Another strategic deception initiative

By GORDON MITCHELL

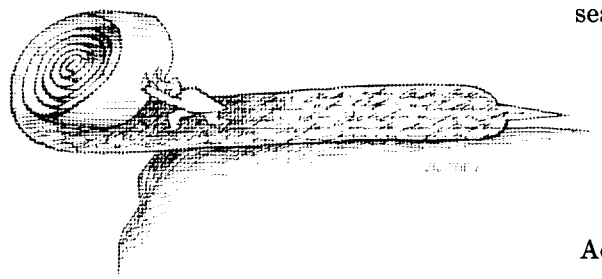
After 14 years of secrecy and misinformation on missile defense research, Congress and the public deserve openness.

Like a gullible and forgetful diner who keeps ordering the mystery soup after a long series of unsavory surprises, Congress has once again thrown billions of dollars into a secretive missile defense program that has become better known for staging tricks than hitting targets.

While Congress has kept technical projects such as airline safety and cancer research on a short leash with relatively good results, it has been content to blindly fund missile defense research without insisting on strict scientific accountability. This blank-check approach, coupled with a lack of systematic oversight, has spun a legacy of failure, fraud, and deception in missile defense research and practice. For example:

■ Key physicists quit Ronald Reagan's X-ray laser project to protest rigged experiments and deliberate distortions of test results. Yet the false data from these experiments eventually seeped into classified congressional briefings and convinced lawmakers to sink billions of dollars into a program that never reached the level of a legitimate scientific enterprise. Indeed, from the start many of the nation's best university-based scientists refused to work on Star Wars projects because the science was suspect.

■ The U.S. Army eventually admitted that it overstated the performance of the Patriot missile defense system in the Persian Gulf War. The Patriot wizardry witnessed on CNN was more illusion than fact. Ground damage per Scud launch actually increased after Patriot was deployed, and missile defense advocates are still hard pressed to produce convincing evidence that Patriot killed even a single Scud.



■ The General Accounting Office (GAO) found that reports issued by the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization on four kinetic-kill programs—KITE, ERIS, LEAP, and Brilliant Pebbles—were systematically distorted. Reports from January 1990 to March 1992, said the GAO, were inaccurate and misleading.

■ Deception in missile defense efforts continues. But the end of the Cold War has opened up two-way traffic on the deception superhighway. Defense officials are now using questionable data to argue that missile defenses won't work too well. In 1994, officials at the Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) Organization secretly contracted with a private think tank to produce "evidence" supporting the argument that the army's Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system will be ineffective enough to be allowed under the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. This evidence was used to brief major U.S. and Russian arms control officials.

These are only a few examples of the consistent and disturbing pattern of secrecy and deception in American missile defense research. This pattern includes deliberate distortion of scientific evidence, strategic blockage of scientific channels of communication, and intimidation of dissent, both in internal and in public communities.

Achieving an effective missile

defense capability may be a laudable goal, but historical experience suggests that it won't happen if the missile defense bureaucracy is allowed to continue operating in a culture of secrecy. If missile defense work remains cut off from the best physics minds in the country, and largely exempt from meaningful congressional oversight, there is every reason to expect that new projects will careen out of control and their handlers will fabricate evidence to keep them afloat, as happened with Edward Teller's far-flung X-ray laser campaign in the early 1980s.

A key part of Ronald Reagan's March 23, 1983, "Star Wars" address was its commitment to open and democratic decision-making on the issue of missile defense. All citizens should have a say in security matters, said Reagan, and on the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), public input was even more crucial. That statement of commitment to open dialogue stoked the patriotic appeal of Reagan's message and permitted the president to link SDI with democracy. But nearly a decade and a half later, Reagan's promise of a democratic SDI has yet to be realized.

Congress's task today should be clear: to give substantive meaning to Reagan's promise of democratic decision-making on missile defense. Such a move would parallel the Energy Department's effort to adopt a more open posture with the end of the Cold War. It would also streamline basic physical research by tossing off the cumbersome shackles of secrecy and classification, and it would reinvigorate scientific peer review, the lifeblood of scientific invention. If missile defense is what U.S. citizens want, certain measures should be taken:

The burden of proof should be shifted to missile defense advocates. The long track record of strategic deception in the program justifies the presumption that missile defenses won't work until proven otherwise. If Congress and the public took a more skeptical approach, they might steer missile defense researchers and program planners toward improving the quality of their technical claims, upgrading the quality of their research, and focusing on realistic, achievable objectives.

BMD classification criteria should be updated to fit the post–Cold War milieu. As the Energy Department recently noted, "The philosophy of declassification and release of information changes with the passage of time." At the height of the Cold War, the nature of the arms race with the Soviet Union made it credible for missile defense advocates to claim that public release of information on missile defense could constitute a "grave, immediate, and irreparable harm" to national security. Today, that argument is out of touch with the current threat environment. Given the lack of grave or immediate ballistic missile threat to the United States, it is appropriate that BMD research data should be presumptively public, not born secret.

Congress should be formally integrated into the scientific peer review process. Each missile defense test should be subject to strict scrutiny by independent and qualified scientific peer reviewers. When tests involve sensitive information that should not be made public, Congress should take the initiative to recruit qualified public reviewers with security clearances. If it were more routinely involved, Congress would have better information with which to make funding decisions, peer review would be made a routine aspect of missile defense research, and research accountability would be improved.

Public involvement should be invited. President Reagan's call for an open and robust debate on missile defense has even more relevance today than it did a decade ago. A multi-billion-dollar decision in a country where millions are struggling to survive carries enormous political and moral overtones, just as the prospect of human annihilation added profound depth to missile defense debates during the Cold War. Now that the threat environment has changed, open and rational public discussion can no longer be labeled as a presumptive threat to national security.

A more open missile defense policy would be salutary, but it is not likely to come easily. Vested interests are too deeply dug in—they've been digging the trenches, after all, for 14 years.

Responsible members of Congress could do the right thing by bucking vested interests and insisting on strict oversight and open public debate on missile defense. Only openness and accountability will redress the legacy of strategic deception spun by missile defense advocates. ■

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