

SundayReview | NEWS ANALYSIS

## ***Which President Cut the Most Nukes?***

By WILLIAM J. BROAD

NOV. 1, 2014

DOVES who once cheered President Obama for his antinuclear crusades and later fell silent as he backpedaled are now lining up to denounce him. A recent skewering by the Federation of American Scientists details how Mr. Obama, despite calling repeatedly for “a world without nuclear weapons,” has reduced the size of the nation’s atomic stockpile far less than did any of his three immediate predecessors, including both Presidents Bush.

Critics are calling out the president not only for modest cuts but also for spending more than previous administrations to modernize the remaining arms and for authorizing a new generation of weapon carriers. They call the upgrades an enormous waste of money, citing estimates that put the nation’s costs over the next three decades at up to a trillion dollars.

Mr. Obama should “suspend plans to develop a new arsenal,” Joe Cirincione, president of the Ploughshares Fund, a private group in San Francisco, wrote recently in an op-ed article in The Los Angeles Times. He argued that the move would save money and advance global security. “Unless something is done soon,” he wrote, “we will buy thousands of new hydrogen bombs and mount them on hundreds of new missiles and planes.”

The Alliance for Nuclear Accountability, a Washington-based network of organizations, recently condemned the administration’s plans as “the largest expansion of funding on nuclear weapons since the fall of the Soviet Union.”

Some critics, while conceding short-term gains from Mr. Obama’s cuts, say the benefits pale in comparison to the risks the administration runs in rebuilding bomb plants and modernizing arms. Some warn that the upgrades could allow a future president to rapidly expand the nation’s atomic forces and have already set a bad example for other nations.

The Arms Control Association, a private group in Washington, recently issued a report, “The Unaffordable Arsenal,” that argued that more cuts “could help induce other nuclear-armed states to exercise greater restraint.”

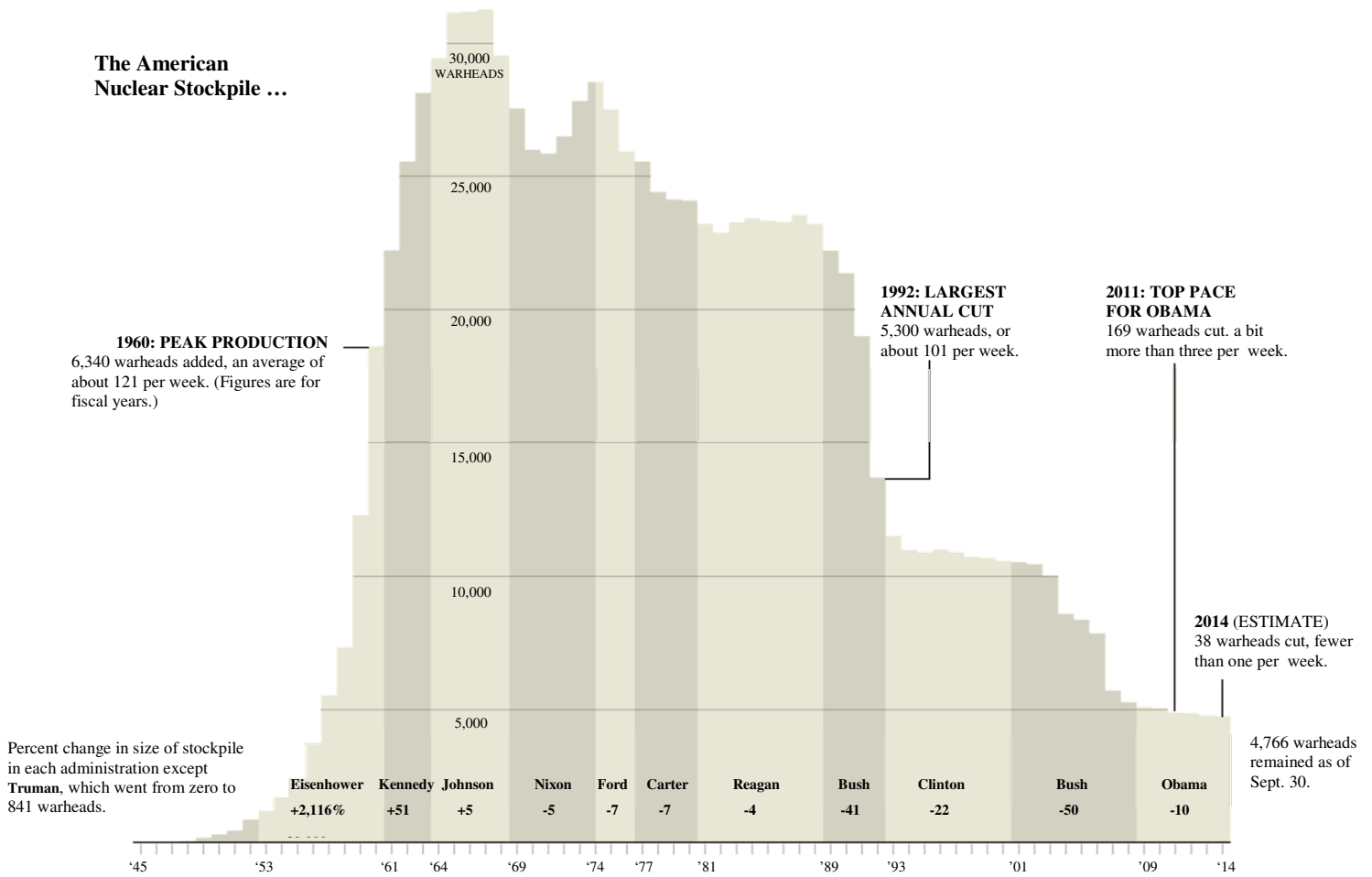
For its part, the White House defends its record as sensible for the times, noting that previous cuts were easy after the collapse of Cold War tensions and that today Congress has fought major reductions. Indeed, it took the administration’s backing of wide modernization to get Senate Republicans to ratify a modest 2010 arms treaty with Moscow. And officials have defended the weapon upgrades as paving the way for future arms cuts and have called the high costs unavoidable, since old arms require more extensive refurbishments.

For his part, Mr. Obama has declared that “we have more nuclear weapons than we need,” implicitly faulting the continuing opposition to further cuts.

Even so, the transformation of cheerleaders into detractors marks a turning point for a vocal part of Mr. Obama’s base. Early on, peace activists hailed the new president for making nuclear disarmament a centerpiece of American defense policy. Crowds cheered when, in an 2009 speech, he said the United States had a moral obligation to seek the “security of a world without nuclear weapons.”

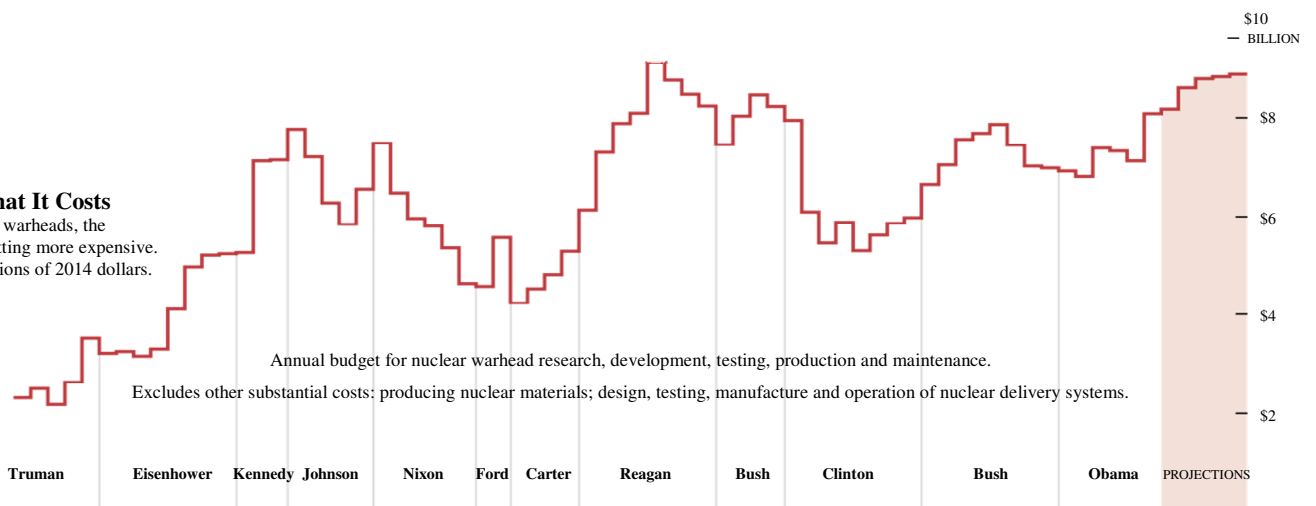
That October the Norwegian Nobel Committee, citing his antinuclear efforts, awarded Mr. Obama the Peace Prize.

## The American Nuclear Stockpile ...



## ...And What It Costs

Despite fewer warheads, the program is getting more expensive. Figures in billions of 2014 dollars.



By BILL MARSH: 1974 stockpile figures are split evenly between Nixon and Ford. Stockpiles and costs are for fiscal years; the 1976 cost increase is partly because the fiscal year's start was changed from July to October  
Sources: analyses by Hans M. Kristensen, Federation of American Scientists and Stephen I. Schwartz, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies.

Early this year, a report by the Monterey Institute of International Studies questioned the wisdom of the modernization push as well as the nation's ability to pay the bill.

And last month, the Federation of American Scientists, a private group in Washington, joined the fray with a report that compared Mr. Obama's record with that of all presidents who held office during the nuclear age. "It's a funny thing," Hans M. Kristensen, the report's author, wrote. "The administrations that talk the most about reducing nuclear weapons tend to reduce the least." So far, he added, Mr. Obama has cut fewer warheads (in numbers, not percentages) than "any administration ever." Mr. Kristensen, director of the group's nuclear information project, noted that, in recent decades, "the biggest nuclear disarmers" have been Republicans, not Democrats.

The most aggressive? President George W. Bush, who during his two terms cut the nation's arsenal in half. His father, while serving a single term, came in a close second with reductions of 41 percent. Together, Mr. Kristensen noted, the two men cut "a staggering 14,801 warheads from the stockpile."

He said Mr. Obama's reductions to date total 507 arms, or about 10 percent of the stockpile when he entered office.

Mr. Kristensen conceded that Mr. Obama's policies of atomic modernization "in the long run" could result in more reductions. But these steps, he noted, would reduce the arsenal only "well after President Obama has left office."

During his presidency, Mr. Obama's public remarks on disarmament seem to have grown less frequent and urgent.

In 2009, he spoke to the United Nations of a historic "shared commitment" to the nuclear-free goal. Later that year, he spoke proudly at a Miami Beach fund-raiser of his "vision for reducing nuclear stockpiles."

Yet some of his recent comments seem almost wistful. Last year, addressing an audience in Berlin, Mr. Obama said that abolishing the weapons was important to pursue "no matter how distant that dream may be."

To applause, he added that the new arms treaty had already reduced warhead numbers to their "lowest levels since the 1950s." Yet a glance at the accompanying weapons chart shows that President Bush could have made a similar boast a decade ago.

William J. Broad is a science reporter for *The New York Times*.