

US Senate panel backs development of “usable” nuclear weapons

Patrick Martin
14 May 2003

The Armed Services Committee of the US Senate voted May 8 in a secret session to lift a decade-long ban on the research and development of low-yield nuclear weapons. The panel endorsed the Bush administration’s proposal, first announced a year ago, to push ahead with the production of nuclear weapons which would be more useable.

The closed-door vote was described by both congressional leaders and the media as a critical turning point in the effort of the administration to resume the design, production and testing of a new generation of nuclear weapons.

The measure must still be approved on the Senate floor, but this is considered a foregone conclusion after the committee action, since it is attached to the spending authorization for the Pentagon for the 2004 fiscal year, a bill which under Senate rules cannot be filibustered and requires only a simple majority for adoption. The legislation is the largest-ever military spending bill, providing a total of \$400.5 billion for the Department of Defense.

The bill will repeal the Spratt-Furse Amendment, adopted in 1993, which prohibited any research and development on a nuclear weapon with a yield lower than five kilotons of TNT, one-third the size of the atomic bomb which destroyed Hiroshima and killed an estimated 200,000 people.

Two other significant provisions in the legislation relate to nuclear weapons: a \$15 million authorization for a feasibility study of production of a so-called bunker-buster bomb, a full-size atomic weapon (up to one megaton) which would be configured for deep penetration into the earth before detonation; and \$25 million for improvements to the Nevada test site, which would allow the US to resume underground nuclear tests within 18 months of a presidential order, as

opposed to the current 36 months.

Bush administration officials and Senate Republicans presented the low-yield and bunker-buster bomb programs as a necessary response to the threat of “rogue states” possessing weapons of mass destruction. It was necessary, they claimed, for the United States to have smaller and more targeted bombs to be able to credibly threaten the use of nuclear weapons against small countries.

Linton Brooks, acting administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration, told the *New York Times*, “We need to make sure our weapons will in fact be seen by other countries as a deterrent. One element of that is usability. If nobody believes there is any circumstance where you will use the weapon, it is not a deterrent.”

Armed Service Committee Chairman John Warner, a Virginia Republican, said after the vote was made public, “Without committing to deployment, research on low-yield nuclear weapons is a prudent step to safeguard America from emerging threats and enemies.”

Two committee Democrats said the decision marked a radical departure in US military and foreign policy that undermined efforts to limit the spread of nuclear weapons.

Carl Levin of Michigan said, “It just sort of makes a mockery of our argument around the world that other countries—India, Pakistan—should not test and North Korea and Iran should not obtain. We’re driving recklessly down a road that we’re telling other people not to walk down.”

Jack Reed of Rhode Island said, “We’re moving away from more than five decades of efforts to delegitimize the use of nuclear weapons,” adding that the administration’s policy was that “we don’t want to be

constrained in any way about any weapon we want to field.”

Despite such protests, however, two key Democrats on the committee, Ben Nelson of Nebraska and Evan Bayh of Indiana, joined all 13 Republicans to approve the shift in policy, a margin which virtually assures final passage.

The committee vote came just over a year after the Bush administration decision to seek a change in the US nuclear targeting was made public, with a Pentagon leak to the *Los Angeles Times* of its proposed Nuclear Posture Review. Under this new policy, seven countries—Iraq, Iran, Libya, Syria, North Korea, China and Russia—are classified as potential targets for US nuclear attack, including preventive attacks. The Nuclear Posture Review also called for development of low-yield weapons and bunker-busters.

The bunker-buster bomb, called the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator, is a hydrogen bomb so powerful that targets 1,000 feet below the surface of the earth would be crushed by the shock waves generated by the detonation. The main technical obstacle, from the standpoint of the Pentagon, is to limit the fallout from such a colossal blast, which would otherwise kill countless people on the surface and make the targeted country’s resources—like Iraq’s oil, for instance—unavailable because of radioactivity.

The Senate committee vote underscores the fact that, despite the incessant administration and media propaganda against Iraq, North Korea and other weak and impoverished countries, it is the US government which is by far the most dangerous developer of weapons of mass destruction.

The United States is the only country which has used nuclear weapons in war, and the Bush administration is the government which has gone the furthest of any in the world in making concrete plans to use weapons of mass destruction in future wars.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact