

Soviet missiles off U.S. coast mean 'three minutes to decide'

Following is EIR's transcript of the speech by Dr. Lowell Wood of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory before a National Press Club forum on beam-weapons defense on Nov. 30. Dr. Wood emphasized that he was speaking as a private individual.

. . . I would like to briefly recapitulate the current strategic arms situation for you, which I suggest is essentially that of two men staring each other face to face holding cocked guns thrust at the other fellow's head. You heard a recapitulation of the basic situation very eloquently from the previous speaker; we are faced with a situation in the United States that Soviet strategic ballistic missile launching submarines are positioned right off both coasts of the United States. We of course have the bulk of our international assets on or close to the coasts, including our capital, and, in particular, from the time that Soviet submarines launch ballistic missiles toward the United States, there is roughly three minutes for political decision makers, located in or about the capital of this country, to live, after the breakwater event is confirmed: That is to say, after the military command centers notify the decision-making authorities in and about Washington, there is somewhere between 150 and 200 seconds to go. That, I would suggest, leaves very, very little time—realistically, negative time—for intelligent political decision making. Maybe it leaves time for no political decision making at all. Then, the thing that happens after that is that you have six to eight minutes after breakwater confirmation until the North American Air Defense Center at Colorado Springs and the Strategic Air Command post at Omaha are destroyed by these same missiles. The bomber field in Fort Omaha is in about the geographic center of the country, so all the U.S. bomber fields are under attack by that time, and the missile fields of the United States are subject to pindown attack—that is to say, having bombs exploded over them launched from submarines, until Soviet missiles from ICBM fields in Central Asia and elsewhere arrive to definitively destroy missile fields and any remaining bomber bases. After that, U.S. decision making capability falls to the National Emergency Command Post's so-called Looking Glass—that's a plane that flies

around over the United States and tries to stay alive and tries to command strategic war; it's going to run out of fuel within eight hours and it would have no place to land. And so, sometime within eight hours of the time that war starts, the United States is left with essentially no political or military decision making capability.

In a circumstance such as I've just sketched, the evaluation of options by the commander-in-chief of the Strategic Air Command—to whom authority will legally devolve to become the commander in chief after most of the political decision-making capability of the country has been wiped out—was circumscribed, to phrase the matter delicately.

On the other side, in particular the deployment of Pershing IIs leaves the Soviets less than 10 minutes to make intelligent decisions after launch confirmation, because, to be candid about it, the Pershing IIs will be aimed, if they are optimally deployed in a military political fashion, they will be aimed at Soviet decision making points, Soviet command posts, and not just Soviet military pockets, in order to symmetrize the situation that Soviet ballistic-missile-launching submarines place the United States in.

So I suggest to you that automatic means, particularly computers, and not political military leaders, will fight strategic war after it's initiated, and very specifically, I invite your attention to the likelihood that strategic weaponry will come under attack—as the previous speaker described—very, very early in the war because of its very high military potential; strategic weaponry will come under attack, and the owners of strategic weaponry will have the option of using it very quickly or losing it in its entirety, and that provides a great deal of impetus toward across-the-board salvo in strategic weaponry by both sides very early in the war.

So I would suggest to you that deterrence through retaliation is a strategic posture which is profoundly unstable, and if anybody is still inclined to doubt that in 1983, I would ask how in the world it is to be rationalized that both sides have increased by roughly an order of magnitude the strategic weaponry in their arsenals during the last dozen years? If deterrence through retaliation is working, why is it that we have to have 10 times more of it now than we did a dozen

years ago on each side? The simple fact of the matter is that it's failing, and failing on a daily basis.

I suggest that there are four basic ways out of this circumstance that I've sketched: political, military, economic, and technical. I'm not a military man, nor am I an economist or a politician, but I do have some technical expertise and experience, and I will speak to you for the remainder of my time on the prospect, from a technical standpoint, of making nuclear war, certainly large-scale nuclear war, technically infeasible to conduct. In particular, I will be exploring with you the prospect of coming up with the analogue of the armor concept and of the armor technology vis-à-vis the stalemated defense-dominated trench warfare, for instance, of World War I. And I'll be specifically attempting to provide some suggestions to the question: what is the analogue of the tank for strategic nuclear warfare? What is the technological fix for the current situation which we're in, if any?

First of all, I'll remind you of certain governmental secrecy regulations in this country through which very little can be discussed publicly by those who are informed about the technical prospects. And I will enlarge on this. Regretfully, the public is frequently misled by either knaves or fools, since the government chooses to stand mute on the subject. There are knaves who knowingly led the public in a direction they have chosen, who know what they're talking about but edit the truth in order to dodge the government's security regulations and sell their point of view in the process, and fools who don't know what they're talking about, but are willing to stand up in public and shoot their mouths off and share their ignorance with their fellows. I fall into the former category; I'm reasonably well informed, and I have a point of view to sell.

I would suggest that the bases for the current approaches to strategic defense, particularly strategic defense against nuclear attack, are much more strongly oriented than in the past, certainly than in the ABM debate and technology explosion of 10, 12, 15 years ago, to attacking strategic nuclear offensive systems very early in their operational use period. This is a major departure from previous circumstances. The reasons for this are sketched out here: The sites of origin of these attacking systems are mostly very well known; often the geographical locations of missile bases and of missile silos within missile fields are really very precisely known by both the United States and the U.S.S.R. Delivery vehicles early in their operational use periods are relatively very slow moving. They are self-illuminated, and the most striking cases, of course, are the very big boosters which are used to loft intercontinental ballistic missile warheads. These exhausts are extremely bright; in the infrared, they are as bright as a good-sized city, except that they come from, essentially, a point in space, so they are enormously bright objects. These delivery vehicles are often clustered; missile launchers in particular had to be very tightly bunched geographically. . . .

Very importantly, strategic offensive systems are extremely fragile early in their operational use cycles. This is

an immensely understandable state of affairs, namely, you don't build bombers and you don't build missiles any stronger than they need to be, because in order to get strength, you have to put more weight on. If you put weight on a vehicle, you have to take weight off the warhead. And the trade-off in its quantitative aspects is a very stringent discipline. You make bombers, for instance, essentially flying fuelheads. You make intercontinental ballistic missile boosters very similar; you can literally, in many cases, with a hammer break through the fuselage or the skin of missiles and bombers—just a hand-held hammer.

Finally, and very importantly, it's not feasible for the owner of the strategic offensive systems which the defense is attacking, to use the nuclear weaponry itself as a sacrificial defense for other aspects of the offensive weapon system. A very, very critical way in which nuclear weapons can be used as they are descending on their targets is for some of them to explode, and thereby greatly improve the likelihood that the ones which are not deliberately exploded in that fashion will penetrate on through to their targets. Alternatively, when they are under attack, when a Soviet warhead is under attack over the United States, it can be salvage-fused very effectively, so that though it might not do maximum damage, the damage it would do if it landed precisely on its target, it can still do a very great deal of damage, and the offense has thereby salvaged a very substantial fraction of its military utility. This is not an option which is feasible if, for instance, the United States attacks Soviet ballistic missiles while they are still over Soviet territory.

The technical basis for defense against nuclear missiles derives from advances of very substantial magnitude across a wide technical spectrum over the past decade, and I'll just mention the four areas in which advances have been especially crucial and especially helpful in proving the technical prospects for strategic nuclear defense: telecommunications, digital computing, the pulsed-power technologies where you get the energy to actually operate these defensive systems, and, very importantly, the directed energy area itself, the means of generating and projecting energy in some cases of very high velocity and mass as well as energy, in a militarily useful fashion over long distances at very high speeds, in many cases at the speed of light, from the point where they originate in a defensive system towards strategic offensive nuclear systems that one is attempting to defend against. These technical advances have resulted in not one or two, but many independent, and, incidentally, possibly synergistic technical options which have been laid before the administration over the last few years, and, specifically, I believe which the President had in mind in his history-making speech of the 23rd of March, in which he called for a shift in emphasis from strategic offense to strategic defense. And these options are both in respect to the technologies which can be used for strategic defense, and the modalities of use which have thereby become feasible; not just terminal phase defense, which one heard about a great deal a dozen years ago or so, but

defense while the bombers or the missile-launched nuclear warheads are in mid-course, and, very importantly, while they are in the very early launch phases of their course.

I'd like to just review for you and attempt to debunk some of the fashionable myths which have grown up about the concept of strategic defense since the President's speech. I won't have time to go into each of these in detail, but I'll just call out to you some of them which I think might be of particular interest. I have already indicated that there is a technical basis for strategic defense, and this is most definitely not wishful thinking. It is most definitely not based purely on nuclear weaponry. There is a large number of prospects, some of which have been discussed publicly, fairly widely publicized, even in the unclassified area, which have no connection with nuclear weaponry for their operation. It is an extremely widely based misconception that strategic defense is necessarily based on weaponry in orbit. There are severe problems with weaponry in orbit, namely, the potential attacker can dispose of it before he launches his attack per se. And so there are a number of proposals whereby all strategic defense weaponry would be ground-based—it would be "popped up" into space and not into orbit, but it could be popped up only in wartime. It is said that strategic defense necessarily violates the ABM treaty, but a constrained, pop-up-oriented system could readily comply with this treaty if it were considered desirable in the foreseeable future to retain that treaty. I would suggest that it's not at all clear that that treaty is in the best interests of the United States or of the Western Alliance. . . . It's not clear that the Soviet Union is capable of violating this treaty in the eyes of the United States.

It is also said that strategic defense can't address the air-breathing threat, in particular bombers and cruise missiles. I would suggest that bombers and cruise missiles indeed are the easier portion of the strategic defense challenge: They are slow-moving, they are soft, and they are easy to detect.

There are certain strategic defenses intrinsically destabilizing; I argued a few minutes ago that it is the current offense-dominated posture which is profoundly unstable, and I would suggest for you that strategic defense is intrinsically a very, very stable option indeed.

The final three points that I would suggest to you, which are fundamental misconceptions, are that strategic defense would lead to the militarization of space—space is already very extensively militarized, and the real goal of any true defense is the demilitarization of places in or around where the people of this planet live. It is said that a defense can always be overwhelmed by our offensive effort; the crucial consideration there is how much does defense cost relative to how much offense costs; when a unit of defense costs less than the counter to that defense, the defense definitively wins. It is said that strategic defense would necessarily be imperfect and that any imperfection is unacceptable. I would suggest that the present posture of accepting total helplessness in the face of offense, is the thing that is totally unacceptable.

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