

Mystery Mushrooms Over Big Nevada Test

By Thomas O'Toole

Washington Post Staff Writer

The nuclear device detonated Tuesday beneath the Nevada desert may have been a test warhead for a weapon being designed to penetrate a defensive missile system like the one being deployed in the Soviet Union.

The Atomic Energy Commission is saying almost nothing about Tuesday's underground blast, repeating only what it said at the time of the explosion, that the test was "weapons related" and of "intermediate yield," which means an explosive force equal to anywhere from 200,000 tons to 1 million tons of TNT.

Speculation Mounts

But speculation mounted yesterday that the device was a test warhead for a ballistic missile that is able to break through a missile defense and hit its target even when under attack by an anti-missile missile.

There are several ways in which a ballistic missile can penetrate an anti-missile defense.

One is by having a warhead that can maneuver and fly on its own guidance to a target different from the one the missile appears headed for.

Another takes the same "maneuverable warhead" approach one step further by utilizing a "multiple" warhead that separates into several maneuverable warheads, which fly at great speed toward the target.

Favored by McNamara

This is the "penetration technique" favored by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara and the backbone of a philosophy that says: "A good offense is a good defense."

One multiple-warhead mis-

sile already under development is the Navy's Poseidon, a solid-fueled missile designed along the lines of the underwater-launched Polaris.

To build such a weapon and make it work means development of a new kind of warhead, the first of which may have been exploded two days ago at the AEC underground test range in Nevada.

There was some speculation that the device was a test warhead for an anti-missile missile, but its size indicated that it was not such a device. Sources said that a warhead for an anti-missile missile would be very small, in the 20,000-ton range.

A relatively small warhead is used on the U.S.'s Sprint, a small anti-missile missile designed to intercept a ballistic missile at high when it is only one minute away from its target. Sprint would destroy the oncoming missile with radiation.

Only slightly bigger warheads would be used by the larger Nike-Zeus, an anti-missile missile designed to catch an oncoming ballistic weapon six or seven minutes from target.

While the U.S. still has both these missiles under development, it has not decided yet to produce and install them around the U.S.