Scarecrow missile defense

While gung-ho over a multibillion-dollar missile shield, the Bush administration seems to realize that it doesn’t work. Gordon R. Mitchell says that false security is worse than none at all.

So far the Bush administration’s missile defense plan has been short on specifics and heavy on hype. However, under questioning from curious allies, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld floated a few details during NATO meetings last month in Brussels.

One scheme under consideration calls for a crash effort to deploy a bare-bones battery of ground-based interceptors in Alaska by 2004. This hurry up defense makes some wonder whether Bush’s anti-missile shield is really an anti-Democrat shield in disguise, designed primarily to win votes for the GOP in the next presidential election.

Politics aside, missile defense’s diehard proponents really think that throwing together a jury-rigged system as fast as possible is militarily sound. Rumsfeld put it this way in Brussels: “As this program progresses, we will deploy test assets to provide rudimentary defenses to deal with emerging threats.”

Translation: The Bush administration wants to deploy missile defenses even before they have been proved to work.

What is the military logic behind such a peculiar strategy? Rumsfeld explains that when it comes to missile defense systems, “they need not be 100 percent perfect” to have a deterrent effect on future adversaries.

Here, leaksy shields are thought to work like scarecrows, frightening away enemies hell-bent on destroying the United States. This makes about as much sense as expecting a delicate burlap to deter from entering your home by a sign reading: “Beware: premises protected by an untested and unreliable anti-theft system.”

When confronted with such conundrums, Bush’s missile defense pitchmas ters resort to a common sense rejoinder: “Any defense is better than nothing.”

However, recent disclosures from U.S. House Committee on Government Reform provide compelling reasons to question even this simple-sounding appeal.

In a June 12 letter to top congressional leaders, committee member Rep. John Tierney, D-Mass., revealed that for months the Pentagon squelched an internal report that “highlights severe deficiencies” in the National Missile Defense testing program.

Phillip Coyle, former director of Operational Test and Evaluation at the Pentagon, wrote the report last August as part of the National Missile Defense Deployment Readiness Review. Tierney’s committee moved to include a copy of the report in the official record of hearings held on Sept. 8, 2000, where Coyle testified as a witness.

After four formal follow-up requests and over seven months later, Congress still had not received a copy of the report.

Finally, the Pentagon handed it over on May 31, 2001, but there was a catch. A cover letter from DOD lawyer Stewart Aly said the Pentagon “has not approved the release of this report to the general public” and that the document “should not be disclosed” to persons other than those “who have an official need to see it.” This gag order was particularly suspicious because Coyle’s report contained no classified information.

It is not hard to imagine why defense officials would want to suppress the report, which found serious problems with the NMD command and control system. In simulated tests, the system mistakenly identified a radar signal as an incoming missile. The system then launched interceptors at these “phantom tracks” after manual override attempts failed. This malfunction was “particularly frustrating” and made operators “anxious” because “there was no tool that could definitively warn operators when a phantom track appeared.”

According to Tierney, this finding constitutes a sober warning to missile defense advocates seeking to rush deployment of immature systems: “One can imagine the potential hazards that could arise in future deployment scenarios if the United States launches multiple interceptors against missiles that do not exist. One immediate danger in these types of situations is that adversaries may interpret these launches as a hostile first strike and respond accordingly.”

The United States could inadvertently sow the seeds of its own destruction by recklessly pursuing a poorly tested missile defense system prone to malfunction. Potential adversaries such as China and Russia often express concerns about missile defense’s offensive capabilities. Such concerns could turn into a recipe for devastating nuclear exchanges in a world where accidental launches of U.S. missile defense interceptors are perceived as acts of aggression.

This warning comes not from a partisan critic, but from an independent assessment office within the Department of Defense. With each measure of information control, the Pentagon deploys to cover up this finding, the implication of Coyle’s report becomes more credible: Scarecrow missile defense could end up being much worse than no defense at all.