

Triumph of fear

If the world is to avoid living under the nuclear shadow, nuclear weapons designing skills must wither and die.

LACKING A SUPERPOWER rival, the United States nuclear weapons complex has struggled to justify its existence and multibillion dollar budget. The National Academy of Sciences reported five years ago, “The three weapons laboratories and the production complex have found it increasingly difficult to retain their top talent and to recruit replacements,” in part because of “uncertainties about the future of the nuclear weapon program.”

Rather than embrace the U.S. commitment under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to give up nuclear weapons, U.S. nuclear weapons managers have sought to save themselves by turning to their oldest ally: fear. But unlike the Cold War, it is not fear of the “other.” Nuclear weapons are now presented as a safety net against an uncertain, and thus fearful, future. The Energy Department argues, “The complete set of [nuclear weapons design and development] skills is required to protect against technological surprise.” The Lawrence Livermore and Los Alamos national laboratories claim that the nuclear weapons complex needs to be “more responsive to future unforeseen problems.” Sandia National Laboratories declares, “You have to practice all parts of your craft or you will not be able to perform up to expectation when a problem arises unexpectedly.”

With the Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW) Program, the establishment of plutonium pit production at Los Alamos (the first such production since 1989), and Complex 2030 (a

comprehensive plan to revitalize the nuclear weapons complex), the United States is launching an open-ended arms race against its own shadow. A 2005 Secretary of Energy Advisory Board’s task force report set the pace by recommending design and production of new nuclear weapons every five years. These plans commit us to a nuclear-armed world for the indefinite future. They are proof that nuclear weapons need no enemies; the selfish Bomb and its desperate makers have taken on a life of their own.

If current U.S. plans are approved, nuclear weapons designers and builders, along with their political and intellectual allies the world over, will breathe a sigh of relief and rush to offer similar justifications. It will mean the triumph of “exterminism,” the system that British historian and peace activist E. P. Thompson described in 1983 as comprising “the [nuclear] weapons-system, and the entire economic, scientific, political, and ideological support-system to that weapons-system—the social system which researches it, ‘chooses’ it, produces it, polices it, justifies it, and maintains it in being.”

This dynamic will be familiar in South Asia. Indian nuclear weapons designers argued for years before the 1998 nuclear tests that their design team from the 1974 nuclear weapon test had grown old and needed to pass on its skills to a new generation by conducting more tests. They pushed the point that

only nuclear weapons design and testing could recruit and retain skilled people. As the designers of the 1998 tests prepare to retire, it is expected they will ask who will maintain India’s nuclear weapons in an uncertain future. How can they do this without more money and technical resources?

The nuclear weapons establishment will make the same case in Pakistan, which conducted its first nuclear test in 1998. How long will it be before Pakistan’s nuclear weapons managers convince Gen. Pervez Musharraf that to maintain the weapons and deal with “future unforeseen problems” they will need new facilities, young scientists, and engineers trained in designing and developing nuclear warheads?

Rather than creating new warheads and production facilities, we need to replace the thinking that sees any kind of value in nuclear weapons. It will not be easy. In 1995, Nobel Prize-winning physicist Hans Bethe, who served as head of nuclear weapons theory for the Manhattan Project, suggested one crucial step toward this objective: “Today we are rightly in an era of disarmament and dismantlement of nuclear weapons. But in some countries, nuclear weapons development still continues. Whether and when the various nations of the

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world can agree to stop this is uncertain. But individual scientists can still influence this process by withholding their skills. Accordingly, I call on all scientists in all countries to cease and desist from work creating, developing, improving, and manufacturing further nuclear weapons.”

If the world is to avoid living under the nuclear shadow until it goes out with a radioactive bang, then it is vital to let nuclear weapons designing skills wither and die. Attention and resources can then turn to dismantling the weapons that still remain and disposing of the highly enriched uranium and plutonium they contain. ✱