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# Inside the ICBM Lobby: Special Interests or the Public Interest?

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# Executive Summary

The nuclear weapons lobby is one of the most powerful forces in the military industrial complex.<sup>1</sup> The lobby's current priority is advocating for the \$315 billion Sentinel program to build a new Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM). The program has faced controversy over both its utility and its cost, including a cost increase of a whopping 81 percent since 2020.

The key champions of the Sentinel program are the Senators from Montana, North Dakota, Utah and Wyoming – states that are home to major ICBM bases or host major work on the Sentinel program. The group – known as the Senate ICBM Coalition – stresses the Sentinel's purported role in strengthening nuclear deterrence as well as its creation of jobs in the states they represent.

However, other members of Congress and ex-defense officials have raised urgent concerns about the Sentinel program, questioning the deterrence rationale that undergirds it and raising the alarm over the risk of accidental nuclear usage. Despite claims about Sentinel's economic benefits, it remains unclear how many jobs the program will actually create.

Weapons contractors – led by the Sentinel's prime contractor, Northrop Grumman – play a central role in the ICBM lobby. Since 2018, members of the strategic forces subcommittees of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees have received \$3.8 million from the 11 major Sentinel contractors. In total, ICBM contractors have donated \$87 million to members of Congress in the last four election cycles alone. Contractors' influence efforts are aided by the fact that senior government officials and members of Congress often secure jobs in the arms industry when they leave

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank his colleagues Ben Freeman, Nick Cleveland-Stout, Hekmat Aboukhater and Ayşe Lara Selçuker for assistance with primary research on patterns of campaign spending and lobbying expenditures.

government; this provides them the opportunity to lobby former colleagues. In all, the 11 ICBM contractors have spent \$226 million on lobbying in the past four election cycles. They currently employ 275 lobbyists, the vast majority of whom have passed through the revolving door from influential positions in government.

The Sentinel program should be scrutinized as part of a larger reassessment of U.S. nuclear policy. The 2023 report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States endorses the program and calls for a comprehensive nuclear weapons build-up, including the possible placement of multiple nuclear warheads on ICBMs – a highly aggressive strategic posture that has not been in place since the Cold War. A high number of Commission members have ties to the nuclear weapons industry, including its co-chair Jon Kyl, who was once a lobbyist for Sentinel prime contractor Northrop Grumman. Congress must weigh the dubious benefits of the Commission’s proposals against the significant risks and costs its recommendations would entail if carried out.

## Introduction

The official justification for spending vast sums on developing and deploying nuclear weapons is their role in deterring other nations from attacking the United States. But that’s not the only thing driving the Pentagon’s plan to spend up to \$2 trillion over the next three decades building a new generation of nuclear-armed bombers, missiles, and submarines.<sup>2</sup> There is a powerful network of corporations, government bureaucracies, members of Congress, and key communities that derive economic benefits from the perpetuation of the nuclear-industrial complex.<sup>3</sup>

Put simply, nuclear weapons are big business, and the beneficiaries of that business want to keep it that way.

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<sup>2</sup> Kingston Reif and Alicia Sanders-Zakre, “U.S. Nuclear Excess: Understanding the Costs, Risks and Alternatives,” Arms Control Association, April 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/reports/2019/USnuclearexcess>.

<sup>3</sup> William D. Hartung, “Massive Overkill, Brought to You by the Nuclear-Industrial Complex,” *TomDispatch*, November 14, 2017, <https://tomdispatch.com/william-hartung-how-to-wield-influence-and-sell-weaponry-in-washington>.

A prime example of the power of the nuclear weapons lobby is the Senate ICBM Coalition. The coalition is composed of senators from states that either house major ICBM bases or host major work on the Pentagon's new ICBM, known officially as the Sentinel: Montana, North Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming. The current members of the Senate from the relevant states are Jon Tester (D-MT), Steve Daines (R-MT), John Hoeven (R-ND), Kevin Cramer (R-ND), Mike Lee (R-UT), Mitt Romney (R-UT), John Barasso (R-WY), and Cynthia Lummis (R-WY).<sup>4</sup>

*Nuclear weapons are big business, and the beneficiaries of that business want to keep it that way.*

A number of the members of the ICBM Coalition are particularly well situated to promote spending on the Sentinel. Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT) is the chair of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee and Sen. John Hoeven (R-ND) is a member of that same subcommittee. As soon as he took over as chair of the defense appropriations subcommittee in 2021, Tester underscored that he would do everything in his power to keep ICBM funds flowing to his home state ICBM facility, Malmstrom Air Force Base:

The folks at Malmstrom are counting on Congress to put aside division and partisan politics, and provide the resources they need to do their jobs and safeguard our national security. As Defense Chairman, I will be working with partners on both sides of the aisle and in the administration to ensure that the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent program [now called the Sentinel] stays on

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<sup>4</sup> William D. Hartung, "Inside the ICBM Lobby: Special Interests or the National Interest," Center for International Policy, March 2021, [https://3ba8a190-62da-4c98-86d2-893079d87083.usfiles.com/ugd/3ba8a1\\_89fe183f8a164e22a2fa29d4d6381d7b.pdf](https://3ba8a190-62da-4c98-86d2-893079d87083.usfiles.com/ugd/3ba8a1_89fe183f8a164e22a2fa29d4d6381d7b.pdf).

track so that we maintain a reliable strategic nuclear deterrent for decades to come.<sup>5</sup>

Other members of the ICBM Coalition hold influential positions as well. Sen. Kevin Cramer (R-ND) serves on the Strategic Forces Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Sen. Mitt Romney (R-UT) serves on the Senate Budget Committee. And Sen. John Barasso (R-WY) is the ranking Republican on the Senate Energy and Water Committee, which authorizes spending for work on nuclear warheads at the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA).

Sen. Cramer made a point of both applauding and claiming credit for the support shown for the new ICBM program in the National Defense Authorization Act for 2024, including \$3.7 billion in funding for the Sentinel and a provision that prevents a reduction in deployed ICBMs from the current level of 400 missiles. Cramer called nuclear modernization “the number one priority in the national defense strategy.”<sup>6</sup>

Sen. John Hoeven (R-ND) has also touted his advocacy for ample nuclear weapons funding. In a press release he recounted his May 2024 exchange with Joint Chiefs of Staff Chair Gen. Charles Brown: “With challenges and growing unrest around the globe, it’s more important than ever that our men and women in uniform have the capabilities and tools necessary to deter our enemies and keep us safe. We secured a commitment from General Brown to continue modernizing our nuclear deterrent, including ICBMs, which is vital to Minot Air Force Base [in North Dakota].”<sup>7</sup>

Statements like the ones above from Senators Tester, Cramer and Hoeven are made primarily for domestic consumption – to let home state voters know they are securing

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<sup>5</sup> “Chairman Tester Tours Malmstrom and Inspects ICBMs with Top Air Force Leadership,” press release, May 21, 2021, <https://www.tester.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/pr-8310/>

<sup>6</sup> “Strong, Bipartisan National Defense Authorization Act Passes Congress, Securing Major Wins for North Dakota,” press release, December 13, 2023, <https://www.cramer.senate.gov/news/press-releases/strong-bipartisan-national-defense-authorization-act-passes-congress-securing-major-wins-for-north-dakota>.

<sup>7</sup> “Hoeven Secures Commitment from Chair of Joint Chiefs of Staff General Brown to Continue Nuclear Modernization, Maintain ISR Capabilities,” press release, May 10, 2024, <https://www.hoeven.senate.gov/news/news-releases/hoeven-secures-commitment-from-chair-of-joint-chiefs-of-staff-general-brown-to-continue-nuclear-modernization-maintain-isr-capabilities>.

substantial federal funds. They are not carefully considered observations about the best nuclear strategy to keep America safe.

Working together with the Pentagon, nuclear weapons contractors and other interested members of Congress, the senators in the ICBM coalition have been extremely effective in fending off efforts to reduce the number of deployed ICBMs in the U.S. arsenal, cut ICBM funding, or explore alternatives to the current plan for a new generation of land-based nuclear-armed missiles.<sup>8</sup>

The ICBM lobby will face a major challenge over the next few months because the Air Force's new ICBM, the Sentinel, has grown in estimated cost by a whopping 81 percent since 2020. The projected lifetime cost of the Sentinel is now \$315 billion, making it by far the most expensive element of the Pentagon's nuclear weapons modernization plan.

The cost overruns on the Sentinel triggered a review under the Nunn–McCurdy amendment, which attempts to address major cost issues early in the process; the goal is to find ways of fixing them before the costs mount. The review concluded that the Sentinel program was an essential element of the U.S. nuclear deterrent and that it must continue even if it results in reductions in funding for other defense programs. In justifying the decision, Deputy Defense Secretary William LaPlante said: "We are fully aware of the costs, but we are also aware of the risks of not modernizing our nuclear forces and not addressing the very real threats we confront."<sup>9</sup>

LaPlante's sentiments on the need to proceed with the Sentinel program at any cost are not universally shared. The Sentinel's cost problems, combined with ongoing questions about its utility as an aid to deterrence, have sparked renewed action by a network of arms control and disarmament organizations and a core group in Congress.

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<sup>8</sup> Hartung, Center for International Policy.

<sup>9</sup> "Department of Defense Announces Results of Sentinel Nunn-Mccurdy Review," press release, July 8, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3829985/department-of-defense-announces-results-of-sentinel-nunn-mccurdy-review/>.

Rep. John Garamendi (D-CA), Rep. Don Beyer, Sen. Ed Markey (D-MA), and Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-OR) – the co-chairs of congressional Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control Working Group – are using this opportunity to press for increased scrutiny of the Sentinel program. Some advocates are calling not only for the cancellation of the Sentinel, but for the elimination of ICBMs from the U.S. arsenal altogether.

Rep. Garamendi (D-CA), a longtime critic of the exorbitant costs of nuclear systems, has placed the fight over the new ICBM in its broader context:

[N]ations have collapsed by overspending on outdated defense strategies, and I fear the United States is repeating these mistakes. Each year, we approve increased spending without ensuring it enhances stability and security. These programs are unnecessary and costly mistakes at the expense of the U.S. taxpayer and further precipitate the modern nuclear arms race between the U.S., Russia, and China.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, former Rep. John Tierney of the Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation offered a blunt indictment of ICBMs:

Not only are intercontinental ballistic missiles redundant, but they are prone to a high risk of accidental use . . . They do not make us any safer. Their only value is to the defense contractors who line their fat pockets with large cost overruns at the expense of our taxpayers. It has got to stop.<sup>11</sup>

The late Daniel Ellsberg made a point similar to Tierney's in a February 2018 interview published in *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*:

You would not have these arsenals, in the US or elsewhere, if it were not the case that it was highly profitable to the military-industrial complex, to the aerospace

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<sup>10</sup> "Congressional Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control Working Group Announce Additional Oversight of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Spending," press release, June 4, 2024, <https://garamendi.house.gov/media/press-releases/congressional-nuclear-weapons-and-arms-control-working-group-announce>.

<sup>11</sup> Transcript of Press Conference of Congressional Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control Working Group, June 4, 2024, <https://share.descript.com/view/QGbwY4R2SKH>.

industry, to the electronics industry, and to the weapons design labs to keep modernizing these weapons, improving accuracy, improving launch time, all that. The military–industrial complex that Eisenhower talked about is a very powerful influence. We've talked about unwarranted influence. We've had that for more than half a century.<sup>12</sup>

Tierney's point about the risks posed by ICBMs was echoed by former secretary of defense William Perry, who said, "These missiles are some of the most dangerous weapons in the world. They could even trigger an accidental nuclear war."<sup>13</sup> A book length treatment of the subject by Perry and longtime nuclear analyst Tom Collina notes that the kind of "bolt from the blue" attack that was a major concern during the Cold War is extremely unlikely, and that in fact "the risk of a surprise attack is significantly smaller than the risk of stumbling into a nuclear war."<sup>14</sup>

Perry and Collina go on to argue that the risk of nuclear war by accident is by no means a theoretical scenario. They point out that the United States has experienced three major false alarms, and that Russia has had two. For example, on June 3, 1980, the United States received a warning that Soviet submarines had launched 220 nuclear–armed missiles at the United States, a figure later presumed to be 2,200 missiles – an all-out attack. Carter administration National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski estimated that he had three minutes to decide whether to tell the president of the potential attack, and that the president would then have four minutes to make a decision on whether to launch U.S. weapons. Just as Brzezinski was about to call the president, it was determined that it was a false alarm. It was later learned that it was the

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<sup>12</sup> John Mecklin, "Daniel Ellsberg on Dismantling the Doomsday Machine," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, February 26, 2018, <https://thebulletin.org/2018/02/daniel-ellsberg-on-dismantling-the-doomsday-machine-2/>.

<sup>13</sup> William J. Perry, "Why It's Safe to Scrap America's ICBMs," *New York Times*, September 30, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/30/opinion/why-its-safe-to-scrap-americas-icbms.html>.

<sup>14</sup> William Hartung, "How Not to Blunder Into a Nuclear War," *Forbes*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/williamhartung/2020/06/09/how-not-to-blunder-into-a-nuclear-war/>.

result of a malfunction of a 46-cent computer chip embedded in a communications device.<sup>15</sup>

## *The risk of nuclear war by accident is by no means a theoretical scenario.*

In addition, technical arguments against keeping ICBMs in the arsenal have been made in independent studies by the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Federation of American Scientists (UCS). Physicist David Wright, a co-author of the UCS report, argued that “There is no technological rationale for maintaining ICBMs. Sixty years ago, ICBMs were more accurate and powerful than submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and communications links with subs were unreliable. Today, SLBMs are as accurate as ICBMs if not more, and the Navy has secure submarine communication links, making the ICBMs unnecessary.”<sup>16</sup>

## **Tools of influence: Campaign contributions and revolving door lobbyists**

Northrop Grumman and the other major contractors involved in the Sentinel program will fight tooth and nail against funding cuts or other efforts to slow down the program. They can employ numerous tools of influence to get their way with the executive branch and Congress. For example, Northrop Grumman and its 10 largest subcontractors on the Sentinel program have donated over \$87 million to Congressional candidates in the last four election cycles (see Table 1).

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<sup>15</sup> William J. Perry and Tom Collina, *The Button: The New Nuclear Arms Race and Presidential Power from Truman to Trump*, Ben Bella Books, March 2021, <https://benbellabooks.com/shop/the-button/>.

<sup>16</sup> Union of Concerned Scientists, “U.S. ICBMs are Superfluous and Increase the Risk of Mistaken Nuclear War, Report Finds,” June 22, 2020, <https://www.ucsusa.org/about/news/icbms-are-unnecessary-according-union-concerned-scientists>.

**Table 1: Campaign Contributions by Top ICBM Contractors, 2018 to 2024**

Company	Component Built	Contributions
Honeywell	Guidance and Control	\$20.2 million
Lockheed Martin	Payload Support	\$18.9 million
Northrop Grumman	Prime Contractor	\$18.2 million
General Dynamics	Command and Control	\$13.0 million
L3 Harris		\$9.9 million
Textron	Re-entry System	\$2.4 million
Parsons	Construction	\$1.9 million
Clark Enterprises	Construction	\$1.8 million
Aerojet Rocketdyne	Solid Rocket Motor	\$530,000
Collins Aerospace	Command, Control and Training Systems	\$230,000

Source: Open Secrets database, <https://www.opensecrets.org/> and <https://www.defenseone.com/business/2019/09/northrop-icbm/159886>

ICBM contractor contributions were focused on members of Congress with the most power to determine the budget for the Sentinel program. Over the past four election cycles (2018 to present) the 11 major Sentinel contractors gave over \$2 million to members of the Strategic Forces Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, and \$1.6 million to the comparable subcommittee in the Senate.

The biggest recipient of ICBM contractor contributions in the House strategic forces committee over the past four election cycles was long-time nuclear hawk Rep. Mike Turner (R-OH), with total donations of over \$305,000. Subcommittee chair Rep. Doug Lamborn (D-CO) lagged behind Turner at \$146,000, and ranking Democrat Seth Moulton

received \$115,000. For a full tally of contributions from ICBM contractors to members of the strategic forces subcommittees, see Table 2.

**Table 2: Top Ten Recipients of Contributions by Major ICBM Contractors to Members of the House Armed Services Committee Strategic Forces Subcommittee, 2018 to 2024**

Member	Amount Received
Rep. Michael Turner (R-OH)	\$305,108
Rep. Donald Norcross (D-NJ)	\$234,085
Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-NY)	\$218,596
Rep. Donald Bacon (R-NE)	\$209,113
Rep. Joe Wilson (R-SC)	\$184,211
Rep. Salud Carbajal (D-CA)	\$162,632
Rep. Doug Lamborn (R-CO)	\$160,200
Rep. Michael Waltz (R-FL)	\$146,132
Rep. John Garamendi (D-CA)	\$115,500
Rep. Seth Moulton (D-MA)	\$115,061

Source: Open Secrets

In the Senate strategic forces subcommittee, the top three recipients of ICBM contractor donations were Sen. Mark Kelly (D-AZ) at \$259,000, Senate Armed Services Committee overall chair Sen. Jack Reed (D-RI) at \$231,000, and Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS) at \$209,000. See Table 3.

**Table 3: Top Ten Recipients of Contributions by Major ICBM Contractors to Members of the Senate Armed Services Committee Strategic Forces Subcommittee, 2018 to 2024**

Member	Amount Received
Rep. Mark Kelly (D-AZ)	\$259,539
Rep. Jack Reed (D-RI)	\$231,200
Rep. Roger Wicker (R-MS)	\$209,301
Rep. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA)	\$209,929
Rep. Angus King (I-ME)	\$169,450
Rep. Deb Fischer (R-NE)	\$118,042
Rep. Tom Cotton (R-AR)	\$102,063
Rep. Joe Manchin (D-WV)	\$79,055
Rep. Jacky Rosen (D-NV)	\$58,797
Rep. Mike Rounds (R-SD)	\$44,819

Source: Open Secrets

Members of the Senate ICBM Coalition have also benefited from donations from Sentinel contractors, to the tune of over \$443,000 in total since 2018. The biggest recipient was Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT) at \$184,000.

ICBM contractors have hired large numbers of well-connected lobbyists, many of whom worked in the Pentagon or Congress before passing through the revolving door into the arms industry.

The 11 major ICBM contractors have spent \$226 million on lobbying since 2018 and currently employ a total of 275 lobbyists among them. Not all of these lobbyists work on

the ICBM issue, but the fact that the firms have a deep pool of lobbyists to draw from in a crisis gives them greater clout. The top firms by number of lobbyists were General Dynamics (72), Collins Aerospace (70), Honeywell (49), and Lockheed Martin (49).

Northrop Grumman's roster of lobbyists – 31 as of 2024 – offers a good sense of the professional connections of advocates for the big arms makers.

Current Northrop Grumman lobbyists include former Rep. Bud Cramer, who served 18 years as a congressman from Alabama and served on the defense subcommittee of House Appropriations. His district included the headquarters of the Army Missile and Space Command. Cramer was a co-founder of the Blue Dog Democrats, an influential conservative faction within the Democrat Party.

Cramer's former chief of staff, Jefferies Murray, also lobbies for Northrop Grumman.

Other current lobbyists for Northrop Grumman include Brian Wilson, a former professional staff member for the Senate Appropriations Committee; Caitlin Shannon Canter, former deputy chief of staff of former Congressman Devin Nunes (R-CA). Nunes served as chair of the House Intelligence Committee and a member of the Ways and Means Committee when he was in the House. Steven Elmendorf is also a lobbyist for Northrop Grumman after spending 12 years as a senior advisor and chief of staff for former Representative Dick Gephardt (D-MO).

Other well-connected Northrop Grumman lobbyists include Mark Kadesh, who worked as a chief of staff both for former California Senator Dianne Feinstein and former California Congresswoman Jane Harman. Feinstein chaired the Senate intelligence committee, and Harman was the ranking Democrat on the House intelligence committee.

# Conflicts of interest in action: The Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States

Conflicts of interest are prevalent in the world of nuclear weapons policy and budgeting, as evidenced last year when a congressional commission on the strategic posture of the United States released its final report. The report called for an expansion of the Pentagon's nuclear weapons modernization plans, at a cost yet to be determined.

When the Senate Armed Services Committee held a hearing on the strategic posture report on October 19, 2023 it had an opportunity for a serious discussion of U.S. nuclear strategy, spending, and how best to prevent a nuclear war.<sup>17</sup>

Given the stakes if a nuclear war breaks out – up to 90 million dead within the first few days of a nuclear conflict between the United States and Russia and up to *5 billion* lives lost once radiation sickness and the reductions in the capacity to grow food kick in—one would have hoped for a serious, wide ranging debate on the implications of the commission's proposals.<sup>18</sup> The commission called for an across-the-board nuclear weapons *buildup* that many independent experts fear will spur a three-way arms race between the United States, China and Russia – an arms race that will only make the ultimate conflict more likely.<sup>19</sup> The commission report also called for spending untold billions on even more new nuclear weapons, in addition to an existing Pentagon plan to

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<sup>17</sup> "Hearings to Receive Testimony on the Findings of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, Senator Armed Services Committee, October 19, 2023

<https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/to-receive-testimony-on-the-findings-of-the-congressional-commission-on-the-strategic-posture-of-the-united-states>.

<sup>18</sup> "Plan A: How a Nuclear War Could Progress," *Arms Control Today*, July/August 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-07/features/plan-how-nuclear-war-could-progress#:~:text=It%20is%20estimated%20that%20there,few%20hours%20of%20the%20conflict> and <https://www.rutgers.edu/news/nuclear-war-would-cause-global-famine-and-kill-billions-rutgers-led-study-finds#:~:text=More%20than%205%20billion%20people.estimate%20post%2Dconflict%20crop%20production>.

<sup>19</sup> Daryl Kimball, "Why We Must Reject Calls for a U.S. Nuclear Buildup," *Arms Control Today*, November 2023, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-11/focus/why-we-must-reject-calls-us-nuclear-buildup>; Hans Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns and MacKenzie Knight, "Strategic Posture Report Calls for Broad Buildup," Federation of American Scientists, October 12, 2023, <https://fas.org/publication/strategic-posture-commission-report-calls-for-broad-nuclear-buildup/>.

spend \$2 trillion over the next three decades to build a new generation of nuclear-armed missiles, bombers, and submarines.<sup>20</sup>

On the ICBM issue, the strategic posture commission pressed for the production and deployment of new missiles as quickly as possible; exploring the placement of multiple warheads on each ICBM, a throwback to a dangerous Cold War approach that had long since been abandoned; and looking into creating mobile basing systems for ICBMs, an idea that was roundly rejected in the 1980s debate over the MX missile system.

Unfortunately, much of the discussion during the hearing involved senators touting weapons systems or facilities produced or located in their states, to the exclusion of analysis of what nuclear posture would best protect the United States and its allies.

For example, Sen. Mark Kelly (D-AZ) stressed the importance of Raytheon's SM-6 missile, built in Arizona, and commended the commission for proposing to spend more on the program. Sen. Jackie Rosen (R-Nev.) praised the role of the Nevada National Security Site – formerly known as the Nevada Test Site – in making sure nuclear warheads were reliable; that is, that they would explode as intended in a nuclear conflict. Rosen called for more funding to address what she described as “significant delays” in upgrading the Nevada facility. Sen. Tommy Tuberville (R-AL) pointed to the billions in military work being done in his state: “In Alabama we build submarines, ships, airplanes, missiles. You name it, we build it.” Sen. Eric Schmitt (R-MO) asked the witnesses to confirm that the Kansas City Plant, which makes non-nuclear parts for nuclear weapons, is absolutely essential for American security.<sup>21</sup>

And so it went, until Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) asked what the nuclear buildup recommended by the commission would cost. She suggested that if past history is any guide, much of the funding proposed by the commission would be wasted: “I’m willing

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<sup>20</sup> Kingston Reif and Alicia Sanders-Zakre, “U.S. Nuclear Excess: Understanding the Costs, Risks, and Alternatives,” Arms Control Association, April 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/reports/2019/USnuclearexcess>.

<sup>21</sup> Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing.

to spend what it takes to keep America safe, but I'm certainly not comfortable with a blank check for programs that already have a history of gross mismanagement.”<sup>22</sup>

Commission co-chair Jon Kyl – a former Republican senator from Arizona and a lifelong opponent of nuclear arms control – told Warren that the commission had done no estimate of costs, and that the commission’s recommendations should be carried out regardless of the price. This was good news for nuclear weapons contractors like Northrop Grumman – a firm Kyl represented as a paid lobbyist after leaving the Senate – but bad news for taxpayers.<sup>23</sup>

Kyl wasn’t the only commission member with a conflict-of-interest. His co-chair on the commission, Madelyn Creedon, formerly worked for the National Nuclear Security Administration, which oversees the U.S. nuclear warhead program. She now runs the Green Marble Group, a consulting firm that describes its mission as working for the “national security community with emphasis on nuclear, space, and countering weapons of mass destruction.” Commission member Frank Miller works at the Scowcroft Group, which provides “strategic and tactical advice” on national security issues, including working directly with government weapons-buying officials and arms companies. Last but not least, panel members Rebecca Heinrichs and Marshall Billingslea both work for the hard-line Hudson Institute, which is funded by arms makers, including firms like Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman that are heavily involved in the development and production of nuclear weapons.<sup>24</sup> In all, nine of the 12 commissioners had ties to the arms industry.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> “At Hearing, Senator Warren Highlights Costs of New Nuclear Arms Race, Need for Crypto Crackdown to Stop Nuclear Proliferation,” press release, office of Sen. Elizabeth Warren, October 19, 2023, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/at-hearing-senator-warren-highlights-costs-of-a-new-nuclear-arms-race-need-for-crypto-crackd>. Summaries of statements of other senators at the hearing are contained in the video of the hearing.

<sup>23</sup> Theodoric Meyer, “Kyl Returns to Covington,” *Politico*, January 7, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-influence/2019/01/07/kyl-returns-to-covington-471777>.

<sup>24</sup> Sara Sirota, “Congress Is Blowing a Key Chance to Reform Nuclear Weapons Policy,” *The Intercept*, March 24, 2022, <https://theintercept.com/2022/03/24/nuclear-weapons-reform-commission-ukraine-russia/>.

<sup>25</sup> Eli Clifton and Ben Freeman, “Buying Influence: Top U.S. Nuclear Board Advisors Are Tied to the Arms Industry,” *The Guardian*, November 10, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/10/us-congress-nuclear-weapon-committee-conflict-interest>.

Susi Snyder of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) put the panel's conflicts of interest in context:

What we've consistently seen is the nuclear weapons industry buying influence. And that means we cannot make serious decisions about our security . . . Instead of having a debate about the tools and materials we need to make ourselves safe we're having a debate about which company should get the contracts.<sup>26</sup>

## Playing the jobs card

When Northrop Grumman was selected as the sole supplier for the new ICBM in September 2019, the company claimed that the development portion of the program would create about 10,000 jobs nationwide. This is a fairly small number of jobs in the context of a national workforce of over 160 million, but ICBM-related jobs are still important to some key communities. This is particularly true in states like Montana, North Dakota, and Wyoming, where ICBM bases make up a significant share of employment in the cities near where they are based. But the jobs at the ICBM bases will only be impacted if ICBMs are eliminated altogether. A cancellation of the Sentinel program alone would only have an effect on the jobs involved in developing and building that system.

The truth is no one really knows how many jobs the Sentinel program will create, and Northrop Grumman and the State of Utah want to keep it that way. The company and the state have successfully blocked public access to the subsidy agreement between the state of Utah and Northrop Grumman, which includes information on how many jobs at what pay scales the company has to create under the Sentinel program to keep the maximum state subsidy. A press release from the Utah Governor's Office of Economic Opportunity claims that Sentinel could create "up to 2,250 jobs [in Utah] over the next 20 years," but there has been no documentation of that claim. Efforts by Taylor Barnes of Inkstick Media to access the subsidy agreement and the job promises contained within

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<sup>26</sup> Eli Clifton and Ben Freeman, "Buying Influence".

it have been rebuffed so far. But it is important to note that virtually any other expenditure of funds, from infrastructure to green energy to health care to education, would create one quarter to two times as many jobs as spending for military purposes.<sup>27</sup>

*The truth is no one really knows how many jobs the Sentinel program will create, and Northrop Grumman wants to keep it that way.*

## The Wicker factor

Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS) is a major cheerleader for ever higher Pentagon budgets. He is the ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, and a long-time military hawk who receives more campaign funding from the arms industry than any other member of the U.S. Senate – over \$340,000 in the 2024 election cycle thus far.<sup>28</sup>

In May Senator Wicker released a report – “21st Century Peace Through Strength: A Generational Investment in the U.S. Military” – which argued for a \$55 billion increase in the Pentagon budget for next year and a jump to spending five percent of GDP for military purposes for years to come.<sup>29</sup> Wicker’s proposed increases would add up to an enormous sum – hundreds of billions of dollars in additional spending in the next five years alone. His recommendations include fully funding the Pentagon’s nuclear modernization plan, and even adding spending in some areas.

Wicker has been a staunch advocate of building the new ICBM as soon as possible. In a January 2024 oped in the *Wall Street Journal*, co-authored with Sen. Deb Fischer (R-NE), he claimed that key elements of America’s nuclear arsenal were “underfunded and

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<sup>27</sup> Heidi Peltier, “War Spending and Lost Opportunities,” Costs of War Project, Brown University, March 14, 2019, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2019/March%202019%20Job%20Opportunity%20Cost%20of%20War.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Open Secrets, <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/recips?cycle=2024&ind=D>.

<sup>29</sup> Sen. Roger Wicker, “21st Century Peace Through Strength: A Generational Investment in the U.S. Military,” May 29, 2024, <https://www.wicker.senate.gov/services/files/BC957888-0A93-432F-A49E-6202768A9CE0>.

behind schedule.”<sup>30</sup> Wicker and Fischer pointed to the Sentinel in particular, even though the Biden administration has provided more than ample funding for the program. Lurking behind these criticisms is a desire not only to lock in existing commitments to the Sentinel program, but to build additional missiles beyond the numbers currently planned, and to include dangerous modifications like adapting the new ICBMs to carry multiple warheads.

## **The bottom line: Put the public interest before special interests**

Numerous experts and former national security officials have pointed out that the United States can maintain a robust nuclear deterrent force without ICBMs.<sup>31</sup> Weapons on bombers and relatively invulnerable ballistic missile submarines are more than enough to dissuade any nation from launching a nuclear attack on the United States. In fact, a case can be made that ICBMs detract from American security because a president would have such a short time span in which to decide whether to launch them on warning of an attack that they increase the risk of an accidental nuclear confrontation sparked by a false alarm. It’s time for the executive branch and Congress to assess the need for ICBMs on the merits, not based on special interest lobbying or outmoded strategic thinking.

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<sup>30</sup> Roger Wicker and Deb Fischer, “America’s Nuclear Weapons Are Dangerously Out of Date,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 19, 2024,

[https://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-nuclear-shield-is-dangerously-out-of-date-icbm-sentinel-china-russia-5f3fc39b?mod=opinion\\_feat2\\_commentary\\_pos3](https://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-nuclear-shield-is-dangerously-out-of-date-icbm-sentinel-china-russia-5f3fc39b?mod=opinion_feat2_commentary_pos3).

<sup>31</sup> See Perry and Collina, Union of Concerned Scientists, and Federation of American Scientists, op. Cit.; Daniel Ellsberg and Norman Solomon, “To Avoid Armageddon, Don’t Modernize Missiles – Eliminate Them,” *The Nation*, November 1, 2021, <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/eliminate-nuclear-missiles/>; and Gabe Murphy, “Ripe for Rescission: A Cost-Benefit Analysis of U.S. ICBMs,” Taxpayers for Common Sense, May 2024, [https://www.taxpayer.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/5-30-24\\_Ripe-for-Rescission-A-Cost-Benefit-Analysis-of-U.S.-ICBMs.pdf](https://www.taxpayer.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/5-30-24_Ripe-for-Rescission-A-Cost-Benefit-Analysis-of-U.S.-ICBMs.pdf).

## About the Author

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