

USA Spending More on Nukes Now Than During Cold War

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Though it has been decades since the Cold War came to a close, the United States government spends more money on nuclear warheads now than it did during its stand-off with the Soviet Union.

As the US vows to cut down its arsenal of nuclear weapons, the cost the country spends annually on maintaining its supply is much more than America invested each year during the Cold War. Estimates suggest that currently the US puts around \$55 billion annually into its nuclear weapons program, reports Mother Jones; by comparison, the cost of the nuke complex for the country during the Cold War ran at an average of only \$35 billion each year.

Only three months into his presidency, Barack Obama said in April 2009 that he envisioned an Earth in the future free of nuclear weapons. Just two years later, however, America's arsenal of those warheads amounts to roughly 2,500 nukes ready to be deployed.

It was only less than two weeks ago that the United States finally dismantled its largest atomic bomb, the B53, which was said to be 600 times more powerful than the nuke that was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan towards the finale of the Second World War. As that nuke was dismantled, Deputy Secretary of Energy Dan Poneman told NPR that the bomb was a "Cold War relic" and showed the direction of dismantling that the United States was heading towards.

Even if the country is cutting back on its nukes, the United States has a backup stash larger than the active bombs, allowing for the country to in total have 5,113 nuclear warheads in its position. The surplus of not-quite-ready nukes is at 2,600, and though they cannot be deployed at a drop of a hat like the others, they can be reanimated as full-fledged warheads.

Peter Fedewa of the pro-disarmament Ploughshares Fund says that those nukes "could be 'raised from the dead' and brought back into deployment with relative ease."

Under the START treaty that the US signed with Russia last year, both countries vow to soon enough limit their stash of active warheads to only 1,500. The document does not, however, say how many back-up nukes either country can have. In the interim, Mother Jones reports that the Pantex plant near Amarillo, Texas holds around 3,000 warheads that are on the schedule to be dismantled, something America used to do at a pace of around 1,300 per year. Last year, however, both Congress and the White House said that the country would

cut back on the cost of dismantling the warheads and instead now invest the money on the upkeep of already dead nukes.

At the country's current rate, dismantling the thousands of atomic nukes would take longer than a decade Joe Cirincione, a longtime analyst of nuclear weapons policy, tells NPR. Currently, only around 250 warheads are dismantled at Pantex each year.

It doesn't help that the country is more interested in revamping the retired nukes than pulling the plug on them entirely, either.

In 2012, the country will spend \$4.1 billion on the "refurbishment" of retired nukes, while only a fraction of that — \$57 million — will be invested in dismantling them. That figure accounts for less than one percent of the country's total budget for the nuclear program. In all, America's nuclear program operates at a cost of around \$55 billion, which is spread across the Departments of Defense, Energy and Homeland Security. Despite Obama's instance on curbing the program, the tally of funding is believed to have gone up by around \$3 billion since only 2008, which at the time accounted for five times the budget of the Department of State — or 14 times what the Energy Department spends on everything else.

"The same facilities that dismantle U.S. nuclear warheads are also refurbishing US warheads," Cirincione adds to NPR. "And right now a decision has been made to prioritize refurbishment. So we're actually building more nuclear weapons than we're dismantling. That didn't use to be the case, but it is now."

When weapons are dismantled and the current snail's pace, the risks in place are of immense danger as well. "There are very strict manuals on exactly what you have to do," Hans Kristensen, spokesman for the Federation of American Scientists, tells MSNBC. "How much pressure can you apply to each screw, what kind of glue holds the chemical high explosives together around the spear of highly enriched uranium."

Both Russia and America have agreed to have an arsenal of only 1,550 deployed nukes come 2018, only a fraction of the 22,000-plus on hand at the end of the Cold War. Obama told an audience in Prague in 2009 he aimed "To put an end to Cold War thinking," adding that America "will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, and urge others to do the same." As the country is investing more money in rebuilding nukes than kicking them to the curb, however, will the president follow through with his plea or will it be added to the list of other promises gone unfulfilled?

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