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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The Threat of Nuclear Terror

Thursday, February 28, 2002; Page A22

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In his Feb. 16 letter, John Gordon, administrator of the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration, dismissed concerns about security at U.S. nuclear weapons facilities.

In the past five years, more than 50 reports by congressional investigators, the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, the DOE inspector general and outside experts have detailed the inadequate safeguards, the security failures and the dysfunctional DOE culture that punishes rather than rewards whistleblowers who raise security concerns. I have interviewed numerous security officials who work at DOE nuclear weapons facilities who believe these problems to be extremely serious.

Mr. Gordon said elite military units are used to simulate hostile attacks. But other DOE security officials told me that the last time an elite military unit was used to test security was in 1998; Navy Seals actually refused to ever participate in such exercises again because the DOE forced them to be so artificial.

Mr. Gordon said security forces are tested to "failure," implying that failing to adequately protect the nuclear weapons material more than 50 percent of the time is a good thing. In fact, DOE uses a set of regulations called the Design Basis Threat to define security at its nuclear weapons facilities. Those regulations do not require the facilities to be protected against a sophisticated terrorist attack. The security exercises at the nuclear weapons facilities never exceed the security levels mandated by these regulations, and so are never truly tested to failure.

If "spin" were an effective deterrent to terrorism at our nuclear weapons facilities, Mr. Gordon's confidence might be well placed. But spin is no substitute for addressing the weaknesses, raised repeatedly by people involved in trying to protect the public from the horror of a terrorist attack. Mr. Gordon seems determined to learn this the hard way.

EDWARD J. MARKEY

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Washington

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