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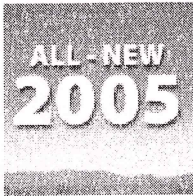
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Tuesday, November 23, 2004

Bunker Buster Busted in Bigger Nuke Budget

By [John Fleck](#)
Journal Staff Writer

Members of Congress, in a last-minute budget deal over the weekend, cut the legs out from under Bush administration efforts to modernize the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

Money to design a nuclear bunker-buster, to build a factory to make new nuclear bomb parts and to set up research teams to study next-generation weapon designs was either cut completely or sharply trimmed back.

The bomb parts factory, which Carlsbad community leaders hope will be built in southeast New Mexico, will be delayed for at least a year.

"It's clearly a setback for the president and the nuclear weapons policies the first (George W. Bush) administration had done," said John Isaacs, president of the Council for a Livable World, a Washington, D.C., arms control group.

Despite the high-publicity cuts, the overall nuclear weapons budget grew. The House and Senate agreed Saturday to spend \$6.6 billion in fiscal year 2005 on nuclear weapons work, \$44 million more than the Bush administration had requested and \$400 million above the fiscal year 2004 budget.

With two nuclear weapons laboratories—Sandia and Los Alamos—the nuclear weapons budget is critical in New Mexico, bringing \$2.7 billion into the state in 2004.

Most of that will be spent on maintaining existing U.S. nuclear weapons and attracted little controversy. A few small budget items aimed at

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the future arsenal, meanwhile, attracted most of the attention.

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The bunker-buster and other initiatives related to future weapons were traded away in a last-minute frenzy of deal-making Friday and Saturday between Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., and Rep. David Hobson, R-Ohio.

Hobson chairs the House subcommittee responsible for the nuclear weapons budget. Domenici is his counterpart in the Senate. Last week, it looked as though no deal was possible between Domenici and Hobson.

That abruptly changed Friday with a flurry of dealing to finish the spending plan.

"We had two days to do this bill. That means you have to make some tradeoffs," Domenici, chairman of the Senate Energy and Water Appropriations Subcommittee, said in a telephone interview Monday.

Money for labs

In return for letting Hobson cut the bunker-buster and other new nuclear weapons initiatives, Domenici got money he wanted for work at Sandia and Los Alamos, Domenici acknowledged in an interview.

Key New Mexico projects included \$91 million for a new microsystems building complex at Sandia and \$40 million for a new plutonium lab at Los Alamos.

"Sen. Domenici did seem to get a lot of consolation prizes in terms of money for the weapons labs," Isaacs said.

The budget for the bunker-buster—the Bush administration wanted \$27.5 million for research—was a tiny part of the overall budget, but it became the centerpiece of a debate over the future of U.S. nuclear weapons policy.

The money was to be spent on research into modifying a nuclear bomb so it could penetrate underground before detonating. The project's backers hope such a weapon would be effective against fortified underground bunkers.

Critics, including Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., said such work sends the wrong message to the world when the United States is trying to convince Iran and other nations not to acquire nuclear weapons.

"I don't think we can credibly try to lead the world in stopping the nuclear program in Iran and other places if we're in the process of developing a new generation of nuclear weapons," Bingaman said in a telephone interview Monday.

Hobson, a Republican intent on reining in National Nuclear Security Administration spending on new nuclear weapons work, made the bunker-buster the poster child of his effort.

May be back

Domenici said White House officials signaled to him that the loss of the bunker-buster "was not a bill-breaker."

"They can ask for this again," Domenici said.

Rep. Heather Wilson, R-N.M., said she believes the bunker-buster will be back on the congressional agenda next year. "This will be a continuing issue," said Wilson, one of the weapon's strongest congressional backers.

Hobson also got his way on the Advanced Concepts Initiative, a request for \$9 million for weapons designers to study next-generation nuclear weapon designs.

That money will be spent instead on the "Reliable Replacement Warhead" program, described in the final legislation as a "program to improve the reliability, longevity and certifiability of existing weapons and their components."

The administration wanted \$29 million for work on the Modern Pit Facility, a new factory that would make plutonium bomb parts. Congress cut that to \$7 million, with restrictions on how the money can be spent.

Both Los Alamos and Carlsbad are on the list of potential sites, and Carlsbad officials have been pushing for the project.



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