

The ICBM Lobby: Why the Pentagon Burns Taxpayer Dollars, and Why Legislators Vote to Blow the World Up



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## Key Findings

- Overall, legislators vote and advocate for the continued development of nuclear weapons in alignment with their personal and political incentives.
- An unofficial House ICBM Coalition, determined by ranking the 20 highest recipients of campaign donations from individuals or PACs affiliated with ICBM manufacturers, votes for continued development of ICBMs primarily because of campaign donations from manufacturers, while the promise of new jobs from these programs acts as a nice bonus.
- The Senate ICBM Coalition advocates for nuclear weapons development outside the Chamber primarily to bring jobs to their states, though campaign contributions from ICBM manufacturers sweeten the deal for these senators.
- Pentagon officials who approve continued funding of nuclear weapons development have worked for such manufacturers and think tanks funded by these same companies.

## Introduction

In 2014, [60 Minutes aired an episode](#) exploring the current state of America's nuclear missile facilities (Stahl [2014] 2023). Reporter Leslie Stahl was given a tour of one of the many underground Air Force bunkers built in the 1960s to monitor [the 400 Minuteman III missiles still in operation](#)<sup>1</sup> (Kristensen et al. 2024), revealing the stark age of the system managing our intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). The computers managed by the Air Force personnel in their mid-20s are too old to take USB thumb drives. Instead, they take floppy disks—"the really old big ones" (Stahl [2014] 2023) that the Air Force operators had never even seen before starting their jobs.

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<sup>1</sup> An additional 50 missiles are in storage (Kristensen et al. 2024).

As our current ICBM arsenal ages like milk, the time has come to begin phasing out the land-based leg of the so-called “triad” of strategic nuclear weapons. As former Secretary of Defense William J. Perry [wrote in a 2016 \*New York Times\* opinion piece](#), “these missiles are some of the most dangerous weapons in the world. They could even trigger an accidental nuclear war” (2016). He argued that while their existence as a more accurate alternative to submarine-launched ballistic missiles could be justified during the Cold War, and while they acted as an “insurance policy” (2016) in the event our submarine nuclear forces became disabled, such a backup is no longer needed today (2016).

Further, [as David Wright, William D. Hartung, and Lisbeth Gronlund proposed in 2020](#), even if the Air Force decides to continue operating ICBMs as a part of its Nuclear Triad, the most efficient and budget-friendly way to do so would be to extend the lifespan of the Minuteman III missiles, rather than building a whole new fleet of land-based missiles (2020), the LGM-35A “Sentinel” missiles. In 2014, [a RAND Corporation study](#) even estimated that “any all-new ICBM system will likely cost almost twice (and perhaps even three times) as much as incremental modernization and sustainment of the MM III [Minuteman III] system” (Caston et al. 2014).

Yet, despite the advice of experts to retire our ICBM fleet, or at least opt to extend the life of our current Minuteman III missile instead of developing an entire new fleet, [Congress has appropriated funds for the development of Northrop Grumman’s Sentinel missiles](#) (Pub. L. No. 118-31, 137 Stat 745-6 (2023)). And even though the Sentinel missile program was [estimated by the Department of Defense on July 8, 2024](#) to be 81% over-budget and delayed by “several years” (2024), the Director of Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation (CAPE) deemed the costs “to be reasonable” (2024), and the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and

Sustainment (USD(A&S)) approved for the program to continue. These decisions, defying experts' advice, prompt three important questions that this report will answer:

- **Why have Congressional Representatives appropriated funds for new ICBMs that waste taxpayer dollars and threaten our national security?**
- **Why did the Senate do the same?**
- **Why did the Department of Defense approve the Sentinel program's continuation after it found that both the cost and timeline for the program skyrocketed?**

Our findings reveal a system of legalized corruption managed by the ICBM manufacturing wing of the military-industrial complex. Namely, ICBM manufacturers lobby U.S. legislators to pass the bills they want by filling their election campaign coffers and promising the maintaining of current jobs or the creation of more, while also ensuring that the Pentagon gets staffed by the people who used to run their companies or the think tanks that affirm their ideological and policy goals.

### **Methodology on Data Collection**

We decided that the current debate over the Sentinel ICBM Program provided an excellent, specific example we could use to examine the dynamic described above. Using OpenSecrets' data, we compiled a chart of the 20 U.S. House Representatives who received the largest amount of donations from individuals and PACs affiliated with ICBM manufacturers from 2022-2024 (Table 1). The calculations account for contributions from 10 manufacturers, using a list of contractors similar to the one that [Quincy Institute Senior Research Fellow William D. Hartung](#) (QIRS n.d.) relied on for [previous reports](#) (Hartung 2021a; Hartung 2021b). We performed the same calculations for the eight members of the Senate ICBM Coalition in

Table 2, who William Hartung identified as “a bipartisan group, including senators from Montana, North Dakota, and Wyoming, where the nation’s three ICBM bases are located, and from Utah, where the missiles are maintained and developed” (2021b).

We then identified the number of existing nuclear weapons production jobs in the U.S. by reviewing the reports and websites of the nine nuclear weapons producers listed on [the National Nuclear Security Administration’s website](#) (n.d.), and either calculated or estimated the number of nuclear weapons manufacturing jobs in the states of each legislator examined. Additionally, we accounted for the number of jobs on the Air Force Bases in Wyoming, North Dakota, and Montana that deal with the current Minuteman III missiles.

To the best of our ability, we also identified states that will see new jobs created by the LGM-35A “Sentinel” missile program, Northrop Grumman’s ongoing [over-budget effort](#) (Lopez 2024) to replace the U.S. Air Force’s current fleet of Minuteman III missiles. Unfortunately, only limited unverified data on Sentinel-related job creation has been made available. The verification of these job creation claims is quite important, as [Hartung noted in a 2009 report with \*The New America Foundation\*](#) (now called *New America*) on how Lockheed Martin woefully overpromised on the number of jobs that [its F-22 fighter plane contracts would create](#) (Majumdar 2012). Defense contractors have an incentive to inflate the number of jobs created by their research and development projects, to garner support from legislators who represent the states where production occurs. These companies have a burden lifted off of their shoulders when they do not have to prove to taxpayers that they fulfilled their promise. Unsurprisingly then, when arguing before the Utah State Records Committee against declassifying the final contract between the Governor’s Office of Economic Opportunity (GOEO) and Northrop Grumman on its Sentinel missile production, an attorney for the defense contractor revealed that the state’s

willingness to keep the program's job creation data hidden from the public was "part of [the reason] why they [Northrop Grumman] decided to provide their business to the state of Utah," [according to a July 26, 2023 \*Inkstick\* article from Taylor Barnes](#).<sup>2</sup> That said, jobs creation claims could still be found for some states on manufacturers' websites, news sites, and the Air Force Global Strike Command's webpage on the Sentinel program. These are likely the numbers that legislators are acting upon.

On Table 1, we also noted the [voting record](#) (Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, 2023) for the top 20 House recipients of ICBM manufacturer contributions on [House Amendment 231 to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024](#) (2024 NDAA), which would "strike the prohibition on the reduction of the total number of nuclear armed Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) deployed in the United States" ([Congress 2023b](#)). No votes on Senate bills or amendments directly and exclusively related to nuclear weapons development could be found for the 2022-2024 timeframe applied.

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<sup>2</sup> The assistant attorney general representing GOEO claimed that Northrop Grumman needed the final contract to be kept private because of concerns that "business competitors" (2023), as well as "Russia and China are probably watching very closely what Northrop Grumman is doing" (2023). He did not elaborate on how declassifying the contract would threaten Northrop Grumman's success or U.S. security.

**The U.S. House of Representatives - Where Cash is King and Jobs In the District Are a  
Neat Bonus**

<b>Table 1: Top 20 House Recipients of ICBM Manufacturer Contributions and Statistics on ICBM-Manufacturing Jobs, 2022-2024</b>				
<b>Recipient</b>	<b>Total Contributions***</b>	<b>Existing Jobs</b>	<b>Sentinel Jobs</b>	<b>Vote on H.Amdt 231 to HR 2670</b>
Calvert Ken (R-CA)	\$339,850.00	11,100**	<a href="#">Yes</a>	No
Rogers Mike D (R-AL)	\$325,950.00	0	<a href="#">Yes</a>	No
Smith Adam (D-WA)	\$244,500.00	0	No	Yes
McCollum Betty (D-MN)	\$167,380.00	0	No	Yes
Courtney Joe (D-CT)	\$165,832.00	0	No	No
Morelle Joseph D (D-NY)	\$159,656.00	<a href="#">8,000*</a>	No	No
DeLauro Rosa (D-CT)	\$158,785.00	0	No	Yes
Granger Kay (R-TX)	\$155,031.00	<a href="#">4,200</a>	No	No
Wittman Rob (R-VA)	\$154,300.00	0	<a href="#">Yes</a>	No
Scalise Steve (R-LA)	\$146,952.00	0	No	No
Aguilar Pete (D-CA)	\$141,824.00	11,100**	<a href="#">Yes</a>	No
Diaz-Balart Mario (R-FL)	\$141,250.00	0	No	No
Cole Tom (R-OK)	\$139,900.00	0	No	No
Womack Steve (R-AR)	\$128,540.00	0	No	No
Cartwright Matt (D-PA)	\$128,099.00	<a href="#">8,000*</a>	No	Yes
Norcross Don (D-NJ)	\$127,730.00	0	No	Yes
Hoyer Steny H (D-MD)	\$127,500.00	0	<a href="#">Yes</a>	No
Ruppersberger Dutch (D-MD)	\$126,000.00	0	<a href="#">Yes</a>	No
Aderholt Robert B (R-AL)	\$125,557.00	0	<a href="#">Yes</a>	No
Graves Sam (R-MO)	\$124,500.00	<a href="#">7,000</a>	No	No
<b>Total Contributions</b>	<b>\$3,329,136.00</b>			

\*Specific employment data for the state was not available. This represents the number of jobs provided by the Naval Nuclear Laboratory, which has labs in NY, PA, and ID.

\*\*[Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory](#) employs 9,291 people, and [Sandia National Laboratories](#) employs 1,809.

\*\*\*Includes contributions from Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, General Dynamics, L3Harris, RTX Corp, Textron, Honeywell, Parsons, Bechtel, and Kratos. This data was sourced from OpenSecrets' database on campaign finance contributions.

While Senators of the ICBM Caucus certainly enjoy some contributions to their campaigns from the ICBM lobby (see below), our findings suggest that such financial contributions are the larger motivation for U.S. Representatives to vote in favor of continued nuclear weapons development.

In total, the top 20 recipients of ICBM manufacturer-affiliated donations pocketed \$3,329,136 from 2022-2024 (Table 1). Only six of these legislators represent states that feature existing nuclear weapons production facilities, and only seven of these representatives come from states that might see new jobs appear as a result of the Sentinel missile program (Table 1).

[The voting record on House Amendment 231](#) best reflects the influence that the ICBM lobby holds over these 20 legislators (Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, 2023). The amendment, rejected by a 266-166 vote, would have removed a section from the 2024 NDAA that prohibits the Department of Defense from using any funds to “reduce, or prepare to reduce, the quantity of deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles...to a number less than 400” (Pub. L. No 188-31, 137 Stat. 599). In other words, the amendment would allow for the Department of Defense to reduce the number of ICBMs currently in use. As the amendment's sponsor, Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), characterized it [during a July 13, 2023 debate on the House floor](#), “This amendment does not change the size of our nuclear forces. It merely allows for reasonable consideration and debate in the future, especially around de-escalation” (169 Cong. Rec. 120 H3520 (2023)).

The implication of the vote, then, is simple: Vote for the possibility of disarmament in the future and lightly threaten the profit margins of ICBM manufacturers, or vote to protect these



defense contractors' quarterly earnings and ban any NDAA funds from being used to reduce the United States' nuclear arsenal. 15 of the 20 top recipients of ICBM manufacturer campaign contributions voted to keep the prohibition on nuclear weapons disarmament in the bill (Table 1). Among the six representatives from states with existing jobs in the nuclear weapons manufacturing industry, five of them voted to ban a reduction in nuclear weapons (Table 1). All seven of the representatives from states expecting to see new jobs from the Sentinel program voted to prohibit any reduction in nuclear weapons (Table 1).

The second highest recipient of ICBM lobby donations from 2022-2024, Rep. Mike Rogers (R-AL) with \$325,950 (Table 1), was the first House member to rise in opposition to Rep. Tlaib's amendment when she proposed it (169 Cong. Rec. H3520 (2023)). He reasoned that because "nuclear threats are growing...now is not the time to be considering cuts to our ICBM fleet, which remains central to our deterrent" (169 Cong. Rec. H3520 (2023)), affirming the theory of nuclear deterrence—one that was [rejected by the 70 state parties of the Treaty of the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons at the United Nations on December 1, 2023](#) (ICAN 2023) and [debunked by Alan Kaptanoglu and Stewart Prager in a February 2, 2022 \*Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists\* article](#) (2022). This was not the only reduction in nuclear weapons that Rep. Rogers rejected, however. Before that debate, he was also the first to object to the preceding item on the agenda, [House Amendment 230](#) (169 Cong. Rec. H3518-19 (2023)), which would have retired the B83-1 nuclear bomb (Congress 2023a), the United States' most powerful nuclear weapon with "an explosive force roughly 80 times greater than that of the Hiroshima bomb" ([Broad 2023](#)), which the Biden administration already plans to retire (2023).

Ensuring the sustainment of the nuclear weapons stockpile would be an important interest of Rep. Rogers. While Alabama has no existing nuclear weapons manufacturing jobs, [Military](#)

[Aerospace Electronic](#) reported in 2020 that two cities in Alabama were set to gain new jobs from [Northrop Grumman's Sentinel missile program](#) (MAE 2020).

### Senate ICBM Caucus - Different Tactics, Different Incentives, Same Effect

<b>Table 2: ICBM Manufacturers' Contributions to Senate ICBM Coalition Members and Statistics on Jobs in Their States, 2022- 2024</b>			
<b>Recipient</b>	<b>Total Contributions*</b>	<b>Existing Jobs</b>	<b>Sentinel Jobs</b>
Romney, Mitt (R-UT)	\$0.00	<a href="#">Unknown</a>	<a href="#">4000</a>
Tester, Jon (D-MT)	\$130,350.00	<a href="#">3,900</a>	<a href="#">2000-3000</a>
Barrasso, John (R-WY)	\$5,595.00	<a href="#">4,325</a>	<a href="#">4000</a>
Daines, Steve (R-MT)	\$7,550.00	<a href="#">3,900</a>	<a href="#">2000-3000</a>
Hoeven, John (R-ND)	\$25,500.00	<a href="#">1,800</a>	<a href="#">2500-3000</a>
Cramer, Kevin (R- ND)	\$6,942.00	<a href="#">1,800</a>	<a href="#">2500-3000</a>
Lee, Mike (R-UT)	\$34,190.00	<a href="#">Unknown</a>	<a href="#">4000</a>
Lummis, Cynthia (R-WY)	-\$3,000.00	<a href="#">4,325</a>	<a href="#">4000</a>
<b>Total Contributions</b>	<b>\$207,127.00</b>		

\*Includes contributions listed on OpenSecrets from Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, General Dynamics, L3Harris, RTX Corp, Textron, Honeywell, Parsons, Bechtel, and Kratos.

While the tools of the ICBM lobby differ in the Senate, its effectiveness is still the same. Rather than an unofficial group of legislators fueled by massive campaign contributions leading the charge for nuclear weapons development programs, the organized Senate ICBM Coalition fights for the continued funding of nuclear weapons not through intense debate on the Senate floor over NDAA amendments, but through persistent pressuring of Pentagon officials, akin to the colloquial “smoke-filled back room dealings” for which Washington D.C. has earned a reputation. Hartung noted in [a 2021 Arms Control Association report](#) how “the coalition has taken dozens of actions, including writing letters to five defense secretaries and a succession of chairs of the Senate Armed Services Committee and arranging meetings with key Pentagon and

military officials, to make the case for continuing the ICBM mission” (Hartung 2021b). These tactics are not a new habit for the Coalition either. [A 2021 \*Slate\* article from Fred Kaplan](#) recounted how the Coalition managed to force President Barack Obama to commit to “modernizing or replacing” (2021) the Nuclear Triad in 2010 by threatening to vote against the New START treaty, an already difficult-to-pass agreement due to the required two-thirds vote for ratification. [An August 1, 2024 article from \*Responsible Statecraft\*](#) documented the extensive history of this coalition’s efforts to ensure the development of a new ICBM, which includes successful efforts to dissuade the Clinton administration from “eliminating ICBMs entirely during its Nuclear Posture Review process” (Knight 2024), to block the Pentagon from studying the environmental impacts of eliminating ICBMs, and rallying their allies in the House to “kill an amendment to the FY20 NDAA that would have required a study on life-extending Minuteman [missiles]” (2024).

The primary motivation for the Coalition is not necessarily the money. The amount of money the senators received in 2022-2024 from ICBM manufacturers pales in comparison to the amount that the top 20 House recipients have amassed in the same timeframe (Table 2). Only one senator—Jon Tester (D-MT)—brought in enough contributions from these groups totalling more than some of the top 20 House recipients (Table 2). The other seven senators’ contributions from the ICBM lobby combined amount to \$76,777—\$47,723 less than the 20th highest-earning recipient of ICBM manufacturer contributions in the House (Table 2). Campaign contributions are always important, of course, but they are a mere bonus compared to the ICBM lobby’s other lever of influence—jobs.

Unlike the representatives identified here, all of the Senate ICBM Coalition members represent states that Northrop Grumman and the U.S. Air Force Global Strike Command have

reported will gain new jobs from the Sentinel Program, ranging anywhere from 2,000 to 4,000 in each of the four states (Table 2). Three of the four states represented by the Senate ICBM Coalition members—[Montana](#) (Chaney 2024), [North Dakota](#) (AFGSC 2023), and [Wyoming](#) (Randall 2024)—each have an Air Force Base featuring 1,800 to 4,325 employees who work on maintenance or operations for the current Minuteman III missiles set to be replaced by the Sentinel missiles. [According to Hartung](#), the existing amount of jobs in Utah related to maintaining the current Minuteman III missiles is unknown at this time (2021b).

### **The Pentagon - The Right People in the Right Place**

On January 18, 2024, [according to a March 2024 Arms Control Association report from Libby Flatoff](#), the Air Force informed Congress “that the new Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) would cost 37 percent more than expected and take about two years longer than planned to build and deploy” (2024). This triggered a “‘critical’ breach of the Nunn-McCurdy Act, a law designed to prevent major cost overruns for weapons systems” (2024), requiring the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) “to conduct a root-cause analysis to determine what factors caused the cost increase” (2024), which in 60 days or less must determine whether the program should continue.

[On July 8, the Department of Defense \(DOD\) announced its findings](#): The Sentinel program is actually 81% over-budget, and a delay of several years is currently estimated (2024). But the OSD’s Director of Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation, Susanna V. Blume, found the new estimates “to be reasonable” (2024). And the OSD’s Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, Dr. William A. LaPlante, “certified that the Sentinel program met the statutory criteria to continue” (2024). Whereas the Pentagon has yet to ever pass an

independent audit, [according to a November 17, 2023 \*Intercept\* article from Ken Klippenstein](#), why would the OSD still approve a program with ballooning expenses, as well as fundamental and operational issues?

As it turns out, [according to her biography on the DOD website](#), Blume, who approved of the program's new cost estimates, worked as the Senior Fellow and Director of the Defense Program at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) before taking up her current position as the Director of Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation (CAPE) in the OSD (n.d.b). CNAS, [according to a February 22, 2021 \*Responsible Statecraft\* article from Brett Heinz](#), is “a bipartisan, DC-based foreign policy think tank with at least 16 former affiliates now in the Biden administration” (2021). Heinz noted that a 2020 report from the Center for International Policy “found that CNAS was the single largest recipient of defense contractor money from 2014 to 2019” (2021) among the 50 think tanks examined. The largest contributor to CNAS “by far” (2021) was Northrop Grumman—the developer of the Sentinel missile. “Not surprisingly,” Heinz wrote, “Our review of past publications from the Center suggests that the line between their positions and the interests of their donors is rather ‘murky’ ... in part because their interventionist views often fit quite comfortably with that of the profit-oriented aims of big industry players, many of whom are jockeying for contracts and friendly regulation from the federal government” (2021). Blume, therefore, found the exorbitant cost increase of the Sentinel program “to be reasonable” (DOD 2024) not because it actually was, but because she has traveled through a career in which one belief has been reinforced upon her: Nothing is too expensive or unreasonable for the U.S. military.

Dr. LaPlante, who certified the continuance of the Sentinel missile's development, holds a career similar to Blume in that regard. Before taking his current position as the OSD's Under

Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, “Dr. LaPlante served as President and Chief Executive Officer of Draper Laboratory, a research and development company specializing in advanced technology solutions in national security, space exploration, health care, and energy” (DOD n.d.a), [according to his biography on the DOD website](#). While Draper has said very little about its involvement in the Sentinel missile program, it briefly mentioned in [an April 23, 2024 press release](#) that it is “a decades-long partner of the U.S. Air Force, including the Minuteman III and Sentinel programs” (Draper 2024). Dr. LaPlante, then, approved an over-budget and irresponsible nuclear weapon development program knowing that his friends at Draper held a stake in the program’s approval. ICBM manufacturers cannot ensure their profits without having a few friends in the Department of Defense who will sign off on their development programs.

## **Conclusion**

ICBM manufacturers guarantee their success by supplying massive campaign contributions to incumbent Representatives, so that they vote to spend taxpayer dollars on the maintenance and continued development of nuclear weapons, while the ICBM lobby dangles potential jobs in the district above the Senate ICBM Coalition members’ heads, nudging them to convince both their colleagues into voting for ICBM development projects and Pentagon officials to approve these programs. These Pentagon officials are more susceptible to persuasion from ICBM manufacturers when said officials have already worked for them or their think tanks. There are limited solutions to the structural flaws of our political system that allow for this legalized corruption to flourish: [establishing a robust public financing program for candidates’ campaigns](#) (Glavin, Malbin, and Vandewalker 2023) and [locking the revolving door between the Pentagon and the military-industrial complex](#) (BCFJ 2021) are great starting points. But even

with clear reform proposals staring legislators in their faces, other questions arise: Why would legislators work to end the injustices of our political system that they benefit from? How would they be convinced to do such a thing? These questions remain unanswered.

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