

# Los Alamos and plutonium

By Arjun Makhijani

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Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, where the first nuclear bombs were designed and manufactured, has been periodically gripped by security crises that involve data and disks and pieces of paper which may have nuclear weapons design data on them. Lab Director Peter Nanos was right to stand down the laboratory to sort out this matter, because loss of nuclear weapons design information could be a critical security problem.

But there is another problem at least as crucial that Director Nanos has not yet addressed. It involves plutonium accounts. Plutonium is, of course, the stuff from which nuclear bombs are made, the stuff from which the bomb that destroyed Nagasaki was made. It turns out that the Department of Energy and Los Alamos have not kept good track of plutonium. Specifically, they haven't kept good track of the plutonium in waste.

They have two sets of books on plutonium. The Department of Energy headquarters thinks that Los Alamos Waste has 610 kilograms of plutonium in Los Alamos waste. Los Alamos Lab itself thinks they have 1,375 kilograms. That's a discrepancy of 765 kilograms -- 150 bombs worth of plutonium.

It was discovered in 1996, when Hazel O'Leary, then Secretary of Energy, published a report as part of her openness initiative. When the discrepancy came to light, she decided to set up a working group, but it seems to have melted away in the bureaucracy. I myself have tried to call the attention of Los Alamos to this problem when I was monitoring the audits of Los Alamos regarding the compliance with the Clean Air Act. But Los Alamos has ignored this issue.

I think it is completely unacceptable that a discrepancy of 150 bombs worth of plutonium should still be on the books eight years after it was first discovered. Lab Director Nanos should seize this opportunity of standing down all plutonium operations, including TA-55 and the Chemical and Metallurgical building until this discrepancy is sorted out and the plutonium books are put in proper order. If he does not, he may fairly be seen as contributing to the very laxness of security he has so correctly decried. I hope that he will form a Task Force in Los Alamos. I hope that the National Nuclear Security Administration and the Department of Energy will also urge Director Nanos to set up this Task Force and sort out the problem. It's very crucial that the plutonium books be reconciled.

These problems are all discussed in a [1996 memorandum](#), which you can see on the web site of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research, [www.ieer.org](http://www.ieer.org). This is Arjun Makhijani.