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No protection, at a huge cost

Missile defense system that Bush wants won't work; here's why

By Nelson Christensen, Joel Weisberg and Barry M. Casper

NORTHFIELD, MINN. — There is no operational national missile defense system. The program is in its infancy, and it will be many years before deployment should be considered. On the heels of an unsuccessful test, President Bush announced last week that he is ordering the deployment in two years of a primitive, insufficiently tested system. Bush is proposing to spend many billions of dollars on a system that has virtually no chance of stopping an intercontinental ballistic missile, or ICBM.

Even an effective system would just be a Maginot Line; weapons could simply go around it. Cruise missiles, airplanes, ships, trucks or suitcases are possible means of bomb delivery that a missile defense is not designed to counter. An ICBM would be the most difficult, expensive and unreliable way for a small state or group to deliver a bomb. ICBM delivery leaves no doubt about the source of the weapon; other clandestine methods provide anonymity.

Supporters of deployment have touted a few tests in which a target missile was hit by an interceptor. Those tests were rigged for success. The target missile transmitted its position to the defense system, making it easy to find and easier to intercept. This was accomplished by placing a beacon on the target. Will North Korea be so kind as to attach these beacons to its missiles? Probably not. Operational missiles will be observing radio silence.

The successful interceptions to date were baby steps in terms of a realistic simulation of a an attack and interception. They do not, in any significant way, prove that the Unites States could shoot down an ICBM.

In order for an incoming missile to be destroyed a number of basic tasks must be accomplished: Detect the launch, track the missile's path, launch an interceptor, guide the interceptor so it hits the target missile (with speeds exceeding 10,000 miles per hour). The ability to perform these tasks has not yet been demonstrated, and their full marriage into a coherent and complete missile defense system is far away.

The system that the Bush administration plans to deploy is the one that is currently the farthest along in development. It is called a "midcourse system" because it intercepts warheads near the middle of their paths, high above the atmosphere. This brings up the issue of decoys deployed simultaneously with the bomb. In the airless vacuum of space a feather's path would be identical to that of an anvil. Consequently, lightweight balloons make excellent decoys. If a country can muster the resources to construct an ICBM and a nuclear warhead, then at minimal cost and effort it could build and stack its missile with decoys that could confuse a missile defense system. Knowledgeable observers indicate that decoys are the Achilles' heel of any midcourse system.

Because Russian and Chinese intercontinental missiles are equipped with sophisticated and numerous decoys, even government officials concede that the midcourse system would probably be ineffective against even a small accidental or unauthorized launch from one of these countries.

All tests to date, up to and including this month's failure, have been totally unrealistic in their use of decoys. The decoys that have been used have been far fewer in number than expected in a real attack. Most important, the test decoys are designed to be easily differentiated from the real warhead, whereas an enemy would purposely make the decoys indistinguishable from the warheads. This is the fatal flaw of the system that will be deployed in 2004; it will be easily fooled.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld seemed to recognize these uncertainties of missile defense when he said, "The reason I think it is important to start is because you have to put something in place and get knowledge about it and experience with it." Very little will be learned from watching primitive interceptors sitting on the ground in Alaska and California.

Our country is facing difficult economic problems while it struggles with vast security concerns. The immediate deployment of this primitive, insufficiently tested system will be an expensive process that will not meaningfully increase our security. Ours is not a defeatist attitude but a scientific one; the system will not protect us.

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