

Time to Stop Modernizing Nukes!!!

The Biden administration, in its proposed military budget, is calling for a restart of something the U.S. arms industry has not produced in any significant quantity since 1992: nuclear “pits” — the spherical plutonium-based implosion bomb that dropped on Nagasaki.

In his record-breaking \$753-billion National Security Budget, \$715 billion of which is for the Pentagon, is another \$38 billion for the portion of the Energy Department budget that is devoted to nuclear weapons and weapons production. It’s a figure that is higher than the proposed 2022 military budget of the outgoing Trump administration and it is a record in constant dollars that exceeds any year of the Vietnam or Korean Wars. The amount is only topped by World War II spending, when the U.S. was fully mobilized in a global conflict.

Bad enough that this obscene amount of spending — greater than any nation of the world is spending on their militaries, many of whom are this country’s NATO allies, — is occurring at a time when the U.S. is not actually fighting any wars. And it includes money for expensive programs that are totally useless, like the F-35 nuclear-capable fighter bomber, the world’s most expensive weapons system in history. But this humongous sum of money also includes almost \$1.5 billion for ramping up the production of plutonium “pits.” That sum, compared to the total Pentagon budget, might seem insignificant, but that would be a grave misunderstanding.

The reason for restarting production of plutonium bombs, with plans for making a 30 such bombs a year at Los Alamos and 50 per year at the Savannah River plant in South Carolina, is that, or so the argument goes, the “pits” in the existing U.S. thermonuclear bombs that sit atop the nation’s silo-based Minuteman Missiles, Trident submarine-based missiles, and in bombs and cruise missile warheads fired by ships and strategic bombers, are degraded by years of emitting radioactivity, and might no longer go critical if triggered. Meaning, America’s hydrogen bombs would be duds.

It’s true that Plutonium, and particularly Plutonium-239, a fissionable element that does not exist naturally on earth, but is instead produced as a bi-product of uranium power plants, does break down naturally over time. But with a half-life of 24,000 years, that is unlikely to render the pits duds anytime soon.

The real reason for the U.S. government proposing a restart of its “pit”-manufacturing facilities is to obtain new “pits” to serve as triggers for new thermonuclear bombs and warheads planned for use by new planes, ships and ballistic missiles, and perhaps as small “useable” tactical bombs with yields as low as 5 kilotons.

This is a bunch of really terrible ideas.

It’s also not the first time that the U.S. government decided to ramp up production of plutonium “pits.”

The first time, though not widely known, was in the summer of 1945, almost immediately after the dropping of the two bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 7 and 9. As Michio Kaku and Daniel Axelrod wrote in their well documented book **“To Win a Nuclear War: The Pentagon’s Secret War Plans”** (South End Press, 1987), orders went out from the Truman administration to begin industrializing production of the country’s new atomic bombs, the first of which had been hand-made from start to finish. It took time.

By the end of 1945 the Manhattan Project team had managed to assemble just two more bombs. And by June 1946, the U.S. stockpile of bombs had reached nine. But meanwhile, Hanford and Oak Ridge, two other critical parts of the Project, were cranking up production of pure U-235 metal for making simpler uranium bombs and more Plutonium-239 for the other type of bomb. Still the process of assembling atom bombs was slow and laborious, and by March 1948, there were just 35 A-Bombs in the stockpile, a number which rose to 50 by May, and 150 by December of that year, when a real assembly line had been established.



The pace continued to accelerate with 250 bombs on hand by October 1949. That was of course two months after the Soviets had exploded their own atom bomb. Not surprisingly, the pace of construction of more “pits” accelerated further, going to 450 by the end of 1950 and into the thousands after that.

Why does this little bit of history matter? Because the U.S., at a time of world peace and with a monopoly on its new super weapon, began mass producing atomic bombs for a purpose. That purpose, Kaku and Axelrod report, was a criminal plan by President Harry Truman to order an unprovoked pre-emptive atomic blitzkrieg on the Soviet Union, as soon as the U.S. bomb stockpile reached 300. That’s the number of bombs that Pentagon strategists had told the president would be needed to thoroughly destroy the USSR as an industrial society, and to cripple the Red Army so it could not be sent to over-run Western Europe in response. The two physicist authors report that the U.S. was also ramping up production of, and refurbishing and upgrading its existing WWII-era B-29s, the only bomber at the time capable of delivering these heavy bombs over a long distance to hit Soviet targets across that vast nation.

That genocidal war-crime was shelved after the Soviets detonated their first atom bomb, which they did before the U.S. had more than perhaps 220-230 bombs, and too few bombers to deliver even those. At the same time, the U.S. has, as Daniel Ellsberg makes clear in his book **“The Domsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear Planner”** (Bloomsbury, 2017), continued to have a **“first use”** nuclear strategy. That is to say the U.S. intends always to be the first country to launch its nuclear weapons. Although Americans are always told U.S. weapons are intended to have a retaliatory role, deterring other countries from making a nuclear attack, retaliation is not what the Minuteman or Trident missiles were designed for. Built to have the very costly pinpoint accuracy needed to hit individual missile silos (which would be empty after a first strike on the U.S.), they are actually intended to hit Soviet missiles in their silos in a first strike. The same is true of the submarine-based Trident missiles with their multiple independently targetable warheads.

The funding for hundreds and thousands of new “pit” triggers raises the question of why the U.S., with 3800 nuclear bombs on hand under the existing arms limitation agreement with Russia, needs hundreds or thousands more “pits.” If some of the older bombs might be no longer working because of the plutonium being depleted, that’s great! We cannot use 3800 nukes in an attack anyhow, without facing devastating blow-back at home in the form of massive radioactive fallout, destruction of many of our allies in Europe, as well as a devastating nuclear winter that would lead to massive starvation globally, including in the U.S. So let’s just reduce the stockpile. It would be a kind of passive denuclearization.

A good way to start.

China, which has only 300 missiles and warheads, has sensibly said it will consider reducing its nuclear stockpile once the U.S. and Russia reduce their own nuclear stockpiles to the size of China’s — which makes total sense.

The world today, if one steps back and looks at it, is very much like the world at the end of World War II. There is no major war anywhere. Major nations, including the U.S., Russia, and China, and even second-tier powers like Britain, France, China, India, etc., are not at war. There are little local conflicts of course, and civil wars too, but no all-out wars anywhere. So why are we hearing all this talk in Washington about Russian, Chinese, Iranian and Venezuelan aggression? There is no aggression. Most of what the U.S. calls Russian and Chinese “aggression” is actually economic development, like the Nord-stream natural gas pipeline from Russia to Germany or China’s belt-and-road projects to link Asia with Europe and Africa by road and high-speed rail.

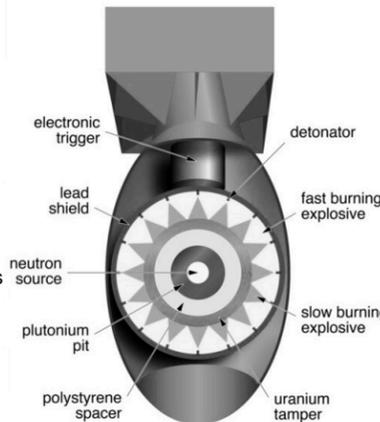
Now is not the time for ramping up military spending but for shrinking it dramatically. Now is not the time to be ramping up production of plutonium “pit” triggers for new nuclear weapons or engaging in a new hypersonic missile arms race or building new stealth bombers and stealth Navy vessels. It is rather a time to be shutting those new projects down and decommissioning the far too many weapons we already have.

We should be entering an era of negotiation to reduce military budgets and confrontation.

The three-quarters of a century since the end of World War II has been a gigantic waste of time, lives, and human potential with the U.S., sadly, being the prime driver of most of the madness. It’s time for the U.S. to lead us all out of this war-mongering madness and into an era of peace.

Instead of pushing President Biden to “get tough” with Russian President Putin at their June 16 summit meeting, the American and Russian people and indeed the people of the world should have been demanding a return to negotiation, cooperation and peace so that we can start to deal with the big crisis facing us all: the global climate emergency!

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UFO'S VS. THE WORK OF SCIENCE

People are asking me what I think about **U.F.O.s** and aliens. They’re asking because I’m an astrophysicist who is involved in the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. I understand that U.F.O. sightings, which date back at least to 1947, are synonymous in the popular imagination with evidence of extraterrestrials. But scientifically speaking, there is little to warrant that connection. There are excellent reasons to search for extraterrestrial life, but there are equally excellent reasons not to conclude that we have found evidence of it with U.F.O. sightings.

First-person accounts are notoriously inaccurate, and don’t provide enough information for an empirical investigation. **“It looked close”** or **“It was moving really fast”** is too vague. What a scientist needs are precise measurements from multiple viewpoints provided by devices that register various wavelengths (visible, infrared, radar). That kind of data might tell us if an object’s motion required engines or materials that we **Earthlings** don’t possess.

Skeptics have already shown that some of the motions seen in U.F.O. videos may be artifacts of the cameras’ optics and tracking systems. If we are being frequently visited by aliens, why don’t they just land on the White House lawn and announce themselves? There is a recurring narrative, perhaps best exemplified by the TV show **“The X-Files,”** that these creatures have some mysterious reason to remain hidden from us. But if the mission of these aliens calls for stealth, they seem surprisingly incompetent. You would think that creatures technologically capable of traversing the mind-boggling distances between the stars would also know how to turn off their high beams at night and to elude our primitive infrared cameras. Don’t get me wrong: I’ll read with great interest the U.S. intelligence report about U.F.O.s,

I believe that U.F.O. phenomena should be investigated using the best tools of science and with complete transparency.

But there may be more prosaic explanations. For example, it’s possible that U.F.O.s are drones deployed by rivals like Russia and China to examine our defenses — luring our pilots into turning on their radar and other detectors, thus revealing our electronic intelligence capacities. (The United States once used a similar strategy to test the sensitivities of Soviet radar systems.) This hypothesis might sound far-fetched, but it is less extreme than positing a visit from extraterrestrials.

What’s most frustrating about the U.F.O.’s story is that it obscures the fact that scientists like me and my colleagues are on the threshold of gathering data that may be relevant to the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial life. But this evidence involves subtle findings about phenomena far away in the galaxy — not sensational findings just a few miles away in our own atmosphere.

Powerful telescopes that will soon be operational may be capable of detecting city lights on the night side of planets that orbit distant stars or the telltale mark of reflected light from planet-wide solar-collecting arrays or the distinctive sign of industrial chemicals in a planet’s atmosphere. All of these **“technosignatures,”** should we find evidence of them, will be small effects. If we do detect such things, you better believe that my colleagues and I will go to extraordinary lengths to eliminate every possible source of error and every possible alternative explanation. This will take time and careful effort.

The work of science, though ultimately exciting, is mostly painstakingly methodical and boring. But that is the price we pay because we don’t just want to believe. We want to know.

-Adam Frank

Author of **“Light of the Stars: Alien Worlds and the Fate of the Earth.”**
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“The question is not whether we will be extremist, but what kind of extremist we will be- will we we be extremist for hate, or for love”

-MLK

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