

# “Red Team” Penetrates Nuke Lab’s Security, Reaches “Superblock”

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During a mock exercise at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL), an antiterrorist “red team” breached security and penetrated Building 332, the so-called “Superblock” where some 2,000 pounds of plutonium and weapons-grade uranium are stored. Lab security personnel failed miserably, TIME magazine reported.

Situated in Livermore, California, LLNL is about an hour’s drive from San Francisco; approximately seven million people live within a 50 mile radius of the weapons facility. But as the Project on Government Oversight ([POGO](#)) disclosed in March,

...the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) has given Livermore Lab a waiver so that it does not have to meet the current security requirements devised by the intelligence community. The encroaching residential community surrounding the Lab has made it impossible to properly protect the Lab’s weapons quantities of plutonium and highly enriched uranium. (“U.S. Nuclear Weapons Complex: Livermore Homes and Plutonium Make Bad Neighbors,” POGO, March 17, 2008)

Reporting on the exercise, TIME’s Adam Zagorin [writes](#),

The attack team’s objective is usually to penetrate the “Superblock,” after which the attackers are timed to determine whether they can hold their ground long enough to construct a crude “dirty bomb” that could, in theory, be detonated immediately, or can buy themselves enough time to fabricate a rudimentary nuclear device, approximating the destructive power of the low-yield weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. A third option in the simulation is for the attackers to abscond with the nuclear material into the heavily populated San Francisco Bay area. (“Security Flaws Exposed at Nuke Lab,” TIME, May 12, 2008)

April’s “force-on-force” exercise pitted two teams in a “real life” test of security procedures. Designed to test nuclear defenses, the “red team” deployed all-terrain vehicles and torches to cut through metal barriers “securing” Building 332 from a hostile assault.

One of the lab’s defensive “centerpieces,” the Dillon Aero M134D Gun (popularly known as a Gatling gun), capable of firing 4,000 high-velocity rounds per minute failed when the hydraulic system used to raise the gun from its “hiding place inside the back of a small truck failed, making it impossible for the gun to be fired,” POGO analysts said.

The use of the weapon itself is not without controversy. Capable of delivering a lethal round

a mile away, its deployment by NNSA is particularly troubling since LLNL is surrounded on all sides by the sprawling Livermore community. POGO researchers detailed,

Within that one-mile range of the Lab are two elementary schools, a pre-school, a middle school, a senior center, and athletic fields, making this weapon unacceptable for Livermore. Even in an accidental firing, the Lab would be spraying lethal bullets into the surrounding neighborhoods. This type of accident is not unprecedented. For example, several years ago there was an accidental firing of a mounted, high caliber machine gun at the Y-12 Complex. The gun, similar in firepower to the Gatling guns, sprayed a building at the facility with bullets, which penetrated walls.

To make matters worse, while security personnel failed to deter the “attackers,” LLNL’s recent exercise hardly simulated “real-world” conditions, not least of which is the inevitable shock and confusion that would occur among “defenders” during the opening round of a surprise attack.

To whit, lab security teams are always given advance notice of the operation; the tests are conducted at night or on weekends, when few of the lab’s thousands of employees are present. Consequently, “defenders” do not simulate potential hostage-taking scenarios that in all probability would accompany belligerent action by terrorists.

But as POGO senior investigator Peter Stockton told [\*The Washington Times\*](#): “It is important to emphasize that Livermore’s security problems are not the fault of the guard force, who have complained about their lack of training and poor tactics. In fact, two security officers were fired for raising these problems.”

Is there a pattern here? As with other spectacular failures by the Bush administration and their corporate cronies, why not, if you’ll pardon the pun, shoot the messenger? After all, its less politically risky than bringing high-end lab executives and senior managers to account.

In 2005 the Department of Energy “approved the doubling of the amount of plutonium stored at Livermore, less than five months after a scientific panel recommended, for security reasons, that nearly all of it be moved to a safer, more remote site,” TIME revealed.

Yet despite this alarming disclosure, the NNSA, allegedly the prime defender of the “homeland” against terrorists intent on deploying weapons of mass destruction, gave their political masters—the nuclear weapons industry—a free pass when it came to (our) safety. This too, is hardly surprising given the make-up of the lab’s administrative “team.”

As a “public-private partner” of the U.S. national security state, the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory is run by [Lawrence Livermore National Security, LLC](#), a “limited liability” corporation comprised of five “partners:” the [University of California](#), [Bechtel](#), [BWX Technologies](#), [Washington Group International](#) and [Battelle](#)—all heavy-hitters in the biotech, construction, defense, energy, nuclear and security worlds. The seven-year contract to oversee operations for the Department of Energy (DoE)—a Bushist satrapy—is worth some \$297.5 million.

Readers are certainly familiar with Bechtel’s sordid history when it came to “reconstructing” Iraq after America’s illegal 2003 invasion and occupation. Three years later, and with contracts in hand worth some \$680 million, the construction giant abandoned Iraq with the

bulk of its infrastructure projects in tatters—and zero accountability from Congress. And when it comes to the corporation’s “expertise” on nuclear “safety,” Bechtel’s record is less than stellar. As [CorpWatch](#) reported back in 2003,

Starting with the Manhattan Project that developed the atomic bomb and engineering the first reactor to generate electricity, Bechtel has been heavily involved in both commercial and military nuclear activities. These have included some of the most notable nuclear mishaps in U.S. history, from California’s San Onofre reactor installed backwards, to the botched clean up of Three Mile Island. Now, while the legacy of environmental contamination and worker exposures continue to threaten public health and safety, Bechtel is finding ways to profit from the radioactive mess its projects have created. (“Bechtel: Profiting from Destruction: Why the Corporate Invasion of Iraq Must be Stopped,” CorpWatch, June 5, 2003)

BWX Technologies, during an earlier metastasis as The Babcock-Wilcox Company, were the designers of pressurized water reactors, one of which partially melted down during the 1979 Three Mile Island accident.

According to [SourceWatch](#),

BWX Technologies, Inc. (BWXT) of Lynchburg, VA, “supplies nuclear fuel and reactor components to the U.S. Navy” and “supplies reactor components for the DOE’s Naval Reactors Program and creates reactor fuel elements for several national government labs.”

In July 2000, the Department of Energy selected BWXT “over the Day & Zimmermann Group, a Philadelphia-based government contractor that owns Mason & Hanger, the company that has held the Pantex contract since 1956,” to operate the government’s Pantex plant.

According to John A. Gordon, the [former] head of the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) which oversees the nation’s nuclear weapons complex, “BWXT Pantex, which has a proven track record in nuclear facility operations, presented the strongest technical proposal.” In its bid for the government contract, BWXT “collaborated with Honeywell, a major aerospace firm, and Bechtel in its Pantex bid.”

Located on 16,000 acres in Amarillo, Texas, Pantex is the the only plant in the United States that assembles nuclear weapons for the Department of Defense. Designated a federal superfund site in 1991, corporate “best practices” have resulted in extensive groundwater and soil contamination throughout surrounding communities.

Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety ([CCNS](#)), revealed that BWXT is similarly “partnered” with the University of California, Bechtel and the Washington Group International in yet another “limited liability” corporation, the Los Alamos National Securities (LANS). Here too, “[security breaches](#)” are frequent.

But how better to “punish” well-connected corporatist miscreants in our post-Constitutional “New Order” than to hand out multi-year contracts to “manage” the most deadly and dangerous materials on earth!

As POGO’s executive director Danielle Brian told TIME, “suicidal terrorists would not need to

steal the fissile material, they could simply detonate it as part of an improvised nuclear device right on the spot.”

Talk about hitting the corporate “sweet spot”!

*Tom Burghardt is a researcher and activist based in the San Francisco Bay Area. In addition to publishing in Covert Action Quarterly, Love & Rage and Antifa Forum, he is the editor of Police State America: U.S. Military “Civil Disturbance” Planning, distributed by [AK Press](#).*

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