

A Budget to Defend the American People, Not the Weapons Makers

It's time we stop prioritizing weapons before citizens and re-evaluate our funding of nuclear weapons.

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Policymakers insist that they cannot afford to provide relief to millions of Americans struggling during a pandemic, cannot afford to provide universal health care, and cannot find funds for education. Despite this, the massive [National Defense Authorization Act](#) passes each year in an allegedly bipartisan fashion.

As Democratic Representatives **Barbara Lee** of California, **Mark Pocan** of Wisconsin, and **Jake Auchincloss** of Massachusetts state in a [letter](#) sent to President Biden,

“Our federal budget is a statement of our national values, and part of undoing the damage of the last four years is re-evaluating our spending priorities as a nation. That re-evaluation should begin with the Department of Defense.”

The budget for 2021 clocked in at more than [\\$740 billion](#). Passed during the throes of the pandemic in mid-2020, Congress [awarded](#) \$130 billion more than requested for the nuclear-armed Columbia class submarine program. While these same legislators whittled down the second round of stimulus payments to Americans to \$600, they simultaneously lined defense contractor’s pockets.

These priorities, putting weapons before citizens, are clearly to the detriment of not just those living in the United States, but to those across the globe. The Pentagon intends to request more funding for nuclear weapons this year as part of a Trump Administration-mandated [revival](#) of sea-launched cruise missiles, a program that had been retired more than a decade ago under President Obama.

These weapons would eventually [equip](#) the Navy with twenty to thirty nuclear-armed submarines, doubling its current fleet size, while also increasing the risk of a mistake or miscalculation, and aggravating relations with China further.

In addition to sea-launched missiles, the Pentagon is also planning to modernize ground-based strategic defense systems despite [compelling evidence](#) that this is unnecessary. Located in states such as Nebraska and Colorado, this system replaces intercontinental

ballistic missiles, though both are often referred to as the *nuclear sponge*, based on a strategy of drawing incoming domestic attacks away from major cities.

In essence, the United States has designated these states as sitting ducks, ready to soak up a nuclear attack. Representatives of these states claim the jobs are worth the risk, yet only [18 percent of Americans](#) agree. Not only does the perpetuation of these weapons put these communities at risk, the contract benefits a single manufacturer: [Northrop Grumman](#).

Small portion of the [National Defense Authorization Act](#) funds go toward mitigating the damage these nuclear weapons have already caused, by funding retrospective solutions such as cleanup, health care, and victim compensation. Communities impacted by nuclear weapons see little progress year after year, despite the evidence of ongoing harm.

In 2019, reports emerged that the Runit dome was [cracking](#), allowing radioactive waste to seep into the surrounding Pacific ocean. The Runit dome was [constructed](#) in 1977 as a temporary measure to contain thousands of gallons of nuclear waste remaining from tests the United States conducted on atolls in the Pacific Ocean from the 1940s to the 1950s. Few improvements have been made since, and U.S. lawmakers have [repeatedly denied](#) responsibility.

Despite agreeing to pay \$150 million in restitution in 1986, a 2010 hearing makes it clear [only a fraction](#) has so far been paid out, decades later.

As climate change causes the tides to rise, Runit will only deteriorate further, and other nuclear waste storage solutions, many near rising tides as well, are at similar risk. The United States has designated Yucca mountain, a space [sacred to the Western Shoshone Nation](#), as a final resting place for U.S. nuclear waste, but protests at the local and legislative levels have stalled construction. This waste has been shuffled around the country while it waits for a final destination, often spending periods of time stored in lower-income areas where residents' protests are [dismissed](#).

The treatment of the [Marshallese](#) underscores a hard truth about U.S. nuclear policy: the abandonment of its long list of victims, spanning from veterans to Indigenous communities. Groups subjected to nuclear fallout from testing, called [downwinders](#), have faced similar neglect from the government that exposed them.

Nearly every year, amendments are offered to the [National Defense Authorization Act](#) that would expand the [Radiation Exposure Compensation Act](#), another half-measure offered to victims of nuclear pollution, yet nearly all have failed.

This act, which is set to expire in 2022 unless it's renewed, currently provides a one-time payment of \$50,000 to \$100,000 to a select group of victims that does not include New Mexican downwinders. These small payments are a drop in the bucket when one considers the lifetime of various cancers many victims experience. New Mexico, the birthplace of the nuclear age, has documented [decades of proof](#) that the nuclear fallout from the Trinity test caused a range of cancers, reproductive issues, and health concerns identical to those of other fallout victims in the included states: Utah, Nevada, and Arizona.

Even if this act is renewed before its expiration next year, it leaves hundreds of thousands of victims and their family members—who are often left to carry the financial burden—behind, including those on the Marshall Islands.

Nuclear weapons pose a [grave threat](#) to the climate; they would, if used, rapidly accelerate climate change and cause a nuclear winter. Their very existence and proliferation are a threat to the well-being of the planet. Countless people have already suffered due to the creation of our current arsenal, and expanding it, during a pandemic no less, is a cruel testament to the values of our lawmakers.

Standalone bills have been introduced to solve many of these issues, but they are often championed primarily by representatives from impacted states, or fiercely opposed when money is on the line. The [Invest in Cures Before Missiles Act](#), introduced by Democratic Representatives **Ro Khanna** of California and **Ed Markey** of Massachusetts, shifts funding away from modernizing the ICBM systems and into COVID-19 response. **Senator Chris Van Hollen** of Maryland and **Representative Joe Courtney** of Connecticut have also [introduced a bill](#) to halt funding for Trump's revival of sea-launched cruise missiles.

The National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2022 poses a unique opportunity to seize agency over the defense budget and lobby representatives to support amendments such as those that provide compensation for downwinders and move funds away from expensive, redundant weapons programs.

The Biden Administration, in its first defense request, would do well to heed Lee, Pocan, and Auchincloss's call.

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