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6-7-1969

Blocking the ABM - Article for The New Republic

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BLOCKING THE ABM—

by Senator Edmund S. Muskie

The debate over deployment of the latest version of the anti-ballistic missile system has an air of unreality about it. The alphabet soup array of systems designations (ABM, ICBM, MIRV, PAR and MSR) provides an aura of mystery and suggests that only the weapons specialists are competent to make judgments on the merits of the proposal. The projected costs of the system (up to \$25 billion a year by the mid 1970's), the size and power of warheads in the system (1 megaton for the Spartan and 1 kiloton for the Sprint), and the calculations of casualties in an ICBM-ABM-ICBM exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union (over 100 million on each side) deaden the senses.

There is a danger that familiarity with the numbers and the letters of the debate will breed a fatalistic acceptance of the system, not because the Congress or the citizens of the United States want it, but because they are uncertain as to the alternatives.

The numbers and the letters are important because they tell us how far we have gone in the development of sophisticated engines of destruction. They tend to confirm our worst suspicions and fears about man being dominated by the products of his

technological genius. They are symbols of man's capacity to destroy himself and the earth on which he lives.

Violence is not new on our planet, but the complexity of systems to implement violent instincts are new. Changing techniques of weaponry are not new, but the speed of change is new. We are caught in a paradox in which long lead-times to develop and deploy weapons systems reduce the time available for us to decide whether or not we want or need the systems. Continuous obsolescence undermines our confidence in weapons systems, but fear of the unknown makes it difficult for us to say no to any ingenious proposal which offers the promise of military security.

Members of the Senate are wrestling with the question of how they should vote on the ABM authorization and appropriations amidst a constantly shifting series of arguments, claims and questions: is ABM necessary? what are its real objectives? will it work? and, what will it do to the arms race?

The Nixon Administration has shifted its arguments for an ABM system from those used to support the "thin system" proposal offered by the Johnson Administration. The Sentinel proposal called for protection against a possible Chinese attack in the 1970's, coupled with a capacity to expand into a thick system

designed to protect the United States against a Soviet attack. The Safeguard system proposal is predicated on a straight-line projection of Soviet ICBM capability which, it is claimed, will give the Soviets "superiority" by the mid 1970's.

I have grave doubts about the projections used to support the Administration's position. They are based on questionable assumptions about current Soviet activities, in which limited deployment of the Tallinn anti-aircraft missile system and the GALOSH (NIKE ZEUS type missiles) deployment around Moscow have been ~~interpreted as~~ ^{Soviet} ~~interpreted as~~ a major AEM program. They are also based on a projection of maximum capability for the Russian SS-9 missile program, a program which would have to be greatly improved to present a real threat to our Minuteman ICBM system. Finally, the emphasis on AEM has shunted aside alternative, and potentially cheaper, methods of deterring Soviet first strike threats.

The Safeguard system is being sold as a "thin system" directed at a potential Soviet threat, with secondary protection against the Chinese, but the Administration's escalating justification for the system raises real doubts as to the ultimate size of the system. In his March 14 statement, President Nixon stressed restraint in developing the SAFEGUARD program. He suggested the possibility of cutting back at a later date.

Secretary Laird and Deputy Secretary Packard have repeatedly implied a long-range goal of full deployment.

In addition, President Nixon observed in his April 18 news conference that he did not "know what (the Soviet) intentions are, but we have to base our policy on their capability." That statement, it seems to me, opens the door to a substantial expansion of the ABM system, far beyond anything projected in this year's Administration requests.

One is driven to the conclusion that the Congress and the nation are being asked to make "one easy down payment" on a monstrous defense system whose costs will dwarf today's expectations.

Coupled with questions as to why and what we are being asked to buy is a doubt as to its feasibility as an effective and convincing deterrent. The Safeguard system is extraordinarily complex, involving a combination of radar, computer, missile and nuclear warhead technology which cannot be fully tested in advance of actual use.

It is not enough to say that we developed the hydrogen bomb in spite of the doubters. That weapon did not include the support systems whose functioning is essential to the performance of the Spartan and Sprite missiles. The hydrogen bomb did not have to be designed to cope with counter-measures which will change in time.

In evaluating the need for the Safeguard -- even if one were to accept the assumptions of the Administration about the Soviet and Chinese threats -- one must not be misled by undue optimism about our technological capacity. In the event of a nuclear missile exchange, there could be no long, complicated check-list and count-down such as we use in our space shots. At this point I cannot accept the contention of some supporters that the system would be virtually fail-safe.

The final, and most important question about Safeguard is the effect of its deployment on the arms race.

That question must be examined within the context of action and reaction between the United States and Russia. Deployment of the Safeguard system, particularly when viewed against the background of MIRV (Multiple Independent Re-entry Vehicle) development, is bound to strengthen the hand of Soviet military leaders who will argue for increased capacity to meet the United States "threat" to their security. Soviet leaders are just as likely to base their policy on our capability, rather than our intentions, as is President Nixon.

Our military leaders make straight line projections on military planning, calculating maximum Soviet capacity and minimum United States capacity. The Russians make the same

projections in reverse. Unchecked, policies based on those mutual projections will inevitably result in an unending upward spiral of arms and terror. Under such circumstances neither the United States nor Russia will be in a position to restrain other countries in the arms race.

The first priority for United States policy-making should not be deployment of the Safeguard system, but renewal of the arms talks with the Soviet Union. One need not be under any illusion as to the difficulty of such talks to recognize their importance to the cause of peace or the redirection of our resources to important domestic needs.

Furthermore, the arms talks should not be complicated by a fait accompli of Congressional action on deployment of the AEM. A vote against AEM would cause problems for our negotiators. A vote for AEM would raise even greater obstacles to successful negotiations.

Modern missile systems are not simple items which can be moved like pawns in a chess game. Once initiated, they have a momentum of their own, compounded of military strategy, military-industrial-political commitments, technological fascination and uncertainty about alternative steps. Safeguard would not be comparable to divisions or task forces. It would be a ponderous program which would threaten to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The AEM debate marks a watershed in our national approach to defense policies. For the first time in many years we have an opportunity to slow down the pace of technological-military development, to give the country time to breathe and to work out -- if possible -- the problems of nuclear threats with the Soviet Union. The Administration has an opportunity to take its cue from the kind of discussion which has been going on in the Congress, under bi-partisan auspices, and to shift its attention and its efforts to the negotiating table before it is committed to an uncertain and dangerous course which appears certain to accelerate the arms race.

In the final analysis, the AEM question becomes one of determining what kind of society we want. Do we want a seething, crippled, fortress America, or do we want a rational, creative and constructive society in which our intentions are clear and our capability for peaceful pursuits are unquestioned? Safeguard threatens to produce the former; halting Safeguard deployment and concentrating on arms control promises the latter.

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