The Heritage Foundation
Executive Memorandum

No. 688 July 13, 2000

PUTTING THE MISSILE DEFENSE TEST IN PERSPECTIVE

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The unsuccessful attempt of a ballistic missile interceptor to destroy a target ballistic missile tells more about the Clinton Administration's failure to manage the military's defense research programs than it does about the technical feasibility of missile defense. The July 7 test failed because of a problem with the military's standard rocket technology not with the newly designed "kill vehicle" that should have destroyed an incoming target warhead. Yet this essential fact has been lost in the stream of commentary that followed the test.

Critics assert that the test proves the United States cannot field an effective missile defense system. They are wrong; but even if they were right, the central policy embodied in the National Missile Defense Act of 1999—to field a national missile defense system as soon as technologically possible—requires the federal government to continue to develop and test a variety of systems to find the most effective and near-term alternatives. Neither the Clinton Administration nor Congress should be distracted from the task of ensuring that the United States deploys a system that can protect all Americans from these weapons of mass destruction.

What Happened. The interceptor tested on July 7 in the South Pacific had two components: a modified Minuteman booster rocket and a kill vehicle to destroy a dummy warhead launched from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. The Minuteman rocket is not new technology. It is the backbone of America's deployed land-based strategic missile forces. The kill vehicle used in this test did contain new technology for intercepting warheads in space. Other elements of the test system—such as sensors to track the target missile in flight, a communications system, a battle management system, and prototype radar—did contain new missile defense technology.

After the target missile was launched from California, it released the dummy warhead in space as planned and a balloon decoy to try to fool the interceptor, which failed to inflate. The interceptor was launched from the Kwajalein Atoll in the South Pacific 20 minutes later. Preliminary analysis of the test results indicates that the sensors, communications system, battle management system, and radar functioned properly. However, a malfunction in the Minuteman booster prevented the kill vehicle from being deployed. According to the Pentagon, the booster rocket started to tumble during flight and did not signal the kill vehicle to separate and begin its intercept routine.

This booster failure may indicate problems with engineering or quality control, but it does not dem-

Produced by the
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for International Studies

Published by
The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C.
20002–4999
(202) 546-4400
http://www.heritage.org

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at: *www.heritage.org/library/execmemo/em688.html*

onstrate problems with missile defense technology. Lt. General Ronald Kadish, Director of the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization, stated during a press conference after the launch that he considered the booster to be so reliable that it was not even on his list of things that might go wrong during the test. Thus, the key new element of the missile defense system being tested never had an opportunity to demonstrate its intercept capability.

What to Do Next. The threat to the United States posed by the proliferation of ballistic missiles is growing, and it will likely accelerate as long as America remains vulnerable to missile attack and hostile countries see an opportunity to use ballistic missiles to intimidate the world's only superpower. Despite the outcome of this test, the Pentagon must move forward quickly with the development and deployment of missile defenses for America. To that end, Congress and the executive branch should:

- **Make every effort to field missile defenses as soon as technologically possible.** The United States made a decision to deploy a national missile defense system when the President signed the National Missile Defense Act of 1999 (P.L. 106–38) into law. Deciding not to deploy such a defense is not an option. The Pentagon must continue to develop and test missile defense technologies with the goal of deploying a defense against small-scale strikes as soon as possible.

- **Urge the President to select a national missile defense deployment plan this year.** President Bill Clinton has stated that he is prepared to select a missile defense plan (or architecture) later this summer or fall. The Pentagon should recommend the system design and ask him to authorize moving forward with that plan as soon as possible.

- **Recommend that construction of a radar facility in Alaska begin next spring.** Construction of this radar is the long lead item in the deployment of a missile defense system. The Pentagon should recommend that construction begin next spring, noting that this step is necessary to meet the principal mandate of the National Missile Defense Act.

- **Recommend a sea-based element in all missile defense deployment plans.** According to news reports, the Pentagon has produced a report for Congress that recommends inclusion of a sea-based element because it is technologically feasible and would enhance a missile defense system's overall effectiveness. It also would reduce the technical risks that undermine ground-based systems.

- **Stick to the flight test schedule for the ground-based interceptor program.** The July 7 test was only the third flight test in a schedule of 19. The Pentagon should continue conducting the scheduled flight tests to refine and perfect the missile defense technology as soon as possible.

- **Tighten management and improve quality control in the missile defense program.** The failure of the interceptor to destroy the target missile was caused by a failure in the proper staging of the rocket—something the technology has been able to do for 40 years. It indicates that the Administration may not be properly managing or assuring the military's research and development programs.

Conclusion. Fielding a missile defense system against small-scale strikes is well within reach, since the hit-to-kill technology has successfully destroyed dummy warheads in flight tests for more than a decade. A single failed test should never determine whether a system will be deployed. Instead, it should be used to help the military determine which technologies are the most capable and effective in meeting America's national security requirements. Deciding otherwise, and leaving Americans defenseless against ballistic missiles, is morally reprehensible.

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