

HEARING TO RECEIVE TESTIMONY ON AIR FORCE NUCLEAR SECURITY

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2008

U.S. SENATE
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
Washington, D.C.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:33 a.m. in Room SR-325, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Carl Levin, chairman of the committee, presiding.

Committee Members Present: Levin [presiding], Bill Nelson, Warner, Inhofe, Thune, and Wicker.

Committee Staff Members Present: Richard D. DeBobes, Staff Director, Leah C. Brewer, Nominations and Hearings Clerk, John H. Quirk V, Security Clerk,

Majority Staff Members Present: Madelyn R. Creedon, Counsel.

Minority Staff Members Present: Michael V. Kostiw, Republican Staff Director, William M. Caniano, Professional Staff Member, David G. Collins, Research Assistant, Gregory T. Kiley, Professional Staff Member, David M. Morriss, Minority Counsel, Christopher J. Paul, Professional Staff Member, Lynn F. Rusten, Professional Staff Member, Robert M. Soofer, Professional Staff Member, and Kristine L. Svinicki, Professional Staff Member.

Staff Assistants Present: Fletcher L. Cork, Kevin A. Cronin, and Jessica L. Kingston.

Committee Members' Assistants Present: Jay Maroney, Assistant to Senator Kennedy, Frederick M. Downey, Assistant to Senator Lieberman, Christopher Caple, Assistant to Senator Bill Nelson, Gordon I. Peterson, Assistant to Senator Webb, Sandra Luff, Assistant to Senator Warner, Anthony J. Lazarski, Assistant to Senator Inhofe, Todd Stiefler, Assistant to Senator Sessions, Mark J. Winter, Assistant to Senator Collins, and Erskine W. Wells, III, Assistant to Senator Wicker.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. CARL LEVIN, U.S. SENATOR FROM MICHIGAN

Chairman Levin: Good morning, everybody. This morning we welcome Lieutenant General Daniel Darnell, Major General Polly Peyer, and Major General Douglas Raaberg from the Air Force, and retired Air Force General Larry Welch, Chairman of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Nuclear Weapons. Lieutenant General Darnell, who is the Deputy Chief of Staff, Plans and Operations, and General Raaberg, the Director of Plans and Operations at Air Combat Command, conducted the initial investigation into

what happened at Minot Air Force and Barksdale Air Force Bases last Labor Day weekend and why they happened.

Lieutenant General Peyer, Director of Resource Integration for the Deputy Chief of Staff, Logistics, Installations, and Mission Support, followed up with an investigation of the entire Air Force nuclear enterprise to see if the problems at Barksdale and Minot were part of a broader systemic Air Force problem. And General Welch, at the request of Secretary Gates, reviewed the nuclear enterprise of the whole Department of Defense to see if the problem was bigger than the Air Force, and unfortunately it is.

The issue this morning is very, very serious. Over a 2-day period last August, the Air Force lost control and knowledge of six nuclear warheads during what had become a routine effort to realign nuclear cruise missiles without warheads between Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota and Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana. Through an extraordinary series of consecutive failures of process, procedure, training, and discipline, the nuclear warheads flew on the wings of a B-52 bomber from Minot to Barksdale inside of cruise missiles. No one knew where they were or even missed them for over 36 hours. The warheads were not discovered until the missiles on which the warheads were loaded were being prepared to be moved to the weapons storage area after having been unloaded from the B-52 at Barksdale after a flight of over 1400 miles.

While historically there have been nuclear weapons accidents with varying degrees of severity, no breach of nuclear procedures of this magnitude had ever occurred previously. Luckily, these weapons weren't stolen or permanently lost, or accidentally dropped from the wings of the B-52 bomber on which they flew, or jettisoned because of bad weather or mechanical problems, with the pilots not even aware that they were jettisoning nuclear weapons containing deadly plutonium.

Each one of the warheads has the explosive power roughly equivalent to seven times the explosive power of the Nagasaki nuclear bomb and ten times the Hiroshima nuclear bomb. If jettisoned and they didn't explode, incredibly dangerous nuclear material could have been spread for miles. That's why the safety precautions are so strict, with multiple redundancies.

The three investigations that have been conducted as a result of this incident have found that the underlying root cause is the steadily eroding attention to nuclear discipline in the Air Force and, indeed, the whole Department of Defense. This inattention started at the end of the Cold War and has grown substantially worse over the last decade. From the results of General Raaberg's initial investigation, the commander's directed investigation, a CDI, it is clear that an erosion of adherence to rigid Air Force nuclear procedures and the "intricate system of nuclear checks and balances were either ignored or disregarded."

The problems existed at both Minot and Barksdale and reflect "a breakdown in training, discipline, supervision, and leadership."

General Peyer's blue ribbon review finds that the problems in the Air Force spread beyond Minot and Barksdale and begin with senior leadership and a lack of commitment to the nuclear mission and extend to shortcomings in training, inspections, and funding.

General Welch, your report finds that the scope of inattention goes even further and is, with a few exceptions, pervasive within the Defense Department.

There are 132 recommendations from these three reports. Some have been implemented. Most have not. This entire episode really is a wakeup call. As long as the United States has nuclear weapons, they must be handled with the utmost security and attention. Many of the details of this incident, the investigation and corrective measures remain classified.

Given the situation on the Senate floor this morning, with I believe nine roll call votes on amendments to the FISA legislation beginning at approximately 10:00 o'clock, we're going to have, after the statements of our witnesses, one brief round of questions and then we will reconvene in S-407 of the Capitol for a closed session, and that is a change in location. We're going to meet in classified session in S-407.

So, Senator Inhofe, I believe you have the opening statement.

STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES INHOFE, U.S. SENATOR FROM OKLAHOMA

Senator Inhofe: I do, Mr. Chairman. Without objection, I'll submit mine and I'll read Senator Warner's statement. I'm told he asked if I would do that. [The prepared statement of Senator Inhofe follows:] [COMMITTEE INSERT]

Senator Inhofe: First of all, thank you for calling this hearing, and I join with you in expressing my deep concern over what may have been one of the most serious nuclear weapons handling and stewardship incidents in the last 60 years. Since the committee first found out about the incident, it has closely monitored in a bipartisan manner the ongoing efforts of the Air Force and the Department of Defense to ensure accountability and to ensure this sort of event does not happen again.

I join our chairman in welcoming our witnesses and thank them for their efforts. I would like to especially thank General Welch again for answering the call and thank them for their efforts. I would like to especially thank General Welch again for answering the call of our Nation to serve, proving again that generals never really die; they just keep working.

Also, I want to welcome General Raaberg, who is a regular fixture there at the Vance Air Force Base. When I used to fly in my plane in there, he was kind enough to let me land there. So we finally had to write a new chapter in the book to make something work. Thank you.

I was impressed with the rapidity with which the Air Force began its investigation and coordinating information to Capitol Hill. The command-directed investigation was a logical first step. The Air Force-wide blue ribbon review and defense-wide Defense Science Board report on nuclear surety were also well-conceived efforts to get at the root problems and causes.

While the command-directed investigation concludes this to have been an isolated incident and the result of the actions of just a few airmen, there are other conclusions that speak to long-term degradation of discipline and adherence to established procedures. The lack of attention to details spanned two separate military installa-

tions. These conclusions seem at odds with each other. The witnesses should be expected to reconcile the differences.

One of the major tenets of our military is accountability. Our military leaders must be accountable to civilian authority and military subordinates accountable to our military leaders. Without a strong reliance on the chain of command, we are weakened as a Nation. I bring this up in light of where accountability has been assigned in this incident. The witnesses will be asked if they are satisfied that we have properly placed accountability where it should reside.

One of the principal conclusions of the blue ribbon review is that the Air Force is spread thin because it has been at war for over 17 years. While I share the concern for the stress that our airmen have been under the past 2 decades, I would ask how that stress was allowed to manifest itself in the procedures used to handle our nuclear weapons and what safeguards were sacrificed that allowed that to happen.

How did we allow our adherence to nuclear codes of conduct to erode to this point? During the Cold War our forces handled over 9,000 deployed nuclear warheads. Under our Moscow Treaty obligations, we will reduce to no more than 2,200 warheads by 2012. But even if we had just one nuclear weapon, the point, as General Welch's report states, is that the complexity of the nuclear enterprise is not reduced. As long as we have these weapons, their military and political nature demands the most intense attention to their proper care. We must sharpen our focus on the extra care required in this nuclear mission.

Of greatest concern to me is how we ensure the events of August of 2007 don't happen again. We need to focus more attention on how our inspection processes and procedures failed to alert us to the decline in discipline that led to the incident. Additionally, we need to reinforce our inspections and readiness reviews to understand and heed the signals of decline and reverse the downturn and before such incident happens again.

I look forward to your testimony and appreciate having this hearing, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Levin: Thank you, Senator Inhofe.

I understand now that General Darnell is going to make an opening statement on behalf of our three Air Force witnesses; is that the intent?

**STATEMENT OF LIEUTENANT GENERAL DANIEL J. DARNELL,
U.S. AIR FORCE, DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF, AIR, SPACE, AND
INFORMATION, OPERATIONS, PLANS AND REQUIREMENTS;**

**ACCOMPANIED BY MAJOR GENERAL DOUGLAS L. RAABERG, U.S. AIR
FORCE, DIRECTOR FOR AIR AND SPACE OPERATIONS, AIR COM-
BAT COMMAND; AND MAJOR GENERAL POLLY A. PEYER, U.S. AIR
FORCE, DIRECTOR OF RESOURCE INTEGRATION, OFFICE OF THE
DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF FOR LOGISTICS, INSTALLATION AND
MISSION SUPPORT**

General Darnell: Yes, sir.

Chairman Levin: And then General Welch, who is the former Chief of Staff of the Air Force, will make a statement about the Defense Science Board study.

So we'll start with you, General Darnell. Thank you all for being here and for your work on this matter.

General Darnell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Chairman Levin, Senator Inhofe, and distinguished members of the committee: Thank you for the opportunity to provide you the Air Force way ahead for our nuclear enterprise. Let me request that our written statement be entered for the record.

Chairman Levin: It will be.

General Darnell: Thank you, sir.

Throughout the history of the United States Air Force, our professionalism and dedication have guaranteed the soundness and surety of Air Force crews and weapons. From our service's beginning, we have earned the trust of our national leadership and, most importantly, the trust of the American public. Unfortunately, in late August 2007 the Air Force flew weapons from Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota, to Barksdale Air Force Base in an unauthorized manner.

It's important to note that during the incident there was never any unsafe condition and the incident was promptly reported to our national leadership, including the Secretary of Defense and the President. These weapons were secure and always in the hands of America's airmen. However, as airmen we are accountable and we will assure the American people that the Air Force standards they expect are being met.

The commander of Air Combat Command immediately initiated a commander-directed investigation. Without delay, the Secretary of the Air Force and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force engaged and initiated a series of specific actions: One, an immediate, successful 100 percent stockpile verification of U.S. nuclear weapons in the Air Force custody; two, a standdown of U.S. Air Force nuclear units for extra training and to emphasize attention to detail; three, Chief of Staff of the Air Force messages to all major commands and each individual airman on standards, discipline, and attention to detail, highlighting mission focus and checklist discipline; four, 100 percent limited nuclear surety inspections of all nuclear-capable units, with Defense Threat Reduction Agency oversight; five, Secretary of the Air Force visits to Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, and Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota; and lastly, a blue ribbon review of policies and procedures focused on the entire Air Force nuclear enterprise. This review took into account operations, maintenance, storage, handling, transportation, and security.

The Air Force is working in partnership with other Federal agencies both inside and outside the Department of Defense to conduct this analysis.

Additional, the Secretary of Defense requested General Larry Welch to lead a Defense Science Board review of DoD-wide nuclear surety.

The root causes identified for the specific incident were unit level leadership and discipline breakdown among a small group of airmen at Barksdale Air Force Base and Minot Air Force Base. As a result of this incident, seven leaders within the Air Force have been removed from their positions, including one wing commander and two group commanders. Additionally, 90 people were temporarily decertified from duties associated with the nuclear mission.

Many of the actions following the incident are still ongoing. The blue ribbon review finds that the Air Force's policies, processes, and procedures are sound and that the Air Force commitment to the nuclear enterprise is strong. However, there are opportunities for improvement in the Air Force's nuclear enterprise.

The Air Force Nuclear General Officer Steering Group has assessed, validated, and assigned responsibility for implementing the recommendations from the commander-directed investigation, the blue ribbon review, and the Defense Science Board. As of the time of this hearing, nearly one-quarter of the recommendations are complete. These recommendations transcend all levels of the Air Force. Common throughout the CDI, the blue ribbon review, and the DSB are recommendations that focus the nuclear enterprise on the level of experience, knowledge, frequency of training, exercises, organizations, standardization, evaluation, and inspections.

The Air Force is committed to continuously improving its ability to fulfill the Nation's nuclear mission, grounded on our core values of integrity, service, and excellence, because it is a credible nuclear deterrent that convinces potential adversaries of our unwavering commitment to defend our Nation. The Air Force portion of the Nation's nuclear deterrent is sound. We will take every measure necessary to continue to provide safe, secure, reliable nuclear surety to the American public.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. [The prepared statement of General Darnell, General Peyer, and General Raaberg follows:]

Chairman Levin: Thank you, General.
General Welch?

**STATEMENT OF GENERAL LARRY D. WELCH, U.S. AIR FORCE
[RETIRED], PRESIDENT AND CEO, INSTITUTE FOR DEFENSE
ANALYSIS**

General Welch: Thank you, Senator Levin. I can be very brief since your opening comments addressed many of the issues in our report.

Our report contains specific findings and recommendations on each of the three levels of cause factors. It was released yesterday. It is unclassified. It is 27 pages long, including appendices. Those three levels of cause factors are:

First, the proximate cause that is the failure to sustain and follow credible procedures and processes. Those deficiencies have been addressed in detail by the Air Force reports.

Level two is focus and that has to do with the dramatic reduction in the number of senior DoD officials with dedicated focus on the nuclear enterprise.

The third level is the enterprise or the environment in which the enterprise operates, and that has to do with the perception at all levels in the nuclear enterprise that the Nation and its leadership do not value the nuclear mission and the people who perform that mission.

We have specific recommendations for addressing each of those three and I'll be pleased to address those during questions. Thank you, sir.

Chairman Levin: Thank you, General.

Let's try an 8-minute first round. There's only a few of us here, so we should have that much time. No, let's try 6 minutes so we make sure we get in at least one before the first vote occurs in the Senate.

General, I'm a little taken aback by your statement that the warheads were -- there was never a safety issue and they were always under the control of American pilots. Did the pilots know they had nuclear weapons on board?

General Darnell: Sir, they did not.

Chairman Levin: So, when you say they were under the control of the pilots, not knowing that you have nuclear weapons on board makes a difference, doesn't it?

General Darnell: Yes, sir, it does. The intent behind that statement is to make it clear that they never migrated off the aircraft anywhere else.

Chairman Levin: In terms of safety, when nuclear weapons are on a plane and they are -- and those planes are on a flight line, is there special precautions taken?

General Darnell: Yes, sir, it's increased security on the flight line with security forces.

Chairman Levin: Is that increase -- was that increased security present here?

General Darnell: At Minot it was not, sir.

Chairman Levin: It was not. Why do we have increased security when we have nuclear weapons on a plane on a flight line? Why do we provide that additional security?

General Darnell: To ensure security of the weapon itself, because of the gravity of, obviously, anyone taking control of the weapon that should not have it.

Chairman Levin: And the absence of that security at Minot represents a significant shortfall, does it not?

General Darnell: It did in this case, sir, yes, sir.

Chairman Levin: Now, in terms of what happened here and the failures that occurred, just kind of going through very quickly what happened here: Tell me -- stop me at any point here if what I'm saying is not accurate. The mistake was putting a pylon, which has six cruise missiles on it -- and these cruise missiles were not supposed to have nuclear weapons loaded in them; they were supposed to have dummies, is that correct?

General Darnell: That's correct, sir.

Chairman Levin: So the pylon that was loaded in error had nuclear weapons on it and these were the checks that failed us, these were the actions that were supposed to be taken that weren't taken. First, at Minot the payload checks were not performed by the handling team. Secondly, there was a deputy maintenance chief at Minot who noted the discrepancy and he never reported back to his supervisor that discrepancy between the pylon that was supposed to be on and the number of that pylon and the one that was on there. So the second failure was the deputy who noted the discrepancy not reporting it back to his supervisor.

Then the deputy did not request verification of the payload. The tow driver at Minot, who's supposed to perform payload checks, did not do so. The munitions scheduling officer or office at Minot failed to verify the status of the pylon as required prior to giving permis-

sion to move the pylon. The air crew is supposed to verify the missile status and the payload on all missiles, did not do so. The aircraft commander did not verify that each of the missiles had been checked and did not, as required, make an entry in his pre-flight log.

Now, so far am I on target?

General Darnell: Senator Levin, I think that's pretty accurate.

Chairman Levin: Okay. Now, that's a lot of mistakes, a lot of checks and balances here that are supposed to work. None of those worked in this case. And I think all of us -- and I think you folks in the Air Force would be the first to acknowledge the severity of not knowing that you're dealing with nuclear weapons and not taking the appropriate steps to secure them. I mean, you live with this every day. You understand the implications of the lack of security or lack of awareness that you have a nuclear weapon on board in terms of the potential for accident, and so I don't think you need a lecture from me at least on that subject. You're aware that this is a very significant failure, the likes of which we don't think have ever occurred before and hopefully will never occur again.

How many folks here would you say failed to carry out some duty that they were obligated to perform? How many different people along the line here?

General Darnell: Senator Levin, I'm going to defer to the officer that did the investigation, but we initially decertified 90 personnel.

Chairman Levin: How many?

General Darnell: 90. Now, as General Raaberg did his investigation he found that not all 90 were involved and restored, restored their status. But initially we had 90 that were decertified.

I'll ask General Raaberg if he'd like to add anything to that.

Chairman Levin: How many approximately failed to perform a duty that they were obligated to perform?

General Raaberg: Sir, as you've aptly indicated, there were five specific procedures broken the day before and the day of the transfer of the tow. It's approximately ten individuals involved in all five of those, not following the rules and not following the procedures.

Sir, you also mentioned that there were effectively three scheduling errors that caused them to actually transfer a nuclear-loaded pylon set of missiles to the aircraft. Sir, at that point the number of individuals involved in that is at least 10 to 15 in that particular realm.

Chairman Levin: So a total of 25?

General Raaberg: Sir, that's about right, plus the greater architect of the organizations and the units involved.

Chairman Levin: So -- and this will be my last question: Have disciplinary actions been taken to date and if so, without telling us who and what for the time being, just tell us, because these are personnel actions which we I think would appropriately leave for a different setting. But against how many of those approximately 25 people would you say some action has been taken?

General Darnell: Senator, it's my understanding that 13 were administered UCMJ action. A total of 15 were administratively removed or affected by the incident.

Chairman Levin: And they've not been returned?

General Darnell: No, sir. Some have been returned, but received punishment for what, obviously, what had occurred.

Chairman Levin: Thank you.

Senator -- well, Senator Warner or Senator Inhofe.

Senator Warner: Senator Inhofe?

Senator Inhofe: Just a couple of brief questions. First of all, I recognized General Raaberg and his fine service at Vance Air Force Base. I didn't say anything about General Peyer at Tinker Air Force Base. So this is old home week. I welcome you here.

General Welch, as I said when I was reading the statement of Senator Warner, you've come back out and I appreciate very much all of the work and the service that you continue to provide. Your report includes 16 recommendations to strengthen nuclear security. One of the recommendations was the Secretary of Defense establish a mechanism to ensure that the lessons from the incident on the 30th of August produce institutional and environmental changes of lasting attention -- I guess my question would be, what mechanisms do you think we need to make sure that our successors aren't here 20 years from now addressing this same subject?

General Welch: Let me answer that as briefly as I can. The reason for that recommendation is that the task force that I chair has been in business since 1992, although previously under a different name, and over the years there have been any number of deficiencies identified by the task force, by other DSB reports, and none of them as serious as this. But in each case the deficiencies were addressed, corrective actions were implemented, but they didn't endure. They didn't last, and over time attention faded away, and then we encountered a new set of deficiencies.

That's the reason for the recommendation. I think our recommendations regarding the level of focus in the Department, that is ensuring that you have flag officers and senior civilians at the right place, in the right level, whose daily focus is on the nuclear mission, and insisting that that be sustained. I believe that's what's required in order to help ensure that this intense attention that we're seeing right now doesn't once again fade away in the future.

Senator Inhofe: General Darnell, when this first happened the first thing I did was draw a line between Minot and Barksdale, and it went right over Tulsa, Oklahoma. So I'm a little sensitive to the route there.

I think the most important question to ask, and you've all touched on it, but it wasn't really all that specific, and that were the weapons ever armed or in danger of being armed? In other words, were the American people ever at risk of having a nuclear weapon get stolen or exploding?

General Darnell: Senator, the weapons were never armed.

Senator Inhofe: They were never armed. I think there's an assumption everybody knows that, but certainly that wasn't covered very well back in August.

General Darnell: The pylon itself was not powered up and as a result the weapons were not armed either.

Senator Inhofe: And they're never armed during transporting?

General Darnell: No, sir. This was what's called a tactical ferry mission. Obviously, we were anticipating a dummy load on the aircraft and there'd be no reason to power the pylon up.

Senator Inhofe: I think it's worth repeating.

I don't have any more questions.

Chairman Levin: Thank you.

Senator Nelson and then Senator Thune. Hopefully, if you get your rounds in we will be able to go to S-407 at that point. If not, we'll come back here. And Senator Warner's waiving his questions?

Senator Warner: I want to do that, but I want to follow on just one point that my distinguished colleague brought out. In no way do we forgive, or anyone else, the sloppiness and the breakdown in discipline and training and so forth. But the weapons were never armed, is that correct?

General Darnell: That's correct, Senator.

Senator Warner: And as a consequence we could say that the American public was never in danger as a consequence if there'd been an accidental dropping or otherwise of these weapons; is that correct?

General Darnell: Yes, sir, that's correct.

Senator Warner: Good.

General Welch, it's nice to see you again. It's a wonderful, wonderful time we had together over these 30 years Senator Levin and I have been on this committee. Glad that you're still very active on behalf of the interests of our country and your beloved Air Force.

Thank you.

Chairman Levin: Just to clarify something that I said. Now, if these weapons had been jettisoned for whatever reason -- there was mechanical failure or they had been jettisoned over water for whatever reason -- could they represent a dangerous release of plutonium? Could that happen?

General Darnell: Senator, it's not my understanding that that would be the case, but we'll have to clarify that for you.

Chairman Levin: You're saying that if these weapons were jettisoned over land --

General Darnell: Yes, sir.

Chairman Levin: -- that there could not be a release upon the destruction of these when they smashed into the ground, that there could not be a release of plutonium? Is that what you're saying, or you don't know?

General Darnell: Sir, I don't know. I'm not -- I'd have to confirm whether that would be or not.

Chairman Levin: Does anyone here know? My understanding is it could be dangerous.

General Peyer: I'm a logistician, not a technician. But knowing the knowledge of how a system is developed, and that's part of the reliability of the system, is that there is no inadvertent detonation of the system --

Chairman Levin: No, I'm not talking about detonation. I'm talking about could the plutonium be released inadvertently if this weapon were smashed into the ground from 15,000 feet.

General Peyer: That piece I would not know.

Chairman Levin: Do you know, General Welch?

General Welch: Yes, sir. The plutonium can't be released unless there's an HE detonation.

Chairman Levin: Unless there's -- there's no possibility of release if jettisoned and it smashes into the ground?

General Welch: Not unless there is an HE detonation, and that's very, very unlikely.

Chairman Levin: Unlikely. Impossible?

General Welch: Well, you know, I'm reluctant to say anything is impossible. Let me say I can't imagine how it could happen.

Chairman Levin: All right. Then why are these so dangerous? Why do they need special inspection and security when they're on a flight line? Why is it important that a pilot even know that he has a nuclear weapon on board?

General Welch: Because with an HE detonation you will indeed scatter plutonium. So the concern is to ensure that no one can have access to these weapons in a way that they can intentionally create a high explosive detonation. There are ways to do that.

Chairman Levin: Thank you.

Senator Nelson?

**STATEMENT OF HON. BILL NELSON, U.S. SENATOR FROM
FLORIDA**

Senator Bill Nelson: Mr. Chairman, that's the appropriate response. There's no assumption of detonation; however, in the crash of two planes in the late 60s or early 70s, plutonium was spread all over the place, and plutonium is lethal. Isn't that correct, General Welch?

General Welch: Absolutely.

Senator Bill Nelson: Mr. Chairman, may I have my official statement put into the record, my opening statement?

Chairman Levin: It will be. [The prepared statement of Senator Bill Nelson follows:] [COMMITTEE INSERT]

Senator Bill Nelson: General Darnell, these events show that the nuclear procedures were ignored by most everyone, and these procedures are designed to force multiple redundant opportunities to ensure that the weapons are safe and their secure and that they're accounted for. In this case, the sloppiness and the lack of discipline and the lack of respect for the process didn't just happen overnight, and fixing the problems are going to take a while.

How long will it take to fix the problems and once fixed what steps should the Air Force take to ensure that we're not going to have this problem again?

General Darnell: Senator, very good question. We have 124 recommendations that we are taking action on. 41 are complete. I would hesitate to give you an exact time line, but obviously we are very quickly implementing as many of the recommendations as we possibly can.

Where we started from an organization standpoint is we put some very key senior leaders into some key positions. As General Welch has mentioned before, I very soon will have a two-star general officer that will be in charge of nuclear matters on the Air Staff that reports to me, and that will be his sole duty, his or her sole duty.

We have a Nuclear General Officer Steering Group that I just chaired 2 weeks ago. We had representatives from every MAGCOM there, reviewed all of these 124 recommendations. We were able to assign OPRs, in other words those responsible for implementing, and we're still working through exactly what the time lines will be.

The Nuclear Weapons Center we stood up nearly 2 years ago at Albuquerque. We'll have a brigadier general in charge of that organization in 2 months.

So from the top down, we have put some people in some key positions to ensure that we can get these recommendations implemented. I'll point out also that we put some other officers in some pretty key positions as well. Brigadier General Jonathan George is going to DOE. We have Lieutenant General Frank Klotz, who is our Assistant Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force; Major General Dick Weber, who is my deputy, as well as Brigadier General Don Alston -- all of them bring -- I won't go through their bona fides, but they've all been squadron, group, and wing commanders, whether it be in the missile field or bomber organizations.

Senator Bill Nelson: General Welch, General Darnell was talking about all how they're correcting it in the Air Force. But in your investigation, this spills over into the Department of Defense as well. So what do you think DoD is going to do to make sure this doesn't happen again?

General Welch: Well, as you say, we found this change in the level of focus on the nuclear enterprise to be Department-wide, and our recommendation -- our report has specific recommendations on what has to be done to fix that. That is, you need a flag officer or a senior civilian whose daily focus is on the nuclear enterprise. You need it on the Air Staff, the Navy Staff, the major air commands, U.S. STRATCOM, the Joint Staff, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

Our feeling was that if you restore that level of focus then you have gone a long ways towards having a long-term reliable fix on this discipline issue.

Senator Bill Nelson: General Darnell, there seems to be a disconnect here between the inspections and the actual performance. As a matter of fact, Minot usually receive favorable inspection reports. So it seems that the inspections don't provide an accurate picture of the situation. So how does the Air Force address that?

General Darnell: Senator, we've looked at that and, frankly, that's a valid observation and criticism. I will tell you that in any inspection there are going to be areas that you've isolated and you're focused on and others that you're not looking at as closely. A team has a finite amount of time to do that.

One thing that we're looking at -- well, several different things actually. First of all, limiting the notice that we provide a unit prior to being inspected. We're looking closely at that. As you well know, if the unit's preparing to be inspected and they know when the inspection is and they've been given a significant amount of time, then they're going to prepare for it in certain ways. We think that there may be some value to a limited notice inspection for units, so we're looking at that.

Elements of our NSIs and our ORIs. We still think it's valid that we have them separated, but we think there are things about each inspection procedurally that could be tightened up. There has been

some discussion about combining both. I think right now, I don't think we're leaning that way.

But I know General Sams, who's in charge of our -- who is our inspector general for the Air Force -- has a number of proposals that he is working on that he will propose to the Chief of Staff in probably another 4 to 6 weeks.

Senator Bill Nelson: Well, General Raaberg, you actually found where some of the inspection teams were cherrypicked. Is this a real problem in the Air Force?

General Raaberg: When I went back and looked at all the inspections, all the way back to '96, to be a little more precise, in my report I indicated that there were in fact findings, some noncompliance. But those are not uncommon in any of those type inspections. In fact, generally they're cleared up either during the inspection or shortly after the inspection.

The key thing was there was no indicator that those deficiencies would be identified or any deficiencies identified in the inspections that led to this actual incident itself.

Sir, I'm not aware of the issue you were discussing just now.

Senator Bill Nelson: Are we talking, is your answer --

Senator Warner: Has your time I believe expired?

Senator Bill Nelson: It probably has.

Senator Warner: I think we'd like to accommodate Senator Thune.

Senator Bill Nelson: Of course.

Senator Warner: Then our open session will be concluded. All the Senators are invited to put questions into the record. So I thank the Senator very much.

Senator Thune, you could wrap it up for us, and then we'll reconvene in S-407.

Senator Bill Nelson: Mr. Chairman, I just want one other question for the record. Is the cherrypicking limited just to the nuclear inspections? He can supply that for the record. [The information referred to follows:] [COMMITTEE INSERT]

Senator Warner: Good.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JOHN THUNE, U.S. SENATOR FROM
SOUTH DAKOTA**

Senator Thune: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you all very much for being here this morning. This is a very serious incident and I have a particular interest in it, serving both as the ranking member of the Readiness Subcommittee and on the Strategic Forces Subcommittee. I think this incident illustrates an important point and that is that everyone is human and humans make mistakes.

That said, obviously we can't tolerate mistakes on a subject that is this important. Our system has to be robust enough to protect us from human error. While I have every confidence in the system, while this subject is very much at the forefront of our minds, my concern would be that as we get farther away in time from this incident that we'll have the same loss of focus and perhaps erosion of procedures.

So what I'd like to do briefly this morning is I've got some questions that I'd be happy to submit for the record, but I would like

to at least ask a couple of questions, and maybe start with kind of the broad view, the 30,000 foot view, if you will. For that question, General Welch, I would simply say that your report discusses a long-term perception that nuclear forces and the nuclear deterrent mission are increasingly devalued.

I guess the question is, in your view how do we regain the focus and value of this mission, given current events in Iraq and Afghanistan?

General Welch: Well, certainly the Department and national security leaders have plenty to occupy their attention. But if you will search the Internet or anyplace else you might like to search for statements from the senior leadership emphasizing the importance of the strategic nuclear mission, I think you will search in vain. So that the people out in the field who maintain these weapons are bright people. They read, they listen. And unless they hear some statements from senior people in this government that what they do is important, then instead of that they will hear all of the other blogs and all of the other things you see about the fact that we should get rid of these weapons, that they're not important, that we don't need them any more. You hear that drum beat. That drum beat is widely publicized, and you don't see the counter. You don't see the counter from leaders that say: Yes, it is important; nuclear deterrence remains a key issue.

So I don't think it's any more complicated than that, sir.

Senator Thune: How would you gauge the current health of the DoD nuclear weapons surety and safety?

General Welch: I'm sorry?

Senator Thune: How would you gauge the current health of the DoD nuclear weapons surety and safety?

General Welch: Well, I think we have uncovered no safety issues, although there are some scenarios where two or three things can go wrong and you might be concerned. But most of our concerns have been about surety. If you look at all the areas and all the ways that we have to store and handle these weapons in order to perform the mission, it just requires, we believe, more resources and more attention than they're getting.

Now, that does not mean that the weapons are not secure. They are as secure as they have ever been. It just means that the standard goes up, which it has. Then there are technologies that can be brought to bear, that are not brought to bear because of legal concerns. There are resource needs that are identified, but there are other priorities.

We are not in the business of telling the Department what their priorities should be. We are in the business of identifying where we think the capability gaps are, and we have done so.

Senator Thune: General Peyer, in your blue ribbon review you note: "A consistent observation permeating this review is the friction between the need for surety perfection and operating in an environment of tightly constrained resources." In your view, how do we best overcome that friction?

General Peyer: We've already taken many steps. As you know, balancing the resources and the requirement is constantly on the plate of our senior leaders. So as we looked at the blue ribbon review and offered very specific areas where some investment and

some resources could be applied to ensure and enhance our nuclear surety program, we've already submitted an unfunded requirements list. I believe that was submitted on Friday, and that would be for an unfunded list. As we go into the fiscal year 2010 POM, we will pick up on those and include those in our POM. So we've already begun that realignment of priorities within our budget.

Senator Thune: I understand that -- I appreciate that answer, that with constrained resources it's a challenge, and we're all facing the challenge of trying to do a lot of things with a lot of competing demands and a very limited amount of resources. But how do you think we got to where we didn't allocate enough to ensure nuclear weapons surety and safety, even in an environment where we've got constrained resources?

General Peyer: Well, Senator, our review found that we still have nuclear surety and it's a strong program. The constrained resources does drive some mitigation strategies that we have. A lot of times, if you don't have an asset you'll apply people instead of an asset that you don't have, for example a piece of equipment. Our aging infrastructure, test equipment for example, nuclear weapons test equipment, is 25 or 30 years old. So definitely a re-look at recapitalizing that.

So as we've gone forward with our resource decisions we are always analyzing exactly where those shortfalls are and we work mitigation strategies to be able to reduce the risk.

Senator Thune: I see my time is up. I think we have a vote on. So, Mr. Chairman, I do have a couple other questions, but I'd be happy to enter those for the record.

Chairman Levin: You could take another minute or 2 of you want.

Senator Thune: Well, let me just, if I could, ask General Darnell. You're in charge of day to day operations for the Air Force and I understand that the Air Force recently put out a new instruction on nuclear weapons maintenance procedures. I guess could you talk a little bit about what that instruction changes, as well as some of the other steps that we've already taken that will ensure that there is an appropriate long-term fix?

General Darnell: Senator, custody transfer and accountability has been several areas that we've looked at, as well as tightening up standards on logistics movements, security, safety. We had some procedures, scheduling procedures, that were violated there at Minot and those have been fixed through a different venue, through 205.

Most of the focus has been there in the logistical area to ensure we tighten up those processes.

Senator Thune: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Levin: Thank you, Senator Thune.

Let me just ask a couple more questions on this issue of whether plutonium can be spread without a detonation. Just checking with my staff, who I think is an expert on the subject, it says that what happened in Spain in apparently the late 60s or early 70s, the reference that Senator Nelson made, was where two American planes crashed, there was no detonation, the weapons did not go critical, but plutonium was scattered, and they're still cleaning up that plutonium 30 years later.

So I guess, General, we'll need you to clarify that for the record if you would, or any of you, if you want to comment on that for the record. But it's a very important point.

Now, we want to secure these weapons in any event because we want to secure them against theft. We've spent a lot of time on securing nuclear weapons around the world. We have Nunn-Lugar, which spends billions of dollars securing nuclear material because we don't want them to fall into the wrong hands.

But the question of whether or not planes that either crash or have to jettison their weight because, their cargo, because they're going to crash or whatever, surely it makes a difference as to whether or not those pilots know they have nuclear weapons, and it makes a difference for a number of reasons. But one of them is that in the case of a crash or in case of jettisoning, according to our information, the weapons can indeed release plutonium, which would be highly dangerous without a detonation or without going critical.

And I would welcome any further comment from our panelists on that at this point if you want to add anything. But if not, I would ask I guess General Darnell or General Welch for the record if you would clarify this point. [The information referred to follows:] [COMMITTEE INSERT]

Chairman Levin: Senator Warner, do you want to add before we go over to S-407 and vote, not in that order?

Senator Warner: Yes. Mr. Chairman, I just wish to point out that it appears that you've had some clear manifestation here of a breakdown in culture and so forth. But the inspection regime did not catch it. Does this now require you to go back and examine how you're going to reestablish the inspection regime so that we won't have a repeat of this? In other words, if this thing had persisted, this type of breakdown in culture, for maybe a decade or more, clearly the periodic checks that go on just didn't work out. Now you've got to write a new system of how you're going to inspect for these potential defects again?

General Darnell: Senator Warner, that's an area that we're looking at very closely. Obviously, inspection-wise there are areas that could be tightened up. Lieutenant General Ron Sams, who is our inspector general, already has several proposals that he wants to take to the next meeting that he has with General Mosely and review those.

But as importantly is working with our DTRA partners and others as well, and we're committed to doing that and we've already begun.

Senator Warner: Anybody else want to comment on that?

General Welch: Our report found that the problem with the inspections is the scope is just too limited. The operational readiness inspections, over time the scope has been more and more limited, to the point where they really don't demonstrate operational readiness.

Senator Warner: That's a pretty dramatic observation, General. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think we've had a good hearing.

Chairman Levin: Thank you, Senator Warner.

Now, we're going to adjourn to S-407 and we'll be coming in and out, a number of us, because we've got 8 roll call votes scheduled

in a row this morning, with 10 minutes each. So it's going to be a little bit chaotic. We very much appreciate all the work you've put in on this matter, and we will see you all up in S-407 as soon as we can get there.

[Whereupon, at 10:25 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]