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An open letter to UC Faculty on our managing the DOE weapons labs
(a note to accompany my talk at today's "town hall meeting" at UCD)

Dear Fellow Faculty Members,

When I came to UC Davis ten years ago I believe I knew, in a distant and abstract sort of way, that I was joining a university that also managed, at least in name, two of USA's key nuclear weapons laboratories. It bothered me, to be sure, yet I was happy to be coming to this pleasant university in this pleasant little town.

Over the years I've tried to reconcile my personal beliefs with the fact that my employer designs, maintains, and manufactures weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). But I haven't figured out how to do this. And as I get older, my conflict only seems to grow. When UC builds our most heinous of weapons, or "manages" those that do, it is *we* who are creating these bombs. How exactly am I supposed to live with this?

There are a hundred rationales. *I don't work on weapons. I don't do classified research. My funding is from the NSF. I support other progressive issues. If we don't do this work, others will, and they'll do it less well. Sure we hate nuclear weapons, but it's just not relevant to our taking on this job.* Facile excuses, but they may help one get some sleep.

When you come to the recognition that *your* services help enable nuclear Armageddon, a torrent of questions come to fill the mind. So let me tell you some of the questions that our faculty have been asking. *What is required to make a bid to manage the labs? How do employees at the weapons labs benefit from their being part of UC? Can there be anything equivalent to academic freedom in the context of classified research? Should UC team with an industrial partner to manage the labs? Wouldn't it be a pain to deal with Intellectual Property (IP) were the labs not managed by UC?*

At this point you must think that I am joking, or trying to be ironic. I promise I am not. Faced with the question of whether or not the University of California should help maintain and evolve USA's nuclear arsenal, the faculty want to know *how many graduate students work at Livermore? And will the University of Texas give us stiff competition?*

I find it sad. It's as though we've contracted some kind moral myopia. How did this happen? How could we even think to focus on such minutiae in the face of so fundamental a question about our humanity and our university's societal role?

We need to come back to reality. We have more than 10,000 thermonuclear weapons in our active stockpile. UC weapons labs designed every last one of them. Many of these weapons we built ourselves, in Los Alamos. Each year, we spend more on our weapons labs than we do on instruction. Each year, we spend more on the labs than we do on research. The University of California is the eleventh largest defense contractor in the USA (some say the sixth). It is likely that we are the largest contractor for WMDs in the world.

Our two weapons labs are not scientific laboratories that dabble in in defense; it is very much the reverse. Over 80% of the spending at the labs is for weapons, and most of the rest is for other kinds of defense work. Scientific research accounts for less than 5% of the labs' budgets.

Let's try again to frame some sample questions, this time pretending to comprehend the moral gravity of the topic. How about: *how many people have died from US nuclear weapons? What is the likelihood of nuclear weapons leading to our species' extinction? What have been the social costs of our nuclear buildup? Have we been good environmental stewards in working with highly toxic materials? What has been our record in dealing with the native-American peoples who live near the Los Alamos lab? Are there other universities, elsewhere in the world, that manage chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons labs? Have we been a political force promoting next-generation nuclear weapons activities and, if so, how did we come to adopt this position? Is it ethically equivalent if I build WMDs or if I leave this work to others?*

I have been trying to understand how we could have gotten so ethically challenged that we form questions like the first set and not the second. Maybe a big part of it is that we are *professionals*. As such, we focus on our career interests, our employer's interests, and the interests of research area. We aren't supposed to think about distant social questions. We accept the status quo. We regard our national fascination with high-tech weapons, and our national proclivity to use them, from a highly abstract perspective, without quite thinking about these artifacts as *real*. We think about our work in a way that ensures that we don't actually *feel* anything at all.

I think we need to be shocked back into reality. That's why I put some grotesque images into my talk. Photographs of a couple of our UC-designed thermonuclear bombs. A man that one of our atomic bombs burned up alive, in Hiroshima. The pattern of a woman's kimono burnt into her skin, from the same attack. The mat of hair that fell from a girl's head, in the days before before she died. (Actually, I removed this last one just before my talk because the image was making me to cry.)

Some feel that this entire issue is moot, because the university doesn't *really* manage the labs, we only serve as a figurehead. Some like our playing this symbolic role. Personally, I feel ashamed.

Sincerely,

Phillip Rogaway
Professor