

May 22, 2018

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell,

We write to respectfully request that Congress reject the Trump administration's request for new, more usable, "low-yield" nuclear warheads for Trident missiles. There is no need for such weapons and building them would make the United States less safe. These so-called "low-yield" weapons are a gateway to nuclear catastrophe and should not be pursued.

To justify this dangerous proposal, the Trump administration is promoting a false narrative that the United States has a "gap" in its ability to deter the use of nuclear weapons by Russia. Officials allege that Moscow believes that an American president would not respond to Russian use of "tactical," or lower yield, nuclear weapons if his only options include "strategic," or high-yield, ones. The president, they argue, would be "self-deterred."

To plug this supposed "deterrence gap," the Trump administration wants to develop and deploy new low-yield nuclear warheads on Trident II D5 missiles on Ohio-class submarines. The administration is asking Congress for \$88 million in FY2019 for this new warhead, in a program that would be completed in that fiscal year under the aegis of the W76 Life Extension Program.

Yet this justification for new Trident warheads fails on many levels:

1. **There is no "deterrence gap."** The United States has a massive nuclear arsenal of some 4,000 warheads, half of which are deployed on land-based missiles, submarines, and bombers. The administration is in the process of rebuilding this arsenal at an estimated cost of \$1.7 trillion, with inflation, over the next 30 years. While this immense program is excessive, adds to a new arms race with Russia, and should be scaled back, Russia cannot doubt that the United States is serious about maintaining an unambiguously strong nuclear deterrent.
2. **The United States already has many low-yield nuclear weapons.** As part of that massive arsenal, the United States already has about 1,000 nuclear weapons with low-yield options, which are being modernized at great expense. If the president ever needed to use a low-yield nuclear weapon, he has many options.
3. **Nuclear war cannot be controlled.** Perhaps the biggest fallacy in the whole argument is the mistaken and dangerous belief that a "small" nuclear war would remain small. There is no basis for the dubious theory that, if Russia used a "low-yield" nuclear weapon and the United States responded in kind, the conflict could stay at that level.

Indeed, it is unlikely that there is such a thing as a *limited* nuclear war; preparing for one is folly. As George Shultz, Secretary of State for President Ronald Reagan, recently noted, "A nuclear weapon is a nuclear weapon. You use a small one, then you go to a bigger one. I think nuclear weapons are nuclear weapons and we need to draw the line there." Secretary of Defense James Mattis similarly declared, "I don't think there's any such thing as a tactical nuclear weapon. Any nuclear weapon used at any time is a strategic game changer."

Ultimately, the greatest concern about the proposed low-yield Trident warhead is that the president might feel less restrained about using it in a crisis. When it comes to using a nuclear weapon, restraint is a good thing.

The proposed “low-yield” Trident warhead is dangerous, unjustified, and redundant. Congress has the power to stop the administration from starting down this slippery slope to nuclear war. We call on Congress to exercise that authority without delay.

Sincerely,

The Hon. Edmund G. Brown Jr.
Governor of California

The Hon. George P. Shultz
Former U.S. Secretary of State

The Hon. William J. Perry
Former U.S. Secretary of Defense

The Hon. Richard G. Lugar
United States Senator (Ret.)
Former Chairman, Senate Foreign Relations Committee

The Hon. Byron Dorgan
United States Senator (Ret.)
Former Chairman, Energy & Water Development Appropriations Subcommittee, Senate Appropriations Committee

The Hon. Gary Hart
United States Senator (Ret.)
Former member, Senate Armed Services Committee

The Hon. Mark Udall
United States Senator (Ret.)
Former member, Senate Armed Services Committee

The Hon. Barney Frank
U.S. House of Representatives (Ret.)

The Hon. John Tierney
U.S. House of Representatives (Ret.)
Former Chairman, House Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs, Government Oversight and Reform Committee

General James Cartwright (USMC, Ret.)
Former Vice Chair, Joint Chiefs of Staff

Lt. General Robert G. Gard (USA, Ret.)
Former President, National Defense University

The Hon. John Holdren
Former Chief Science Advisor to the President

The Hon. Thomas Countryman
Former Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation

The Hon. Andrew Weber
Former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Defense programs

The Hon. Thomas Graham Jr.
Former Special Representative of the President for Arms Control, Non-proliferation and Disarmament

The Hon. Susan F. Burk
Former Special Representative of the President, Nuclear Nonproliferation

The Hon. Laura Kennedy
Former US Permanent Representative to the Conference on Disarmament

The Hon. Steven Pifer
Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and Ambassador to Ukraine

The Hon. Anne M. Harrington
Former Deputy Administrator for Defense Nuclear Nonproliferation, U.S. Department of Energy National Nuclear Security Administration

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Former Director for Press & Communications and Deputy Spokesman at the National Security Council

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Ben Rhodes
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Former Director of Strategic Outreach in the Office of the Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security

Bishop Garrison
Former adviser and Executive Director, Homeland Security Science & Technology Advisory Committee

Morton Halperin
Former Director of the Policy Planning Staff, Department of State

Newell Highsmith
Former Deputy Legal Adviser, Department of State