Midgetman Missile Plans Generate Political Debate

A new ICBM has been designed for use as a strategic reserve, although the Pentagon may not intend to use it that way

BEGINNING in 1992, according to present Air Force plans, hundreds of military personnel will climb into truck cabs every day, drive a few miles, stop, listen to music or television, drive a few miles more, and then stop, in unceasing repetition, as part of a novel effort to keep the Soviet Union at bay. Situated behind each cab will be a new, highly accurate intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), and the purpose of its periodic movement will be to protect it from a preemptive nuclear attack.

Unlike the two-man teams in fixed silos, the drivers of these trucks will play no active role in the launch of a retaliatory U.S. attack. The instructions will come instead from mobile command posts, also shuttling here and there on government land. Hence, the truck cabs are not protected as well as the missile itself against radiation and blast, and the drivers will probably perish in the early stages of a Soviet attack.

The Air Force believes that such an attack will never occur, however, because the trucks will be designed to roam over 28,000 square miles (an area larger than the state of West Virginia), and a barrage of that area would use up virtually *every* Soviet land- and sea-based missile. Like good poker players, nuclear strategists never want to play all of their cards at once, and an attack that leaves no reserves is considered unthinkable.

The price for the peace of mind that such a system could provide will be high in comparison with existing land-based strategic missiles: roughly $50 billion (in 1982 dollars), or more than double the cost of the MX, a controversial multiple-warheaded missile that has been the focus of debate for more than a decade. It is fairly cheap, however, when compared with the cost of America's sea-based deterrent, the Poseidon and Trident submarines, which serve roughly the same purpose.

The Air Force has asked Congress to authorize full-scale development of the missile—popularly known as the Midgetman—and its mobile truck launchers this year, for a down payment of $1.4 billion. But not many tears will be shed at the Pentagon if the legislators say no. Of the eight U.S. strategic weapons systems presently under development, the Midgetman is clearly the military's least favorite. To many of its supporters there, the Midgetman serves one primary function: it is the only politically feasible means to obtain more MX.

On Capitol Hill, in contrast, support for the Midgetman is widespread, making it perhaps the only modern strategic weapons system to be shoved figuratively down the Pentagon's throat. As Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger bluntly acknowledged last fall, "the Midgetman is a missile that is designed by Congress . . . and we are working on it because that's our direction. . . . This is the direction that we have been told to go." An intense battle over the program, pitting various factions of the Administration as well as key legislators against each other, is expected in coming months.

Major General Aloysius Casey. *"Accuracy has a lot going for it."*

The story behind this unusual weapons system begins at the Air Force Ballistic Missile Office (BMO) in San Bernardino, California, where consideration was first given in the early 1970's to a replacement for the aging Minuteman II missile force. Although common wisdom has it that the military seeks only missiles with multiple warheads, some officials at BMO and the Pentagon saw a continuing need for a single-warhead weapon such as the Minuteman II.

As Brigadier General Charles May, Jr., the Air Force deputy director for operational requirements, explains, "if you fire a missile that's got ten warheads, you're going to have to land all ten of those warheads. Now, you may not in certain circumstances want to do that. Your target may be up against a populated area, your target may be up against the [edge] of a friendly country. So it would not be from the targeter's point of view an appropriate weapon. Just like a machine gun, it's not always the appropriate weapon to set on automatic. You have to have the capability also to fire one round at a time, and a single-warhead missile gives you that capability. A limited nuclear response capability is [also] something that the single-warhead missile can do."

Of course, as a much more cost-effective weapon, the multiple-warhead MX attracted the bulk of the Pentagon's attention and support throughout the 1970's, despite increasing concerns on Capitol Hill and elsewhere that deployment of such an accurate missile might be strategically destabilizing unless it was capable of surviving a preemptive attack. Only when a congressional impasse developed over basing for the MX in 1983 did BMO's single-warhead missile spring into the public eye. A presidential panel, formed to break the logjam, consulted with Congress and devised a compromise plan to deploy a smaller number of MX in vulnerable silos but add a small, second missile that would be deployed in such a manner that it was invulnerable to any reasonable Soviet attack.

"The only way we got the MX, the only way we restored life to the MX program was to couple it with the small missile as a more sensible way to go in the long run with ICBM's," says the panel's chairman, former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft. Congressional moderates "were willing to swallow the MX in order to get the assurance from the Defense Department that we were going in the right direction."

One of the principal benefits of the new Midgetman missile, according to the Scowcroft panel report, is that it would provide a secure strategic reserve force, which could potentially be fired hours or perhaps days after a preliminary exchange. This will in turn reduce the pressure to protect U.S. land-based missiles by launching them early in a superpower crisis, even before Soviet warheads have detonated on U.S. soil (see box). A second major benefit is that single-warhead missiles are relatively low-value targets, as they require the expenditure of at least one attacking warhead and leave the enemy without the net gain by which the

A Worrisome Shift in Nuclear Strategy

To a large extent, the debate over the Midgetman missile system turns on the nature of existing and planned U.S. nuclear attack strategy, which remains one of the country's most closely guarded secrets. Specifically, support for the Midgetman, which is mobile and has one warhead, draws much of its strength from concern that the Reagan Administration has already adopted or might soon adopt a so-called launch-on-warning or preemptive nuclear attack strategy as the principal means of guaranteeing the survival of its land-based nuclear forces.

Under this scenario, U.S. missiles would be fired merely on the warning or expectation of a Soviet attack; otherwise, any missiles left in vulnerable silos would risk destruction. One concern is that the mere existence of such a policy will cause the Soviets also to expect an attack and thus make a nuclear conflict more likely; another is simply that strategic warning might somehow be incorrect.

Officially, Administration officials say that these concerns are ill-founded, because the United States intends only to retaliate after a confirmed Soviet attack. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, for example, declared last August in a letter to Senator William Proxmire (D–WI) that "we are not utilizing combinations of weapons and supporting [command, control, and communications] systems that foster a 'hair-trigger' or preemptive first-strike environment by either design or of necessity." Similarly, Donald Latham, the assistant secretary of defense for command, control, communications, and intelligence, testified before Congress last spring that "on a policy basis, our policy is not one of launch on warning, absolutely not. . . . That is a very dangerous type of policy, and it is not part of our deterrent posture."

Advocates of the Midgetman point to a number of statements by military officials and analysts that provide at least indirect evidence to the contrary, however. Last September, for example, General Robert Herres, commander in chief of the North American Aerospace Defense Command, told the House Committee on Government Operations that "we, in the military, would like to provide the National Command Authority with the flexibility to be able to ride out at least some portion of a nuclear attack if that should be necessary." Unfortunately, he added, this is impossible without "a lot more survivability for some of your systems. . . . [We] have been able to keep up with the capability to launch on warning, but to go beyond that takes quite a bit of investment."

Similarly, General Bennie Davis, a former commander in chief of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), was asked at a closed session of the Senate Armed Services Committee in 1983 if there was "any doubt we are moving to a prompter response in terms of retaliation than we were, say, 3 or 4 years ago?" The reply was "No." His inquisitor, Senator Sam Nunn (D–GA) went on to ask if Davis would "prefer to be in a position where if we decided to, we could ride out an attack rather than retaliating while under attack?" Davis's reply was "[yes,] all other things being equal, and prudently, certainly, but as a practical matter we have been unable to attain that."

Bruce Blair, a former Minuteman launch control officer who presently works at the Brookings Institution, makes what is perhaps the most direct public statement about a launch-on-warning strategy in his 1985 book, *Strategic Command and Control*. Blair, who had prepared a highly classified report on the subject for the congressional Office of Technology Assessment, writes that "at present, we are operationally geared for launch on warning, a reflection of the low confidence we have in our ability to absorb the brunt of an attack before retaliating. . . . Strategic organizations actually expect to receive retaliatory authorization within minutes after initial detection of missile launches. That expectation is so deeply ingrained that the nuclear decision process has been reduced to a drill-like enactment of a prepared script, a brief emergency telecommunications conference whose purpose is to get a decision from the national command authorities before incoming weapons arrive."

Although many experts worry that a strategy of launch on warning is dangerously destabilizing, not everyone agrees. Robert Everett, the president of the MITRE Corporation, a major military research center, believes, for example, that the prospect of a U.S. first strike or launch on warning helps keep the Soviet Union on its toes. "The enemy does not know we might not strike first or launch from under [attack] given sufficient provocation and therefore he must be careful about provocation and must worry about and spend money on survival," Everett recently told the chairman of a Defense Science Board panel on the Midgetman missile, John Deutch, in a letter. "I am opposed to limiting the options of our descendants faced with the unpredictable future and also opposed to giving our enemies a free ride."

A number of military officials disapprove of this policy, however, including General Richard Ellis, another former SAC commander. In congressional testimony several years ago, he termed it "destabilizing." Similarly, T. K. Jones, a former deputy under secretary of defense for strategic and theater nuclear forces, has remarked that "we are really worse off" if both sides adopt such a strategy. At a hearing last fall, Nunn remarked that "we have had . . . testimony over and over again that if we move to [launch on warning] as a policy, if that becomes our basic policy as opposed to one possible option . . . then we have indeed moved to a destabilizing position."

Yet Nunn and Senator William Cohen (R–ME), a strong Midgetman advocate, complain that the United States is indeed moving toward such a position. Cohen, who sits on both the Armed Services and Intelligence committees, says that he has heard this from military officials. "They don't call it launch on warning; they call it prompt retaliation, prompt launch," Cohen says. "But any way you look at it there has been much more discussion of it. You will not find this in any of their writings or their public statements, but my assessment is that there is no intention whatsoever of absorbing a first strike" before launching a retaliatory strike.

A March report on Midgetman by the Defense Science Board avoids any direct reference to current U.S. strategy, but emphasizes that Soviet missile accuracy is likely to improve dramatically during the 1990's, placing silo-based missiles increasingly at risk and the United States under increasing "pressure to launch its ICBM force—before there [are] any nuclear detonations on U.S. soil." The solution, according to the report, is to obtain "a high degree of [missile] survivability," which the Midgetman is designed to provide. ■ **R.J.S.**

Midgetman launchers. *This prototype, constructed by Boeing Aerospace, was designed to move at 30 miles per hour over dirt roads. One of two competing models, it is also hardened to resist overpressures of 30 psi caused by a nuclear blast.*

outcome of a nuclear conflict is commonly judged.

Congress swiftly bought this argument and created a powerful lever to ensure Pentagon compliance: It enacted a constraint on the deployment of the MX that could be lifted only when the Midgetman program had passed certain milestones, including a decision this year to proceed with full-scale development. "The suspicion was that we would drag our feet and stretch it out," says Major General Aloysius Casey, the BMO commander. Now, most observers feel that the program's directors, to their credit, have worked assiduously to meet the congressional demands, with the vigorous support of a handful of Air Force officials in Washington. But the present design of the missile does not conform exactly to what all of the proponents had in mind. And hostility to it remains so strong in some quarters that Scowcroft rates the likelihood of its ultimate production as only 50%.

No longer is the missile apparently considered a replacement for the Minuteman II. "I know of no current plans to phase the Minuteman II out," says Brigadier General Edward Barry, Jr., vice commander of BMO and program director for Midgetman. Instead, the Midgetman force of roughly 500 warheads will be added to the Pentagon's present total of 10,174.

Nor is the missile viewed strictly as a weapon to be held in reserve, as an element of assured retaliation against targets remaining after an initial nuclear exchange. Specifically, each missile has been designed with a so-called "prompt hard target kill" capability, meaning that it can readily destroy enemy command posts and missile silos in the early stages of a conflict. "If it were the only single-warhead missile, and the national command authority were to direct some sort of a limited [nuclear] response, it could very well be used as a first-use weapon," says General May.

The missiles get their "hard target kill" capability from highly accurate guidance mechanisms, similar to those used on the MX. Since the successful operation of the mechanisms depends on precise knowledge of the missiles' launch points, the Air Force will conduct surveys of the government reservations where the trucks will be deployed and set up coordinate markers. When the drivers approach these markers, they will stop, feed the coordinates into the guidance system, and either park for a time or continue immediately on their way.

The provision of this lethality, in combination with sufficient missile range to reach virtually every "hard" target in the Soviet Union, will contribute significantly to the program's total costs, a circumstance that has created a minor controversy. Henry Rowen, a professor of public management at Stanford University who served on a panel of the Defense Science Board on the Midgetman program, recently wrote that the government "has given too much weight to having ICBM's with a prompt, hard target kill capability in the context of a Soviet strike from the blue." He suggests that consideration be given to "relaxing this condition" and to the potential contribution that sea-based forces can make to an attack on "relevant Soviet military targets in a realistic set of contingencies." Rowen, a longtime adviser to the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency, adds that "such consideration might not support spending upwards of $50 billion on a small number of additional ICBM [warheads]." His views are shared by a handful of congressmen.

Others, such as House Armed Services Committee chairman Les Aspin (D–WI), disagree, on the grounds that the deployment of additional hard-target killers keeps the pressure on the Soviet Union to make political concessions in Geneva and elsewhere. General Casey says that it is simply nonsensical to build an ICBM that lacks this capability. "Even if it were on a post- or trans-attack mission, it seems to me that accuracy has a lot going for it. For a hard target, it allows us to get in one shot. For a soft target, it's much more effective. And of course our whole history has been to tighten up on accuracy. I think it's fundamental."

Finally, the missile will soon be modified so that it can carry so-called "penetration aids" composed of metal chaff and warhead decoys to confuse a potential Soviet ballistic missile defense, which presumably would be unnecessary if the missile were used as a strategic reserve. Last year, for example, the Air Force told the House Armed Services Committee that "it is not clear that the post-attack mission of the [Midgetman] dictates penetration aids as a hard requirement" because a missile defense probably would not survive the initial nuclear exchange. "If I use your hypothetical of a strategic reserve force," General Barry says, "you may be right. By the time the reserves are called up, there is nothing left to defend against it."

Policymakers at the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill increasingly believe that either the United States or the Soviet Union will abrogate the treaty limiting missile defense systems over the next few decades, however, which would raise the specter of a more robust, survivable defensive threat. As a result, there is presently little dispute about the Midgetman modification, which will increase the missile's weight by 25%, and its cost by an undetermined amount.

Although some congressmen and arms control experts are concerned by this apparent shift in the Midgetman's likely strategic role, they still support the program. "Finally, the Air Force has come up with a land-based submarine," says one congressional aide, meaning that the Midgetman contributes to deterrence by ensuring adequate U.S. retaliation against attack, just as strategic submarines do. Like many others in the community of strategic analysts in Washington, he supports the Midgetman on the grounds that the creation of such a capability complicates a Soviet attack and serves as a hedge against the presumably remote possibility that submarines might one day be vulnerable to a preemptive strike. ■

R. JEFFREY SMITH

First of three articles. Next: the controversy over the number of Midgetman warheads.