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## Nuclear Labs Raise Doubts Over Viability of Arsenals

By WILLIAM J. BROAD

Published: March 26, 2010

In a challenge to the White House, the nation's [nuclear weapons](#) laboratories have warned Congress that federal programs to extend the life of the nation's aging nuclear arsenal are insufficient to guarantee the viability of the weapons for decades to come.

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direct bearing on the [new arms control agreement reached this week by the United States and Russia](#).

Rather, it addresses a long-simmering debate on what steps the United States should take to ensure confidence in the destructive capacity of its shrinking nuclear arsenal.

[President Obama](#) came into office vowing to end a Bush administration initiative to build a new generation of nuclear arms. In a speech last month to the National Defense University, Vice President [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#) praised the labs for maintaining the arsenal and promised an additional \$5 billion over the next five years to support that work.

The new warning about the arsenal's reliability came in letters from the directors of the nation's three nuclear weapons labs to Representative Michael R. Turner, an Ohio Republican who is the ranking minority member of the [Armed Services Committee's subcommittee on strategic forces](#). He had asked the directors for their opinions about a federal report, made public late last year, that suggested programs to extend the life of the nation's nuclear weapons were good enough to guarantee their potency for decades to come.

That finding, from an independent group of scientists that advises the federal government on issues of science and technology, could influence whether the Senate ratifies another nuclear treaty, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty — a prime objective of the Obama administration — or whether the nation instead prepares for the design of new nuclear arms.

Republicans on Capitol Hill have argued that concerns over the reliability of the aging stockpile and the possible need for new designs compel the nation to retain the right to conduct underground tests of new weapons.

The three laboratory directors all criticized the report from the group of independent scientists, which is known as the Jason panel. Michael R. Anastasio, director of the [Los Alamos National Laboratory](#), said he “did not agree” with the report's conclusion about maintaining the nuclear arsenal for decades with existing methods.

“Some materials and components in the current stockpile cannot be replicated in a refurbishment,” he wrote, adding that available ways to mitigate aging were “reaching their

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limits.”

George H. Miller, director of the [Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory](#), said the main findings of the panel’s report “understate, in my view, the challenges and risks encountered in ensuring a safe and reliable nuclear force.”

Although the three letters were all written in January, Mr. Turner’s office released them now amid reports of an agreement on the new arms reduction treaty.

Arms control advocates dismissed the letters from the nuclear laboratories, which employ many thousands of nuclear specialists, as blatant attempts to protect their turf, rather than to air objective assessments.

“They are calculating that the administration does not have the courage to do battle with them, and they may be right,” said Greg Mello, executive director of the Los Alamos Study Group, a private organization that monitors the nuclear laboratories.

“Stepping back,” he added, “it appears the White House and liberals in Congress have been outmaneuvered — again — by the nuclear weapons establishment.”

~~In a statement on Thursday~~ Mr. Turner said that he was making the letters public “to further inform the public discussion on U.S. nuclear weapons policy and strategy” and that he planned to raise the reliability issue at a coming hearing with the director of the [National Nuclear Security Administration](#), which runs the weapons laboratories.

A version of this article appeared in print on March 27, 2010, on page A7 of the New York edition.

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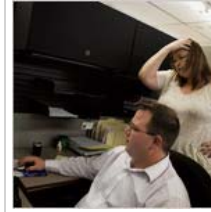
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