

Executive Memorandum

No. 934
May 20, 2004



Published by The Heritage Foundation

Cut and Delay Is the Wrong Policy for Missile Defense

Baker Spring

The Bush Administration is constructing missile defense systems so that by later this year, the United States will have an operational capability to defend its people against limited ballistic missile strikes. It is not a moment too soon. For more than 30 years, the U.S. has pursued a policy of vulnerability to missile attack. As a result, the nation's missile defense capabilities lag behind the ongoing expansion of the ballistic missile threat. The U.S. needs to move quickly to put in place missile defense capabilities that catch up with—and ultimately run ahead of—the threat.

Some Members of Congress, however, see the Department of Defense Authorization Bill as an opportunity to cut the missile defense program's budget and delay fielding an operational capability. To achieve these goals, they plan to offer amendments to the bill, which is currently before both the House of Representatives and the Senate (H.R. 4200 and S. 2400). As these amendments surface in Congress, Members should remind themselves of their moral obligation to protect American citizens against all forms of attack. Indeed, Congress passed a law in 1999 (Public Law 106-38) that established the policy "to deploy as soon as is technologically possible an effective National Missile Defense system that is capable of defending the

territory of the United States against limited ballistic missile attack."

Spurious Contentions

Congressional critics of missile defense are relying on two spurious contentions to support their arguments for delaying the achievement of an operational defense and for cutting the missile defense budget:

- Critics are relying on two spurious contentions—inadequate testing and excessive costs—to delay missile defense.
- The initial deployment's primary purpose is to test the technologies.
- The missile defense budget is only 3 percent of the defense budget.

Spurious Contention #1: Missile defense systems are not being adequately tested. The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) put forward this contention in a "technical" report released earlier this month. Consistent with their

recommendations, Senator Jack Reed (D-RI) may offer an amendment that would impose traditional testing standards on the missile defense system.

This contention is wrong for two reasons. First, the primary purpose of the missile defense system that the Bush Administration is putting in place is to test the technologies. The operational capability will be derived from this test bed. If the govern-

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/abm/missiledefense/em934.fgm

Produced by the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute
for International Studies.

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

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting
the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to
aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

ment wanted to build a testing capability for missile defense without an operational capability, it would build the system that the Administration is building today. The operational capability is inherent in the test bed.

This unique feature of missile defense led the Bush Administration to develop it using a new approach called spiral development. The Reed amendment would undermine the overall program and—paradoxically—could even reduce the testing capability called for in his amendment.

Second, the U.S. has no missile defense in place now. Therefore, obtaining an operational capability is critical because the nation has no other way to defend against ballistic missile attack. The UCS report is a veiled attempt to change policy—not merely recommendations for correcting technical problems. This is evident because the purported technical study fails to include recommendations for overcoming the described technical shortcomings and for building a more effective missile defense system. The report uses technical arguments only to support the policy argument that the U.S. is better off remaining vulnerable to missile attack. The Congress has rejected this policy argument in the past and should do so again.

Spurious Contention #2: The Department of Defense is spending too much on missile defense. This contention is wrong for the simple reason that the missile defense budget is roughly \$10 billion, while the Bush Administration's request for the Defense Authorization Bill is roughly \$422 billion. Thus, missile defense is less than 3 percent of the requested defense budget. Nevertheless, Senator Ben Nelson (D-NE) may offer an amendment to cut funding for the construction of additional missile defense interceptors. Other amendments to cut funding for missile defense will probably be offered during consideration of the Department of Defense Authorization Bill. With the U.S. missile defense program lagging behind the threat, the program deserves full funding.

Reordering Priorities

This is not to say that the Bush Administration's missile defense program is perfect. For example, the Kinetic Energy Interceptor (KEI) program—

which, over the next eight years, will build a surface-based interceptor for countering ballistic missiles in the boost phase—appears to be focused primarily on building a new high-velocity interceptor. The better approach would be to put more of that money into developing lighter and smaller kill vehicles that are more compatible with existing land-based and sea-based boosters, allow an interceptor to carry multiple kill vehicles, and could easily be fashioned into space-based interceptors. The third capability is particularly important because space is the best place to deploy missile defense interceptors.

Second, the Missile Defense Agency could support a program to adapt the Navy's Standard Missile 2 to the missile defense mission. These changes could actually accelerate the operational capabilities of missile defense, but they should not be used as excuses to cut the overall missile defense budget. This reordering of priorities is particularly important in the missile defense budget after fiscal year 2005.

Conclusion

In accordance with the law, the Bush Administration is working to test and field missile defenses for countering limited attacks as soon as possible. With an operational capability only months away, Congress should not change either the law or existing policy, but instead should fully fund the Bush Administration's missile defense program.

The American people want to be protected against attack. The federal government's primary responsibility is to provide them with that protection, including protection against ballistic missile attack. Congress recognized this in 1999 when it enacted the National Missile Defense Act. America is still vulnerable to ballistic missiles, and the threats have advanced. Now is not the time for Congress to reverse its commitment to the American people to field a missile defense system for their protection "as soon as is technologically possible."

—Baker Spring is F. M. Kirby Research Fellow in National Security Policy in the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies at The Heritage Foundation.