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Mystery Material Messes With Nuke Refurb

NUCLEAR, BIOLOGICAL AND CHEMICAL WEAPONS

March 11, 2008: The effort to refurbish elderly W76 nuclear warheads is being held up by difficulties in manufacturing a substance codenamed "fogbank." A year ago, the nuclear weapons industry was proposing new warhead design for the navy's sea-launched Trident D5 ballistic missiles. This would involve replacing 3,000 W76

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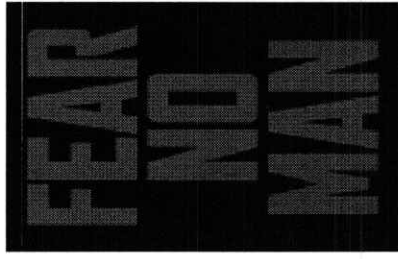
warheads that currently equip 336 missiles. This project would cost about \$100 billion. The navy preferred to refurbish the W76s.

The navy wanted to build more nuclear submarines, and that was going to be expensive. That includes both Virginia class SSN attack subs, and replacements for the current Ohio class. Since the Ohio are expected to serve into the 2020s (they entered service in the 1980s and 90s), the more immediate need is for more Virginias. These 7,800 ton boats cost over \$2 billion each. The navy wants at least fifty of them, to replace the aging Los Angeles class boats. The navy needs subs more than it needs new warheads. But the companies and organizations that build and maintain nuclear warheads want the work. Which is more essential?

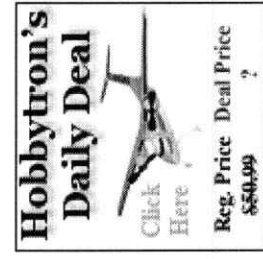
The case for a new warhead is that this would provide a nuclear weapon that is more reliable, less likely to go off by accident, cheaper to maintain and more difficult to use if one is stolen by terrorists. The navy maintains that the current W76 warheads, produced between 1972 and 1987, are adequate. The W76s are old, but like any piece of expensive machinery, they are carefully maintained. Parts wear out and are replaced. Most importantly, this warhead has been tested. So we are sure that a W76 will explode when ordered to. Because of a 1992 treaty, nuclear weapons may no longer be tested, even underground. The new warhead would have to be "tested" via simulation. That is not a major obstacle. Simulation of complex systems is now quite common, and reliable. It's one of those unseen technologies that make life so much better for everyone. The nuclear weapons designers, however, believe they



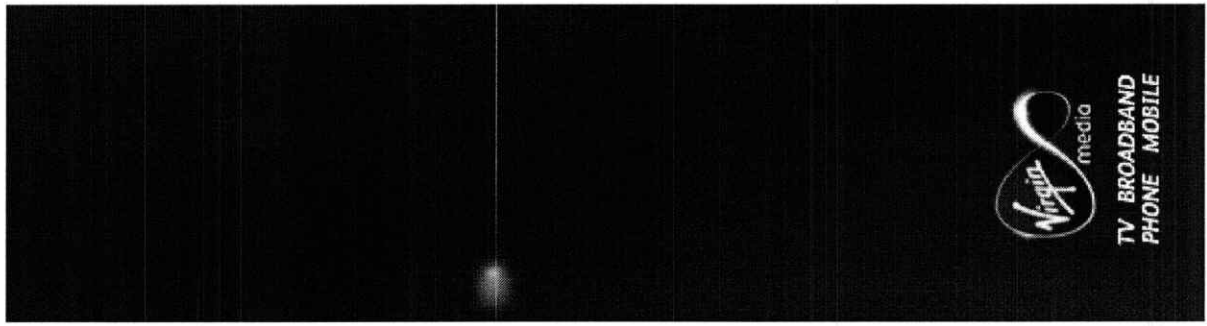
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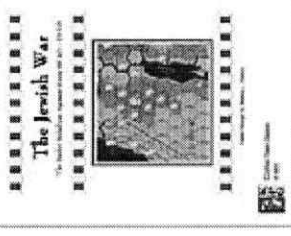
have discovered several flaws in the W76 design, things that could be eliminated with a new warhead, even one that will never actually be detonated. One of the flaws is apparently the difficulty of reviving the manufacture of key W76 components like the mysterious fogbank chemical.

There are two other factors, that don't get mentioned as much in this debate. First, the labs and manufacturers who design and build nuclear warheads would like the work. Times have been tough for the nuclear weapons crowd since the Cold War ended in 1991. Since then, several treaties have been signed that reduce the American nuclear arsenal. Thus it is bad politics to try and get lots of money for new warheads. This is especially true because most people would like for there to be even fewer warheads. It's the old debate over "how many warheads do you need to get the job done." The U.S. currently has 7,000 nuclear warheads. There are another 8,000 out there (most of them Russian).

Over 15,000 warheads have been taken out of service in the last fifteen years. The U.S. and Russia had so many because both nations had developed tactics that included attempting to knock each others land based missile silos out of action. Any exchange of that many warheads, even if only ten percent of them actually went off, would have destroyed Eurasia and North America. Those tactics are no longer popular, thus you only need a few hundred warheads to pose a credible nuclear threat. The U.S. and Russia have agreed to get try and get each of their warhead inventories down to 2,000 or fewer.

As a result of all this, getting \$100 billion for a new generation of

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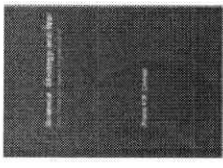
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warheads has become a long shot. The decision was made to refurbish. Then along came, or didn't, fogbank. The details of all this are very secret. But it does show that the nuclear weapons producers still have work. Maintaining existing warheads costs over a billion dollars a year, with or without crises like fogbank failure. That includes money needed for maintaining and upgrading facilities, as well as work on the warheads themselves, and research and development of maintenance requirements and techniques. Nukes are still a big business. But they are not likely to get a lot bigger.

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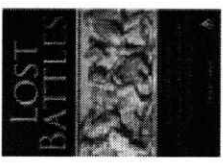
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