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Thursday, July 8, 2004

# Flaws Seen in Sub-Launched Nuclear Warhead

By **John Fleck**

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Some U.S. nuclear weapons experts have quietly questioned whether the backbone of the U.S. nuclear arsenal suffers from a fundamental design flaw.

If the problem is real, it has "national security implications for the United States," Everet Beckner, deputy chief of the National Nuclear Security Administration's nuclear weapons program, wrote in a letter in the fall.

U.S. nuclear weapons experts convened a top-secret meeting in Los Alamos in March to debate the question of whether the W76 submarine-launched warhead will work as it was designed.

Beckner and others willing to speak on the record about the issue say they remain confident the weapon is sound.

Beckner said the review begun at the March meeting has not been completed, with a report due to be co-authored by one of the weapons lab insiders who thinks the warhead has a problem.

The effect of the potential problem remains classified. Available unclassified information suggests the problem, if real, would cause the warhead to explode with less than its designed yield. If true, that would appear to reduce its ability to do the job for which it was designed—

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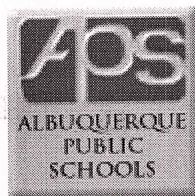
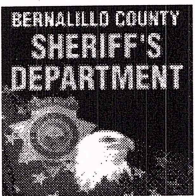
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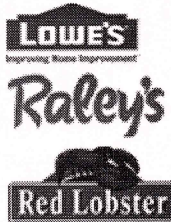
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destroying hardened enemy missile silos.

Los Alamos National Laboratory officials concurred in Beckner's assessment that there is no evidence of a problem. "The laboratory is very confident in the performance of the Los Alamos-designed W76," said lab spokesman Jim Danneskiold.

There are currently an estimated 2,300 W76s in the U.S. nuclear arsenal, more than any other nuclear weapon. The warhead is carried aboard submarine-launched missiles. Independent experts say it was designed to have a yield equivalent to approximately 100,000 tons of TNT— about seven times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, in 1945.

The debate surrounds testing of the W76 conducted in the 1970s, when the warhead was being designed. According to several unclassified sources, the explosive yield of at least one test was not what the designers expected.

The debate nearly three decades later is over whether that test reflects an underlying problem with the weapon's basic design— "original weaknesses of the system," as Beckner put it in a February memo— or whether it merely was an engineering problem that was fixed and later tested successfully.

Past reviews of the test data did not find any problems. In the mid-1990s, a panel of independent nuclear weapons experts with access to classified test data concluded the W76 was fine.

In addition, a review in the early 1990s done for Congress by a Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory nuclear weapons designer found no problem with the W76.

After the problem test, a change was made to the weapon, and a second test was conducted, said Bob Peurifoy, a retired Sandia National Laboratories weapons expert who participated in the mid-'90s evaluation of the U.S. test data. In the later test blast, code-named "Baseball" and conducted beneath the Nevada desert in 1981, the W76 "worked just fine," Peurifoy said.

"There was a device-yield test during development that, because of some engineering oversight, did not deliver the expected yield," Peurifoy said in a recent telephone interview from his home in Texas. "That was corrected."

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Peurifoy blamed the resumed debate on an effort within the U.S. nuclear weapons complex to find a pretext to resume U.S. nuclear weapons tests.

"The assertion of some is that we have to continue to test," said Peurifoy, a staunch opponent of testing.

The United States has not conducted an underground nuclear weapons test since 1992. Continued adherence to a test ban is a primary goal of the arms control community.

Among the questions to be discussed at the March meeting, according to a preliminary list of agenda items obtained by the Journal, was the question of whether the weapons labs had been planning a test to deal with the W76 question that was canceled by the 1992 moratorium.



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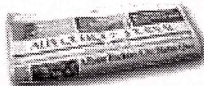
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