



Star Wars Revisited

By Michelle Ciarrocca and William Hartung

Some dreams never die. On March 23, 1983, Ronald Reagan surprised the nation and the world by announcing an ambitious research program designed to render nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete." Reagan acknowledged that this "formidable technical task...may not be accomplished before the end of this century." He was right: the U.S. has spent more than \$70 billion

since that time on various missile defense programs without producing a single workable device.

Under the Clinton administration, it became U.S. policy to deploy a National Missile Defense (NMD) system "as soon as technologically feasible." President Clinton's commitment to missile defense was tempered by his pledge to base a deployment decision on four criteria: the overall costs of the program, the technical feasibility, an assessment of the ballistic missile threat facing the U.S., and the impact it would have on arms control and arms reduction efforts.

Although the NMD system was restructured to focus on

the seemingly more realistic goal of defending all 50 states from an accidental missile launch by Russia or China or from the attack of a rogue nation such as Iran, Iraq, or North Korea, technological difficulties still abound. Given a critical test failure in July 2000 and a growing chorus of criticisms, President Clinton found himself in a safe position to delay deployment of the proposed NMD system before leaving office. In September 2000 he said, "I simply cannot conclude with the information I have today that we have enough confidence in the technology, and the operational effectiveness of the entire NMD system, to move forward to deployment." Clinton added that even if missile defenses could be made to work, they would at best add a modest margin of protection from nuclear weapons. At worst, they could spark a new, multisided nuclear arms race that would increase the risks of nuclear war.

But Reagan's dream of a shield against nuclear weapons lives on. As Frances Fitzgerald writes in *Way Out There in the Blue*, her history of what was then known as the Strategic Defense Initiative: "Every time the program seemed ready to expire, or collapse of its own weight,

something would happen to bring it to life again." The latest "something" keeping the program alive is the administration of President George W. Bush.

With missile defense-booster Donald Rumsfeld by his side, on May 1 Bush delivered a speech at the National Defense University, sounding an awful lot like Reagan. Bush reiterated his campaign pledge calling for a missile defense system capable of defending the entire U.S., as well as "our friends and allies and deployed forces overseas," from ballistic missile attack. The Bush team proposes a layered approach that would combine the ground-based NMD system inherited from the Clinton administration with sea-, air-, and space-based components, but specifics remain vague. The administration promises that information on the cost, timing, and structure of the proposed system will be released after Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld unveils the results of his review of U.S. defense strategy.

In meetings with NATO defense ministers, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld claimed that a missile defense system would "dissuade and discourage potential adversaries" while enhancing deterrence. He added, "as this program progresses, we will likely deploy test assets to provide rudimentary defense to deal with emerging threats." But allies remain skeptical. German Defense Minister Rudolf Scharping has argued that "a coherent political answer to the threats" is needed, "because technological means alone are not sufficient." Secretary of State Colin Powell fared no better in his meetings with NATO foreign ministers. They offered to "continue substantive consultations" with the U.S. but did not endorse President Bush's missile defense plan.

Unconvinced of either the missile threat or the technological merits of a missile defense system, America's allies are primarily concerned that the Bush administration will abrogate the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia. In a statement distributed to the NATO ministers, Rumsfeld said, "The treaty stands in the way of a 21st-century approach to deterrence." However, a hasty decision to withdraw from the treaty could seriously jeopardize future nuclear reductions in Russia's armaments and encourage China and other nations to build up their arsenals. In the rush to deploy a missile defense system, all the risks—undermining the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, sparking a new nuclear arms race, and straining U.S. relations with its NATO allies—surface immediately, whereas the purported security benefits of missile defense deployment will not be realized for years, if at all.

Key Points

- On May 1, 2001, President Bush reiterated his campaign pledge to deploy a multitiered ballistic missile defense system as soon as possible.
- More than \$70 billion spent on missile defense projects since 1983 has produced precious little beyond cost overruns and technical failures.
- The Bush proposal to move full speed ahead with missile defense, even if it means abandoning the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, could halt progress toward nuclear arms reductions and spark a new global arms race.

Problems with Current U.S. Policy

Despite the Bush administration's determination to have a rudimentary missile defense system in place by 2004, the fact remains that none of the Pentagon's missile defense programs are up to the task, and it is *not* because the ABM Treaty is standing in the way. The annual report of the Pentagon's Director of Operational Test and Evaluation (DOT&E) outlines the daunting challenges facing U.S. missile defense programs. Assessing the ground-based NMD system, the DOT&E report warns that the system is far from ready to intercept the kinds of missiles "currently deployed by the established nuclear powers" and recommends broadening the test program to attempt to intercept real world threats that include decoys. To date, the system has failed two out of three intercept tests. A new DOT&E report claims that the one successful test used a Global Positioning System inside the mock warhead that helped guide the intercept missile to the target.

Meanwhile, the sea-based, boost-phase system, promoted by many missile defense advocates as a near-term and easy solution to the nuclear threat, is based on a missile that has yet to be designed, much less tested. The DOT&E report asserts that it is not a viable option and goes on to note that "a major upgrade to the AEGIS radar" would be required, while both the missile and kill vehicle would have to be radically redesigned. Optimistic estimates put initial deployment at 2008, with full deployment not possible before 2020.

The Space-Based Laser, intended to destroy a ballistic missile in its boost phase, is little more than a concept at this stage. Only a handful of components of the system have been tested, the actual testing facility hasn't even been built, and integrated flight experiments aren't expected to take place until 2010. According to a General Accounting Office report, the Air Force's new satellite surveillance package, called Space-Based Infrared System-Low, is "at a high risk of not delivering the system on time or at cost or with expected performance." The satellite network, which is to track incoming warheads and decoys, is a vital component of any expansive missile defense system. The Air Force plans to launch the network's 24 satellites in 2006, with the full system deployed by 2010. But this time frame means that the Air Force would begin deploying the satellites before adequate testing has been completed.

The multitiered approach favored by the Bush administration will be enormously expensive, dwarfing the Congressional Budget Office estimate of \$60 billion for the Clinton administration's more modest system. Estimates for the more ambitious Bush approach range from the Council for a Livable World's projection of at least \$120 billion to the Center on Strategic and International Studies' (CSIS) prediction of \$240 billion. In the short term, the Bush administration is planning to increase missile defense funding from the \$5.3 billion allocated for FY2001 to \$7.5 billion for FY2002. Under Bush, total missile defense spending could jump to \$10 billion or more annually. The major contractors—Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, and TRW—have already racked up long-term contracts for missile defense worth in excess of \$20 billion, and that's *before*

they reap the benefits of the new spending that will flow under President Bush's more expansive approach.

The missile threat has been greatly exaggerated, while the consequences of deploying a NMD system have been downplayed. The government's top ballistic missile analyst, Robert Walpole, has repeatedly pointed out that an attack on U.S. territory with a weapon of mass destruction has a "return address" on it, meaning the U.S. would know exactly where it came from and would launch a devastating retaliatory strike. North Korea, the supposed impetus behind U.S. missile defense efforts, is years away from developing a reliable ballistic missile that could deliver a nuclear warhead to the United States. Furthermore, Pyongyang has put its missile program on hold to pursue negotiations with Washington.

Just how big a threat missile defense could pose to U.S. security can be found in a report issued last summer by the National Intelligence Council. That report suggested that deployment of such a system would likely provoke "an unsettling series of political and military ripple effects . . . that would include a sharp buildup of strategic and medium-range nuclear missiles by China, India and Pakistan and the further spread of military technology in the Middle East."

Bush has suggested reducing the number of nuclear weapons in the U.S. arsenal to "the lowest possible number consistent with our national security" and taking these weapons off of hair-trigger alert. Bush rightly noted that, "keeping so many weapons on high alert may create unacceptable risks of accidental or unauthorized launch." But Bush also stated that "nuclear weapons still have a vital role to play in our security and that of our allies." In their more honest moments, President Bush and his advisers speak of "refashioning the balance between defense and deterrence," not replacing the cold war era "balance of terror" with a defensive shield. The seeming contradiction in the Bush view—reducing the size of the U.S. arsenal and taking forces off of high alert while provoking other nuclear powers with a massive Star Wars program—disappears if you look at the common thread uniting these proposals: nuclear unilateralism.

Spurred on by the ideological ranting of conservative think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and Frank Gaffney's Center for Security Policy, a powerful bloc within the Republican Party has increasingly come to treat negotiated arms control arrangements as obstacles to U.S. supremacy rather than as guarantors of a fragile but critical level of stability in the nuclear age. The right-wing rallying cry is "peace through strength, not peace through paper." If that means shredding two decades of international arms control agreements (most of which were negotiated by Republican presidents), then so be it.

Key Problems

- Ambitious missile defense proposal fails to take into account the reality of missile defense programs under development.
 - The costs, both monetary and political, of deploying NMD outweigh the benefits.
 - Bush's missile defense system is coupled with radical changes in the size and composition of U.S. nuclear forces and does not entail a proposal for abandoning the grim reality of mutually assured destruction (MAD).
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Toward a New Foreign Policy

While President Bush and his advisers are trying to gather international support for their dubious and vague missile defense proposal, they're squandering valuable time that could be used to promote cooperative measures for the reduction of both U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals. A series of provocative actions toward Russia—from the expansion of NATO to references to Russia as a "top proliferator" of ballistic missile technology to persistent statements about the U.S. withdrawing from the ABM Treaty—has stalled momentum toward U.S.-Russian nuclear weapons reductions.

President Bush has tied deployment of a missile defense system to deep reductions in the U.S. nuclear arsenal in an attempt to allay Russian and international opposition. Bush

has also hinted at a sort of "grand compromise" to gain Russia's approval for amending the ABM Treaty to allow for a missile defense system. The proposed package deal could include military aid, joint antimissile exercises, and arms purchases for Moscow. But the offer seems more salesmanship than substance, with no genuine attempt to ease Russia's fundamental concerns. Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin has warned that U.S. violation of the ABM Treaty would force Russia to augment its nuclear capability by mounting multiple warheads on its missiles. At the same time, Putin suggested that both the START I and START II treaties would be negated by the U.S. abrogating the ABM Treaty. The termination of these treaties

would also eliminate verification and inspection requirements and allow Russia to hide its nuclear capabilities.

Taking innovative steps to get nuclear reductions back on track should be the top priority of U.S. policymakers, and such reductions should not be tied to a U.S. missile defense system. Nuclear arms reductions between the U.S. and Russia have been stalled since the signing of the START II Treaty in 1993. The treaty, which would reduce each nation's nuclear arsenals to 3,500, has yet to be ratified by the U.S. Senate. President Putin has suggested cutting even further, to 1,000 or 1,500 nukes each, while President Bush has voiced a similar position but avoided an exact number.

Additionally, instead of cutting more than \$72 million in funds intended to help safeguard and dispose of Russian nuclear material, President Bush should be showing his commitment to nonproliferation by increasing the budget for these activities. A bipartisan commission issued a report in January calling the risk of theft of Russian nuclear materials "the most urgent unmet national security threat" facing the U.S. and urged sharp increases in spending for the Russian programs. Getting U.S.-Russian nuclear reductions back on track and supporting multilateral efforts toward nuclear abolition would also give the U.S. much greater credibility in promoting wide-ranging security discussions

between India and Pakistan aimed at capping and eventually eliminating their nascent nuclear programs.

As for North Korea, Iran, or Iraq, there are other methods of dealing with the threat of a ballistic missile attack from these nations that would be far less costly and far more effective than building a multibillion-dollar missile shield. But instead of picking up where the Clinton administration left off in talks with Pyongyang, Bush started his term by delaying further negotiations until his administration could conduct a comprehensive review of U.S. policy toward North Korea. As Spurgeon Keeny, president of the Arms Control Association, notes, Bush's actions (or lack thereof) are "widely perceived internationally as intended to preserve, and even enhance, the North Korean ballistic missile threat so that it can serve as the rationale for early deployment of a national missile defense." Initial Bush administration efforts to restart the talks with North Korea aroused skepticism when new demands were laid on Pyongyang in the area of conventional force reductions without indicating when or whether Washington would meet its original obligations under the framework agreement. If implemented as planned, the framework agreement could scale back and eventually eliminate Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs as part of an overall improvement in U.S.-North Korean economic and political relations. President Bush should fulfill America's long-overdue commitments under the nuclear framework agreement with North Korea and should continue to support South Korea's efforts at cooperation and reconciliation with North Korea.

Ultimately the U.S. and other nuclear powers should strive for a nuclear-weapons-free world by living up to their commitments, signed 30 years ago, under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) "to reduce and eventually eliminate their vast arsenals of nuclear weaponry." On May 20, 2000, at the conclusion of the sixth review of the NPT, the U.S. and 186 other countries came to a global consensus on nuclear disarmament, declaring it the "only absolute guarantee against the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons." The U.S. must lead the way toward this goal.

The continued pursuit of missile defense will have far-reaching consequences for the future of arms control and the goal of nuclear abolition. It will create a false sense of security for Americans and increase the threat of nuclear war for the world. A modest missile defense program of research, in the range of a few hundred million dollars per year focused on primarily improving the performance of a medium-range defensive shield to replace the current Patriot system, is justified as a way to limit the potential damage posed by the use (or threat of use) of medium-range missiles. But the main focus of Washington's energy and resources should be on preventive measures, which are far more effective at reducing the threat of nuclear war than any pie-in-the-sky defensive schemes.

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Key Recommendations

- Instead of pursuing a costly, unworkable missile defense program, the U.S. should pursue deep reductions in U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals without preconditions.
 - Washington should redouble its diplomatic efforts to cap—and ultimately eliminate—nascent nuclear weapons programs in North Korea, Iran and Iraq.
 - The U.S. must lead the way in reducing, and finally eliminating, the world's bloated nuclear arsenals by living up to commitments it signed 30 years ago in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.
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Sources for More Information

Organizations

Center for Defense Information
Email: info@cdi.org
Website: <http://www.cdi.org/issues/bmd/>

Coalition to Reduce Nuclear Dangers
Email: coalition@clw.org
Website: <http://www.crnd.org/>

Council for a Livable World Education Fund
Email: clw@clw.org
Website:
<http://www.clw.org/pub/clw/ef/clwef.html>

Federation of American Scientists
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Website: <http://www.fas.org/nsp/bmd/index.html>

Global Network Against Weapons & Nuclear Power in Space
Email: globalnet@mindspring.com
Website: <http://www.space4peace.org>

Global Security
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Website: <http://www.globalsecurity.org>

Union of Concerned Scientists
Email: ucs@ucsusa.org
Website: <http://www.ucsusa.org/arms/index.html>
Contacts: Lisbeth Gronlund, David Wright

World Policy Institute
Email: hartung@newschool.edu
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<http://www.worldpolicy.org/projects/arms>

Websites

Arms Control Association (publisher of *Arms Control Today*)
<http://www.armscontrol.org/>

Ballistic Missile Defense Organization
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