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Nuclear Time Warp

Did House Republicans somehow miss the end of the cold war? At a time when, for the sake of both security and fiscal responsibility, the country should be reducing its nuclear arsenal, the House has approved a defense authorization bill for 2013 that threatens to freeze the number of weapons at current levels and, over time, waste billions of dollars on unnecessary purchases and programs.

Thankfully, the bill isn't likely to become law. But it is worth taking a closer look, both for what it says about Republicans' misplaced strategic priorities — and about how far President Obama has already gone to appease them.

The United States and Russia each have more than 1,500 nuclear weapons deployed and many thousands more as backup or awaiting dismantlement. Gen. James Cartwright, the retired vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a former commander of nuclear forces, recently said that [deterrence could be guaranteed](#) with 900 warheads, with only half deployed at any time.

If the United States fails to keep pushing for even deeper cuts — or raises any doubts about its current commitments — it will have an even harder time rallying global pressure to contain the nuclear ambitions of Iran, North Korea and others. Remember George W. Bush's contempt for treaties?

At \$642 billion, the House Pentagon authorization is \$4 billion above President Obama's request and \$8 billion above the 2011 Budget Control Act agreement that the Republicans demanded and are now trying to overturn. More than \$1 billion of that increase is nuclear-related. Here are some of the worst parts of the bill:

¶The 2010 New Start pact commits Washington and Moscow to cut their deployed strategic weapons from 2,200 to 1,550 by 2018. One provision in the bill would halt reductions if the president, or any successor, failed to meet Mr. Obama's promise to spend \$88 billion to upgrade the nuclear labs and \$125

billion over 10 years to replace aging bombers, submarines and land-based missiles. Mr. Obama made those overly generous commitments to win ratification of New Start. Most outrageously, the bill says the country can't keep reducing weapons if the defense cuts in the Budget Control Act are not overturned.

¶The bill would bar reduction, consolidation or withdrawal of tactical weapons in Europe — we can't imagine a more unnecessary weapon — unless several onerous conditions are met. It mandates a report on possibly reintroducing tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea.

¶It contains \$160 million to build a new plutonium plant in New Mexico to make new cores for weapons. The Energy Department has said its needs can be met for now with existing facilities. The projected cost has ballooned to nearly \$6 billion. It adds nearly \$500 million next year to develop a ballistic missile submarine that the administration wants to delay and we believe is unnecessary.

The White House has threatened to veto the authorization unless the worst provisions are deleted. The Senate bill has only made it through committee, but it has some troubling aspects, including keeping the plutonium plant project alive.

General Cartwright is only the latest heavyweight to endorse significant nuclear reductions. Former Ambassador Thomas Pickering and former Senator Chuck Hagel joined him in a [report by Global Zero](#), a policy group urging major changes, including the 900 target. Separately, Henry Kissinger, James Baker, George Shultz and Sam Nunn have endorsed the eventual goal of a world without nuclear weapons. So has President Obama.

The president needs to leverage that support to argue the case for much deeper cuts and push back against members of Congress who — incredibly — still haven't gotten beyond their cold war obsessions.

