

**STATEMENT BY ENERGY SECRETARY
SPENCER ABRAHAM
TO THE
SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
February 8, 2001**

Mr. Chairman, Senator Levin, and Members of the Committee, it is a privilege to appear before you today. I want to thank you for providing me with this opportunity to discuss the important national security programs on the Department of Energy.

Having been on the job less than three weeks now, I am certain that I will be able to answer all of your detailed questions with great ease.

As each of you are intimately aware, more than two-thirds of the Department of Energy's budget is funded from defense accounts. The Department supports our national security in many critical areas, including: (1) maintaining our enduring nuclear deterrent; (2) mitigating the proliferation of nuclear weapons, fissile materials, and weapons expertise; (3) providing the Navy with effective nuclear propulsion systems; and (4) cleaning up the legacy of more than 50 years of nuclear weapons production.

I wish to say at the outset that I intend to work with each of you to ensure that these programs are successful and that they continue to support the national security interests of the United States. Let me begin by taking a moment to briefly discuss my views on each of these areas, starting with the programs of the National Nuclear Security Administration.

First, I will say that I fully supported the establishment of the NNSA when I was in the Senate and continue to support it today. I voted for the Domenici-Kyl amendment and for the Defense Authorization Act which created the NNSA. General Gordon and I have established a very productive working partnership and I am confident that this new entity will be successful.

Weapons Programs

As I stated during my confirmation hearing only three weeks ago, the most sobering and important responsibility vested in the Secretary of Energy is the duty to certify to the President each year that the U.S. nuclear arsenal is safe, secure and reliable.

I can assure the members of this Committee that nothing I do will be higher on my priority list than ensuring the safety and security of our nuclear deterrent.

The DOE weapons program is continuing to implement new methods of certifying the safety, reliability, and effectiveness of U.S. nuclear warheads in the absence of underground nuclear testing. This requires expensive and technically complex new experimental facilities and capabilities. Not all of these facilities and capabilities are operational yet, but the Department is continuing to make progress in this area. We must establish these new facilities and capabilities as rapidly as possible.

I believe that we would want to pursue most of these new capabilities even if we were in a testing environment. I hope to work with you and the other members of Congress in the coming months to ensure that these programs are adequately funded and supported. In addition to establishing these new science-based certification tools, DOE is also in the process of evaluating our critical production capabilities -- such as tritium gas production, uranium processing, and plutonium pit production. Again, these capabilities may require expensive, new facilities and technologies and in the future, I hope to work with you to ensure that any need which we may have are successfully met.

Nonproliferation Programs

The Department also plays a critical role in threat reduction, by addressing the challenge of nuclear weapons proliferation. This nation has an acute interest in accounting for and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons materials, technology, and expertise. The Department has had many past successes in this arena and -- working with you B I will continue those efforts.

I believe that the recent Baker-Cutler report will serve as a useful tool to help frame the debate on these critical issues, and I look forward to working with you to address these challenges.

Naval Reactors Programs

This is an area of the Department that is running exceptionally well. In my opinion, the old adage -- "If it isn't broken, don't try to fix it" -- applies here. I have great confidence that Admiral Bowman and his staff will continue the tradition of excellence that has marked this program since it was established by Admiral Hyman Rickover in the 1940s.

Environmental Management

The Department also has the unenviable responsibility of cleaning up and managing the wastes generated during more than 50 years of nuclear weapons

production. These problems were not created overnight and certainly we are not going to dispense with them quickly or easily. But, we can do a better job.

I plan to examine DOE's cleanup program and identify those areas where we can make better progress in cleaning up and closing excess facilities and sites. I plan to work closely with you, the other Members of Congress, and also with the States and local communities that host these sites, to find ways to accelerate the pace of cleanup. By working to reduce overhead costs, I feel we can free up more funds for accelerated cleanup.

Other Challenges

There are many other challenges facing the Department.

Improving security will be a very high priority of mine. I intend to work with General Gordon and the other DOE program offices to ensure that the Department's senior managers are fully engaged in improving security at all of our sites, not just the national laboratories.

Maintaining the Department's unique and critical skills will also be a top priority of mine. People are DOE's most valuable asset. Yet, we know that many production facilities are one engineer deep in essential manufacturing areas and many labs are at risk of losing their highly trained scientists and engineers to more attractive employment opportunities. In addition, the average workforce age at sites such as Pantex and Y-12 is well over 50 years old.

These are very troubling trends that must be addressed. I have spoken to former Senator Kempthorne about the Chiles Commission report, and I intend to take a close look at the Commission's recommendations to ensure that we are taking steps to maintain DOE's most valuable commodity B its highly trained workforce.

Finally, we must find a way to recapitalize DOE's aging infrastructure. DOE has allowed its nuclear weapons production plants to degrade in recent years, leaving a tremendous backlog of deferred maintenance and modernization. The deterioration of existing facilities is a very serious threat to DOE's mission readiness. Some have projected the backlog to be as high as several billion dollars. We must begin to address this problem and I would ask for your support in this area.

Closing

In closing, let me say again that I am extremely honored that President Bush has chosen me for this position. The missions of the Department are vital to our national interests.

I pledge to work with the members of this Committee and others in Congress to carry out these missions to the best of my abilities and in the best interests of the American people.

Thank you.