



A Nuclear Family Vacation: Travels in the World of Atomic Weaponry

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Begin with a dash of plutonium, sprinkle some uranium-235, add a trigger mechanism and a rocket booster, and voilà, a nuclear deterrence program! At least that's how it used to work.

For two years authors Hodge and Weinberger, both reporters on defense issues, used their vacations to visit various sites involved with the development, production, and storage of atomic weapons and the planning of nuclear war. Weinberger is the author of *Imaginary Weapons: A Journey Through the Pentagon's Scientific Underworld* and is a contributing writer for *Wired's* national security blog. Hodge is a writer for *Jane's Defense Weekly*, *Slate*, *Financial Times*, *Foreign Policy*, and *Details*.

What they found in this post-Cold War and 9/11 attack era was a huge and expensive infrastructure struggling to reinvent itself. Before the collapse of the USSR the policy of deterrence kept the peace; after the collapse and just when it seemed that the "need" for weapons of mass destruction was drawing down, the 9/11 attacks threw war planners into a new phase.

What has emerged is a call for a new generation of nuclear weapons, among them, the Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW) which would have a more reliable triggering device, thus requiring fewer controversial tests. Because the recent focus of the nuclear complex has been the stalwart stewardship and maintenance of stockpiles, new design tasks would attract young scientists just as the previous generation nears retirement. "With little public debate...the government was pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into an effort to revive nuclear weapons production," the authors write. "According to the current schedule, it expected the first production unit of the RRW to be made in 2012."

Surprisingly funny and completely understandable to the layperson, *A Nuclear Family Vacation* is a memorable trip through the looking glass of nuclear annihilation.

DEIRDRE SINNOTT (June 16, 2008)

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