

WE / Nukes

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A New Lease On Life for Dr. **Strangelove**?

by Seymour **Melman**

Even as the Federal Budget is in critical imbalance, the Pentagon has brought forward three new nuclear programs that bypass the Quadrennial Defence Review and only add to existing overkill, total cost unknown.

— a huge \$2.2 billion dollar laser facility expected give "a new lease on life" to the hydrogen bomb group at **Livermore**. (5/27/97)

-- a new class of nuclear warhead mounted in needle-shaped depleted uranium bomb casings designed for destroying underground facilities. (5/31/97)

-- a new testing facility 1,000 feet below the Nevada desert to gauge detonating reliability of older nuclear warheads. (6/3/97)

The full cost of these innovations is unknown, and their military rationales do not survive close scrutiny. There is surely this real limit to military power: a person or community can be destroyed only once. Nevertheless patterns of military excess that were institutionalized during the long Cold War, and reached levels of overkill military power, are now to be exceeded.

Since 1940, the United States has spent more than \$4 trillion (in 1996 dollars) on a total of 70,000 nuclear weapons and their delivery systems.

We need reminding that Hiroshima was destroyed on August 5, 1945 by a single nuclear explosive with the power of 15,000 tons of TNT, enough TNT to fill 750 railroad freight cars. About 140,000 people were killed.

Consider, as purely hypothetical nuclear targets, the combined present populations of Russia and China: 1,351,000,000, equal to 9,650 **Hiroshimas** of 1945. Using the Hiroshima yardstick, warheads with the combined power of 144.7 million tons of TNT would suffice to destroy these two countries. (The targeting of warheads would have to take into account that their blast effect does not increase proportionately with their size.)

In such an imaginary exercise, allowing an additional 30% for possible launch and warhead failures, the equivalent of 188.2 million tons of TNT would be needed. This is merely 8% of the active U.S. nuclear arsenal's 2.3 billion tons. The other 92% represents an outrageous excess of overkill and military spending.

If we assume \$4 trillion as an understated cost of America's nuclear enterprise, then the 92%

overkill share represents \$3.7 trillion. *That sum is more than twice the net value of all the buildings and machinery of America's manufacturing industries.* A full accounting of the cost of America's nuclear weapons enterprise is to be published in 1998 by the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Cost Study Project at the **Brookings** Institution led by Stephen **Schwartz**.

The Pentagon's new nuclear weapons programs are outlandish on military grounds and constitute a virtual economic veto on fixing much of what is broken or malfunctioning in the infrastructure and industries of our country.

The nuclear weaponeers, and their **commander-in-chief**, are not an independent sovereignty. They have had adequate opportunity to revise their work by conversion to civilian serving tasks. They prefer instead to continue the good life in the equable surroundings of Los Alamos and **Livermore**.

The one thing left to do with these overkill factories is to shut them down.