

Missile Defense: Can Anything Be Done?

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Ballistic Missile Defense is well on its way to become America's most expensive and least effective weapon. If present trends continue, and there was an annual award for the Dollar for Dollar Most Wasteful Government Spending Program, it would, in a fair competition, go to missile defense.

Very large cost overruns are coming to light: wasteful practices noted by the General Accounting Office, an imprudently accelerated research and development phase, and a manipulated, distorted test program that even Pentagon officials have complained about.

There is a rush to deploy a portion of the program that is not ready for deployment. ECAAR's recent study, *The Full Costs of Ballistic Missile Defense*, documents the potential military and economic costs of the program and some of the critical technical uncertainties.

The Bush Administration envisions a layered program with defensive weapons based on the ground, at sea, in the air and in space. It would take many years to fully deploy all the systems and no one can predict with certainty what the present administration and its successors will actually build. Military plans change and sometimes, rarely, weapons programs are curtailed or canceled.

The ECAAR study shows that if all systems that logically could be included in a layered program are built the full costs could total \$1.2 trillion. This includes research, development, testing, production, and operations and support for the expected lives of the systems. The study concludes that even if all the systems are built there is no assurance that they would be effective in protecting military assets or urban populations.

The idea of spending vast sums on weapons systems that have not been proven to be effective violates the acquisition procedures put into place to assure that the Pentagon does not waste taxpayers' money, and is inconsistent with the principles that govern the market place and common sense. Only in the strange world of military contracting could such practices survive.

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld has been leading the way to deploy missile defenses, whether or not technologically ready. He argues for an "evolutionary" approach to missile defense in which systems will be built and deployed before they are proven successful in operational tests, and later replaced as necessary when more effective ones are developed. Instead of the fly-before-you-buy approach adopted by his predecessors, Rumsfeld wants to buy-fly-and-retrofit. But, given the difficulties of successfully defending against small and possibly large numbers of offensive missiles, equipped with decoys and other penetrating devices, there can be no assurance that ineffective systems can be made effective after they are deployed.

The White House and the Pentagon, emboldened by control of both houses of Congress, and their success in persuading Congress to approve massive increases in defense spending, are pushing the program forward. Nevertheless, there are limitations on executive power in our system of government, as well as fiscal and physical limitations, and recently some aspects of these were brought home to the Administration with respect to missile defense in small but significant ways.

At the end of last year, the Pentagon announced it would deploy in 2004 the first 20 ground-based missiles together with up to 20 sea-based missiles. This came as no surprise to those familiar with George Bush's stated commitment to deploy missile defenses by the end of his term of office. But it did raise eyebrows among those familiar with the state of missile defense developments and the many failures in the test program. Failures have occurred even though the tests have been highly scripted, to the point where beacons have been installed on the

test attack warheads so that the defensive missiles would be sure to locate and hit them.

Several years ago, Phillip E. Coyle, the Pentagon's Director, Operational Test and Evaluation, criticized the poor results of missile defense tests. Coyle, who resigned his post, has continued to point out shortcomings in the program. Just recently, Thomas P. Christie, the present Director, Operational Test and Evaluation, has made known his own concerns about the program and the limited effectiveness of the planned initial deployment of missile defenses. In a new official report Christie's office concludes from the test results that the ground based missiles have yet to demonstrate significant operational capability, that there still remains a lack of a deployable boost vehicle, that technical limitations have forced "unrealistic engagement at relatively low altitudes," and that systems other than the ground-based one also lack operational capabilities.

In addition, Christie's report expressed concern about the potential for systems in the program to circumvent the normal acquisition process and to go into full-rate production prematurely.

In an apparent effort to avoid further embarrassing test results, the Pentagon proposed in a recent defense spending bill to simply bypass the further testing required before going into production for the initial deployment. Rumsfeld justified this decision by asserting that it is not necessary to dot every i and cross every t before deploying such an important program. The technical justification was that the initial deployment should be considered part of the development and demonstration phase.

Some members of Congress complained vigorously about this tactic and for reasons still not entirely clear the Pentagon seems to have reversed the decision. In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 18, Pentagon officials said that they did not intend to avoid the required testing. One day later, testing director Christie, appearing before the same committee, expressed doubts that the initial deployment could be completed in 2004. Christie told the committee that essential components of the ground-based system had still not been built and probably could not be tested by that time.

At least two important lessons should be drawn from these incidents. One is that the controversy over missile defense is not over, the debate continues, and there remain opportunities to influence the future course of the program.

Advocates of an accelerated missile defense program, who choose to ignore questions about costs and effectiveness, have the advantage of an administration that has made missile defense a central part of its defense planning. Nevertheless, there are a number of officials in the Pentagon and in Congress who are critical of the program, who believe it should remain a research and development program until its effectiveness can be demonstrated in operational tests.

The second lesson is that time, in one sense, is on the side of the critics because there is so much of it. The ECAAR report shows that while there may be efforts to deploy relatively small parts of the program, it will be many years before anything like full deployment occurs.

According to what can be learned about present schedules, deployment of most systems would not be completed until 2015. If those schedules are to be met missile defense expenditures must be greatly expanded in the next few years. Spending has increased under Bush, but it is not close to what will be required when systems go into full production.

Billions of dollars are being wasted in the premature acceleration and rush to deploy some of the existing half-baked systems. But those who argue for a more rational approach that takes account of the technological limitations of missile defense and considers alternative approaches to the problem of proliferations of weapons of

mass destruction, should not be unduly discouraged. There is time and an urgent necessity to continue working on the problem. There is much to do.

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