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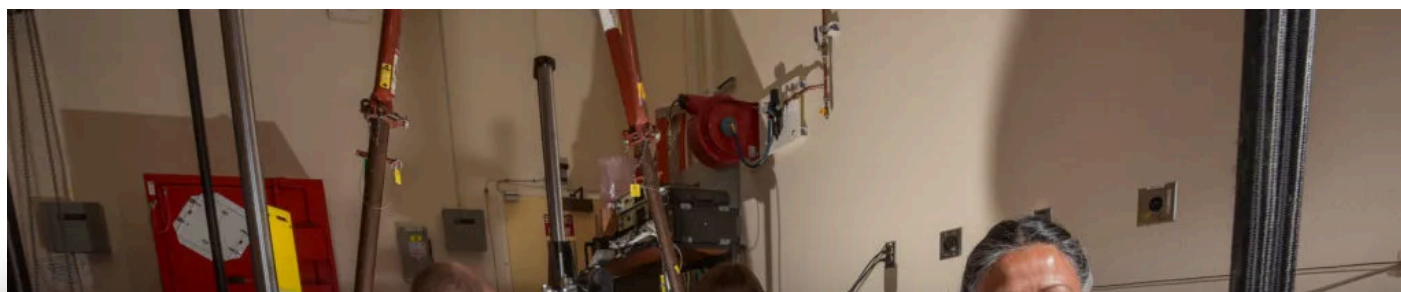


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DOGE's staff firing fiasco at the nuclear weapon agency means everything but efficiency

By Stephen Young | Analysis | April 16, 2025



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According to a recent [press report](#), the Energy Department has identified 8,500 employees who are “nonessential” and therefore vulnerable to being laid off by Elon Musk’s chainsaw-welding wrecking crew known as the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). Of those 8,500 employees, 500 work in the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), the agency responsible for maintaining the US nuclear weapons stockpile. This follows on from a chaotic period in February, when 177 NNSA employees were summarily fired by DOGE. Following a bipartisan uproar, DOGE reversed course, [rehiring](#) all but about 27 of the staff who had been laid off.

The media coverage of those forced-then-reversed departures was extensive, with the [Washington Post](#) and the [New York Times](#) each reporting later the details of the Trump administration operation. But all the coverage, including the latest news, misses two important aspects of this debacle.

Creating chaos in an agency responsible for the safety and security of nuclear weapons is already concerning; the early DOGE firing plan and any new layoffs are very inefficient ways to save taxpayers’ money. According to DOGE, the average salary of the Energy Department’s staff, including the NNSA, is [\\$116,739](#). If the 500 “nonessential” employees are laid off and all those initially let go were not rehired, it would save

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or the path the United States is taking.

First, supporters of new nuclear weapons argue that, as plutonium pits age, they will stop working as expected. In the early 2000s, pit lifetime was **estimated** at 45 to 60 years. Given that pit production stopped in 1989, that estimate could be a cause for concern, if true. Fortunately, pit lifetime estimates were significantly updated in 2007, when JASON, the federal government's independent science advisory committee, **concluded** that most plutonium pits "have credible minimum lifetimes in excess of 100 years as regards aging of plutonium" and that "those with assessed minimum lifetimes of 100 years or less have clear mitigation paths."

In 2014, Congress passed **legislation** mandating pit production "driven by the requirement to hedge against technical and geopolitical risk and not solely by the needs of life extension programs." The law called for demonstrating the capacity to make 80 pits per year by 2027. The "technical" risk highlighted appears tied to pit lifetime—an argument thoroughly refuted by JASON's reassuring conclusions.

The geopolitical risk perception is more complicated and has become profoundly more so since 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea. In 2018, Russian President Vladimir Putin **announced** proposals for multiple new types of nuclear weapons, focused on defeating US missile defenses. In 2021, China's new land-based missile silos were **uncovered**, with 250 or more eventually **spotted**. In 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, and since then **has made** frequent nuclear threats and posture changes, including stationing nuclear

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and threatening nuclear and conventional military forces. Moving now to resume pit production and make new nuclear weapons only exacerbates the problem, accelerating an already budding nuclear arms race.

Today's pit production effort. Over time, the 2014 requirement evolved into a goal of producing at least 80 pits per year by 2030. In its attempt to meet this goal, the agency has been updating and expanding operations at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico and repurposing an abandoned, unfinished facility at the Savannah River Site in South Carolina.

How much the new plutonium pit production line will cost is uncertain: The NNSA has not provided an official cost estimate. The only clue came in 2024, when then-agency administrator Jill Hruby **revealed** a new—but still unofficial—cost estimate of \$28 to \$37 billion for setting up the two pit production sites (not counting program operating costs). A large part of that cost is the construction at the Savannah River Site, which the NNSA estimates will cost between \$18 and \$25 billion.

These already high-cost estimates still do not include the cost of building the new nuclear warheads those pits will go into. The **estimated cost** of the first new warhead type, known as the W87-1, has been announced by NNSA as being around \$14 billion, with the second warhead type, the W93, costing at least \$20 billion.

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already been spent on the still-unfinished project and the total life cycle cost would be \$56 billion.

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NNSA's failed MOX plant is just one example of the many high-priced projects that the agency ultimately canceled. The stomach-churning part of all this spending is that it is unnecessary to keep the US nuclear stockpile safe and secure. The US national laboratories have a successful record of carrying out life-extension and refurbishment of existing weapons. Much of the US nuclear arsenal has recently undergone such refurbishment, thereby eliminating the need for an expensive, rushed job to make new pits and new nuclear bombs, saving far more in one fell swoop than any DOGE hack job.

Cut new nuclear weapons, not staff ensuring their safety. Joining—and arguably fueling—the new nuclear arms race will come at a nearly unbearable cost for the United States. New plutonium pits and new nuclear warheads are only one fraction of a massive undertaking to rebuild every element of the US nuclear arsenal—every missile silo, every submarine, every bomber, and every bomb and missile they carry—in the name of

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DOGE's arbitrary cuts in NNSA staffing were an ill-informed and very poor choice. The US government could save vastly more money by reconsidering the bloated defense programs that the NNSA is responsible for executing compared to the relatively insignificant savings from the haphazard elimination of staff critical for national security.

The NNSA firing debacle questions whether DOGE is serious about reducing wasteful government programs and promoting efficiency. But if Congress and the Trump administration are, they could easily find tens of billions of dollars to save from the NNSA budget so no more taxpayer is used for a new nuclear arms race that the president has said he does not want.

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Greg ⌚ 11 months ago

Stephen, I think this is fine as far as it goes. But it doesn't go very far. You don't suggest how to save money on pits, for example. Be specific. Do you imagine that the U.S. government is going to stop investing in the capability and capacity to make pits, because of a 19-year old JASON study? That would be quite unrealistic – foolish even. Recall that a subsequent short

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John Doe  11 months ago

You had 4 years with your guy in place, to get stuff done. Now it's not your guy any more, suddenly you have all the answers.

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Stephen Young

Stephen Young is a senior Washington representative for the Global Security program at the Union of Concerned Scientists. ... [Read More](#)

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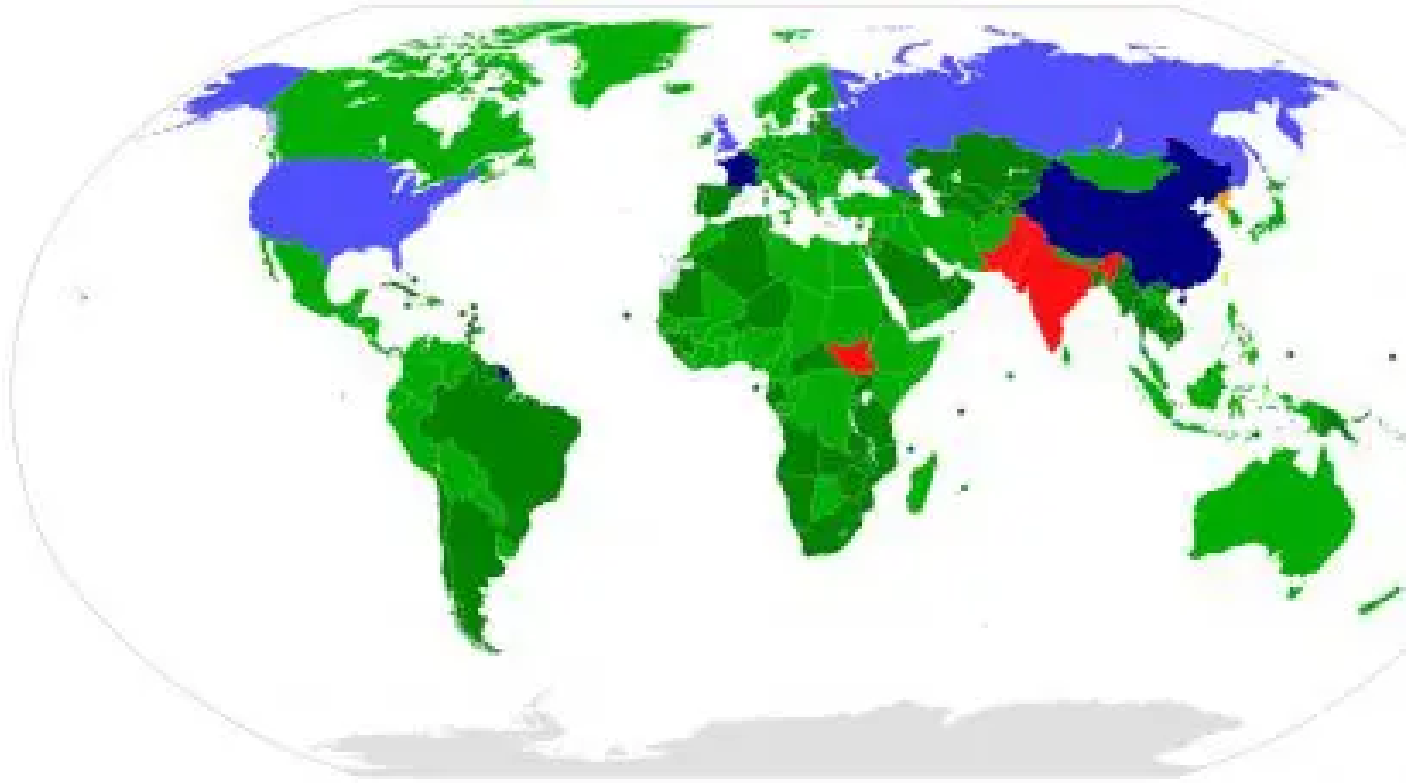
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