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Trends. Problems with the National Ignition Facility: Implications for Leadership and Test Bans

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The National Ignition Facility (NIF) is intended to be a laser system that would allow scientists to study the properties of nuclear weapons without detonating such weapons. As such, the NIF--as part of the stockpile stewardship program--would help ensure the safety and reliability of the United States (US) nuclear weapons supply. However, an external panel commissioned by the US Department of Energy Secretary has identified significant NIF cost overruns and scheduling delays and attributed significant blame to the former assistant secretary of energy for defense programs. There are at least two significant Issues at stake.

The first is the US national security objective of achieving a global and comprehensive test ban treaty. Already weakened by a recent vote against an approximation to such a treaty in the US Congress, the security objective faces important validity concerns if nuclear weapons safety and reliability cannot be adequately addressed. In fact, political momentum in the US and elsewhere might grow towards abandoning testing moratoriums--even if the consequences of abandoning the moratoriums for grand Issues of war, peace, and the environment might suggest that abandoning the abandonment might be a better direction.

The second Issue involves the leadership and management of national security programs that depend on technological innovation. When things go wrong, a predictable set of psychological dynamics are unleashed that harbor their own momentum. These dynamics include scapegoating, demonizing the scapegoat, and rationalizing the scapegoating and demonizing through generating a host of very objective sounding violations of what obviously was plain common sense. These dynamics--beyond the unconscious conflicts and phenomena that may form the ultimate foundations--suggest a degree of certainty about the world of technological innovation and how to manage it that frankly is quite fantasy-oriented.

So one is left with trying to keep a new genie in a new bottle via a new system--the NIF--through an old and even primeval psychology. A penchant for optimism does not seem warranted. (See Benjamin, R.D. (1998). Negotiation and evil: The sources of religious and moral resistance to the settlement of conflicts. *Mediation Quarterly*, 15, 245-266; Dervin, D. (1997). Group fantasy and its discontents during the Clinton administration. *Journal of Psychohistory*, 25, 184-193; Eigen, M. (1985). Toward Bion's starting point: Between catastrophe and faith. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 66, 321-330; Glanz, J. (January 11, 2000). Panel faults laser architect for overruns. *The New York Times*, p. A18; Simon, B. (1988). The imaginary twins: The case of Beckett and Bion. *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 15, 331-352.) (Keywords: National Ignition Facility, NIF, Nuclear Test Ban, Nuclear Weapons.)