

May 29, 2003

Bush Administration Examines Steps to a Revamped Arsenal

By CARL HULSE and JAMES DAO

WASHINGTON, May 28 — Backed by Congressional sentiment favoring a new approach to nuclear weapons, the Bush administration is taking steps that could lead to revamping the nation's cold-war-era atomic arsenal to meet what officials describe as more imminent modern threats.

The House and Senate last week approved a series of provisions sought by the White House and the Pentagon that could open the door to development of new nuclear weapons. Administration officials say the changes, which include relaxing a ban on research into smaller nuclear weapons, would not violate any existing arms treaties, though that is disputed by others.

These initiatives have alarmed arms control advocates and Democrats in Congress who say that the administration is determined to create a new generation of nuclear weapons, potentially touching off an arms race as other nations try to match American capability.

Critics of Bush administration nuclear policy were already deeply concerned about the administration's opposition to ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty as well as indications from officials that new testing might be needed to maintain the safety and reliability of the nuclear stockpile. A secret nuclear policy document issued last year also suggested that new weapons might be needed.

Taken together, these actions foreshadow potentially significant changes in the nation's nuclear weapons policy.

Administration officials say that they have made no decision to produce the first new nuclear weapons since the 1980's and that further Congressional debate and approval would be needed to do so. But they say an enormous nuclear capability to deter a rival superpower fortified with its own intercontinental missiles could be an outdated concept in the current world environment.

Instead, they say, a new generation of nuclear weapons may be needed to destroy facilities that could be constructed underground where biological and chemical weapons are being developed or stored.

"It is a return to looking at the defense of the nation in the face of a changing threat," Fred S. Celec, deputy assistant to the secretary of defense for nuclear matters, said of the push for authority to pursue a new nuclear program. "How do you deter and dissuade potential enemies of the United States from doing us harm? I don't know that we ought to eliminate any tools in our inventory."

Mr. Celec and other officials said that existing, congressionally imposed restrictions on research were chilling potential progress in the field of nuclear weapons science.

Linton Brooks, chief of the National Nuclear Security Administration, said: "We want to look at advanced concepts, not because we want to do anything in the near term, but so that we can look at

future options. But now we can't do any sort of research without getting the lawyers involved."

Opponents are not reassured by promises by the administration that its sole aim is the study of nuclear potential. They point to position papers, testimony by officials and other declarations of the need for new nuclear thinking.

"It is unrealistic to think we are going to go ahead and even test but not use these nuclear weapons, particularly with the expressions and statements that have been made by the administration," Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, said.

Mr. Kennedy and his allies, who in a series of votes last week were unable to block the provisions that opened the door to new nuclear research, say the push for new nuclear capacity is reckless and ill-conceived, given the White House demand that other nations disavow nuclear force. In a floor speech, Senator Dianne Feinstein, Democrat of California, called the juxtaposition diabolical.

As it adopted a larger defense measure last week, the House eased a 10-year-old ban on research into smaller nuclear weapons while the Senate lifted it entirely. Lawmakers also rejected proposals to block spending on turning existing nuclear warheads into weapons capable of piercing underground bunkers.

And they backed initiatives cutting the lead time for conducting nuclear tests to 18 months from 3 years. That could pave the way toward resumption of underground nuclear testing that was suspended more than a decade ago, the critics say. The administration says it has no plans for such tests.

The sums involved are tiny by the standards of the \$400 billion Pentagon measure: \$15 million for a feasibility study on weapons conversion already taking place at national nuclear laboratories and \$6 million for research into "advanced concepts" like a weapon of five kilotons or less.

The legislation also includes \$22.8 million to study the environmental impact of manufacturing plutonium pits, which are core elements of nuclear bombs. Though the final shape of the bills has yet to be worked out, it is clear that the administration will get much of what it wants.

There is also little doubt that senior officials in the Pentagon and the White House believe that the nation's nuclear arsenal is ill-equipped to deal with the post-Soviet world. Those officials have made it equally clear in a variety of writings, public statements and internal reports issued over recent years that the arsenal needs upgrading, perhaps with new kinds of weapons.

The existing stockpile mainly consists of immensely powerful weapons intended to deter a large power like the Soviet Union, but not small ones like North Korea or Iran. And it is not adequately outfitted to incinerate chemical or biological weapons facilities safely, or to destroy deeply buried targets, officials say.

Those concerns are clearly spelled out in a classified Pentagon document known as the Nuclear Posture Review, which was provided to Congress last year and has been obtained by The New York Times. While administration officials insist that not everything in the document has been made policy, it provides a comprehensive blueprint that reflects the thinking of many of the administration's national security policy makers.

"Today's nuclear arsenal continues to reflect its cold war origin," the report said, calling for a new approach known as "the new triad."

"New capabilities must be developed to defeat emerging threats such as hard and deeply buried targets, to find and attack mobile and relocatable targets, to defeat chemical or biological agents and to improve accuracy and limit collateral damage," it said.

Classified Pentagon studies have concluded that more than 70 countries now have underground facilities and that at least 1,100 of those sites are suspected of being strategic command centers or weapons bases.

Conventional weapons do not have the blast force and cannot burrow deeply enough into the ground to destroy such sites, Pentagon officials say. While large nuclear weapons might render such sites unusable, they would also cause immense damage to surrounding communities.

For that reason, the Pentagon has requested money to study sheathing nuclear weapons in harder cases so they can penetrate deeper into the earth before exploding. Many military planners also say they believe that nuclear weapons smaller than five kilotons would be good for hitting buried targets because they would cause less harm to nearby civilians.

Administration officials have also begun arguing that low-yield weapons might be more effective in deterring smaller countries from using or even developing unconventional weapons. Under this theory, those countries may now believe that the stigma of using a large nuclear weapon against them is so great that the United States would never do so.

But a less devastating weapon might seem more threatening to those countries precisely because the United States might appear more willing to use it, Pentagon officials say. The Nuclear Posture Review lists Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea and Syria as countries that pose new kinds of threats to the United States.

Democrats and arms control advocates say conventional weapons can be modified to destroy deeply buried targets as effectively as nuclear weapons. They say even low-yield nuclear weapons will release large amounts of radioactive debris.

And they argue that any moves by the United States to develop new nuclear weapons will encourage similar behavior in other countries.

"Arguments that low-yield weapons serve U.S. interests because they produce less collateral damage and are therefore more usable than high-yield weapons are shortsighted," a group of eight prominent nuclear scientists wrote in a letter sent to senators recently. Democrats said they would press their resistance when opportunities present themselves.

"I remember how people lived in this country in fear of the nuclear bomb," said Ms. Feinstein, who added that the nuclear questions before Congress merited close attention. "I think the American people have to weigh in on whether they want this nation to open that door and begin a new generation of nuclear weapons."