

President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.

March 25, 2024

The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden,

We write to urge your Administration to continue the long-held U.S. tradition of promoting transparency by declassifying the number of nuclear warheads in the U.S. stockpile, the number of annually dismantled nuclear warheads, and the number of nuclear warheads awaiting dismantlement. Upholding such transparency is vital for nonproliferation and disarmament efforts, maintaining diplomatic credibility and democratic values, preventing misinformation and miscalculation, and setting an example for pursuing these efforts as a leader on the global stage. Indeed, to live up to the standard of being a responsible nuclear state, it would seem essential to provide the same transparency your Administration is urging other states to adopt.

In previous years, the U.S. government has engaged in a commendable practice of releasing nuclear warhead stockpile information to the public. In 1994, the U.S. Department of Energy declassified the stockpile size between 1945 and 1994. In 2010, the Obama Administration declassified the remaining history of the U.S. stockpile as well as the number of dismantled warheads. This practice continued in subsequent years, even expanding to include the number of nuclear warheads dismantled and those awaiting dismantlement. These disclosures were used by U.S. diplomats to demonstrate progress in reducing nuclear arsenals and that the United States is leading in nuclear transparency.

The Trump administration needlessly put an end to this transparency for three years, but your Administration corrected that wrong in October 2021 by providing an update on the stockpile size, the number of nuclear warheads awaiting dismantlement, and the number of annually dismantled warheads as of September 2020. We commend your Administration for making the decision to re-engage in transparency.

However, in 2023, your Administration twice rejected a request by the Federation of American Scientists to release the same data as in previous years. Notably, the stated reason for this denial was that the relevant agencies “do not believe that [declassifying this information] is in the best interest of the United States.” This reasoning is incorrect, insufficient, and stands in direct contradiction to your own Administration’s previous statements on transparency. Your Administration’s regrettable decision to reverse this practice is therefore highly unusual and is symptomatic of a concerning trend toward nuclear opacity by the world’s nuclear-armed states. If past legal practice enables the release of these numbers, it is far from clear that there is a legal basis for keeping this number classified.

The decision to conceal this data joins an unfavorable and dangerous trend that undermines the abilities of U.S. diplomats to promote nuclear transparency in other countries, inhibits the ability of the public to engage in informed conversations around nuclear risk reduction, diminishes U.S. credibility in domestic and international environments, and allows more secretive nuclear powers like Russia and China to pass off U.S. criticism as hypocrisy.

In contrast, publicizing this information helps U.S. diplomats engage in effective risk reduction and arms control negotiations, and improves the United States' image in multilateral fora like the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It would therefore be consistent with your Administration's emphasis, as indicated in the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review, to focus on arms control and risk reduction measures as a means to "strengthen stability, head off costly arms races, and signal our desire to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons globally."

Declassifying this information also aligns with the United States' democratic values by providing the U.S. public with important, factual information that it needs to monitor its government and make informed decisions in voting booths.

Nuclear ambiguity and opacity can lead to arms racing and miscalculation based on worst-case assumptions, particularly in an era of heightened nuclear tensions. We urge your Administration to reverse this trend of needlessly withholding nuclear warhead stockpile and dismantlement numbers and instead engage in a good faith effort to promote transparency, stability, and democracy.

The Federation of American Scientists has long believed that transparency reduces nuclear dangers. Our legacy of encouraging the release of warhead stockpile numbers goes back to our origins, including as early as 1946. The arguments for keeping this data secret were flawed then and remain so today.

Sincerely,



Daniel Correa
Chief Executive Officer
Federation of American Scientists