



February 25, 2014

The Honorable Ernest Moniz
Secretary, Department of Energy
1000 Independence Ave. S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20585

Via E-mail: The.Secretary@hq.doe.gov

Dear Secretary Moniz:

For some time now we've been concerned about the potential appointment of Colonel Steve Asher as Associate Administrator for Defense Nuclear Security/Chief of Defense Nuclear Security at the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), a position with responsibilities that go well beyond those of his manager job at a Target store in Spokane, Washington.¹

But our concerns don't start there. Prior to his employment at Target, Asher was Group Commander and Chief of Police for the 341st Space Wing at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana, one of three sites each responsible for 150 Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles. Asher left the base to pursue a corporate career in July 2008, and in November that year Malmstrom failed a force-on-force security test during an inspection of the site.² Experts have advised the Project On Government Oversight that proper security readiness would not have deteriorated that quickly and is indicative of how Asher managed the security forces.

The failed tests in 2008 were neither the first nor the last embarrassing incidents for the Air Force officers charged with guarding our nuclear weapons. Just last month the Air Force discovered that 92 of the 190 Malmstrom Launch Officers cheated on their most recent monthly launch-readiness tests.³ As many as 40 were directly involved in the cheating, while the rest were aware of the misconduct but failed to report it. These launch officers have been decertified and suspended. Bruce Blair, currently at Princeton and formally a launch officer, claims cheating had been endemic for years.⁴ If this was indeed such a widespread problem for so many years, it is

¹ Lydia Dennett, "Former Target Manager Now Acting Chief of Defense Nuclear Security," POGO Blog, January 31, 2013. <http://www.pogo.org/blog/2013/01/20130131-former-target-manager-now-in-charge-of-nuclear-security.html>

² Noah Shachtman, "Air Force Struggles in Another Nuke Test," *WIRED*, November 10, 2008. <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2008/11/air-force-flunk/> (Downloaded February 24, 2014)

³ Ernesto Londoño, "Officials: 92 Air Force officers assigned to nuclear arsenal involved in cheating scandal," *The Washington Post*, January 30, 2014. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/officials-92-air-force-officers-involved-in-test-cheating-scandal/2014/01/30/ddfd6db2-89d6-11e3-833c-33098f9e5267_story.html (Downloaded February 24, 2014)

⁴ "Air Force officers caught in cheating scandal," January 16, 2014, video clip. Accessed February 24, 2014. PBS NewsHour. <http://video.pbs.org/video/2365157871/> (Downloaded February 24, 2014)

clear that Colonel Asher either knew about it or was blind to the misbehavior going on right at his doorstep. Either way he should not be rewarded with a promotion and a major new role in the security of the entire U.S. arsenal of nuclear weapons.

A look back shows that the Air Force has struggled to keep its house in order for years. In 2006 a B-52 bomber was mistakenly armed with nuclear-tipped missiles and sent across the country.⁵ That same year the Air Force mistakenly sent nuclear parts to Taiwan.⁶ And in May 2008 Minot Air Force Base failed its security tests, just two months before Malmstrom would fail its.⁷ Then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates promptly fired the two highest ranking officials: Air Force Secretary Michael W. Wynne, and the service's chief of staff, General T. Michael Moseley, for the incidents. Secretary Gates said he believed the repeated security failures reflected a "pattern of poor performance."⁸

It seems that the pattern continues. In addition to years of mass cheating at Malmstrom, two officers at the base are under investigation for drug possession.⁹ However, unlike the Air Force which has allowed a culture of incompetence to breed for years, the NNSA must take a stand and not allow such a dangerous attitude to cross over into the Department of Energy. Although the NNSA has determined that Colonel Asher has enough Air Force experience for this new promotion, he has not proven to be an effective leader and should not be rewarded with more security responsibilities.

If you have any questions, or would like to discuss this issue further please contact Peter Stockton at pstockton@pogo.org or (703)-589-1718.

Sincerely,



Danielle Brian
Executive Director

⁵ Sharon Weinberger, "Lose a Nuke, Lose Your Job," *WIRED*, October 19, 2007. <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2007/10/lose-a-nuke-los/#previouspost> (Downloaded February 24, 2014)

⁶ Josh White, "Nuclear Parts Sent To Taiwan In Error," *The Washington Post*, March 26, 2008. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/25/AR2008032501309.html> (Downloaded February 24, 2014)

⁷ Noah Shachtman, "After Losing Nukes, Air Base Flunks Security Tests," *WIRED*, May 30, 2008. <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2008/05/after-losing-nu/> (Downloaded February 24, 2014)

⁸ Tom Shanker, "2 Top Leaders of Air Force Pushed Out After Inquiry," *The New York Times*, June 6, 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/06/washington/05cnd-military.html?ex=1370404800&en=5481a94d0d454cd1&ei=5124&partner=permalink&expprod=permalink&_r=2& (Downloaded February 24, 2014)

⁹ Andrew Tilghman and Brian Everstine, "Two Malmstrom nuclear officers implicated in narcotics investigation," *Air Force Times*, January 9, 2014. <http://www.airforcetimes.com/article/20140109/NEWS/301090027/Two-Malmstrom-nuclear-officers-implicated-narcotics-investigation> (Downloaded February 24, 2014)