

The questions are nearly all about money and politics. Ironically, a new consensus might emerge because the debate is so obviously deadlocked.

# The ICBM Problem Rolls On

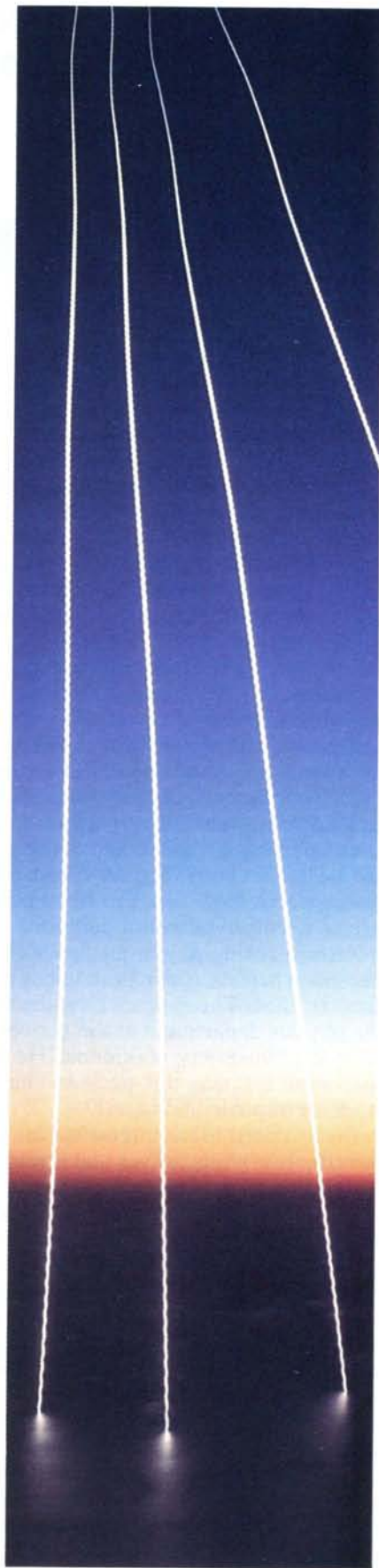
**F**OR a decade, no US arms debate has been complete without a scrap over ICBMs. Ronald Reagan, who entered the White House through the "window of vulnerability," provoked controversy with his missile ideas. Lawmakers vigorously promoted counterplans.

The actual objective—deployment of land-based missiles in ways less vulnerable to a sudden, devastating Soviet attack—fell into a black hole while Washington policymakers deadlocked over whose missile scheme provided the more perfect answer.

Now, the outlook for ensuring the viability of the overexposed US ICBM force may be improving for the most unexpected of reasons. In a sudden turnabout, exhausted missile partisans on all sides have begun to concede, in effect, that their own plans can't really work.

The Air Force and its backers have admitted that it is politically impossible to get the full force of 100 multiwarhead Peacekeeper missiles they sought; USAF will deploy no

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Unarmed LGM-118A Peacekeeper Mk. 21 reentry vehicles plummet to a Pacific target area. USAF wanted 100 of the ICBMs, but the force was capped at fifty.



more than half that number. Supporters of the rival, single-warhead Midgetman ICBM have confessed that it is not feasible—again, for political reasons—to field their missile anytime soon.

The retreat from entrenched positions increased prospects for eventual compromise on the missile issue. Experts claimed a new political coalition might then provide sustained backing for a two-missile deal proposed by President Bush. If so, the Pentagon will at last be able to attend to one of its oldest problems.

What the President finally decided to propose, after spending months reviewing strategic and domestic political issues of extraordinary complexity, was a missile scheme to:

- Provide mobility for fifty LGM-118A Peacekeepers, fitted with 500 superaccurate warheads, that already are on alert in fixed silos in the Midwest. In a few years, the weapons would be based on trains garrisoned at USAF bases.

- Forgo production of a second batch of fifty Peacekeepers.

- Resuscitate the MGM-134A Small ICBM or "Midgetman" missile and increase research funding for its truck-like, road-mobile launcher.

- "Sequence" the deployment of the two ICBMs—Peacekeeper first, Midgetman later.

Even the President's staunch supporters warned that the verdict won't be in for some time. They noted that on Capitol Hill, House and Senate negotiators spent the better part of September locked in bitter debate over whether to go along with all aspects of it.

Though the Senate had adopted the Bush scheme without change, a shaky, bipartisan, dual-missile coalition in the House collapsed. In the House, the Administration's rail-garrison Peacekeeper budget request was slashed, and the Midgetman request was zeroed out.

### "A Threat That Does Not Exist"

Even before the two sides reached a final resolution of the argument, however, it had become clear that the Administration must be prepared to weather months, if not years, of political battles before either weapon goes into operation.



Technicians work on a full-scale model of the single-warhead Midgetman Small ICBM. President Bush has pushed back deployment of the Midgetman to 1997.

Starts and stops were virtually certain, and there was no assurance of success.

The problem that the President's proposal was designed to remedy—nuclear vulnerability—certainly hasn't disappeared. That is true even though the debate about vulnerability has been raging for so long that some, such as former Under Secretary of Defense Fred Iklé, now wonder whether it really matters.

The push for mobile ICBMs, maintains Democratic Rep. Ron Dellums of California, is "an effort to respond to a threat that does not exist. . . . We have a leg of survivable mobile missiles. It is our [strategic-missile-firing] submarines."

But President Bush and his advisors did not accept this line of reasoning. They focused on a problem, remote but not unthinkable, that Pentagon analysts said the Chief Executive could face in a future crisis with Russia.

It was this: US ICBMs still form the backbone of deterrence. Currently, the land-based leg of the strategic nuclear triad consists of 450 single-warhead Minuteman II, 500 triple-warhead Minuteman III, and fifty ten-warhead Peacekeepers, which went into full operation last year. All are deployed in fixed silos.

But ever since the late 1970s, when fearsome new Soviet SS-17, SS-18, and SS-19 missiles began to exhibit unprecedented power and accuracy in test launches, the US has worried about the Soviets' presumed ability to blast most of America's silos without using more than a third of their missile warheads.

The American President—so the theory went—would be left to retaliate with bombers and strategic submarines, weapons ill-suited to a swift, discriminated, nuclear counterattack.

If anything, the vulnerability problem has grown worse since then, in part because the Kremlin has deployed a new, more accurate version of the monster, ten-warhead SS-18. One recent study, conducted jointly by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and The Johns Hopkins University's Foreign Policy Institute, claims that no more than five percent of US ICBMs could now ride out a full-scale Soviet attack.



In the report's words: "The ability of [the ICBM force] to carry out fully its deterrent function—retaliation in the wake of a Soviet first strike—is today clearly in doubt."

### **Fixed ICBMs at Risk**

One of the strongest voices of warning has been that of Rep. Les Aspin, the moderate Wisconsin Democrat who chairs the House Armed Services Committee. He recently issued a report whose title, "Strategic 'Surprise Attack' Thinkable," left no doubt about the drift of his concerns.

Aspin says the threat to fixed US ICBMs is not likely to vanish under terms of a START agreement, even one that obliges the Kremlin to cut in half its premier force of 308 SS-18s weapons.

"What about the future?" he asks. "Accuracy improvements on other Soviet missiles, [ten-warhead] SS-24s and [single-warhead] SS-25s, are likely to be enough to allow them to target US silos. In fact, the missile accuracy may already be there. Suddenly, the Soviets would have 3,000 warheads, more than enough to shoot at 1,000 American missiles in their silos."

It sounds grim, but the view held by President Bush and his advisors was that the US land-based missile force isn't done for just yet. His conclusion was that, with a package of Peacekeeper and Midgetman weapons, the US could regain some survivability in the force and acquire additional counterforce power.

One who expressed agreement was Gen. Larry Welch, the Air Force Chief of Staff. In his estimation, the mobile Peacekeeper and Midgetman provide "a superb operational combination of capabilities."

Critics, however, contended that the Air Force might be placed in a situation analogous to that of driving a Cadillac to the poorhouse. The Bush plan was expensive, due to inclusion of the costly Midgetman program. What's more, others noted, there won't be all that many missiles, and most won't go operational for a decade.

In light of these shortcomings, why did President Bush decide to take the course that he did? The explanation, defense analysts agree, is

that only a two-missile plan held out hope of political approval, inasmuch as neither Peacekeeper nor Midgetman enjoyed enough support to survive on its own.

Representative Aspin summarized the basic dilemma this way: "The central reality is that we have never had a problem coming up with technical solutions to the ICBM vulnerability problem. The real problem has been coming up with solutions that are politically acceptable" to enough lawmakers.

### **Relocating Peacekeeper**

It was the recrafting of the Peacekeeper element of the strategic missile program that posed the greatest problems and controversy for the Administration and Congress. The Air Force and Pentagon have long viewed this as the top ICBM priority.

Deploying a full complement of 100 weapons equipped with 1,000 accurate and powerful warheads, proponents said, was of paramount importance. Now, all have conceded that this idea is dead.

The Administration turned thumbs down on all plans to produce the second batch of fifty missiles to match the number of Peacekeepers developed and deployed since 1986.

From the outset, the Administration frowned on the Air Force's plan to keep half the 100 missiles in silos while the rest were made mobile. The White House then decided to pull the existing fifty weapons from silos for use on the rail-garrison trains.

One explanation was that it made no sense to leave such valuable missiles in vulnerable silos. The strategic argument was not the only factor. Powerful Democratic lawmakers, and some Republicans, had demanded a cap on the number of Peacekeepers as the price for their support of the compromise missile package.

What finally emerged was a plan to put two Peacekeepers aboard each of twenty-five special trains that would be parked on USAF bases. In times of international crisis, they would be dispersed on the nation's rail lines to prevent an adversary from targeting them with blockbuster ICBMs.

The baseline Peacekeeper train consists of seven cars: one engine,

one launch-control car, one maintenance car, two missile-launch cars, and two security cars. Each train would have some boxcars to provide camouflage. The first train would be ready in 1992.

The trains would be maintained on 100 percent alert while in garrison, with at least two launch-control cars in operation at all times. On command, Peacekeeper trains would disperse over the US rail network, becoming "lost" on 120,000 miles of track.

The plan has its weaknesses. Representative Aspin worries that the Pentagon has given little thought to the potential political and security problems posed by local protesters and saboteurs. Moreover, Peacekeeper trains would be under the direction of civilian workers, raising the danger that their locations could be revealed.

The major problem with the rail-garrison plan was the speed—or lack of it—with which the trains could deploy from their bases. Using the current plan of twenty-five rail-garrison trains at a minimum of seven bases, the Air Force reports that the trains can be dispersed widely enough within six hours to require Moscow to expend its entire force of more than 3,000 SS-18 warheads in order to conduct a successful strike.

The problem, said many critics, was that Washington might not have that much warning, or might fail to act on it even if it came. Their point was that Peacekeeper survivability, being dependent on human decisions, could never be assured.

### **Is Midgetman the Answer?**

Such was not the case with a proposed force of small, highly mobile Midgetman ICBMs. With their deployment in truck-like launchers, the weapons could be scattered widely on tactical warning of attack in only about thirty minutes.

The smaller weapon thus promised such flexibility in location and operations that an opponent would be required to expend excessively large barrages of high-value ICBMs in order to do a substantial amount of damage.

Aspin's analysis: Peacekeepers on trains "would require strategic warning—that is, at least several hours of notice—to flush out to safe-



ty on the rails. Therein lies the case for Midgetman. Midgetman is a system that does not rely on strategic warning for survivability."

The Midgetman program had generally been portrayed as a force of 500 one-warhead missiles on 500 hard mobile launchers. The current 37,000-pound missile has the volume to accommodate not only a warhead but penetration aids also.

The hard mobile launcher would consist of a manned tractor and an unmanned missile launcher possessing off-road capability. It would have the ability to park away from roads in a hardened position separated from the tractor. Command and control could be performed from remote sites.

Plans calling for initial deployment at Malmstrom AFB, Mont., include 150 to 200 hard mobile launchers. The next deployment of 150 to 200 hard mobile launchers would come at F. E. Warren AFB, Wyo. An additional 100 to 200 hard mobile launchers would be located at Ellsworth AFB, S. D.

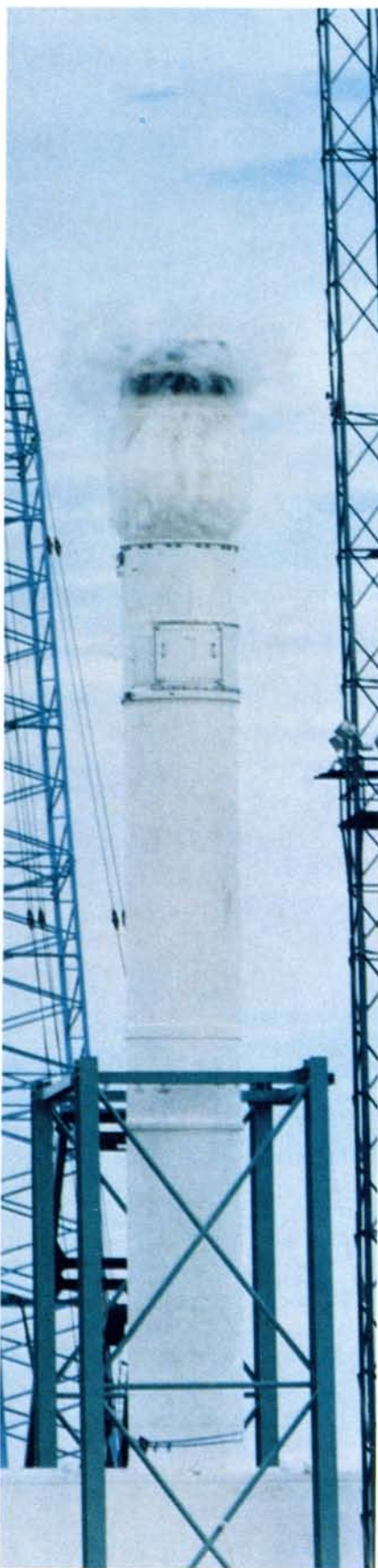
In his reconsideration of the Midgetman program, President Bush also extracted concessions from proponents of the system. For one thing, Bush left the ultimate size of the force deliberately vague. Numbers have ranged anywhere from 100 to 500 missiles, with 300 considered to be a likely complement.

It was the proposed timing of Midgetman production and deployment, however, that underwent the greatest change. Initial operational capability, once planned to occur at more or less the same time as rail-garrison Peacekeeper, slipped four years. Advocates now grudgingly accept that first deployment won't take place until 1997, with full operations after 2000.

Politics was one reason for the rescheduling. Peacekeeper supporters on Capitol Hill, Republicans and some Democrats, insisted that deployment of the mammoth missile be put first in the queue, or they would not back Midgetman.

### Phased Funding

A more pressing reason was money. With the bill for a host of major weapons programs coming due in the first part of the 1990s, and defense budgets leveling off or declin-



*In July 1989, a simulated Peacekeeper was launched from a full-scale model of a Missile Launch Car. Peacekeeper in rail garrison is the first step in the current ICBM plan.*

ing, President Bush and his advisors concluded the Pentagon couldn't afford full deployment of two missiles simultaneously.

As a result, plans called for Midgetman activities to be funded at relatively low levels over the next several years, with expenditures to grow steadily after that.

The White House itself was forced to make a concession. To mollify skeptical Midgetman partisans, Defense Secretary Richard Cheney added \$947 million over three years for mobile launcher development. Air Force officials reported that the source of the new funding has not been identified.

High cost shaped up immediately as the Achilles' heel of Midgetman. General Welch told the Senate Armed Services Committee in June that the tab for a 500-missile Midgetman program comes to \$28.3 billion, measured in 1989 dollars, with \$24.9 billion yet to be funded. Estimated operations and support costs per year came to \$500 million. By contrast, the figures for Peacekeeper are \$5.6 billion in program costs and \$200 million for yearly operations.

In his pursuit of the Peacekeeper/Midgetman force, the President seemed to have a powerful factor working in his favor: There was no obvious alternative to his plan.

Experts maintained that other basing options are not likely to emerge. Dozens have already been considered and rejected as unworkable, unaffordable, unpopular, or all three.

Nor did deployment of active ballistic missile defenses appear to hold out much promise for protecting ICBMs now based in silos. A recent Congressional Budget Office study reported that deployment of a modest system of 2,200 ground-based interceptors would cost \$29 billion and require abrogation or renegotiation of the Antiballistic Missile Treaty. Even then, the report concluded, "uncertainties" would "plague" the system.

The sense that time had finally run out on the ICBM debate was expressed by House Armed Services Chairman Aspin. "We do not have to panic. We can take some time to correct [ICBM] vulnerability. But we can't take forever. We do need to act." ■