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The Obama Administration's New Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) Elicits Some Cheers, Some Jeers from Nuclear Bomb Lab Neighbors in Livermore

TRI-VALLEY CAREs' "TOP LINE" RESPONSE TO THE OBAMA NPR: "First, some cheers," said Tri-Valley CAREs Executive Director, Marylia Kelley. "The Obama NPR is mostly unclassified, while the Bush NPR was inappropriately shrouded in secrecy. Further, it is notable that the new NPR opens with a quote from the President's April 5, 2009 Prague speech in which he committed to 'seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons'."

Kelley added, "The NPR contains some welcome statements that move the nation toward that goal: It forswears new types of nuclear weapons, endorses further reductions in stockpile numbers, and limits the role of nuclear weapons in the U.S. security posture. In so doing, it moves away from some of the dangerous policies contained in the Bush NPR." Kelley continued, "We who live in the shadow of nuclear weapons facilities in California applaud these Obama policy initiatives."

"However," Kelley cautioned, "We must hold Obama accountable and offer jeers for the NPR's endorsement of Bush administration initiatives to revitalize and rebuild the nuclear weapons complex, which we and others have dubbed the 'Bombplex'."

Scott Yundt, the group's Staff Attorney, explained, "The NPR tries to justify additional funding and 'flexibility' for the weapons labs, including Livermore, to research and develop what will be essentially new warheads. Regardless of how the Obama administration frames this policy, it will be clear to the world that the U.S. is planning to build up its nuclear weapons complex for decades to come. This will inhibit the ability of the U.S. to play a leadership role in moving the world toward the abolition of nuclear weapons."

Yundt continued, "I am deeply disappointed that the NPR does not do more to constrain the infrastructure to develop and build new and modified nuclear weapons. I fear that the facts on the ground in building new weapons plants, and not the words on paper, will ultimately determine how the world sees this NPR."

BACKGROUND ON THE NPR: A year has now passed since President Obama invigorated peace and disarmament advocates around the world by declaring in Prague, "clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons."

The administration chose the anniversary of the President's historic Prague speech to release the long awaited Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which will serve as a guide for U.S. nuclear weapons policy.

Tri-Valley CAREs' members, who live around two of the nation's nuclear weapons facilities, the Livermore Lab and the Sandia, Livermore Site, worked this past year to ensure that the "transformational" change enunciated by the President in Prague would become the centerpiece of his administration's NPR. Our members' hopes are backed by practical aspirations that by winding down a reliance on nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, Livermore Lab and Sandia, Livermore could focus their work and resources on cleaner and greener civilian science missions.

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In the build up to the NPR, the administration had been debating over a number of key issues. The one that matters most for the Livermore community is the debate over just how far the DOE should be allowed to go in changing nuclear warheads in the existing stockpile.

THE WEAPONS LABS & THE NPR: The weapons lab directors have expressed a desire to “replace” existing warheads with newly manufactured, untested nuclear components of new and modified design. This strategy would provide the weapons labs with little mission change and abundant weapons funding for the next 20 years or more.

However, the “replacement” option is presently unnecessary and could be scientifically risky, according to the prominent scientists called the JASON, called upon by Congress last year to answer the question of whether the country’s existing methods are sufficient to maintain a safe and reliable nuclear stockpile into the future.

Moreover, the “replacement” option is politically undesirable because it would undermine U.S. efforts to discourage other countries from seeking nuclear weapons and hamper efforts to build support for the nation’s wider nonproliferation goals. Finally, “replacement” options could mean more highly polluting R&D done at Livermore Lab.

The Obama NPR permits the “replacement option,” but does not embrace it. On page 39, it says, “The full range of LEP [Life Extension Program] approaches will be considered: refurbishment of existing warheads, reuse of components from different warheads, and replacement of nuclear components.” The NPR report goes on to say, “In any decision to proceed to engineering development for warhead LEPs, the United States will give strong preference to options for refurbishment or reuse...”

WEAPONS COMPLEX INFRASTRUCTURE & THE NPR: Dating back to the Bush era, the Department of Energy National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) has been pressing for a new, rebuilt nuclear weapons complex, which Tri-Valley CAREs and others have dubbed the “Bombplex.” Two prominent features of the “Bombplex” are a new, oversized and wrongly missioned, plutonium complex at Los Alamos Lab in NM, called the CMRR, and a new, oversized, wrongly missioned uranium bomb plant at Y-12 in TN, called the Uranium Processing Facility (UPF).

According to NNSA, the CMRR will enable the production of 50 to 80 new-design plutonium pits per year. Such a capability is only “needed” if the U.S. redesigns its nuclear weapons, which the President says he will not do and the NPR does not sanction. (Note: Existing capability at Los Alamos Lab is able to produce up to 20 plutonium pits per year for an existing design already in the arsenal, which is more than sufficient for maintenance to the standards laid out in the new NPR). NNSA envisions that the UPF would produce 50 to 80 new “secondaries” (the H-bomb part of a modern bomb) each year. Again, this capacity is more than what is needed to maintain the existing nuclear weapons stockpile in line with the new NPR.

TRI-VALLEY CAREs’ POSITION: Tri-Valley CAREs opposes Life Extension Programs that make changes to the nuclear weapons stockpile beyond what is required to maintain the existing safety and reliability of the weapons as they await dismantlement, pursuant to Article 6 of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. We further oppose construction of the CMRR-Nuclear Facility at Los Alamos and the UPF at Y-12. We call on the Obama administration to instead make careful, surgical investments in infrastructure only where needed for actual warhead maintenance, for verifiable, irreversible dismantlement of weapons, and for responsible storage and disposition of nuclear materials.

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The NPR report is available at www.trivalleycares.org under the “key government documents” section.