

THE COURTER AMENDMENT: TRANSFORMING STRATEGIC DEFENSE INTO REALITY

So far, the Strategic Defense Initiative has been spurring research on advanced strategic defense technologies. This, of course, is only a first step if a defense is to be developed giving the U.S. any kind of protection from Soviet missile attacks. Development, testing, production, and deployment of strategic defense systems will be essential. Recognizing this is legislation introduced by Representative Jim Courter, the New Jersey Republican. Proposed as an amendment to the fiscal 1987 National Defense Authorization Bill, it would direct the Administration to concentrate research, development, and testing on near-term strategic defense systems. This wisely would focus the SDI program more than it has been so far on the clear-cut military mission of providing a U.S. ballistic missile defense at the earliest opportunity for the widest possible area.

Up to now, the Reagan Administration has been pursuing SDI as an open-ended theoretical research program aimed at answering scientific questions about the most perfect defense possible. While a fascinating scientific exercise, this never-ending approach undermines strategic defense deployment prospects by centering the debate almost exclusively on SDI's technological feasibility. In effect, it says the U.S. should not do anything until it can do everything. This makes the perfect defense the enemy of a near-term good defense and hence threatens to erode political support for the program. What is worse, the "perfect or nothing" approach concentrates on technologies and scenarios based on some far-off theoretical Soviet threat. It almost ignores existing near-term Soviet capabilities.

Courter believes that the U.S. could proceed quickly with development, testing and deployment of strategic defense systems. He argues convincingly that this is allowed by the so-called "strict" interpretation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. The ABM Treaty permits the development, testing and deployment of fixed,

land-based strategic defense systems such as advanced interceptors and the development and testing of ground-based lasers. This exactly is what the Courter Amendment envisages. Under it, for example, the U.S. could deploy the 100 anti-ballistic missiles allowed by the ABM Treaty, a number already deployed by the Soviet Union around Moscow. The ABM Treaty also permits the development, testing, and deployment of anti-satellite weapons and air defense surface-to-air missiles capable of destroying ballistic missiles.

The Courter amendment calls for reconfiguring the SDI program to 1) develop, test and deploy as soon as possible defensive systems which comply with the ABM Treaty; 2) ensure that any deployed system be able to survive barrage attacks by offensive forces; 3) provide the most effective protection for the largest possible U.S. area; 4) be cost-effective when deployed against the most effective and most probable countermeasures; and 5) be compatible with future systems for defense against strategic and tactical ballistic missiles.

To encourage research on promising boost-phase technologies, the Courter amendment directs that \$100 million be taken from non-SDI Defense Department research and development programs to fund the so-called Boost Surveillance and Tracking System (BSTS). This program would upgrade the U.S. early warning system against ballistic missile attack and, when deployed in a SDI system, identify and track Soviet missiles in their boost-phase.

The Courter amendment does not deflect the SDI from its grand goal of devising technologies and strategic defense architectures which eventually will lead to more perfect systems. It merely concentrates immediate attention on what can be done as soon as possible. There is no compelling reason why the Pentagon's Strategic Defense Initiative Organization cannot conduct research and make plans for near-term deployment of limited ballistic missile defenses. This would be an important first installment on a much more comprehensive system that will follow as the technology becomes more promising.

Kim R. Holmes, Ph.D.
Policy Analyst

For further information:

W. Bruce Weinrod, ed., Assessing Strategic Defense: Six Roundtable Discussions, Heritage Foundation Lecture Series No. 38 (1985).

Loren Thompson, "Managing the Transition from Nuclear Offense to Strategic Defense," Heritage Foundation Background No. 459, September 30, 1985.