Congress cancels warhead projects

Committee kills nuke funding, halts planning until Bush leaves office

By Ian Hoffman, STAFF WRITER
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In several recent moves, Congress has dealt blows to two cornerstones of the Bush administration's nuclear-weapons policy: a new nuclear arsenal and a multibillion dollar factory to build it. In effect, it blocked those projects until President Bush has left office.

A key Senate defense committee Friday killed all funding for the new bomb plant, as well as a third of the money for the first in a planned series of "reliable, replacement warheads" meant to replace thousands of existing bombs dating from the Cold War.

The Senate Armed Services Committee echoed its House counterpart and said weapons designers working on the new warhead at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory cannot go beyond conceptual design and cost studies to engineering a prototype bomb.

That consensus between the Senate and House defense committees doesn't end work on the new warhead, but it does mean the most important elements of Bush administration policy are unlikely to move beyond paper studies before a new president takes office.

The Senate appropriations committee has yet to weigh in on nuclear weapons matters this year, and both chambers still must iron out differences. But the legislation passed so far strongly suggests that the latest administration policy on weapons is headed for deferral to a new president, if not defeat.

"I think they're not going to be able to begin, much less complete, the nuclear agenda that they came in with," said Christopher Paine, senior nuclear weapons analyst for the Washington, D.C.-based Natural Resources Defense Council, a group favoring arms control. "Their most dangerous nuclear arms initiatives have been averted by Congress."

House and Senate lawmakersdiffer somewhat on who should decide the next step in U.S. nuclear policy. U.S. Rep. Ellen Tauscher, D-Alamo, who chairs a House committee on strategic forces, wants to name a high-level commission to decide what U.S. nuclear strategy should be and how many weapons it needs. Her counterparts in the Senate would pass the matter directly to the next president, in a request for a more traditional nuclear posture review.

The Bush administration conducted such a review in 2001, and the final version called for de-emphasizing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense.

Classified portions of the review that were leaked, however, called for designing new nuclear weapons, including earth-penetrating "bunker busters," and expanding the traditional deterrence role for U.S. nuclear arms to include attacking targets in less than a full nuclear war. Administration officials talked of extremely low-yield nuclear weapons and more exotic devices, such as electromagnetic pulse weapons. The 2001 Nuclear Posture Review also called for contingency strike plans against Iran, North Korea, China and other countries, including several without nuclear arms.

Congress funded programs to explore the new bombs for the next three years, although with growing opposition. Critics argued pursuit of new nuclear weapons by the world's greatest military power made it harder for the United States and its allies to dissuade other nations from building nuclear arsenals of their own.

"The Bush administration's proposals met at first with skepticism and on closer examination, outright opposition," said Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, a nonpartisan group of diplomats, scientists and policy experts.

"Lots of nonproliferation and arms-control efforts have been used up just blunting these bad administration policies, while the U.S. has lost valuable time and credibility abroad," Paine said.

Starting in 2004, Congress began turning back almost every major proposal from the administration for new weapons designs or new weapons manufacturing facilities. Key lawmakers began calling for a broad debate about what U.S. nuclear weapons are for and what size arsenal is required.

The latest evolution of administration policy called not for militarily new bomb designs but for cheaper, hardier replacements for each type of Cold War-era warheads and bombs in the arsenal. The new "reliable, replacement warheads," or RRWs, would be simpler, last longer and be harder for terrorists to detonate if they stole one.

And breaking with long tradition, the new bombs never would be tested live. If successful, weapons scientists and

administration officials said, the new warheads could allow for a smaller arsenal, with fewer bombs held in reserve against some unknown failure.

But the moves in Congress so far this year suggest lawmakers are taking a go-slow approach, noting the lack of evidence that anything is wrong with the existing bombs and warheads that would warrant a new multi-billion-dollar bomb program.

"I would call it the beginning of the end of the RRW," said Kimball of the Arms Control Association. "At a minimum, the next administration is going to decide whether some form of RRW is pursued or whether we pursue the existing strategy, which has been working quite well, to maintain the stockpile."

Contact Ian Hoffman at ihoffman

@angnewspapers.com.

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