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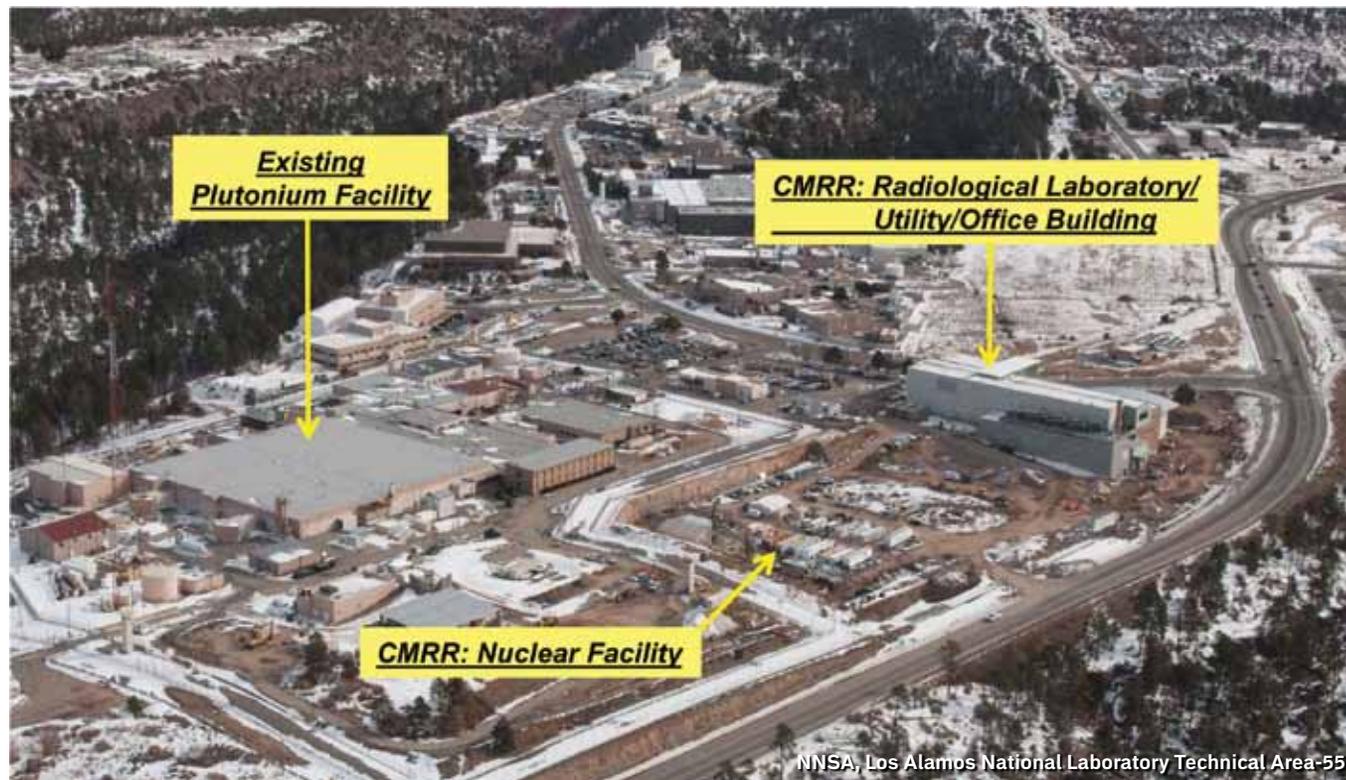
NUCLEAR 'SHOCK & AWE' BACKFIRES ON LOS ALAMOS

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CONSCIOUS CULTURE: POLITICS REVIEWS BOOKS ENTERTAINMENT



The imperial overstretch of a debt-ridden empire collapses



NNSA, Los Alamos National Laboratory Technical Area-55

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Greg Mello, Executive Director, and Trish Williams-Mello, Operations Director, of the Los Alamos Study Group

Cut to the bone

As part of its fiscal year (FY) 2013 budget request released Monday, Feb. 13, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) proposes to delay, “for at least five years,” all spending on a proposed \$4-to-\$6 billion plutonium facility to be located in Los Alamos.

This facility, called the “Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Nuclear Facility,” or “CMRR-NF,” has been the flagship U.S. nuclear warhead infrastructure project and the first priority of the NNSA’s program of weapons complex modernization for the past decade. The project has been under development since 2001 and will have absorbed a total of \$994 million by the end of the present fiscal year, unless Congress halts current-year outlays. These funds have been used primarily for design, and also for construction of a multi-function support facility for the proposed new building, now indefinitely delayed.

NNSA’s FY2013 Budget Request requests zero (0) dollars for this project in FY2013¹ and requests \$35 million to replace the storage functions of this facility.

Why was this “flagship” put on the back burner for five years? The obvious answers are 1) our country is broke, 2) the NNSA already has plenty of infrastructure that can be used as is or upgraded as needed to fulfill all of its missions—an alternative that the Study Group has been recommending for several years, 3) there is currently no official mission for warhead core (plutonium pit) production—the facility’s core mission, 4) the chosen construction area is totally riddled with earthquake faults, as is most of Los Alamos, and 5) to comply with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty the U.S. is legally bound to decrease its nuclear weapons stockpile, not build it up. All of us here at the Los Alamos Study Group are pleased to note that the NNSA has determined, after getting hit with our two lawsuits, pressure from Congress and many others in government, that they agree with us—they have plenty of infrastructure they can utilize and they can save \$1.8 billion over the next 4 years.² The Study Group is pleased to share credit, but the real heroes in this story are the professional staff in Congress, the White House and the Pentagon, who did their jobs.

We can only hope that this about-face by the NNSA augurs a deeper programmatic reexamination and a very aggressive effort to end the poor performance by NNSA’s contractors, in this case Los Alamos National Security (LANS), which

has contributed to a great waste of taxpayer money. In that light we also welcome NNSA’s announcement of late last week that it would make public its Performance Evaluation Reports (PERs) of its site contractors.³ There needs to be a congressional investigation of how exactly the perennial bad management within NNSA has been allowed to persist, and what to do about it.

The CMRR project has been a fiasco from the get-go. In the beginning, NNSA and LANL—then run solely by the University of California—proposed CMRR structures which even the most cursory examination revealed could never be built. The construction materials specified in environmental documents could not have built a shed, much less a fortified, seismically sound nuclear facility to hold and protect several tons of plutonium. As the project developed, NNSA and its contractors kept the bad news from Congress, as they always do, until the last moment, which generated huge (tenfold and greater) cost increases before the design even began to firm up. At this point, after spending \$665 million on the Nuclear Facility, NNSA had not even decided which major design concept to follow—deeply buried or shallow construction—and is very far from a completed design. NNSA is spending between one-half and one million dollars per day to complete the design for this facility, which

is highly unlikely to ever be built—and if it were, much of the design would need to be redone anyway. Congress should end this unnecessary waste.

There is a dire need for a broader discussion of priorities. The United States spends far too much on nuclear weapons, not just because we have too many of them but also because our so-called “stewardship” of them has been designed to maximize, not minimize, spending in many program elements. At the labs in particular, there is abundant wasteful overhead, non-value-added work of all kinds, “vaporware” posing as science, and grandiose ideas that make no sense, of which CMRR-NF was one. In addition to this “pure” waste, there is waste associated with needless warhead modernization, which “churns” the warhead complex for highly dubious reasons. Beyond that, we have the waste embodied in superfluous warheads and delivery systems, which deliver no extra “value” even under the “nuclear deterrence” paradigm, which we believe to be destructive, absurd, and immoral in any case. This FY2013 budget is a very tentative beginning at the deeper reforms we need. Failing those reforms, the nuclear warhead enterprise will eventually suffocate from its excessive privatization and its extremely high internal rate of inflation for the actual services rendered.

Completely out of control—history in the making

In late 2001, with the events of 9/11/01 fresh on its collective mind, George W. Bush’s national security team was busy. One war (in Afghanistan) was just getting going, and another (in Iraq) was on the drawing board.

This was also when the Bush administration was putting the finishing touches on a brand new plan for U.S. nuclear weapons. A bit of it was made public in January 2002, but by March shocking classified details began to emerge. Nuclear weapons, citizens learned, would not just be for “deterrence” but also for what came to be called “compellence.” The nuclear arsenal would have to evolve, and promptly, to adequately project U.S. power in a dangerous post-9/11 world.

This would require a much larger production capacity than was available. The new and upgraded factories would be cornerstones in a new “capability-based deterrence,” in which nuclear and non-nuclear forces were to play important roles. The capacity of the nuclear factories and labs would be so great, and the flexibility of the forces they produced so dazzling, that would-be nuclear competitors would simply give up, ceding military advantage to the U.S. Our new, more “usable” nuclear weapons and the factories that made them would awe our enemies and rivals into submission.

Call it the “Ozymandias” theory. “My

name is Ozymandias, King of Kings/Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair.”

It was nuclear “shock and awe,” except that the “shock” was to be industrial, embodied in a new “responsive infrastructure” for nuclear weapons. The “shock” also would be financial, of course, and environmental, in the lucky communities chosen to host the new factories. The problem with giant new facilities for weapons of mass destruction involving highly toxic, flammable, fissile materials that had to be kept under the highest security was of course, the public. “Shock” was for enemies, not the “homeland”—especially during the environmental review process, which provides at least some limited opportunities for litigation.

Particular urgency was attached to establishing a new factory to make plutonium cores for warheads—“pits.” Insufficient pit production capacity was the single biggest perceived bottleneck by the NNSA since the raid and closure of the Rocky Flats Plant in Colorado in 1989.

By mid-2002 two parallel efforts were underway to fix this. The first involved repurposing an existing proposal to replace a large, old nuclear facility at Los Alamos called the Chemistry and Metallurgy Research (CMR) Building. The original idea, hatched in 1999, was to replace CMR with a lab limited to less than 900 grams of plutonium. Senator Bingaman’s

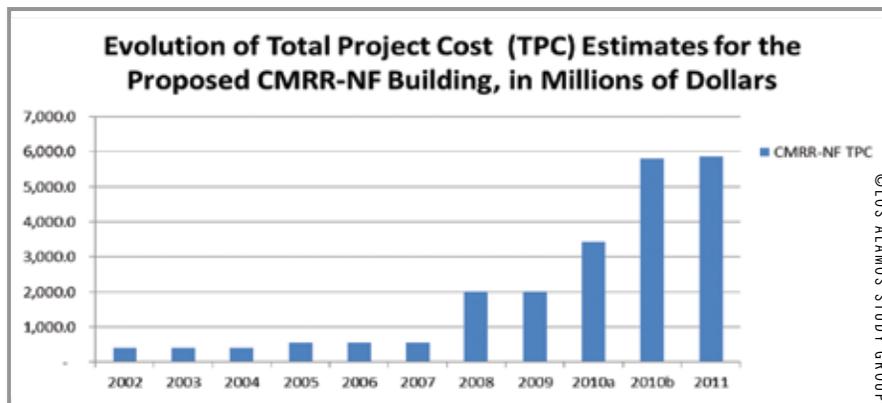
spokesperson said at the time that the new lab “would not be a ‘Taj Mahal’ but a scaled-down, streamlined facility that would meet the needs of the lab at a lower cost than they are met now.”

But the Bush nuclear planners thought on a different scale altogether. They took this “Replacement” project, now christened “CMRR,” and turned it into a plan for a huge plutonium building with twice LANL’s existing processing area—tripling that space. It would hold six metric tons of plutonium, enough to remake all the strategic warheads in the U.S. arsenal today. According to one NNSA official, it “will have the plutonium stores for the Nation.”⁴ Much like a mythical dragon’s hoard.

The total cost of the early, non-“Taj Majal” project was, in 2001, a cool \$375 million, which seemed large enough at the time. By 2004 the cost had risen to \$600 million. We didn’t notice that the combination of falling space and rising cost had already jacked up the cost of useful space by a factor of four, in hindsight a portent of much larger increases to come. In 2005, the estimated total CMRR cost rose again to \$838 million. Fast-forward to November 2010 and the costs for the CMRR-NF had risen to an estimated \$3.7 to \$5.9 billion. The higher, more credible estimate is 15 times the cost estimated in 2001.

The other 2002 plan to make pits was called the “Modern Pit Facility” (MPF).

The story of CMRR is ... the slow-motion collapse of imperial overstretch in nuclear weapons, a clear-cut case of neoconservative ideology running into limits set by management competence and contractor greed, geology and geography, and the limits of public finance of a debt-ridden empire.



Unmistakably, MPF was what it was, and it quickly became a magnet for opposition to über-hawkish Bush nuclear policies and was finally killed.

The CMRR-NF was to be far from the benign facility as it was described in the 2003 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)—supposedly having no signifi-

cant environmental impacts of any kind. The NNSA ignored our pleas to examine cheaper and safer alternatives, to reexamine the seismic situation, to reexamine the underlying purpose and need of the facility, and so on.

Already in 1997, the Study Group
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ROB ROGERS



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had prepared a review of existing LANL seismic data, showing far greater hazard than was admitted—or, as DOE's reaction showed, understood—at the time. Curiously, the 2003 CMRR EIS was based on an obsolete, highly optimistic analysis from 1995 that had been severely criticized by LANL's peer reviewers. It was precisely the rejection of that early, over-optimistic seismic picture which had been the *raison d'être* for the CMRR project in the first place. In 2007 LANL and its consultants published an updated seismic analysis based on long-standing LANL research, showing significantly greater accelerations and earthquake frequencies than previously admitted—as great as those experienced at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear facility, or even greater.

The bigger part of the project went underground—both figuratively, and as we later learned, literally as well. A support building—the Radiological Laboratory, Utility, and Office Building (RLUOB)—was designed and its construction began. All RLUOB's labs combined were to contain less than nine grams of plutonium. In terms of radiological protection this is not so very different than a hospital, or ordinary college lab. The larger nuclear facility was quietly under design—and in all its aspects, including any problems, quite secret.

Meanwhile, back in Washington, the House of Representatives was never happy about this project. For five years, starting in 2004, House Appropriators saw a train wreck coming and tried to kill this project but were overruled each time by an inflexible Senate Appropriations Committee, whose lead negotiator on nuclear issues was Sen. Pete Domenici, a senator who never saw a radionuclide—or pork barrel project for New Mexico—he didn't like.

The story of CMRR is an important story of the slow-motion collapse of imperial overstretch in nuclear weapons, a clear-cut case of neoconservative ideology running into limits set by management competence and contractor greed, geology and geography, and the limits of public finance of a debt-ridden empire. Not just CMRR but also the entire thrust of ambition in nuclear weapons that has been demanded by neoconservatives and the nuclear contractor spokespersons in Congress are now failing. ☸

¹ Department of Energy, National Nuclear Security Administration, *FY 2013 Congressional Budget Request*, February 2012, Vol. 1, 188.

² *Ibid.*, 185.

³ ExchangeMonitor Publications and Forums, *Weapons Complex Morning Briefing*, Feb 13, 2012.

⁴ Donald Cook, Deputy Administrator for Defense Programs, NNSA, *Testimony, Senate Armed Forces Subcommittee*, March 30, 2011: "... it's not only a facility we're putting in place for actinide research and development, but will have the plutonium stores for the Nation."



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