

Energy Dept

Clinton's Nuclear Policy Mostly Unscathed

Congressional defense committees sliced about 18 percent from the Department of Energy's \$13.6 billion budget request, denying the agency advanced construction authorization for a program to replace nuclear weapons testing with scientific simulators and to scale down its weapons production complex.

But the defense authorization bills drafted the week of June 9 do not significantly challenge the administration's post-Cold War nuclear weapons policy, despite misgivings from the political left and right.

The defense authorization markups in the Senate Armed Services Committee and House National Security Committee were the first since many of those misgivings were formally aired. Last October, Rep. Floyd D. Spence, R-S.C., released a report — "The Clinton Administration and Nuclear Stockpile Stewardship: Erosion By Design" — declaring that White House policy "is already atrophying the nation's capability to develop, produce and sustain a safe and credible nuclear deterrent" and may ultimately render U.S. nuclear weapons inoperable.

Robert C. Smith, R-N.H., chairman of the Senate Armed Services subcommittee on Strategic Forces, also has said he fears scientific simulators alone cannot maintain the safety and reliability of the nuclear arsenal. At a Feb. 5 committee hearing, Smith decried the administration's "floundering and vacillation" on weapons issues, hinting at some policy changes in the works.

Yet when the time came, conservatives opted against pushing measures to resume small-scale nuclear testing or to alter the administration's approach to weapons research. The cuts meted out by both defense committees would have little effect on Energy Department activities for fiscal 1998. Both approved funding levels for the Energy Department's core weapons programs at around \$4 billion, matching the president's request. Spence acknowledged that any attempt to challenge administration policy likely would have been outflanked by the Senate or White House.

"I still feel strongly about it," Spence said. "But deciding what to do about it is another thing. The veto is a powerful weapon."

Anti-nuclear groups say the administration is lavishing unnecessary federal dollars on its nuclear weapons laboratories and plants. A Congressional Budget Office report released in May estimates that the program, called science-based stockpile stewardship and management, will cost \$61 billion through 2010. Nuclear opponents say the program will allow weapons scientists to do precisely what conservatives lament they will be unable to do: design and



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build new nuclear weapons.

The defense authorization bills provide some comfort for both sides. The administration had sought \$1.5 billion in advanced authorization to build many of the projects it envisions for the nuclear weapons complex, including a giant laser in California, a new high-explosives facility in New Mexico, and environmental cleanup facilities at several installations. Such advanced authorizations are commonplace for the Pentagon but unheard of for the Energy Department.

Both committees opted to authorize funding only for fiscal 1998. The House National Security Committee cut the agency's funding request by about \$2.6 billion. The Senate Armed Services Committee trimmed it by just over \$2.4 billion. Members said that handing the Energy Department a blank check for the next decade would be premature. The National Security Committee provided the Energy Department \$629 million for construction, enough for the coming fiscal year.

Ronald V. Dellums of California, the committee's ranking Democrat, allayed anti-nuclear concerns by inserting language mandating that nuclear weapons research and production remain consistent with U.S. treaty obligations.

The committees also largely rejected a \$1 billion privatization initiative designed to help the Energy Department clean up its contaminated nuclear facilities. The agency had intended to use the money to significantly transform the way it does business. For instance, rather than building and operating a nuclear waste cleanup facility on its own, it would guarantee a price for the purchase of treated nuclear waste. Then corporations would bid on the contract to build the facility knowing they would have a guaranteed market for their "product."

But Republicans and Democrats alike were skeptical the agency could pull off the scheme. The House committee cut all but \$70 million from the request. Their Senate colleagues provided \$215 million to keep pilot privatization projects going, but they ordered the Energy Department to consult with Congress before bidding out new contracts.

Still, the relative success the administration is having in shifting nuclear weapons to almost a caretaker status is evidence that these fearsome armaments do not hold the attention or interest they once did.

"I don't think people tend to equate nuclear weapons with [military] readiness," said Rep. John M. Spratt Jr., D-S.C., a member of the National Security Committee. "I don't think stockpile stewardship is a top-drawer concern with most people."

— Jonathan Weisman