

Nuclear misconceptions must not inform US weapons policy

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An informed debate about our nuclear deterrent policy is welcome, especially on an issue that is so critical to the nation's security. Unfortunately, too much of today's nuclear debate is characterized by critics of our nuclear deterrent policy endlessly repeating what I call the "seven deadly nuclear sins."

These are commonly held assumptions about our nuclear policy that turn out to be largely mythical; nonetheless, because they are so often repeated by a misinformed media, they tend to drive the debate. What are they?

The first sin is the characterization of the United States nuclear modernization program [as creating an arms race](#).

The second sin is describing our nuclear modernization effort as "[unaffordable](#)."

The third transgression is the claim that Russia's buildup of nuclear weapons [is a response to offset](#) America's building of missile defenses.

The fourth sin is the assumption that Russia's adoption of an escalatory policy to use nuclear weapons early in a conventional conflict is simply [a counter to America's](#) similar policy or [is not Russian policy](#) in the first place.

Fifth is the claim that newly proposed American low yield nuclear warheads would be [highly destabilizing](#) and lower the nuclear threshold.

Sixth is the fairy tale that [U.S. policy is to launch](#) our missiles on warning. This implies America's land-based missiles are all on hair trigger alert, just a mistaken warning away from being launched, and thus candidates for the nuclear junkyard.

And finally, the granddaddy of all sins, [is the strange notion that](#) conventional weapons can be prudently substituted for nuclear arms, allowing us to reduce even further our deployed nuclear forces.

Let's examine the facts. [The current Russian nuclear buildup](#) was announced in 2006 and began in the late Bush/early Obama administration when there were no U.S. modernization programs, a period that was called a nuclear acquisition holiday. The largest expansion of the Russian nuclear modernization program, including the new Sarmat heavy ICBM, began during the period in which the Obama administration was negotiating the New START Treaty.

Now that the U.S. is actually planning to build a new nuclear deterrent, is it affordable? Well, the [defense budget is 15 percent of the](#) federal budget. And the entire nuclear enterprise is now 4 percent of the \$700 billion defense budget. Four percent of 15 percent is .6 percent. That's the cost today within the total federal budget of nuclear deterrence. By contrast, we spend 3 times as much annually on food stamps.

What about our missile defenses triggering a Russian nuclear expansion? Ironically, just as the U.S. announced new missile defenses in 2002, [Putin agreed to cut nuclear arms](#) from 6000 to 2200 warheads and [then again in 2010 agreed](#) to cut nuclear warheads to 1550.

What about the Russian nuclear escalatory policy? According to General John Hyten, the commander of

U.S. Strategic Command, [Putin announced that new strategy in April 2000](#) during the Clinton administration. That is long before America's nuclear modernization program began.

Is it still Russian policy? [Well, yes. Russia is deploying](#) new [low yield weapons](#), uses such weapons in military exercises and announces repeatedly its policy is to use theater low yield nuclear weapons first and preemptively to assure they win a conventional conflict.

If we claim Russian low weapons are destabilizing and lowering the nuclear threshold, then of course similar American weapons must also be destabilizing, correct? Here critics get it all wrong. [Russia wants to use their low yield weapons first](#). That would break the nuclear threshold. Russian policy calls for this because Moscow believes that this results in a Russian victory.

On the other hand, a U.S. low yield cruise missile [gives the U.S. a similar regional low-yield prompt](#) deterrent that can respond quickly to such a Russian threat — a capability we do not now have. This new deterrent capability would significantly raise, not lower, the threshold to Russian first use of nuclear weapons.

Does the U.S. have a policy of launch on warning? And are the Minuteman ICBMS on hair trigger alert?

No, not at all. [No American ICBM can be launched](#) without a presidential order. And given the [enhanced and redundant survivability](#) of our nuclear deterrent, no element of our deterrent need be used before an enemy attack is confirmed. There [is no policy of launch on warning](#) — and there has not been for decades.

Finally, [it is absurd to equate conventional weapons](#) with nuclear warheads. For example, our former commander of Strategic Command, General Chilton, in remarks to the Mitchell Institute April 13, 2018, [says to match the destructive](#) power of a 200-kiloton nuclear warhead would require dropping our largest conventional bomb — the MOAB — simultaneously from 11,000 C-130's (which we don't have). Or 8000 B52 sorties (we have 75 B52s) simultaneously dropping 800,000 Mark-82 conventional gravity bombs. Enough said.

In 2006, [Putin announced](#) that by 2014 Russia would be fully 70 percent modernized and in 2014 Russia announced it would be 100 percent modernized by 2021. America's nuclear upgrades won't start going into the field until 2026.

To meet this challenge will be politically tough to do. But to succeed in defending this country, we must maintain a reasonably strong political consensus across party lines for the better part of two decades to move forward with our entire nuclear deterrent modernization plan. That will require that both Congress and the electorate be well informed. That cannot happen if fake nuclear news continues.

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