrent and reduce the number of weapons in our stockpile without resorting to testing or pursuing a modernization program”**, by which he clearly meant RRW. He also claimed that existing U.S. nuclear weapons were designed on an “assumption of limited shelf life” and that it was impossible to keep extending their operational lifetimes.

His claims belie even what the nuclear weapons laboratories understood long ago, that U.S. nuclear weapons have long reliable lifetimes. In 1993 a “Stockpile Lifetime Study” by the Sandia National Laboratories (SNL) stated:

It is clear that, although nuclear weapons age, they do not wear out; they last as long as the nuclear weapons community (DoD and DOE) desires. In fact, we can find no example of a nuclear weapon retirement where age was ever a major factor in the retirement decision.

The Study also showed that most defects in U.S. nuclear weapons were caused not by aging but production flaws that were corrected within the first few years. There is, of course, no guarantee that new-designs RRWs would not introduce their own production defects. To produce new nuclear weapons while also promising not to test them is rash to the extreme compared to betting on an already extensively tested arsenal that has had the bugs worked out.

Since the 1993 Stockpile Lifetime Study confidence in existing U.S. nuclear weapons has been further increased by plutonium pit lifetime studies conducted by the nuclear weapons labs and reviewed by independent experts. Plutonium pits are the crucial nuclear weapons cores or “triggers” and have long been regarded as by far the most potentially problematic component. In November 2006 the independent experts concluded that plutonium pits have reliable lifetimes of 85 years or more, more than double the Department of Energy’s previous estimates. That led to Congressional rejection of funding for RRW and its related expansion of plutonium pit production for those new designs.

Concerning the effects of aging on the thousands of nonnuclear components in a nuclear weapon, DOE conceded long ago that it is not a major concern given proper surveillance and maintenance. As the Department stated in a legally-required 1996 study of its proposal to consolidate its nuclear weapons complex, “high confidence in the safety and reliability of nonnuclear components and subsystems can be established” because of initial manufacturing data followed by subsequent lab and flight tests.

Jay Coghlan, Executive Director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, commented, “It’s tragic that in its waning days the Bush Administration still pushes for new nuclear weapons. It makes no national security sense to trade in what we know are reliable nuclear weapons for speculative new ones. It certainly makes no financial sense to rebuild the stockpile in today’s deteriorating economic climate when it is not needed. And finally, it makes no sense from a perspective of global leadership toward eliminating the one class of weapons of mass destruction which are the gravest strategic threat against us, and that is nuclear weapons.”

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The 1993 Sandia Lab Stockpile Lifetime Study is available at:
http://www.nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/Sandia_93_StockpileLife.pdf

The JASON’s Pit Lifetime Study is available at:
http://www.nukewatch.org/facts/nwd/JASON_ReportPuAging.pdf