May 4, 2018

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator McConnell,

We ask you to reject the proposal in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review for a new “low-yield” warhead for the Trident II D5 submarine-launched ballistic missile. This new weapon is unnecessary and would increase the risk of miscalculation and wider nuclear use. The Administration’s FY2019 budget included $22.6 million in DoD funding and recently added $65 million in DOE funding for this weapon.

There are three reasons you should oppose this new weapon.

First, the Trump administration’s case for this new low-yield warhead rests on the faulty premise that there is a “deterrence gap” with Russia. Because of this supposed “gap,” the Nuclear Posture Review suggests that Russia might use a low-yield nuclear weapon first in a conflict and assume the United States would be “self-deterred” from responding because the Pentagon lacks sufficient low-yield nuclear options.

But there is no gap. The United States already deploys several types of B61 bombs and an air-launched cruise missile with low-yield options, totaling approximately 1,000 weapons in its arsenal. In addition, current plans call on the United States to invest more than $150 billion to field a new B61 bomb with low-yield options, a new cruise missile and warhead with low-yield options, as well as a new stealth bomber and fighter aircraft to deliver these weapons.

Second, in the highly unlikely event of a Russian limited nuclear attack, there is no evidence to suggest that a limited US nuclear counterstrike would end the conflict. In fact, such a response would increase the risk of further nuclear escalation.
As President Reagan’s Secretary of State George Shultz testified to Congress on January 25, 2018, “The idea of a low-yield nuclear weapon is kind of a mirage. It is a nuclear weapon... [It] invites escalation.”

Third, a low-yield warhead on a ballistic missile invites miscalculation. If Russia detected an incoming Trident missile, it would not know whether it was armed with a low-yield or high-yield warhead. Based on a worst-case scenario, it may feel pressured to respond quickly by launching a missile of its own, further increasing the risk of unintended nuclear escalation.

It was this same discrimination problem that led Congress to soundly reject the idea of deploying conventionally-armed Trident missiles in 2008. Congress was rightly concerned about the inability of nuclear-armed adversaries to determine whether a ballistic missile launched from a US submarine was armed with a conventional or nuclear warhead. If Russia detected an incoming missile, it would have to assume it could be nuclear-armed, which could lead it to launch a nuclear weapon in response.

When testifying before Congress on March 20, 2018, General Hyten, the commander of US Strategic Command, said, “I have everything I need today to deter Russia from doing anything against the United States of America. We’re fully ready against any threat that exists today, without a doubt.”

Based on that assessment, it is unclear why the Administration is seeking to fast-track the development of a low-yield warhead in FY2019.

We urge you to deny funding for the “low-yield” Trident warhead.

Sincerely,

Glenn Carroll, Coordinator
Nuclear Watch South

Jeff Carter, Executive Director
Physicians for Social Responsibility

Tom Collina, Director of Policy
Ploughshares Fund

Jay Coughlin, Executive Director
Nuclear Watch New Mexico

Lisbeth Gronlund, Co-Director and Senior Scientist
Global Security Program
Union of Concerned Scientists

Ralph Hutchinson, Coordinator
Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance

Derek Johnson, Executive Director
Global Zero

Marylia Kelley, Executive Director
Tri-Valley CARES, Livermore CA

Daryl Kimball, Executive Director
Arms Control Association

David Krieger, President
Nuclear Age Peace Foundation
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title and Organization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hans Kristensen</td>
<td>Director, Nuclear Information Project, Federation of American Scientists</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gerry Lee</td>
<td>Executive Director, Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paul Kawika Martin</td>
<td>Senior Director, Policy and Political Affairs, Peace Action</td>
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<td>Stephen Miles</td>
<td>Director, Win Without War</td>
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<td>Robert K. Musil</td>
<td>President &amp; CEO, Rachel Carson Council</td>
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<td>John Qua</td>
<td>Senior Campaigner, Beyond the Bomb</td>
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<td>Guy Quinlan</td>
<td>President, Lawyer’s Committee on Nuclear Policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Becky Rafter</td>
<td>Executive Director, Georgia WAND</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laura Skelton</td>
<td>Executive Director, Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility</td>
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<td>John Tierney</td>
<td>Executive Director, Council for a Livable World</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cassandra Varanka</td>
<td>Nuclear Weapons Policy Coordinator, Women’s Action for New Directions</td>
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<td>Anthony Wier</td>
<td>Legislative Secretary, Nuclear Disarmament &amp; Pentagon Spending</td>
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<td>Friends Committee on National Legislation</td>
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