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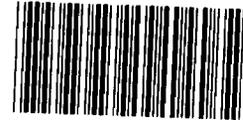
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B-197548

February 19, 1980

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The Honorable John Glenn  
Chairman, Subcommittee on Energy,  
Nuclear Proliferation and  
Federal Services  
Committee on Governmental Affairs  
United States Senate



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Dear Mr. Chairman:

Subject: [Assessment of various aspects of this  
Nation's nuclear safeguards programs]  
(EMD-80-48)

Protecting nuclear material from violent use against society has been an issue at the very heart of the nuclear energy debate from its beginning. Although there have been no instances of actual terrorist use of nuclear materials, there is a considerable history of illegal acts directed at U.S. nuclear materials and facilities. While most of these incidents turned out to be hoaxes and posed no imminent danger to the health, safety, or security of the general public, these occurrences underscore the need for an effective safeguards system.

For this reason, our Office has made several assessments of various aspects of this Nation's nuclear safeguards programs. And, at your request, we have recently completed another review of some key aspects of this important issue, the results of which are discussed in this letter.

Our review was directed at determining the effectiveness of the Department of Defense's nuclear safeguards system and at comparing that system to the systems used by the other two Federal agencies--the Department of Energy and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission--having responsibility for the security of nuclear weapons or nuclear weapons-grade materials against theft, diversion, or sabotage. In addition to our work at Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Department of Energy, and Department of Defense headquarters, we evaluated the on-site security at a number of sites within the responsibility of each of these agencies. We also reviewed the on-site security programs by interviewing site officials and employees, touring the sites--including after dark observations--and by testing various elements of the security system.

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EFFECTIVENESS OF THE DEPARTMENT  
OF DEFENSE SAFEGUARDS PROGRAM

The Department of Defense is responsible for the security of nuclear weapons and for the security of nuclear weapons-grade material found in research reactor fuel and in fuel for naval propulsion reactors. The objective of the Department's safeguards program is to prevent the sabotage, theft, diversion, or any other unauthorized access to a nuclear weapon or weapons-grade nuclear material. In pursuit of this objective, the Department has established minimum standard security requirements that are to be met by its nuclear facilities. We visited five nuclear weapons sites, two research reactor sites, and a naval fuel storage site to determine whether they met the minimum established requirements and to ascertain whether the sites could withstand the recognized range of threats posed to them.

At the five weapons sites we found that, while all of the sites met most of the minimum security requirements, each one needed important improvements before all of the requirements would be met. At each of these five sites, we made two visits--about a year apart--and found that many of the security problems identified during our original assessment in the fall of 1978 still remained in the fall of 1979. And, while all of the facilities were in the process of upgrading their security to meet the minimum standards, they have been slow in implementing corrective measures. It is difficult to understand the continued existence of these security problems 7 years after the Department first recognized significant vulnerabilities in its nuclear weapons protection program and 4-1/2 years after it first issued its upgrading requirements. Furthermore, in some instances where measures were implemented to compensate for a facility's failure to meet established requirements, we found that the compensating measures could be improved. However, because of the security constraints placed upon us by the Department, we cannot discuss the nature of the security problems found at the sites we visited.

Regarding the Department's research reactor and naval fuel storage facilities, we found that security appeared to be adequate. While we did find some minor improvements that could be made, their importance to the overall security of the facility was not significant.

COMPARISON OF DEPARTMENT OF  
DEFENSE, DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY,  
AND NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMIS-  
SION SAFEGUARDS PROGRAMS

Like the Department of Defense, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Department of Energy are also responsible for protecting the public against the hazards of theft, diversion, or sabotage of nuclear materials. While all three agencies are responsible for large amounts of nuclear materials that either can be used to fabricate nuclear explosive devices or to spread radioactive contamination, the Departments of Defense and Energy also have custody of nuclear weapons themselves.

We found that each agency designs its security system to what it believes to be the existing threat and that each agency has different estimates of what that threat is. These differing threat levels have resulted in a situation where similar nuclear materials are receiving different levels of protection. For instance, we found that the nuclear weapons within the possession of the Department of Energy receive significantly different levels of security than those within the Department of Defense.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE  
SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

To increase the effectiveness of the security programs at facilities possessing nuclear weapons or significant quantities of nuclear weapons-grade materials and to provide a better basis for assessing the adequacy of the protection, we recommend that the Department of Defense:

- Reexamine its security upgrading schedule for nuclear weapons sites within the United States on a top priority basis with the goal of expediting corrections to the security deficiencies we identified.
- Reevaluate its criteria for accepting compensatory security measures in instances where specific facilities fail to meet explicit DOD security requirements.

RECOMMENDATION TO THE  
CHAIRMAN OF THE NATIONAL  
SECURITY COUNCIL

To permit a more orderly and more consistent approach to the safeguarding of nuclear weapons and/or nuclear

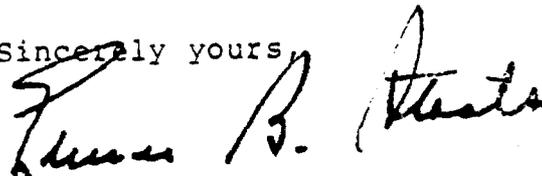
weapons-grade material in this country, top level policy guidance is needed. Accordingly, it is necessary that the National Security Council provide such guidance since it is the focal point for issues pertaining to this country's security affairs.

In view of this, we recommend that the Chairman of the National Security Council coordinate the nuclear threat definition policies of the Departments of Defense and Energy and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. This responsibility should include assuring that similar types of nuclear materials get equal levels of protection regardless of which Government agency controls them.

AGENCY COMMENTS

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the Department of Energy, and the Department of Defense provided comments on the issues discussed in this letter. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission did not specifically comment on our recommendations. Although the Department of Energy did not specifically disagree with our findings, conclusions, or recommendations, the Department commented that further elaboration was needed to more fully explain some of the key issues. The Department of Defense did not agree with some of our conclusions and recommendations and suggested language changes to more fully reflect security measures in place. We believe, however, that the long-term interests of the program are better served by focusing on improvements in security that can be made.

Sincerely yours,



Comptroller General  
of the United States