

# How Los Alamos is Driving the Development of New Nuclear Weapons

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*by Nick Schwellenbach and John Pruet*

In 1945, J. Robert Oppenheimer declared, "I am become death, the destroyer of worlds," after he witnessed the first nuclear explosion under the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos National Laboratory. His statement, a line from the Bhagavad-Gita, displayed his own apprehensions with helping to create weapons capable of overwhelming destruction

Almost 60 years later, Los Alamos, located in northern New Mexico, once again stands at a major crossroads in nuclear weapons development, but this time around lab officials do not openly harbor the same reservations as Oppenheimer. In fact, Los Alamos, in its own entrenched institutional interest, has been driving drastic changes in national nuclear weapons policy. Now that Bush has been re-elected and Congress has drifted farther right, these troublesome developments are sure to continue.

After almost a decade of management scandals and security failures at Los Alamos, the Department of Energy has decided to open management to outside competition, with the University of Texas System and several corporations such as Northrop Grumman and Bechtel eyeing the bid.

Opposition to Los Alamos has been visible at both UT and at the University of California System, the long-standing manager of the Lab.

Students, faculty and alumni have voiced opposition based on moral, as well as more mundane reasons—the rife security, management, and environmental problems and also whether management would, on balance, yield benefits over the costs and risks involved.

UT and UC have both asserted that management of Los Alamos brings research and prestige to the university that manages the Lab. However, any qualified researcher from any university, manager or not, already has access to working on or collaborating with research done at Los

Alamos. Due to this, several faculty members and students question the professed research benefits to their respective universities that would result from a management contract. Additionally, "prestige" from management of this so-called "crown jewel" of American science is also dubious when Los Alamos is revealed for what it truly is: a bomb lab.

Proponents of the lab emphasize the few truly worthwhile projects such as HIV research, but downplay the overwhelming mission of the lab—maintaining the current nuclear stockpile and developing new nuclear weapons. In fact, out of a total DOE operating budget of \$2 billion, the DOE budget request for fiscal year 2005 includes \$1.36 billion for weapons programs, or about 79 percent of its total DOE budget, while other science programs receive a mere 3.4 percent or \$59.8 million.

Perhaps more revealing, is that funding for science programs has dropped from roughly \$75 million in FY 2003 to just below \$60 million requested for FY 2005. During the same time period, funding for weapons programs at the lab has increased by about \$150 million. Los Alamos has clearly not shifted gears from its historic role as a core component of America's nuclear weapons complex.

On the contrary, recent changes to nuclear policy have many experts concerned that a new nuclear

arms race could soon unfold. The Bush Administration's nuclear initiative to develop a new class of weapons coincides with the competitive bid for Los Alamos as well as the congressional increases in lab funding. Researchers at Los Alamos, alongside those at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, are working to develop these new "mini-nukes." Despite the name, these weapons are not very "mini." They range from explosive yields of one-third to multiple times that of the bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima in World War II which killed approximately 100,000 civilians. And like most weapons, "mini-nukes" do not discriminate between combatants and non-combatants.

These new weapons are designed to deter so-called "rogue" states from possessing their own weapons of mass destruction capabilities.

Advocates, including Los Alamos personnel, claim that "mini-nukes" provide a more credible deterrence than traditional nuclear weapons because they decrease the amount of "collateral damage" to civilian areas while still destroying targets such as airfields, underground tunnels and bunkers as well as enemy stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons

While the feasibility and possible benefits of these "mini-nukes" remain unclear at best, Los Alamos employees along with other officials have feverishly sought their realization. One seemingly obvious reason for the lab's

enthusiasm is that a "mini-nuke" project would provide scientists and research with a reinvigorating mission and direction.

A March 2002 article in USA Today pointed out the relative importance of this factor. Designing new nuclear weapons provides hands-on instruction for future generations of weapons scientists that are fast-replacing older Cold War personnel. Thus, the challenge allows Los Alamos and other national labs to gain a new technological edge and retain the top minds in research.

However, persuading government leaders to dramatically change national nuclear policy has been no easy task for lab employees. Two analysts from Los Alamos, T.N. Dowler and J.S. Howard, authored a landmark essay for the Fall 1991 issue of Strategic Review calling for the development of what they referred to as "micro-nukes." Earlier that same year, they had lobbied and secured support for their plan from the Defense Science Board with a presentation entitled "Potential Uses for Low-Yield Nuclear Weapons in the New World Order." Unfortunately for Dowler and Howard, then-President George H. W. Bush called for a moratorium on new nuclear weapons development and testing in 1992. Subsequently, the nuclear weapons complex suffered from almost a decade of stagnation as it struggled to adapt to a post-Cold War era.

The call for "mini-nukes" from Los Alamos employees continued. In 2000, Stephen Younger, then head of nuclear weapons work at the lab, wrote a paper supporting "mini-nukes" and their possible use in the future.

Most recently, in October of 2003, four employees of Los Alamos authored an essay for the journal Comparative Strategy entitled "An Analysis of Reduced Collateral Damage Nuclear Weapons." This essay attempted to reconcile the development of "mini-nukes" with the Bush Administration's Nuclear Policy Review leaked to the public in January

Los Alamos personnel argued that in order for the US to reduce its nuclear stockpile but still retain a credible nuclear deterrent against "rogue" states, greater diversity in available nuclear weapons would be required (i.e. "mini-nukes"). They also stated that developing such weapons would allow US forces to avoid undesirable "collateral damage." In 2003, Los Alamos marked the 60th anniversary of the lab's creation by producing its first plutonium pit (the core of a nuclear weapon) in 14 years. The Global Security Newswire referred to this as "a first step toward reconstituting a nuclear warhead production program," and by 2007 Los Alamos expects to produce 10 such pits a year.

Along with the resumption of pit production, the passage that same year of the Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2004 signals the

implementation of a new, fundamentally different nuclear policy advocated by Los Alamos and the nuclear weapons complex. Most importantly, the congressional Act lowers the bar for future testing and repeals the "Spratt-Furse" provision banning low-yield nuclear weapons.

The development of "mini-nukes" could prove even more dangerous than nuclear weapons production during the Cold War. As Newt Gingrich stated in 2003 for USA Today, "This would be a weapon designed to be used. It would not simply be a weapon of deterrence, as current nuclear weapons are." The threshold for nuclear weapons use will be lowered because the US will be more willing to use smaller nuclear weapons on non-nuclear weapons states. This would open a Pandora's Box. In turn states with weapons may become more likely to use their weapons, and prod more states to acquire nuclear weapons as a deterrent to US "pre-emptive" war. On a downward spiral the US may then utilize "mini-nukes" to attack these new nascent programs.

The University of Texas and University of California Systems argue that management of Los Alamos is national service. What they really mean is that university management is active engagement with the warfare state by lending an academic gloss to activities many of the best and brightest might otherwise steer clear. Yet Los Alamos and its scientists and engineers are not simply just "following orders," in fact many of them are shaping an increasingly hostile American nuclear weapons policy from the bottom up. Whoever "manages" the Lab will be directly complicit in a new nuclear arms race. Los Alamos has shown over the years that it is a power unto itself and that, as evidenced by 60 years of University of California management, its main function as a weapons of mass destruction facility cannot be resolved or mitigated by university involvement.

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