

Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrators – A New Arms Race?

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The Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (RNEP) is the latest in a long line of Bush administration failures in nuclear weapons policy. The RNEP is essentially a large bomb with a thermonuclear warhead, designed to penetrate deep into the ground before exploding. In theory, the depth of the blast combined with the explosive effects of the nuclear warhead could destroy hardened underground facilities, including command posts, missile silos, WMD storage facilities, and terrorist caves. As an added benefit, promoters of the RNEP claim that the radiation, heat, and pressure from the nuclear weapon will destroy any chemical and biological material that is present at the blast site. Based on these claims, the Department of Energy requested more than 484 million dollars over the next five years to fund research on the RNEP. Wisely, the House removed all funding for the RNEP research program in the 2005 budget, but the Bush administration and the Department of Energy are still quietly lobbying for an expanded research program. The RNEP is promoted as an essential tool in the US nuclear arsenal against rogue states and terrorists, but the reality is that these weapons don't work, will not protect the American public against the threats we face, and the money for this program could be far better spent.

The RNEP fails on several grounds, first among them the fact that any weapon is technologically incapable of penetrating the ground to the extent necessary for the facilities that the RNEP is designed to destroy. No weapon has been shown to penetrate more than 20 feet of concrete or 100 feet of loose dirt, and the RNEP won't be able to, either. Facilities buried in rock or deep underground, which over 90% of the stated targets are, will be safe from the penetrating effects of these weapons. In addition, the impact of the RNEP with the ground has great potential to destroy the delicate electronics in the nuclear warhead, negating the purpose of the weapon.

Second, the massive amount of radioactive fallout released in this explosion will render tens, if not hundreds, of square miles uninhabitable. The RNEP is designed to carry a nuclear weapon one hundred times larger than the nuclear weapons dropped on Japan. The destruction will be massive and uncontainable; if the target happens to be in a city (such as the alleged Iraqi WMD storage sites), much of the city will be incinerated and thousands of people will be affected by radiation.

Third, the effects of nuclear weapons will not be able to destroy chemical and biological weapons, and the explosion may actually cause them to be spread over a large area. The heat and radiation will destroy any biological or chemical agent within a few tens of feet of the explosion, but will not have much of an effect on material any farther away. However, the destruction of any storage containers would release any biological or chemical weapons, which would be spread over a large area along with the radioactive fallout from the nuclear weapon.

As if these three reasons for abandoning the RNEP weren't enough, the development of new nuclear weapons undermines the United States' attempts to rein in

the proliferation of nuclear weapons worldwide. The RNEP is undeniably a first strike weapon, and the Bush administration in the last four years has lowered the threshold for a nuclear strike. These two facts could lead other countries to believe that in order to protect themselves they must also develop nuclear weapons. Additionally, we may spur the expansion of underground facilities which we still do not have the capability of destroying.

The implications of the RNEP are clear: it is a thoroughly useless weapon, requiring hundreds of millions of dollars to develop. If the Bush administration was serious about protecting Americans from the threats of WMD in the hands of terrorists or rogue states, this money should be spent to remove chemical, biological, and nuclear material from unsafeguarded sites in Russia and the former Soviet states. More effort should be spent developing conventional earth penetrating weapons; the penetration effects are desirable, but the nuclear effects are not. Congressional leaders are on record stating that the RNEP is necessary because it's a "usable nuclear weapon". This statement begs the question – does the United States really want to *use* nuclear weapons?