

Lessons of the Past, Recommendations for the Future

**Testimony of
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**United States House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs**

April 30, 2008

The past twenty-five years have been disappointing ones for anti-ballistic missile programs. Advocates have consistently appeared before Congressional committees warning of urgent threats and promising a technological solution with rapid progress, improved capability and assured defense. The threats have not appeared, indeed, they have greatly diminished. This is fortunate. The anti-missile programs have been consistently behind schedule, over budget and under achieving.

Lessons Learned

This was predictable. In fact, it was predicted before this Committee in a series of hearings in 1991 and 1992, the last time prior to these hearings we conclude today that Congress undertook a comprehensive review of the threats, cost and benefits of anti-missile weapon systems. I was privileged to help staff those hearings.

Experts from the then-General Accounting Office testified before this committee in May 1991 on the programs of the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization (SDIO). These experts reported on the waste resulting from “the persistence of the administration and SDIO in making plans and starting project on the basis of unrealistic and overly optimistic funding requests and schedules.”¹ A GAO report detailed the money lost from “this optimistic planning” including:

- \$1 billion for the free electron laser
- \$1 billion for the BSTS satellite system
- \$720 million for the space-based chemical laser
- \$700 million for the neutral particle beam
- \$600 million for the STARLAB target tracking experiment
- \$360 million for the airborne optical adjunct aircraft

¹ *Activities of the House Committee on Government Operations, One Hundred Second Congress, 1991-1992. Report 102-1086, p. 173.*

Another GAO study requested by the Committee found that officials of the Strategic Defense Initiative program gave exaggerated and misleading claims of success. The report detailed six incorrect statements in four separate tests during the preceding 2 years, including:

- The “Brilliant Pebbles” tests were not “90 percent successful,” as claimed. Nor did they represent increasingly sophisticated tests.
- The ERIS interceptor did not discriminate between its target and decoys, as claimed. Discrimination remains a major unsolved problem.
- The test of the HEDI interceptor did not validate the design, as claimed. Parts of the missile broke into pieces, ripping off gauges and forcing costly redesign.
- The LEAP test was not a success, as claimed, failing to achieve critical altitude and accuracy requirements.²

Nonetheless, advocates for the programs argued that the growing threat justified rushing new, untested systems into deployment.

Keith Payne, president of the National Institute for Public Policy and later assistant secretary of defense for forces and policy, 2002-2003, warned this committee in October 1991:

“Within the decade, the continental United States could be in the range of ballistic missiles of several Third World nations...When the ballistic missile threats of the late 1990s and the early 21st Century are considered, initiating deployments of GPALS [the Global Protection Against Limited Strikes system, a scaled-down version of the original SDI system] is not only reasonable, but essential for future U.S. allied and Soviet security.”³

Other expert witnesses told the Committee that there was not an urgent threat. Steven Hildreth of the Congressional Research Service said, “No new, additional ICBM threat from third countries to the United States is foreseen over the next ten years or so.” John Pike, then director of the space policy program at the Federation of American Scientists, said, “The prospects that an anti-missile shield might be needed in this century are so remote that there is no reason, other than political expediency, for proceeding soon with deployment of such a system.”⁴

The advocates were wrong; the independent analysts were right. The threat predicted did not appear and is still unlikely to appear in the near-term. Informed by the Committee’s hearings on anti-missile programs, the Congress, in the Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 1993, revised the Missile Defense Act to eliminate the specific goals of deploying a limited missile defense system in the United States by 1996. The goal of

² Ibid., p. 177. GAO Report NSIAD-92-282.

³ Ibid., pp. 175-176.

⁴ Ibid., p. 175

seeking modification to the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile [ABM] Treaty was also repealed. These were sound judgments that withstood the test of time.

Similarly, in 1996 the Joint Requirements Oversight Councils, headed by Admiral William Owens, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, recommended that:

“The JROC believes that with the current and projected ballistic missile threat, which shows Russia and China as the only countries able to field a threat against the US homeland, the funding level for NMD should be no more than \$500 million per year and TMD [theater missile defense] should be no more than \$2.3 billion per year through the FYDP. These funding levels will allow us to continue to field critical TMD/NMD systems to meet the projected threats and, at the same time, save dollars that can be given back to the Services to be used for critical recapitalization programs.”

Lessons Lost

The Joint Chiefs’ common sense approach was correct then and is still sound today. Officials in the Bush administration choose to ignore this advice and the lessons of the past. Officials believed that breaking out of the ABM Treaty, tripling budgets and committing to deploying a system would soon provide a protective shield for the United States. They were wrong.

Steven Hadley, now National Security Advisor, wrote in 2000 that, “the U.S. NMD program is already well behind and likely to lose the race against the threat—if the race has not already been lost.” He argued that North Korea, Iran and Iraq could test an ICBM capable of carrying a nuclear warhead between 2005-2010. He pushed for a crash program to deploy anti-missile systems “to counter these threats before 2005 (or more likely 2007 or 2008), when a more mature capability could be developed.” He believed a “quick fix” could be deployed immediately of Aegis ships with an upgrade of the Standard Missile interceptor that would “provide a capability to intercept threatening missiles early in their flight (in the “post-boost” or “mid-course” phases).”⁵

Hadley’s proposal mirrored the 1995-96 recommendations of a Heritage Foundation panel chaired by Henry Cooper that concluded:

“For an investment of \$2-3 billion, 650 defensive interceptors on 22 AEGIS cruisers could be at sea by 2001, achieving a limited global missile defense capability for the U.S. and for American forces and allies overseas...[T]hese highly mobile platforms could defend Americans in all 50 states from a limited long-range missile strike, as well as defend American troops and allies overseas.”⁶

⁵ Hadley, Stephen J. “A Call to Deploy.” *Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2000, 23:3 pp. 95–108.

⁶ *Defending America: Ending America’s Vulnerability*, An Update by the Missile Defense Study Team (“Team B”), The Heritage Foundation, March 15, 1996, “Introduction,” available at: www.heritage.org/Research/MissileDefense/BG1074.cfm

This was and still is a fantasy.

Anti-missile programs are now free from any treaty restraints, flush with cash, and exempt from the normal defense program checks and balances. Instead of soaring performance, we have a record unblemished by success. The administration has been forced to simplify its demonstration events and has resorted to fielding systems that have never been operationally tested. It is a placebo strategy that gives the troops and the nation the illusion of defense.

A New Approach

The officers and leaders of the anti-missile programs are hard-working patriots. But we have given them a Sisyphean task. They are rolling money up the hill, but the programs keep rolling back down. This strategy is unacceptable. It is time to change the mission, time to restructure the program. The Congress and the next administration should consider improving the programs to give the nation a better chance to field capable weapon systems against the near-term threats.

Dissolve the National Missile Defense Agency. The agency, under a variety of names and directors, has proven a deeply flawed development and procurement vehicle. The best chance of restoring balance to the programs is to devolve the various elements back to the services from whence they came. The services are in the best position to weigh the costs and benefits of the systems against other military needs.

Restore Normal Test and Procurement Procedures. All weapon systems, including anti-missile systems, must be rigorously tested under battlefield conditions before they are given to the troops or deployed in protection of the nation. The current deployment strategy of deployment without realistic tests risks commanders committing troops to battle believing they have protection when they do not, or committing the nation to a course of action believing there are defense options when there are not.

Produce an Integrated, Objective Threat Assessment. The threat from ballistic missiles should be evaluated in its entirety and in the context of all threats to the United States. Efforts to cherry-pick intelligence to support a particular point of view or to commit funding on speculation or threat exaggeration must be rebuffed.

Commission an Independent Technological Assessment. The Congress should request an independent organization review the progress and prospects of the various proposed anti-missile technologies. A 1987 report by the American Physical Society helped refocus the SDI program with its detailed assessment that the feasibility of directed energy weapons would not be known for at least two decades. A similar study by the APS on current systems could greatly inform Congressional oversight.

Restore Fiscal Discipline. Pending these recommended reviews, the budgets for anti-missile systems should be concentrated on deploying capable systems against the short- and medium-range threats confronting American troops and allies. Funding for defenses

against long-range threats should focus on research and development. No funding should be allocated to systems that have not proven their operational capability. Contractors should not be rewarded for failure.

Congress should not be guided by the mistaken belief that we have, or soon could have, technology capable of protecting us from long-range missiles. Nor should standards be relaxed and deployments rushed based on exaggerated threat estimates. Research on effective anti-missile systems should continue, and deployment of tested systems can play a role in the defense of the nation and our troops, but it will likely remain the weakest and last line of defense.

Attachment:

“The Incredibly Shrinking Ballistic Missile Threat,” *Foreign Policy*, May/June 2008