

IN PERSON: ROBERT S. (STAN) NORRIS

A BEAN COUNTER WHO KNOWS HIS BEANS

BY DAVID C. MORRISON

"I got diverted," Robert S. (Stan) Norris, co-author of the *Nuclear Weapons Databook* series, says of the unlikely turn his career took at the start of the Reagan Administration. "I went from Plato to Cap Weinberger."

In 1976, Norris earned a doctorate in political science from New York University. He went on to pursue a conventional academic career, teaching political philosophy at Ohio's Miami University and at a branch of the university in Luxembourg. After arriving in Washington in early 1981, however, Norris couldn't land an academic job. He ended up signing on as a nuclear weapons analyst at the Center for Defense Information, a liberal think tank. Three years later, he jumped over to the Natural Resources Defense Council Inc., where he has solidified a reputation as one of Washington's top atomic "bean counters."

"I'm one of these people in the 1950s who was told to dive under the desk in the civil defense drills," the 48-year-old Norris said, explaining his decade-long nuclear detour. "I'm pretty much a product of the psychology of the Cold War, wondering what this thing was and whether we would make it."

When not walking reporters and book authors through the atomic labyrinth, Norris has helped to write two volumes of the *Databook* on the U.S. warhead production complex (Ballinger Publishing Co., 1987) and another, no less exhaustive, tome on Soviet nukes (Harper & Row Publishers Inc., 1989).

With a colleague at the council, Thomas B. Cochran, Norris also wrote the entry on atomic arms for the 1990 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which broke sufficient new ground to prompt a front-page story in *The New York Times*. "I felt a terrible responsibility," Norris recalled. "Generations of schoolchildren would be plagiarizing my article for years to come, so I really wanted to get it right."

And, for the past five years, with William M. Arkin, an analyst with Greenpeace U.S.A. and co-author of the *Databook*, Norris has penned a monthly Nuclear Notebook feature, chockablock with fun and not-so-fun facts and figures, for *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.

"They've done a great job of ferreting out information," Congressional Research Service analyst John M. Collins, a



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formidable military bean counter himself, said of Norris and the other *Databookers*. "They have uncovered things that to my knowledge have not been made available through other sources. If I could identify any fault, it would be their motivation, [which] from the very beginning has been anti-national defense. But does this influence the quality of the research? Probably not."

"I don't think I'm a terribly ideological person," Norris said. "I have strong views on some matters. But let the chips fall where they may. It would not be good to have to tailor your research findings to some position that is in conflict with them. That just can't happen."

In the September 1989 *Bulletin*, in fact, a reader complained in a letter that Norris had counted 33,000 Soviet nukes and 22,500 for the United States, when the Center for Defense Information had recently cited far lower warhead numbers for the Warsaw Pact (25,000) and much higher ones for NATO (31,000).

The center's "figures are wrong and cannot be substantiated," Norris charged in a printed reply, critiquing his former employer's methodology. "I do not think they could provide a single footnote." The center subsequently excised its interview with Norris from a television documentary it was filming.

Such disputes flare up because nuclear stockpile numbers have long been top-secret. Besides filing Freedom of Information Act requests and poring over con-

gressional hearings, Norris said, he must also rely "on a kind of a sixth sense about what sort of sounds right" in counting his beans. In any event, his estimates have withstood the test of recent revelations.

In an unprecedented disclosure, Army Gen. Colin L. Powell, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, revealed on Jan. 29 that the U.S. atomic arsenal totaled 21,000 warheads in 1990. (Norris's estimate: 20,750.) The stockpile, Powell added, would dwindle to 6,300 warheads. (Norris's projection: 6,700.) Norris's calculation in last July's *Nuclear Notebook* that the ex-Soviet arsenal now holds 27,000 nukes is universally quoted, even by Defense Secretary Dick Cheney in public remarks.

Like the U.S. arsenal, the Soviet stockpile is fated to shrink—and with it, you might think, Norris's bean-counting career. This summer, he plans to hand Westview Press Inc. a manuscript on nonsuperpower atomic arsenals for Volume 5 of the *Databook*. And, as Norris sees it, there's lots more to do.

"I have remained quite busy here tidyng up after the arms race," he said. "And then, when that's pretty much behind us, I guess I can become a historian. We've only scratched the surface in a historical way about the impact these weapons have had on our lives, and I remain ever curious to learn more. I love my job, and I have an interesting vantage point. Every day, when I come to work I learn something new."