

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

An administration drift

The President's waffling on key issues facing NATO has drawn fire from strategic analysts.

Analysts from the Center for Defense Policy, speaking at a press briefing here on May 4, expressed grave concerns over the drift of the Bush administration on strategic policy issues, noting that the "lack of a moral compass" is leading the administration seriously astray.

Frank Gaffney, Jr., a former Pentagon analyst who now heads the Center for Defense Policy, was joined by Allen Keyes of the American Enterprise Institute and Roger Robinson, who served on the National Security Council staff during President Reagan's first term.

They blamed the drift of the Bush administration toward dangerous concessions to the Soviets on what Keyes called "a lack of a clearly articulated sense of our own goals."

He said the "downplaying of the importance policy" has led to a "go along to get along approach" by President Bush so far, and this could lead to disastrous consequences, because it has contributed to a climate in which the initiative appears to be in the hands of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov.

"The U.S. is reacting to Gorbachov, and any time you adopt a reactive posture, you are essentially being passive," Keyes pointed out. "It makes us hostage to the policies of the Soviets."

In reality, Keyes said, it is Gorbachov who is reacting to events, including the failure of his own system, but because the United States is not pursuing its own clearly defined goals, it finds itself "aiding and abetting, in

an uncautious way," Gorbachov's attempts to deal with his crises.

Gaffney charged Bush with a "split the difference" approach to issues, citing the example of the decision to subsidize the sale of 1.5 million metric tons of grain to the Soviets. "Some people wanted to sell the Soviets 3 million tons, and some wanted to sell them nothing, so what did Bush do? He cut the difference right down the middle, to sell 1.5 million."

Gaffney, Keyes, and Robinson all expressed fears that the Bush administration will capitulate in some kind of compromise with the position of West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, which has become the formal West German government position, demanding early negotiations with the Warsaw Pact for reductions in battlefield nuclear weapons.

Gaffney predicted that Bush would try to punt on the issue until after the Memorial Day NATO summit, in order to try to focus attention on the 40th anniversary celebration of NATO, which was originally intended to be the main business of the meeting until the short-range missile issue suddenly emerged.

Sure enough, later the same day, during an impromptu press conference at the White House, when asked about the missile issue, Bush stressed that the NATO meeting would have the celebration of the anniversary as its focus, and that he would not talk about issues that are being worked out privately among the NATO members.

By indicating that he is "willing to talk" on the issue, however, reporters

interpreted him to mean that he is willing to negotiate on the missile issue with allies who want a deal to cut out the systems prior to an agreement on conventional forces.

Therefore, Bush, by punting once again when called on to take a stand, set himself up to make a dangerous compromise.

In fact, the new West German demand for immediate negotiations to reduce the battlefield missiles arose only because the United States was willing to make an earlier concession on the issue to the West Germans.

During the NATO defense ministers' meeting in Brussels in April, the United States agreed to forego modernization of the Lance system until after the West German elections next year. On the basis of that concession, the allies were able to come out with a joint communiqué at the conclusion of the meeting.

Having won that concession, however, the very next day, Genscher's demand for negotiations on missiles suddenly surfaced as the new West German policy, creating one of the most contentious conflicts in the history of NATO.

For some who can't help saying "I told you so," the issue had its genesis in the signing of the ill-conceived Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty by Reagan and Gorbachov in 1987, which opened the door to the thinking that reductions in the West's nuclear deterrent against vastly superior Soviet conventional forces in the European theater is a credible policy.

While President Bush and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher now berate the West Germans for wanting to negotiate away the short-range missiles, they only have themselves to blame, because it is they who have continued to endow Gorbachov with their blessings for his "sincerity."