

# Rosanne Greco: The F-35 and nuclear capability

By [Commentary - VT Digger](#)

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*Editor's note: This commentary is by retired Air Force Col. Rosanne Greco, who spent 30 years on active duty in the Air Force, including as a delegate to four international nuclear arms control negotiations, including the Strategic Arms Reductions Talks (START). She is a former chair of the South Burlington City Council and a member of Save Our Skies VT.*

The Department of Defense's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review contained a message of enormous significance for Vermonters. It designated the F-35 as a part of its strategic nuclear bomber force. This is the first time a fighter has been so designated. That makes the F-35 completely different from the F-16 or any earlier nuclear-wired fighter. Numerous high-level Defense Department officials have elaborated on the role that the F-35 will play in regional nuclear deterrence, that is, in so-called "small" nuclear wars.

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The F-35 will carry what has been called the most dangerous nuclear weapon in America's arsenal: the B61-12 guided nuclear bomb that is custom tailored for the F-35. The Pentagon has been developing this new nuclear bomb specifically for the F-35's bomb bay since 2010. The B61-12 nuclear bomb has settings for four different sizes of nuclear blast, referred to as a "dial-a-yield" capability. Because the B61-12's "smallest" setting is only a third of a kiloton, military war planners are talking about this as a "usable" nuclear weapon. And even more dangerous, because of the F-35's stealth technology and the accuracy of its B61-12 bomb, the F-35 is being considered a first strike nuclear weapon.

Not since the worst Cold War crisis has the United States been as close to a nuclear war as we are now. This is because our current administration is ripping up nuclear arms control treaties, budgeting a trillion-and-a-half dollars for new nuclear weapons — and most frighteningly, "modernizing" most of them with smaller, more "usable" nuclear weapons while openly stating that these nuclear weapons will give us the option of conducting a first nuclear strike against non-nuclear threats.

Moreover, our current president seems not to understand nuclear weapons or the consequences of using them. In fact, he has spoken about wanting to use nuclear weapons.

Current F-35 models with their current computer system, including the ones scheduled for Burlington, do not yet have the nuclear capability. Pentagon officials estimate that the F-35 could be armed with the B61-12 nuclear bomb as early as 2020. Once this occurs all new models of the F-35 will be nuclear capable; and previously produced F-35's, including Vermont's, will be upgraded with the same nuclear capability.

Because the military is not required to release information about military capabilities and missions, it is highly unlikely that Vermonters will be told when "our" F-35s become nuclear capable. Therefore Vermonters will

likely never know ... just as Vermonters were never told the last time the Vermont Air National Guard was assigned a nuclear mission.

In the 1960s, the F-89, the fighter model then being flown by the Vermont Air Guard, was upgraded to be nuclear capable. Shortly thereafter the Vermont Air Guard was assigned a nuclear mission and actually flew from Burlington carrying nuclear weapons.

Even though the F-16s had nuclear wiring, they were never declared part of our strategic nuclear triad, as the F-35 is now. Thus the F-16 posed no strategic nuclear threat to Russia or China, and Vermont was never a nuclear target.

However, the F-35 is now part of our nuclear triad, it will carry a “usable” nuclear bomb, it’s been discussed officially as being a first strike nuclear weapon, and the Vermont Air National Guard is the first operational Guard base for the F-35. There are two huge implications for Vermont from these facts.

First, the Vermont Air Guard’s F-35s will immediately become a huge threat to our enemies and Vermont will become a nuclear target. It’s important to clarify that in nuclear targeting, it is the delivery vehicles and their bases which are targeted, not the warheads. So, it’s the bombers and the bomb bases which are the targets not the bombs.

And, second — in our name — the Vermont Air National Guard could be assigned by the president to drop a nuclear weapon on another country. The F-35 will carry two nuclear bombs, each bomb has a maximum yield of 50 kilotons. The nuclear bomb we dropped on Hiroshima was “only” 15 kilotons. It killed 146,000 people — about 90,000 died on the first day, and 56,000 people died over the next 4-6 months.

Because it is a single seat fighter, the F-35 is a far more dangerous nuclear bomber than our other two current strategic bombers, the B-52s and B-2s. They have crews; the F-35 has only one human being in control. So, one F-35 pilot, with one push of the button, could imperil the planet.

If Vermont’s F-35s are assigned a nuclear mission, then the beginning of a nuclear war could start from Vermont. However, if Vermonters say “no” to basing nuclear bombers in Vermont, then the beginning of the end of nuclear weapons could start from Vermont. Either of these outcomes may depend on the choices Vermont legislators will make in May.