

W76-2 “Low-Yield” Warhead Fact Sheet*

The W76-2 “low-yield” Trident warhead is dangerous, unjustified, and redundant.

Background: The W76-2 nuclear warhead is a “low-yield” warhead called for by the first Trump administration's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review. It is mounted on the Trident II D5 ballistic missile, and deployed on OHIO Class “Trident” ballistic missile submarines. Trident's only mission is strategic nuclear deterrence; therefore, the W76-2 turns this stated mission on its head.

There is no “deterrence gap.” The United States spends approximately four times the amount as Russia each year on its nuclear arsenal—amounting to \$61.3 billion for the U.S. in 2011 compared to \$14.8 billion for Russia. The US government is in the process of rebuilding this arsenal at an estimated cost of \$1.7 trillion, with inflation, over a 30-year period. While this immense program is excessive, adds to a new arms race with Russia, and should be scaled back, Russia cannot doubt that the United States is serious about maintaining an unambiguously strong nuclear deterrent.

The United States already deploys a variety of low-yield nuclear weapons. These include 150 B61 gravity bombs that can be set from 0.3 to 60 kilotons, and air-launched cruise missiles with yields of 5 to 150 kilotons. These weapons are being upgraded to extend their lifetimes, and are receiving improvements, including greater accuracy. For comparison, the W76-2 will be 6.5 kilotons.

Nuclear war cannot be controlled. Perhaps the biggest fallacy in the whole argument is the mistaken and dangerous belief that a “small” nuclear war would remain small. There is no basis for the dubious theory that, if Russia used a “low-yield” nuclear weapon and the United States responded in kind, the conflict could stay at that level.

An adversary cannot determine what warhead is incoming. The W76-2 warhead is mounted on the Trident II D5 ballistic missile, deployed on OHIO Class “Trident” ballistic missile submarines. Presumably, the W76-2 warheads are mounted exclusively of the much larger yield W76-1(90 kiloton) and W88(455 kiloton) warheads. In the event that one or more missiles are launched at an adversary, there is no way to determine what warhead(s) is/are incoming. This would very likely lead to escalation, with an adversary assuming the worst case and launching a massive counterattack.

The W76-2 negates Trident's stated, and sole, mission: Trident's stated mission is strategic nuclear deterrence – to deter a nuclear attack on the United States by another country by demonstrating to that the U.S. has an assured second-strike capability, meaning a survivable system for carrying out a massive retaliatory nuclear attack. The mixing of low-yield and high-yield nuclear warheads contradicts Trident's longstanding mission.

Bills introduced to stop the W76-2: In February, 2019, bills were reintroduced in the new Congress to stop production of the W76-2 warhead. The bills were called the Hold the LYNE Act; “LYNE” stands for Low-Yield Nuclear Explosive. Representative Ted Lieu introduced H.R. 1086, and Senator Ed Markey introduced S. 401. Both bills would “prohibit the research and development, production, and deployment of the Trident D5 low-yield nuclear warhead, and for other purposes.” Both bills never got out of the starting gate.

Fiscal Year 2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) Passed: The compromise version of the annual defense spending bill passed in December 2019 allowed the Trump administration to quickly deploy the new W76-2 nuclear warhead. The original House version of the NDAA prohibited deployment of the W76-2, which defense experts have called “a gateway to nuclear catastrophe.”

QUOTES:

"A nuclear weapon is a nuclear weapon. You use a small one, then you go to a bigger one. I think nuclear weapons are nuclear weapons and we need to draw the line there." - George Shultz, Secretary of State for President Ronald Reagan²

"I don't think there's any such thing as a tactical nuclear weapon. Any nuclear weapon used at any time is a strategic game changer." - James Mattis, Secretary of Defense for President Donald Trump²

"It's not like the Russians are going to be sitting there saying, 'Well, let's wait to see this one detonate first. Oh, it's a small mushroom cloud! Well, in that case...' A nuke is a nuke. Once it's used, the gloves are off." - Hans Kristensen, director of the Nuclear Information Project at the Federation of American Scientists⁴

"All the Russians are going to see is that a missile that only carries nuclear warheads is heading towards Russia [and would most likely retaliate with powerful long-range weapons]... Russian policy, as [President] Vladimir Putin has said many times, is not to wait for it to land." - Jeffrey Lewis, Middlebury Institute of International Studies⁴

"We do not view nuclear weapons as a tool in warfare... It makes no sense for us to build low-yield nuclear weapons." - Representative Adam Smith, Democratic chair of the House Armed Services Committee⁵

REFERENCES:

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4. *Trump Administration Begins Production Of A New Nuclear Weapon*, January 28, 2019, NPR <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/28/689510716/trump-administration-begins-production-of-a-new-nuclear-weapon>
5. *The U.S. And Russia Are Stocking Up On Missiles And Nukes For A Different Kind Of War*, WVXU, February 1, 2019, <http://www.wvxu.org/post/us-and-russia-are-stocking-missiles-and-nukes-different-kind-war>
6. *The New "Low Yield" Submarine-Based Nuclear Warhead*, Fact Sheet, Union of Concerned Scientists, www.ucsusa.org/w76-2

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