Weekly ICBM EAR Report

Image: Illustration of the Sentinel next-generation ICBM. Credit: Northrop Grumman - Space News

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Edition: Week of May 4th, 2026

ICBM EAR Week of May 4, 2026 - Prepared by Peter Huessy, President of Geostrategic Analysis and Senior Fellow at National Institute for Deterrence Studies (NIDS) and the Gold Institute for International Strategy

Quotes of the Week

USSTRATCOM JEC Director Maj Gen AnnMarie Anthony: "We really can't assume, as warfighters, that the electromagnetic spectrum is going to be a permissive environment. It is a critical warfighting maneuver space…it's actively contested by our adversaries."

Senator Angus King (I-Maine) at a SASC Hearing: "The unfortunate truth is that it's fallen to the lot of all of us to modernize the entire [U.S.] nuclear triad at once.

Rep. Mark Alford (R-MO): "Foreign ownership near U.S. nuclear bases, including Whiteman, is a real national security risk and should concern EVERY American. My Strategic Assets Protection Act takes action—cracking down on CCP-linked activity and protecting America's nuclear deterrent. My bill just advanced in the House."

Dale R. White, SASC Testimony: "The first complete three-stage ground test missile had been assembled last fall, paving the way for the program's first flight, a missile pad launch scheduled for 2027, which will mark a pivotal moment in our flight test campaign."

Chinese Ambassador for Disarmament Affairs and Deputy Permanent Representative to Geneva Shen Jian: "At the #NPTRevCon, I delivered a statement at Main Committee II, highlighting the importance of reducing the role of nuclear weapons in national security policy & preventing 'proliferation through nuclear sharing.'"

ICBM EAR Nuclear Highlight of the Week

Senator Angus King (I-Maine)at a SASC Hearing: "The unfortunate truth is that it's fallen to the lot of all of us to modernize the entire [U.S.] nuclear triad at once. Probably, in retrospect, we should have been doing pieces of it over the last 30 or plus years. Plus…we're having to modernize the nuclear weapon production [warheads, bombs] as well as the triad platforms [bombers, submarines, missiles]. I refer to it as the pig in the budgetary python. It's a lump that's moving through that we're just going to have to swallow in order to maintain the basic bedrock of our national security strategy, which is [nuclear] deterrence." King also explained DoD "is conducting a once-in-a-generation modernization of our triad...ensuring the existing triad of ICBMs, submarines, and bombers can remain safe, secure, and effective as the bedrock of our national defense deterrence policy with two near peer adversaries, Russia and China."

Top Congressionally Related ICBM/Nuclear News & Developments**

Air Force Gen. Dale R. White, Director of the Critical Major Weapon Systems program, updated for the Senators on the SASC what's going on with the Air Force's Sentinel ICBM program. IOC is scheduled for 2031 or two years beyond its initial target. More than a decade ago, Senator Kent Conrad (D-ND) passed legislation that required the USAF to keep Minuteman III "through 2030."

In retrospect the law saved the ICBM leg of the Triad and gave the US time to put together a SLEP for Minuteman with the GRP and PRP (guidance and propulsion replacement programs) and then develop the placement Sentinel program designed to remain in the nuclear force through 2080. That means more than 50 years, which comes to a $2.6 billion a year cost, which compares to $11.62 billion Americans spend each year on movie tickets or 443% more than the annual average cost for Sentinel.

The Director also explained Minuteman III costs $2 billion for sustainment and operations, or $5 million per missile which also includes modernizing essential equipment. The 55 year old deterrent is on alert some 99.% of the time, a tribute to the Minuteman force Command and its thousands of heroic miliary and industry missileers. White also noted that the first complete three-stage ground test missile had been assembled last fall, "paving the way for the program's first flight, a missile pad launch scheduled for 2027, which will mark a pivotal moment in our flight test campaign." Sentinel also broke ground on a prototype Sentinel launch silo in Promontory, Utah, "a key step in tackling one of the program's most significant engineering challenges." White said Sentinel is also on a path to its Milestone B decision by the end of this year, entering EMD and an IOC or initial operational capability around early 2030s.

A big challenge is Minuteman may have to operate through 2050 some 14 years longer than planned. GAO says "Prolonged operation of the aging system presents sustainment risks. Addressing these risks in a transition risk management plan would help ensure the system meets requirements during the transition." The Sentinel Site Activation Task Force detachments at each missile wing, test site, and acquisition location has been established to guide the transition to the new ICBM.

As for the new Raider or B21, White says it is on track to be delivered to Ellsworth USAF base in 2027 while undergoing an increase in production by 25%. General Davis, the USAF Global Strike Command, says the existing B2, B52 and B1 force "remain in high demand across multiple theaters including for Rough Rider, a 2025 operation in Yemen; Midnight Hammer in Iran; Absolute Resolve in Venezuela; and today in Epic Fury in Iran." In Epic Fury, Davis said, "Global Strike Command conducted over 150 bomber sorties, 48 of which were round-trip from the United States. These missions were a minimum of 18 hours in duration, with those from the U.S. taking as long as 40 hours."

Adm. William J. Houston, Director, Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program reported to the SASC the Columbia nuclear reactor propulsion plant would finalize development in fiscal 2027, adding, "The life of the ship core, now entering serial production, is directly supporting the Navy's number one acquisition priority and a key strategic asset."

Vice Adm. Johnny R. Wolfe, Jr., Navy Director for Strategic Systems Programs, confirmed the first Columbia sub was "definitely on track" to make the initial, planned 2039 deployment. Wolfe said the biggest risk on the government side "is understanding all the testing that we're going to need to do both from the [test] pad and from the platform [the submarine] before we start deploying in 2039."

As for NNSA, David E. Beck, Deputy Administrator for Defense Programs, described seven nuclear warhead modernizations and several complex construction programs that were underway. The W88 Alt 870 warhead upgrade for the Navy's Trident II D5 sub-launched ballistic missile and the B61-12 Air Force tactical nuclear bomb are recently completed programs.

Also, in progress are upgrades for the B61-13 tactical bomb; the B80-4 warhead for the Long-Range Standoff cruise missile; the W80-5 warhead for the new Navy sub-launched cruise missile; the W87-1 warhead for the Minuteman III and Sentinel ICBMs; and the W93, future warhead for the Navy D5. Beck explained the US requirement is "to make 80 pits a year by 2030 and we have set a goal to make 100 collectively through December of 2028, which means that in order to get there from here, we will have to make between 30 and 50 pits per year. We're moving closer to the objective." (**The ICBM EAR thanks the Cyber Brief essay of May 4 from which much of this information is based.)

ICBM EAR Essay on Real Clear Defense May 4

https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2026/05/05/blaming_america_first_dangerous_waters_ahead_1180672.html

Administration Developments

U.S. Strategic Command, in collaboration with the U.S. Naval War College, recently conducted the annual Deterrence and Escalation Game and Review, a wargame that USSTRATCOM Commander Adm. Rich Correll said "serves as a critical proving ground, allowing us to rigorously test our assumptions, integrate joint force capabilities across domains, and transform deterrence concepts from strategy to operational reality."

The State Department Bureau of Arms Control and Nonproliferation: "The U.S. hosted an #NPTRevCon event in a demonstration of nuclear transparency and commitment to nonproliferation. The U.S. is leading on strategic stability, risk reduction, and arms control, and on peaceful uses of nuclear energy - unleashing the Golden Era of U.S. energy dominance."

Secretary of the Air Force Troy E. Meink wrote: "I am pleased to support the nomination of Lt. Gen. Doug Schiess to be our next Chief of Space Operations. He brings the operational experience, strategic mindset and leadership we need to continue that momentum and ensure space capabilities remain a decisive advantage for our nation."

Gen. S. L. Davis, Commander, Air Force Global Strike Command: "Strengthening the #NC3 Enterprise! Recently met with the leadership teams of the Nuclear Command, Control & Communications (NC3) Integration Directorate & the Air & Space Forces Center within @MITREcorp's National Security Sector, at Hanscom AFB."

National Nuclear Security Administration announced the completion of Pantex Plant's High Explosives Science and Engineering facility.

The National Nuclear Security Administration: "Out with the old. In with the new. NNSA recently completed the High Explosives Science and Engineering facility at Pantex Plant. It replaces 15 WWII-era buildings with one cutting-edge center for high explosives research and nuclear weapons modernization. The Trump Administration promised to rebuild America's strength. This delivers."

The Air Force Life Cycle Management Center: The B52 Commercial Engine Replacement Program completed its Critical Design Review, and the first test plane is expected to begin modification this year.

The State Department Bureau of Arms Control and Nonproliferation: "We're ready for the next era of arms control—but we can't do it alone. Other countries have a responsibility to help ensure strategic stability. We call on every delegation in this room to join us in encouraging China and Russia to come to the table and take action without further delay."

USSTRATCOM Commander Adm. Rich Correll U.S. Strategic Command: In collaboration with the U.S. Naval War College, recently conducted the annual Deterrence and Escalation Game and Review. said "serves as a critical proving ground, allowing us to rigorously test our assumptions, integrate joint force capabilities across domains, and transform deterrence concepts from strategy to operational reality," according to a press release from the command.

International Nuclear Related Developments

USCENTCOM Commander Adm. Brad Cooper: U.S. forces shot down multiple Iranian missiles and drones fired at U.S. Navy and commercial vessels and destroyed six of Tehran's small boats in the Strait of Hormuz as his command works to keep the waterway open for merchant ships.

Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev The prospect of Germany getting close to acquiring nuclear weapons is a casus belli, and in this case, Russia could resort to all response measures in nuclear deterrence, said.

Medvdev also warned the slightest move by Germany toward acquiring nuclear weapons would constitute a legitimate casus belli against Russia, as stipulated in Moscow's strategic documents,

North Korea said that Pyongyang is not bound under any circumstances by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and criticized the United States for providing "extended deterrence" to its allies and "neglecting" its nuclear disarmament commitments.

Reuters – notorious for bad predictions---reported that the time Iran would need to build a nuclear weapon has not changed since June of last year, when analysts estimated that joint U.S.-Israeli airstrikes against Tehran's nuclear program had pushed back the timeline to up to a year.

Iran's Oil Storage Clock Is About to Run Out

As U.S. blockade holds, Iran's inability to store tens of millions of barrels of oil could alter the course of the war, analysts say.

By John Haughey

May 06, 2026 - Updated:May 06, 2026

The "storage clock" is ticking as tankers that exported 3.2 million barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil remain bottled up in Iranian ports by the U.S. Navy.

The blockade in the Gulf of Oman is a pressure-point tactic, part of a global strategy to deny Tehran $13 billion in monthly revenues and paralyze Iran's petroleum industry by forcing it to shut down when it runs out of space to store what it can't ship.

Since U.S. President Donald Trump imposed the blockade on April 13, at least 1.5 million barrels of Iranian oil have been stored every day because there's no place to move it.

Those barrels are starting to pile up. According to consensus industry estimates, including by UK-based Energy Aspects, up to 68 million barrels of Iran's 122-million-barrel maximum storage was full in late April, and there was space for 20 million to 30 million barrels more.

The squeeze is rattling Islamic Republic leaders, Trump said in an April 28 Truth Social post.

"Iran has just informed us that they are in a 'State of Collapse,'" the president wrote. "They want us to 'Open the Hormuz Strait,' as soon as possible, as they try to figure out their leadership situation."

The president has expressed confidence that Iran will soon meet his demands to terminate nuclear weapons development, end support for terrorist groups, and withdraw its territorial claim—and control—of the strait.

To calculate when these "state of collapse" concessions will manifest, time and space become coefficients in a pencil-and-napkin math equation. The answer is a so-called storage clock. It has one fulcrum constant: More time equals less space.

Kpler and JP Morgan analysts were among those in late April doing storage clock math, projecting that Iran would run out of time and space within 15 to 22 days—mid- to late May—if it can't ship oil.

"Iran is being pushed into a storage-driven shut-in cycle," analyst Homayoun Falakshahi wrote in a separate April 29 Kpler analysis. "Iran faces imminent forced shut-ins, with storage saturation likely within [about] 20–24 days, triggering rapid production cuts."

The Gambia-flagged tanker vessel Bili is anchored in the Strait of Hormuz off Bandar Abbas in southern Iran on May 2, 2026. Iran's Revolutionary Guards on May 4 denied that any commercial ships had crossed the Strait of Hormuz.

Energy Aspects projected in late April that it could take up to seven weeks, or until mid-June, for the blockade to force shut-ins and shutdowns. Analyses by Wood Mackenzie, the Atlantic Council, the Center for Strategic

International Studies, and the Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University, among many others, offer timelines that fall between mid-May and mid-June.

Some maintain that Iran's storage clock has already expired. The Institute for the Study of War and The Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute said Iran's storage was depleted as of April 29.

The Foundation for Defense of Democracies projected there would be a shutdown by April 25.

Foundation senior fellow Miad Maleki, a former U.S. Treasury executive, estimated in an X post that Iran had approximately 20 million barrels of storage left on April 12 and predicted that within 13 days of maxing out capacity, "Iran must shut-in wells."

No Way Out

Iran has four oil- and gas-producing regions. The Khuzestan fields have been producing since the 1960s, generating about 2.2 million bpd. West Karoun on the Iraqi border produces 500,000 bpd. The provinces of Fars and Bushehr along the Persian Gulf mostly produce offshore natural gas, including from South Pars, the Iranian sector of Qatar's North Field, the world's largest gas field. The fourth region is Iran's Persian Gulf oil fields, from which about 65 percent of the oil originates in the Kharg district's three fields.

All roads, railways, and pipelines, and virtually all hydrocarbons extracted from Iran's oil and gas fields, lead to Kharg Island, an eight-square-mile coral outcrop 300 miles north of the Strait of Hormuz that houses more than 25 percent of Iran's storage capacity. Ninety percent of Tehran's oil for export is pumped from terminals at Kharg into supertankers, up to 10 at a time.

By April 20, one week after the United States implemented the blockade, stored oil at Kharg Island was at 74 percent capacity, Center on Global Energy Policy fellow Antoine Halff wrote in an April 28 analysis.

U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent wrote on X on April 21 that storage on the island would be full "in a matter of days" and that "the fragile Iranian oil wells" would be shut in.

Four of Iran's five other export-capable ports—Sirri and Lavan islands, Saroosh, and Assaluyeh near Bushehr—are inside the Persian Gulf. Only Jask is south of the strait, although no ships are using its newly built terminal on the Gulf of Oman with the U.S. Navy lurking nearby.

Although Iran has a robust domestic pipeline network, it only receives crude via cross-border pipelines for refining from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and it only exports natural gas in pipelines to Turkey, Iraq, and Armenia.

Tehran has limited capacity to expand exports by rail, although Iran Oil Exporters Union spokesman Hamid Hosseini said in widely reported comments that the regime is considering shipping oil by train on a newly built rail corridor from Iran to Yiwu and Xi'an in China.

A container on the first train connecting China and Iran upon its arrival at Tehran Railway Station in Iran on Feb. 15, 2016. Iran Oil Exporters Union spokesman Hamid Hosseini said shipping oil by train on a newly built rail corridor from Iran to Yiwu and Xi'an in China is being considered.

Unless the U.S. Navy lifts its blockade, Iran cannot move oil and gas out of the country, putting the same squeeze on Tehran that it has imposed on its Gulf State neighbors since early March—menacing the Strait of Hormuz, bringing Gulf trade to a standstill, damaging ports and infrastructure in drone and missile strikes, and marooning an estimated 20,000 sailors on ships anchored in limbo on "the Arab side" of the Gulf.

"When Iran first disrupted tanker traffic in the Strait of Hormuz, those Arab producers with the least available storage capacity and no export alternative were quick to ramp down production," Halff said. "With the United States now restricting marine traffic to and from Iranian ports, Tehran faces the same conundrum."

Antoine Halff, program director for global oil markets at the Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University, testifies before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee during a hearing about the

outlook for energy and commodity markets on Capitol Hill in Washington on Jan. 19, 2016. Chip Somodevilla/ Getty Images

Shutdown Stresses

When the storage clock expires, wells are capped—or shut in—rigs disassembled, field grids unplugged, refineries shut down, and men and machines idled. Restoring production to pre-shutdown capacity can take weeks or even months.

The longer that oil and gas infrastructure is offline and marginally manned, the more vulnerable it is to structural damage and, as Trump noted, the more prone it is to "explode" from unvented pressure.

Robin Mills, a fellow at the Center on Global Energy Policy, wrote on the center's website: "Long-term shut-ins could lead to corrosion of wells and pipelines, the settling of sand and debris in the wellbore or pumps, or the mechanical deformation of the wells. ... Careful technical planning of shutdowns and restarts ... can fix most of these problems."

The potential for long-term damage to Iran's energy infrastructure during a shutdown is compounded by its "wax" oil, a heavy crude that can solidify and block wells and pipelines when it is not flowing.

"There is some anticipation that the need to shut-in producing wells and fields will cause damage to facilities, cause them to 'explode,' or permanently reduce Iran's oil production capacity even if and when the blockade is eased," Mills wrote.

Another potential threat to shut-in wells is water coning.

"When mature oil wells shut down, bottom water rushes in, a process called water coning," Maleki wrote on X.

"Oil droplets get permanently trapped in rock pores. This oil can never be recovered.

"Forced shut-ins could permanently destroy 300,000-500,000 [bpd] of production capacity, that's [$9 billion to $15 billion per year] in revenue, gone forever."

The risk of "impairment from prolonged shut-ins ... is real, but highly field-specific," Siamak Namazi, an Iranian business executive who was imprisoned for eight years by the regime before his 2023 release, wrote in an April 29 Middle East Institute analysis.

Iran's biggest fear in recovering from a shutdown is not that it "would suddenly lose the ability to pump oil," he said, "but that some fields could return more slowly, at lower rates, or with lasting reductions in productive capacity."

"In other words, the damage would likely be partial, uneven, and costly—not absolute," he said.

Wily, Resilient Foe

Several analysts, including Falakshahi, cautioned that even in a "state of collapse," the Islamic Republic is unlikely to cede to U.S. demands without concessions. Tehran's National Iranian Oil Co. "has strong expertise" because it has survived half a century of sanctions, the Iran–Iraq war, and the COVID-19 shipping shutdown, among other adversities, he said.

Mills wrote, "The reality ... is that Iran has shut in oil production in the past without serious repercussions (as have other oil producers), although gas production may have to be cut back."

French Commandant Thomas Scalabre points toward the positions of ships on the Strait of Hormuz on a screen at the Maritime Information and Cooperation and Awareness Center in Brest, France, on April 27, 2026. Fred Tanneau/ AFP via Getty Images

Rotating shut-ins across wells, rather than fully idling fields, is among the ways Iran has avoided full lockdowns in the past. According to widespread media reports, Iranians are stashing oil in old tankers and in “junk storage”—in anything, anywhere possible.

Halff said there is likely underestimated onshore storage embedded in “structurally long storage capacity relative to exports”—referring to long distances from well to port—in central and southern Iran.

Iran has made significant investments “to increase alternate storage and export facilities over the past 10 years,” he said, which “suggest the country may not be in imminent danger of a major crude oil shut-in.”

“The pressure on Tehran is real,” Namazi said, cautioning that Iran operates under its own rules. “Production losses that look decisive on a spreadsheet may carry less weight in the regime’s calculus than many Western analysts assume.”

Since 1979, the Islamic Republic “has prioritized survival, coercive leverage, ideological commitments, and internal control over economic welfare,” he said.

“It has tolerated sanctions, isolation, inflation, capital flight, and deep economic damage when leaders judged those costs preferable to strategic concession,” Namazi said.

He dismissed “countdown narratives” as “dangerous,” warning against making “a deeper analytical mistake in assuming the Islamic Republic weighs costs the way a normal commercially minded state would.”

“The prospect of losing oil production capacity is highly unlikely to convince current decision-makers in Tehran to concede to American demands,” he said.

Freed U.S. citizens Siamak Namazi (R), Morad Tahbaz, and Emad Shargi disembark from an airplane at Davison Army Airfield at Fort Belvoir, Va., on Sept. 19, 2023. Jonathan Ernst/POOL/AFP via Getty Images

The standoff in the strait has raised energy costs in the United States; the national average for gas has topped $4 a gallon. And because November’s midterms—in which slim Republican majorities are imperiled—are drawing nearer, many analysts think Iran believes it can outlast an impatient Trump.

“Tehran may also be betting that its tolerance for pain exceeds that of its rivals and an oil-sensitive global economy—that others will seek relief long before it seeks compromise,” Namazi said.

‘How the High-Stakes Rescue Mission in Iran Unfolded

US Natural Gas Market Shielded From Global Price Shocks During Iran War

Reuters reported that Goldman Sachs estimated that Gulf crude production on April 24 was running 57 percent below pre-war 20 million bpd levels, as roughly 14.5 million bpd capacity was offline in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain.

The U.S. Energy Information Agency projects that if the impasse extends beyond mid-May, Gulf exports could dip below 9 million bpd, half of which would be exported via Saudi Arabia's East-West Pipeline to Yanbu on the Red Sea.

Not only has Iranian control of the strait stymied Gulf export economies, but also, Tehran's missile and drone attacks on "the Arab side of the Gulf" have disabled production, causing billions in damage that will require months to restore to pre-war production.

A March 18 missile strike destroyed Qatar's Ras Laffan Industrial City Pearl plant that liquefies natural gas for transport. QatarEnergy CEO Saad al-Kaabi said it will take up to five years to rebuild.

Qatar's Energy Minister and CEO of QatarEnergy Saad Sherida al-Kaabi speaks during a press conference in Doha, Qatar, on Sept. 1, 2024. Karim Jaafar/AFP via Getty Images

Since the war began, the UAE has intercepted 314 ballistic missiles, 1,672 drones, and 15 cruise missiles launched by Iran, according to the Emirati defense ministry.

The pressure from Iran's control of the strait is exposing fissures; some Persian Gulf States support the United States' campaign, and others are allegedly amenable to negotiating a separate peace with Tehran. That friction resulted in a fracture when the UAE announced on April 28 that it would exit OPEC, effective May 1, to pursue "sovereign responsibility in a new energy age."

"It's a bombshell announcement. I'm still shocked thinking about it," said Amena Bakr, Kpler's head of Middle East energy and OPEC+ insights, during an April 30 webinar.

She said that tensions between the UAE and Saudi Arabia had "been bubbling under the surface for a while."

"We've heard Emirati officials come out publicly and say they feel some Arab states didn't do enough for them when they were attacked by Iran," she said. "As you know, Iran was targeted on the [UAE] even more than Israel."

William Reinsch, Scholl chair emeritus at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, wrote in an April 22 analysis that the war has "exposed the fragility of the smaller countries in the Persian Gulf."

Gulf States "spent decades trying to convince the world they are safe and reliable destinations for foreign investment, manufacturing, tourism, and transit," he said. "The war has shattered that illusion. While infrastructure can, and will, be repaired, investor and visitor comfort levels will be much harder to restore. People and money will start to look elsewhere."

Exterior views of Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries headquarters in Vienna, Austria, on April 28, 2026. The United Arab Emirates announced on April 28 that it is leaving the cartel of oil producers effective

ICBM EAR News Story of the Week

America's aging Minuteman III nuclear missiles are getting replaced. We got an inside look.

By Ian Lee
Updated on: May 5, 2026 / 7:50 AM EDT / CBS News

CHEYENNE, Wyo. — Flying in over the Wyoming prairie aboard the Air Force's new Grey Wolf helicopter, the commanders of U.S. Strategic Command and Air Force Global Strike Command are taking us to a place that was once so highly secure that trespassers could be shot on sight — a Minuteman III Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, or ICBM, silo.

Hundreds of these active nuclear silos dot the landscape from Colorado up to the Canadian border.

"There are always approximately 400 (ICBMs) ready to go at any moment," says Air Force Global Strike Command Gen. S.L. Davis over the Grey Wolf's comms system.

CBS News traveled with Davis and Adm. Rich Correll, commander of U.S. Strategic Command, for an exclusive look at the modernization of America's ground-based nuclear deterrent from the Minuteman III to the new Sentinel. They are leading the effort and are in Wyoming to inspect the progress at F. E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne.

L-R: Ian Lee aboard a Grey Wolf helicopter with Air Force Global Strike Command General S.L. Davis and Admiral Rich Correll, Commander of U.S. Strategic Command.CBS News

We land at Echo 10 near the border with Colorado. It's the first silo to go offline as the Air Force shifts to Sentinel. But even for being a decommissioned silo, security is tight. An Air Force rapid response team, trained to retake nuclear silos from a hostile force, is already on the ground.

Greeting us at the entrance is Col. Terrance J. Holmes, the wing commander of the 90th Missile Wing at F.E. Warren, home to 150 Minuteman III ICBMs.

"It is a heavy weight," he says about commanding so many nuclear warheads. "But I can tell you that our defenders, our operators and the support personnel that drive the mission of the 90th Missile Wing, stand ready every single day, 24/7."

The upgrade to Sentinel is about a decade behind schedule. But as Minuteman IIIs go offline, Holmes insists his forces will still be able to act if the president calls upon them.

"I am focused on maintaining day to day nuclear surety and deterrence for the nation, and that mission does not and will not ever stop even during the transition to the Sentinel," he says.

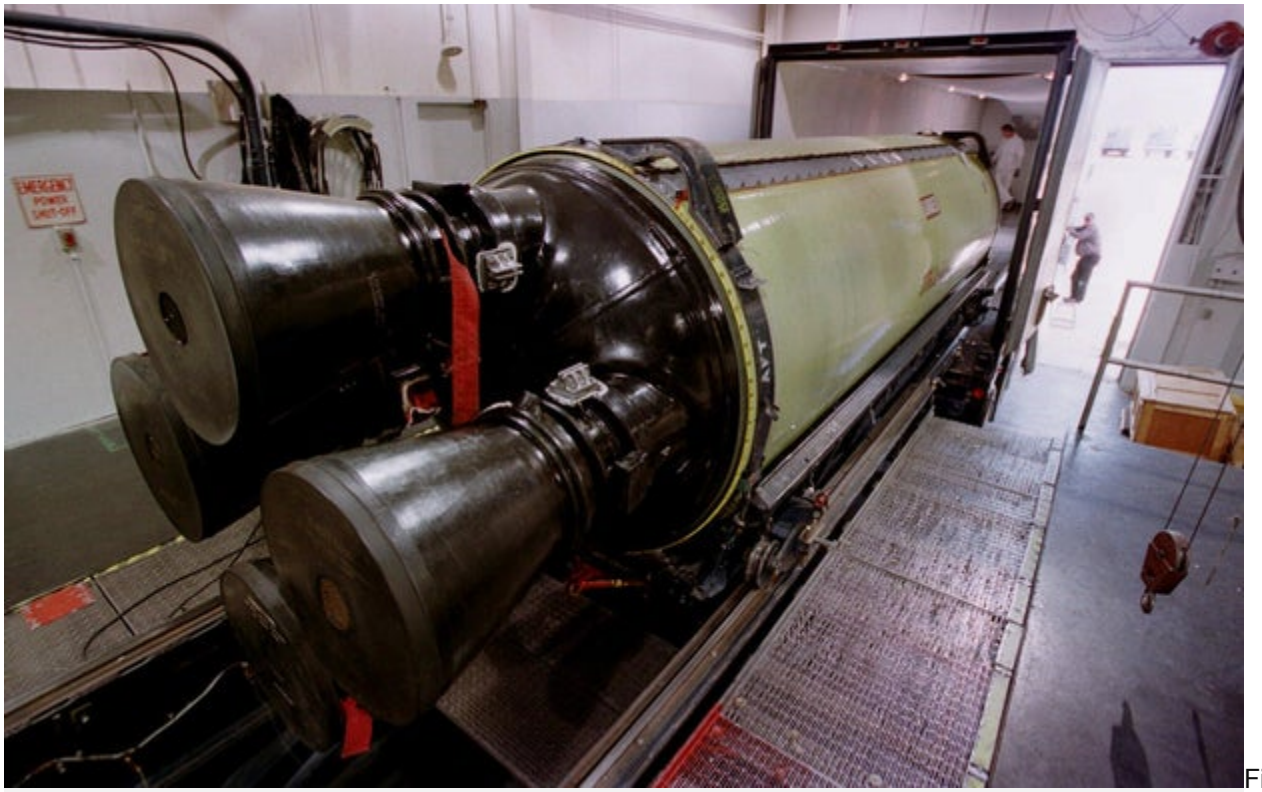
We climb down a ladder through a circular shaft, past feet of concrete, and into a world designed to destroy worlds. The equipment reflects Minuteman III's age.

Ian Lee descends into a decommissioned Minuteman III nuclear missile silo.CBS News

"The system was originally designed for a decade," says Correll. "We've been operating it since 1961. So, it's well past its design life."

Around the silo, 60-year-old technology lines the walls, with a shaft several stories high in the middle that once housed a 60-foot nuclear missile.

"The Minuteman III that's on alert today is the Minuteman III that I took command of as a lieutenant over 35 years ago. The launch facility that supports the Minuteman III [was] built before I was born," says Davis.


File photo: A Minuteman III missile engine.AP Photo/Douglas C. Pizac

Back at F.E. Warren, the commanders show where the missiles and warheads will be assembled. The new buildings contrast with the base's red brick buildings constructed when calvary charges still dominated the battlefield.

"(Sentinel) is bigger, it's faster. It has longer range and it can carry more payload," says Davis. "It's safer, it's more secure and it's more reliable."

The Sentinel program is currently 80% over budget and is costing U.S. taxpayers roughly $141 billion. The Air Force is constructing over 450 new launch silos and between 50 to 75 launch centers and other facilities to support the program.

The commanders insist that once it's up and running, it'll be cheaper to operate than the Minuteman III because it'll require less maintenance. The new Grey Wolf helicopter will also provide better security, reach and reaction time to any silo around the country.

Critics may argue that this is all unnecessary spending for a weapons system that is never used, but Correll disagrees.

"We use it every single day. Deterrence is active," he says. "The absence of action on the part of the adversary to do us harm is employment of that system day after day."

America's adversaries are also upgrading their nuclear weapons programs, including China, Russia and North Korea. The Pentagon is upgrading other parts of the country's nuclear triad by replacing the B-2 Stealth bomber with the B-21, and Ohio Class nuclear-powered ballistic submarines with the Columbia Class.

"Our nation's nuclear deterrent is safe, secure, reliable and credible," Correll says. "America will be safer."

Outlook for 2028 Mid-Terms: Cloudy

Since 1981 I have monitored the “arms control” community for the USAF and for many years the National Security Adviser to the President. The argument from the abolition and nuclear freeze folks has partially changed but it remains rooted in bad assumptions. The group continues to push countervalue deterrent strategies (burning down cities in retaliatory strikes) but only as better than warfighting, which is how they characterize counterforce, which is striking back at a nation’s military forces and leadership.

The abolition folks repeatedly say that nuclear weapons are only ok for deterrence, but not useable if deterrence breaks down. One key assumption underlines this belief: if one nuclear weapons is used in retaliation, the odds are that nearly all nuclear weapons will eventually be used as there is no capability to “use” nuclear weapons and survive. Even weapons that are highly accurate, small-size and low yield, as there is no difference between a regional/theater/battlefield nuclear weapon with a minimal yield and a long-range strategic nuclear warhead of many hundreds of kilotons.

Since the 2023 movie Oppenheimer, the abolition folks have brought forward a new twist on what is or is not possible for deterrence. As Annie Jacobsen in her book On Nuclear War and the 2024 movie Dynamite both conclude, nuclear deterrence even the threat to retaliate against cities will someday not work and breakdown. The assumption is that the US military will “jam up” the American President to retaliate “all in” even after a small first strike. The assumption is there will thus be a wholesale use of thousands of nuclear weapons, bringing on “nuclear winter” with the subsequent death of billions of human beings. Given these assumptions, the abolition people are pushing to jettison current nuclear deterrent strategy as unworkable, on the way toward an eventual elimination of all nuclear weapons. On this they are becoming more and more explicit. And Hollywood wants to tell their story with a third movie pushing abolition projected to come out soon.

Left unanswered is how to deter bad guys brandishing nuclear weapons prior to the abolition of nuclear weapons! How do you deter on the way toward abolition? I posed that question to Annie Jacobsen, and her response was to drop her explicit support for abolition as a solution and let the “experts” answer. Dynamite took both deterrence by retaliation off the table but also missile defense to intercept an attack in the first place. The movie assumed missile defense—even against a single warhead---would not work. And not knowing where the missile originated, either had to retaliate against all nuclear armed adversaries or do nothing at all.

The big arms control groups posted assessments of the movies and book---but largely directing how the public should think about these issues particularly that not only should current nuclear deterrence strategy be jettisoned but also that missile defense is not a viable option. Their worry? The public would reasonably support missile defense if a nuclear armed missile came toward the US even as the command authorities did not know where the missile came from, which was the scenario for the movie Dynamite.

My view is that the abolitionists are working toward 2028 and will be proposing abolishing unilaterally over time nuclear deterrence in favor of a minimal deterrent (low numbers of nuclear weapons and no missile defense) and relying instead on conventional weapons. What is also going to be highlighted is the cost of current strategy. The Congressional Budget Office within the next year will calculate the cost of nuclear sustainment and modernization. Those numbers will be updated next January-February. CBO will assume the US will buy more B21 bombers and Columbia class submarines, even more Sentinels. They will maximize projected costs and estimate costs to exceed $2 trillion. Representators Mo Khanna and Jim Garamendi (both D-CA) are the HASC leaders and will have the support of Adam Smith (D-Wash) who could again be the HASC chair. The future at best looks overcast. It could be downright stormy. In 1984, former Vice President Mondale proposed killing SDI, rekindling détente with the USSR and communism, freezing nuclear mods, ending aid to El Salvador, dumping the contras, and preventing any INF deployments in Europe by the US and NATO. These Reagan policies won the Cold War and

took down the Soviet Empire. But the progressives opposed them across the board. They lost 49 states. But kept the House and in 1986 took the Senate.

Warning on US Airpower

America's Air Superiority Is Losing Altitude

Wall Street Journal, May 5 (0200), Pg. A15 | Sens. Ted Budd (R-NC) and Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH)

Since the turn of the century, the U.S. military has dominated the skies. With unmatched speed, stealth and sensors, our fighter aircraft have achieved air superiority in every modern conflict and proved that air power is the fastest, most flexible and most lethal means to project combat power. But the future of American air power is uncertain. The U.S. is losing its decisive edge over China, which is on pace to field the world's first sixth-generation stealth fighters. The Chinese J-36 and J-50 first flew in 2024, while America's F-47 isn't expected to fly until 2028 and won't enter operational service until the mid-2030s. As part of its historic military buildup, China is eclipsing the U.S. in aircraft production. We need a national mobilization of our industrial base to counter China and maintain control of the air.

About the ICBM EAR

Peter Huessy's ICBM EAR Report was originally prepared for the USAF in 1981 to help inform US nuclear deterrent policy professionals at the height of the Cold War. Eventually it was provided only to key elements of the Nuclear related Aerospace Industry. The objective: help build an informed political community on nuclear deterrent issues, especially the deployment of the US nuclear deterrent, especially the MX (Peacekeeper) missile. The report covered developments in the nuclear arena on a weekly basis, including developments in Congress, key events, threat assessments, remarks of top US officials, international activity key to US security interests, nuclear budget and program element issues, and arms control and proliferation matters as well.

Weekly ICBM EAR Report
Prepared by Peter Huessy
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