

Heritage Lectures

No. 1133
Delivered July 22, 2009



Published by The Heritage Foundation

September 10, 2009

Alaska's Strategic Role in the Defense of the United States and the Vital Role of Missile Defense

The Honorable Mark Begich

EDWIN J. FEULNER: We at The Heritage Foundation have devoted countless hours over the years to helping Americans understand the importance of a missile defense system, from extensive research over the decades to our *33 Minutes* documentary—33 minutes being the length of time it is estimated between the launch from a rogue state and the time an oncoming missile could hit the United States. We have provided the leadership for America on this issue with arguments, facts, and insights so that all Members of Congress and the American people can follow the arguments.

In fact, it wasn't until President Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative speech in 1983 that the concept became a household term. Since 2002, the U.S. has been vigorously developing, testing, and deploying missile defense technology.

Over the past six years, the military has run 34 hit-to-kill interceptor tests, almost all of them successful. Now, in the face of a belligerent North Korea and an increasingly isolated Iran, funding for the missile defense initiative has been slated to be cut by \$1.4 billion. While the world is changing, America and our allies still need to be defended from these growing missile threats.

Today, I'm very pleased to welcome a special guest to contribute to this important national conversation. Senator Mark Begich was elected to the U.S. Senate from the state of Alaska last November. Before that, having been born and raised in Anchorage, he served on the City Council of Anchorage; he served on numerous

Talking Points

- Alaska has nearly 10,000 troops deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq, making it sixth among all states and territories in volume of personnel serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- America's missile defense system overall is 90 percent accurate because of robust testing and the issues that the military has been homing in on involving better technology.
- Something is happening, and it's in our best interest to do something about it from an economic standpoint, but also from a long-term energy standpoint. In a crisis moment, the result is likely to be bad decisions.
- The whole issue of energy independence is critical if we are to have more flexibility in our national defense strategies and in our world strategies when it comes to dealing with international affairs.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/BallisticMissileDefense/hl1133.cfm

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Center for Foreign Policy Studies
of the
Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
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state committees and commissions; and he served most recently before his Senate service as mayor of Anchorage, which is Alaska's biggest city. He has been on the Board of Regents of the university.

He knows the challenges facing Alaska very well. More important, he serves on very significant committees: Commerce, Science and Transportation, Veterans, and—most important for today's discussion, not only for Alaska, but for the entire United States—the Senate Armed Services committee.

We are particularly pleased he could join us today because, as many of you know, right now, at this very moment on the Senate floor, the Defense Authorization bill is being debated.

—Edwin J. Feulner, Ph.D., is President of The Heritage Foundation.

THE HONORABLE MARK BEGICH: I sit as a Democrat from Alaska on the Armed Services Committee. It's the first time anyone from Alaska has been on that committee since 1968. It's a very interesting time, and Alaska is a very different state. I was born and raised there, and I know.

In my own caucus, first, they wonder why I'm here today talking to your group. They wondered, "Are you sure you have the right building?" I said, "Absolutely." But several other Democrats were actually very supportive of me coming over.

I'm a Democrat that has a little different view. I come to the Senate with a pro-defense, pro-gun, pro-development, pro-privacy viewpoint. Alaskans are very libertarian in that area of privacy. We're very strong on defense. We just had a vote, as a matter of fact, on the Thune amendment, which was about concealed-carry laws for guns.

It was interesting because when the bill first came out, about two or three months ago, I was presiding. Listening to Senator Thune talk about this new piece of legislation, I thought, I like that. So as he was finishing, I turned to the one of the pages. I said, "Have him come up here." He came up, and I said, "I want to cosponsor that legislation."

And this week, when he was preparing to present it, he says, "I have a bipartisan support on this legislation." It was like 22 Republicans and me, so I felt

I was carrying an incredible load on my back and on my shoulders, but I felt good. We just took the vote. It failed by just two votes. He had to get 60, and he got 58 in the final call. I forget the exact number of Democrats, but there were about 15. A lot of them are freshmen, new Democrats, and we come from a different perspective.

In a lot of ways, it's not surprising to my Alaskan voters that I would be here today. I never turn down any group to speak in front of. I don't care if it's the Alaska Independence Party who wants to secede from the United States to the Alaska Center for the Environment to Gay Pride: You name it, I go, because what people get from me is pretty straight talk, and I like to hear what people's views are. It helps me develop who I am as a person.

The Northern Perspective on National Defense

Today I want to discuss national defense issues from a perspective you may not have heard often: the Northern Perspective. Those of us from Alaska truly view things a little differently.

Anchorage is the largest city in Alaska; it's actually 43 percent of the state's population. On top of that, we're an international city. We can touch, within nine hours from Alaska, 90 percent of the industrialized world by air. We do business with Japan, Korea, China, Russia. Probably about every four or five weeks I would do interviews with international press corps that would come to Anchorage and talk about the strategic importance of Alaska, and especially Anchorage.

Just to give you one other data point, Anchorage is the second or third—it goes back and forth—largest cargo hauler in the world. We move more cargo than almost everywhere else, except a couple of cities, in this world. So if you're shipping anything west of the Mississippi internationally, more than likely it's coming through Anchorage. UPS as well as FedEx's international headquarters are in our city.

I say that because also, from a military perspective, they understand that strategic importance. When you think back to when Alaska was set up and originally purchased in 1867, the U.S. Army helped administer it, and then the next group about

10 years later was the Navy and the U.S. Revenue Service. We ended having the Coast Guard as one of our biggest components.

As time progressed and the gold rush occurred and Alaska continued to move forward, we saw—and it was General Billy Mitchell that understood—the air strategic location of Alaska back in 1935 when air was just becoming more aggressively part of the equation. His famous quote was, “Alaska is the most strategic place in the world from a military standpoint.”

As you can imagine, with World War II and the buildup of Alaska’s vital role, the nation’s defense grew dramatically. The Alaska Highway was constructed by the military and military equipment. I don’t know if anyone’s ever subjected themselves to driving the Alaska Highway; this was a road that the military constructed in record time. The idea was to move goods into Alaska for a strategic location. It was built by the Army.

Also, we had a unique group of individuals. They were Alaskan people, Eskimos, Alaska Territorial Guard, who were really our eyes and ears on the shores of Alaska for the United States. A very important group. There’s not many left now.

As a matter of fact, I’m battling right now in the Department of Defense budget to get a little clause taken care of. These are individuals, about 26 of them, who served this country for more than 20 years, and the Army will not pay them a pension. But they get Veterans Administration benefits. It’s a small group that is 86 years old. They actually paid them for a short period of time; then they cut them off and told them they might have to repay it.

I said, “What are you talking about? These individuals served our country. They were on the front lines. They volunteered to serve, and then they continued to serve in the military in other capacities for another 20-plus years.” So we are aggressively working on that.

Iraq and Afghanistan

Alaska, again, as we move into where we are today, is very vital. We have 30,000 active duty members from all branches, from all our bases, from Elmendorf, Eielson, and Clear Air Force

bases, as well as Forts Richardson, Wainwright, and Greely, which are our Army bases. These bases are home to the latest and greatest military equipment. The big debate yesterday was F-22s. We have F-22s. We have a whole complement of them, and we’re very proud of the fact that we have them. We also have the C-17s. If you’ve ever been in one of those, it’s an incredible aircraft, one that is making a big difference.

We also have a Stryker brigade, the Army’s model deployable brigade combat team, to fight the counterinsurgency, which is critical. Our Stryker brigade already has seen activity in Iraq, and another Alaska airborne brigade combat team has recently been deployed to Afghanistan. I’m sure you’ve seen the recent accounts of PFC Bowe Bergdahl, who is from Fort Richardson, originally from Idaho but stationed at Fort Richardson.

Alaska also is the home to 75,000 veterans, the highest per capita in the nation, 11 percent of our population. I want to give you this background so you see the backdrop of what I deal with as a person who sits on the Armed Services Committee and is involved heavily in the issues that surround the military in Alaska, but also our country.

Five us recently came back from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Tom Carper (D–DE), Mark Udall (D–CO), Kay Hagan (D–NC), and Jeanne Shaheen (D–NH) went on this trip, along with myself, to really understand what’s going on in Afghanistan and Pakistan. We got there just as things started to move. We left one of the cities, and it was bombed the next day or so. We were there in the heightened area. But it was important to understand, because I wanted to know what makes sense, what do we need to do, especially as we deal with what affects our troops.

Alaska has nearly 10,000 troops deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq. When you think of our state, a lot of people say it’s just a small state up north. But if you think of the volume, we’re the sixth among all states and territories in volume of personnel serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The trip was an eye-opener, to be very frank with you. It gave me a sense of where we need to be and how the counterinsurgency is working; but also, spending time in Pakistan was very important. We

were there right when the shift was starting to occur, where the military in Pakistan was finally realizing they have to move their forces over to the border with Afghanistan to make some impact; otherwise they're going to be overrun.

So for us, it's important; for this world, I think it's important. We want a stable government in Pakistan. We want to make sure that the Taliban does not take control of their government in any form or any way. We were there right when this was all starting to move and shift, so when you talk about being at the right place at the right time, this may have been yes on one day but no on the next, because you weren't sure what was going to happen next.

Also, as we finished there, North Korea was getting active. We were travelling and then starting to get reports as we went with regard to North Korea and what's going on there.

Alaska and Missile Defense

As you know, in Fort Greely, we're very fortunate to have the ground missile defense system. Greely currently has capacity for 26 missile interceptors, maintained by members of the Alaskan National Guard. The interceptors can be launched to intercept an incoming enemy missile.

It's hard to describe this to people who are not aware of it. It's a bullet hitting a bullet. That's the technology. It's an incredible technology that has developed over the last several years.

One of the arguments early on was, it doesn't work. Well, that's why you're testing it. I could never understand that argument. As soon as you got it up and running, they said it doesn't work. No, you're testing it, you're improving it, you're advancing the technology. If you ask the military today, as we have done in the Armed Services Committee, about the missile defense system overall, it's 90 percent accuracy. That's not too bad, and it's because of robust testing and the issues that the military has been homing in on involving better technology.

As you know, the President had proposed cuts to not only the ground base, but also some other programs within the missile defense system. The budget that's in front of us today has, on the ground

missile defense system, the continuation to a certain extent of that program, but it also still has a termination of the Multi Kill Vehicle as well as the Airborne Laser Tail 2.

This is mainly because in the eyes of the committee, as well as the individuals that were developing the systems, we were jumping to production, and they want to continue to focus on the experimental stage, which seems rational. But we have to be very careful that people don't just throw out the whole missile defense system because they think that's old technology and that's not where we are today. That's an incorrect view.

The GMD system, as you know, is in Alaska and California, and it's supported by an array of radars deployed all around the world. It's an American-based defense system to protect our nation. It's the only operational missile defense system. The decision to reduce the total number of deployed operational interceptors from 44 to 30 was the President's proposal. The investment strategy may have changed, but the threat clearly hasn't.

Consider the quantity of missile testing that North Korea has done since this budget proposal was presented by the Administration. North Korea has launched 16 ballistic missiles and conducted one underground test, as well as a multi-stage long-range missile. The latest launch on July 4 means that 70 percent of the missile tests that they have done since 1988 have occurred since April of this year.

Maybe it's a coincidence, but I'm not sure I like that coincidence. As they do these tests, they're perfecting their technology, but they're also showing their wares. First, they want to improve their technology. Second, they want other countries to see what they have, because they're in the business of selling too. That's what they do. That's part of their hard cash economy.

So it's not just about North Korea and what they might do; it's what North Korea will do and who they will sell it to. We have to keep that all in perspective.

Robust Testing and the Long-Term View

Fort Greely is the home of most of our Ground-Based Midcourse Defense Interceptors. Alaska soon

will be the home of the Sea-Based X-Band Radar, which is currently going through some testing and will be located in Adak.

Along with that, the Kodiak, Alaska, launch is important because it's also a launch facility for testing to replicate enemy threats and launches. This is in Alaska. The good news on this front is that Secretary of Defense Robert Gates made it very clear that he wants robust testing, and, again, we're very supportive of that. We think that's important. If you don't have robust testing, you cannot perfect the technology.

In the weeks since the announcement to reduce the number of Alaska-based interceptors by the Administration, the Missile Defense Agency has had to do some fast analysis. Part of the problem is deteriorating conditions for what's called Missile Field 1.

In Alaska, you have Missile Field 1; then you have completed Missile Field 3, and then Missile Field 2 that we're now doing. What they quickly found as we were going through this discussion in our committee was that Missile Field 1, which was originally six silos for the interceptors, was designed to be a test facility and was put together very quickly. Because of that, it has leaking antifreeze, has mold contamination, outdated copper pipes that are freezing and thawing, and a variety of other things which, as you can imagine, for a missile silo are not good to have.

We learned this through the discussion of the committee, which was not public until we brought it out. And what we found was, even under the robust plan as they claim they had in the Administration, what was about to happen was that they were going to have less capacity because the first six silos are inadequate and are deteriorating. It was important for us to make that point. Also, the plan for Missile Field 2 is to stop the construction, close it down, seal it up, move on.

We debate a lot about cost overruns, expensive things we're doing. The problem with that is, why would you take all the work that's being done there, shift it out of there, all the people and equipment, and then, now that we've got to replace the six that are deteriorating, bring them all back and do the next six or seven?

What we argued for in committee, and were successful in Missile Field 2, was to make sure that the next seven silos be finished. So, as they figure out how to decommission the first six, there's seven silos to move forward until they finish their long-term planning in regards to the Defense Review as well as the Ballistic Missile Defense Review. Our view was, why would you make a decision when you don't have a plan yet of what you want to do with ballistic missile defense systems? The argument was received in a positive way by the committee. It worked, and they were unanimous in the final outcome.

Also, we made sure to ensure that Congress has all the information available at the time of the budget submission in the future, which is critical because we did not have it this time. I know how the system works; I used to be a manager as a mayor, and when you control the information, you deliver as you see fit. In this situation, we've made it very clear in Section 243 of the Defense Authorizing bill to provide future-year defense plans annually that provide a schedule and plans for testing, sustainment, development, and deployment of GMD.

What we were working on when we were doing this budget was a 2010 kind of budget only. With missile defense, it's a long-term view you have to have. You have to see the whole picture, and we were only being delivered this short-term picture.

When we started asking questions about 2011, 2012, 2013, that's when we started to learn about Field 1 and what was happening with that. They had no plan yet to deal with that, so we had to help develop it through the process. This will make it clear that they must work through this process with us and show us the long-term picture.

Energy Independence and National Security

Finally, the whole issue of energy independence is critical if we are to have more flexibility in our national defense strategies and in our world strategies when it comes to international affairs. What I'm finding is that oil and gas issues are not necessarily high on the list of a lot of folks in the Democratic caucus. Now, I said that six months ago; today, it's a little different. We have more Democratic Senators

coming from Western states now: Montana, the Dakotas, Colorado, New Mexico, Alaska—what I call the Rocky Mountain Western states.

Why is that important? Because we're states that understand natural resource development. We understand oil and gas; we understand mineral development. It's all part of what we do in our states as part of our economy. So we bring a different voice to the table that hasn't been there in a long time. We bring it from an economic standpoint, but we also bring it from a national defense standpoint: how important it is to be energy independent as far and as much as we can.

The issues around oil and gas, as we move to an energy bill for this country, will be aggressively fought. Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA) has really carried the water in the Democratic caucus on oil and gas issues, but now she has reinforcements; the new folks are here, and we're laying out what we think is important. The energy bill as well as the climate change bill will be an important two pieces of legislation as we move forward in the next four or five months, and I think what you'll see is a more moderate wing of the Democratic Party within the caucus laying out our positions on how these industries need to be part of the equation.

Again, that's a little different, and I think it's going to be exciting. As I said, energy is one piece, but climate change is another. We'll see how that all plays out as time goes on, but I can tell you, from Alaska's perspective, we are ground zero. Anyone wants to talk about climate change, I can spend hours on that. But I also understand the impor-

tance of industry, because we see how you balance the oil and gas industry against the environment, at the same time recognizing how we have to deal with climate change.

We can argue all we want about what causes it; the fact is that something is happening, and it's in our best interest to do something about it from an economic standpoint, but also from an energy long-term standpoint. What you don't ever want to get into is a crisis moment, because when crisis moments happen—whether it's around energy, climate change, you pick the issue—the likelihood is that you will have bad decisions come out of it because you're in a crisis.

You're making decisions for the moment, not the long term, so it's in our best interest as a country to figure out how we nail this package together the right way. As I've told my colleagues, if you can get Alaskans to agree to a climate change bill, it's probably going to be a good bill because that means it's protected our industry.

I love sitting around with other Senators when they talk about coal, because coal-state guys are adamant. They're militant on energy issues. I say, "Oh, yeah, that's great. If I combine all of your coal, every state in this country, including Hawaii, we exceed the amount of coal deposits in the country in Alaska. We have half-plus the coal deposits of this country. We understand nonrenewable and renewable energy, but we also understand the impacts of climate change."

So it's going to be a very exciting and very challenging time.