
Why America Needs Missile Defense—Fast

Frank J. Gaffney Jr.

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It is all too widely held a perception that national security no longer matters—that it stopped mattering when the Berlin Wall was pulled down, or when the Soviet Union fell apart. This is, of course, nonsense.

The American people, and particularly those at what I call the “grasstops” level, must think seriously and rigorously again about how important national security is to everything else. If we haven't got national security right, there's a pretty good chance that it isn't going to matter how good our educational system is, whether the Social Security system is solvent, whether our welfare system is overtaxed or undertaxed. As a people, we

have to be reconnected to the fact that defense and foreign policy probably will shape our future, just as they have shaped so much of our past. And if we don't do it right, chances are they will shape the future in a very unhappy way, as they have in the past.

Lunatic Despots

What is different today is that the means of inflicting immense destruction and disruption on societies like ours are finding their way into the hands of relatively primitive and very ominously misruled nations. I am speaking of weapons of mass destruction, a generic term largely used by the wonks in the defense establishment to

describe a category of weapons so abhorrent that most of us would really like not to know anything about them, let alone to think seriously about the possibility that they might be visited upon us.

Nuclear weapons are, of course, the most notorious weapons of mass destruction. There are also chemical weapons, biological weapons, and radiological weapons, which would use the destructive capabilities of radioactive material to kill people and contaminate territory. This can be done today by even relatively primitive militaries.

A weapon of mass destruction that wouldn't physically destroy human beings—though it could have an incalculable effect on our society—is an electromagnetic pulse (EMP) weapon that emits, when it is detonated, a very high, very sharp burst of energy of short duration. Unless extensive and expensive steps have been taken to protect electronic systems against that pulse of energy, it can fry—literally fry—every piece of electronic machinery within its lethal radius, which could be quite large if it were detonated by a ballistic missile high above the United States.

These weapons increasingly are being mated up with longer-range ballistic missiles, and they are coming into the hands of the likes of Kim Jong-il, the lunatic despot of North Korea; Saddam Hussein, the lunatic despot of Iraq; whoever is running Iran, and it probably isn't the recently reelected "pro-reform" president; the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi; the Sudanese Islamists; the Syrian son of

the ruthless lunatic dictator Hafez al-Assad; the Pakistani general who's just made himself president; and so on. Unfortunately, these countries are being aided and abetted in acquiring both the weapons to go on these missiles and the missile technology itself by Russia and China—countries that, today, have the capability to devastate the United States with long-range weapons of mass destruction: armed ballistic missiles.

The Debate Begins

At last, we are beginning to have the debate that is needed to address this threat. And the debate is finally being joined at the right level and in a very public way—not just within the Washington Beltway but across this country and, indeed, around the world.

George Bush has decided to make defense against ballistic missile attack one of the central pillars of his administration. During his recent visit to Europe, a less than friendly reception notwithstanding, he managed to make the case persuasively that the United States knew what it was doing when it said that we cannot tolerate a continuation of our current abject vulnerability to the sorts of threats I've described.

Most Americans still don't know that we have no defense against even one of those missiles, no matter where it might come from, whether it might be an accidental launch or a deliberate one, whether it might have a chemical warhead or a biological warhead or an EMP warhead or a nuclear warhead. When you get outside the Beltway and

talk with ordinary Americans, this isn't even a close call: blacks, whites, rich, poor, educated, relatively uneducated, liberal Democrats, conservative Republicans, all overwhelmingly say that we have to have a missile defense. And they're right.

The United States will have a missile defense. I can say that without fear of contradiction. George Bush is determined to press ahead despite the carping of our allies, the criticism of the elite in this country, and the opposition of the Russians and the Chinese (and the North Koreans, the Libyans, the Iraqis, the Syrians, and the Pakistanis)—and many of the congressional Democrats, particularly those who have taken over leadership positions in the Senate.

That's the good news.

The bad news is this: I'm not sure we're going to have it before we need it.

Saddam Hussein used a missile to inflict the greatest damage American forces incurred during the Gulf War. There are thousands like it within range of our friends and, in some cases, our forces overseas. Most have relatively short ranges, but increasingly they are of longer and longer range; ultimately, more and more of them will be capable of reaching us. When one of those missiles is used to destroy someplace we care about, none of the arguments we're still hearing, especially inside the Beltway—that missile defense will cost too much, that the technology is imperfect, that the Russians or the French don't like it, that it offends the sensibilities of the chairman of the Senate Armed Services

Committee or of the Foreign Relations Committee, that it violates the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with a country that ceased to exist a decade ago—will have any standing at all.

And in the aftermath of the destruction of who knows what—Tel Aviv? Taipei? Tokyo? London? Minneapolis/St. Paul?—we will, as one people, respond as we did to Pearl Harbor: we will move heaven and earth to put into place defenses against those sorts of threats in the future.

For starters, we will take what we have now—which is not a global missile defense, or even a defense of our own country, or even, really, a defense of our forces and our friends overseas—in the form of some fifty-five cruisers and destroyers operated by the United States Navy all over the world: in the western Pacific, in the Persian Gulf, in the eastern Mediterranean, in the Atlantic and the Pacific. These ships were deliberately designed not to have ballistic missile defense capabilities. They were designed to protect the fleet against aircraft and against cruise missiles, which fly like airplanes. Nevertheless, they represent the basic infrastructure for a truly global missile defense, particularly in the near term. We have these platforms, the ships. We have the launchers that are aboard them. We even have a version of the missile we need. We have radars and other sensors. We have communication systems and people trained to operate them.

That does not constitute a missile defense system—we deliberately dumb-ed down the system in the 1970s so that

it wouldn't come anywhere close to being a problem under the terms of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty—yet it represents 90 percent or more of what is needed to deploy a missile defense over most of the world.

Still, after Taipei or Tokyo or the Twin Cities has been destroyed, we will make those ships into missile killers.

Preventing Disaster

Winston Churchill's memoirs of the Second World War include what he calls *minutes*, his memos from the war period. He wrote to the heads of his research and development units, the chiefs of staff, the commanders of his military units, asking them, in his inimitable way: Why can't we do thus-and-such to improve our capability to deal with the U-boat threat? Is there any reason why you couldn't configure this widget and that to give us some capability against the radar-directed bombers laying waste to London?

That's the spirit I'm confident we would evince after someplace has been destroyed. The destruction of Churchill's country was the mother of invention. Very little of what he suggested worked perfectly initially, but it helped as a stopgap until, among other things, Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the war and the tide turned irrevocably.

My point is this: if that kind of emergency approach to a catastrophe is how this great country and its industry and technology and its political leadership and its people would respond after an attack, why not do something now

and maybe **prevent** a disaster? We ought to be telling the skippers of those AEGIS ships right now that if a ballistic missile goes over their heads toward someplace we care about, they are authorized to fire whatever they've got and take their best shot.

We are allowed to withdraw from the ABM treaty with six months' notice. In the coming six months, we could prepare the ships to be considerably more effective.

If you believe that a treaty configured for a world with two superpowers that doesn't resemble today's world at all could possibly still have legal standing given that the other party disappeared ten years ago; if you believe that we should still be honoring a treaty that the other party massively violated by deploying a territorial defense of the old Soviet Union that Russia still has today; if, despite all of that, you think we still ought to honor the formal requirements of this treaty, then let's give them six months' notice, and six months from today let's start making those AEGIS ships as capable as they can be.

Is it a panacea? No. Is it an Astro-dome that will protect everything we care about against all threats from truck bombs and cruise missiles and tramp steamers and the like? No. But will it begin to help protect this country against a known and growing danger? There's no doubt about it.

Pearl Harbor ruined careers. There were a lot of hard feelings about unpreparedness. How could it have happened? The American people were

very unhappy that the United States' Pacific fleet was devastated in a surprise attack that our war gamers actually knew could happen. How will the American people feel if in, literally, a blinding flash, they suddenly find out the very hardest way imaginable that their government knew a far more deadly threat existed and failed to take action? It could be the cause of enormous political turmoil, even instability, in this country.

Some people say that we don't need to worry about missile defense because we would just obliterate whoever launched the missile. That may be, but it will be too late for the people at the receiving end of that missile, just as it was too late for the two thousand people who died at Pearl Harbor. And in all likelihood, it won't be two thousand people who will die. These weapons of mass destruction don't even start counting at numbers lower than—what? Ten thousand? Fifty thousand? One hundred thousand?

Missile defense, as good as we can make it and as quickly as we can bring it to bear, is the only responsible course. It is recklessly irresponsible to do anything other than to bring to bear such defenses as we can, knowing that they won't be perfect; knowing that there are lots of other ways that people can hurt us and we need to address those as well; knowing that there will be some unhappiness, particularly on the part of people who like our vulnerability because they've figured out how to exploit it for their own purposes.

At the end of the day, I guarantee you that we will have a missile defense.

Following his talk, Frank Gaffney took questions from his American Experiment audience.

Dennis Schulstad: Missile defense—for which you make a very compelling case—is enormously expensive. Are you concerned that other worthwhile defense programs will suffer because of money spent on missile defense?

Frank Gaffney: As a nation, we have the capacity to invest at least 4 cents out of our national dollar, of our gross domestic product, on defense. We are currently spending roughly 2.9 cents, the lowest level, as a percentage of GDP, since Pearl Harbor. If we were to invest 4 cents, it would translate into roughly \$100 billion more per year for the next few years, at least.

The beauty of the approach I've just laid out is that, since roughly 90 percent of it is already out there, the cost of making marginal improvements is relatively trivial. We've spent more than \$50 billion on the AEGIS system, depending on who you talk to and precisely what kind of capabilities you're talking about. We might need to spend somewhere between \$2 billion and \$10 billion more to make it into a missile killer. Over five years, that's peanuts—the Pentagon spends that much money on coffee every year. If we were to spend as much as Bill Clinton *talked* about

spending (never actually intending to do it, and having picked the militarily least effective and most expensive approach possible—a ground-based system in Alaska), it would have been \$60 billion spent over ten or twelve years, according to the Congressional Budget Office. As a nation, we spend that much on pizza. We spend more than that on cosmetics and entertainment. These are not insuperable sums.

On the other hand, if we don't increase the overall investment we're making in national security—we have severely underfunded it for the past ten years as we have been cashing in the so-called peace dividend—it is true that there will be trade-offs. Even a relatively inexpensive missile defense system will bump up against other priorities. The answer is to increase the size of the pie. If that isn't done, I would expect to see senior members of the military not only decrying the inadequate investment we're making in national defense, but also saying that missile defense is not as high a priority as this or that.

The right answer is to do both and do them properly.

Fred Joseph: You have, in the past, mentioned a window of opportunity. What is the time frame we're looking at?

Frank Gaffney: I have no way of knowing. I am a worst-case planner, both by training and by personal cussedness, and I'm always happy to be wrong. I have anticipated for quite some time that something would happen. Apart from a couple of episodes—

Saddam Hussein's use of the Scuds, Muammar Gaddafi's launching, back in 1984 or 1985, a missile aimed at a NATO base in Italy (it didn't make it, and nobody was hurt)—we're living on borrowed time.

At a particularly ugly moment in the renewed intifada between the Palestinians and Israel, Saddam Hussein was judged by U.S. and Israeli intelligence services to have stood up—that is to say, prepared for launch—mobile missiles he had deployed in the western desert of Iraq. Nobody knew what the missiles had on them, but the assumption was that they wouldn't be like the last ones he threw at Israel. It didn't come to blows, but it was a near thing. The Israelis almost went after those missiles. What that would have precipitated, nobody knows.

Even if you discount intentional uses of these missiles, it is possible that one might go off accidentally. There were recent reports of two missile systems: one a surface-to-air missile system that is, I believe, part of this illegal antimissile system the Soviets bequeathed to the Russians, and a launch complex for ballistic missiles that blew up in Russia. And we had earlier episodes in which the Russians thought we were responsible for starting a nuclear war when a sounding rocket was launched by Norway as a scientific experiment; Norway had notified the Russians, but the Ministry of Defense didn't get the word from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Those sorts of things could translate into a terrible accident, and in the absence of having

anything to stop it, what do you do? You get on the hotline and somebody apologizes? Or you attack one of their cities? That's a pretty ugly prospect.

John Hansen: I recently heard a retired Air Force major general talk about how amazing it was to see on television during Desert Storm how an airplane could lock in on something and guide a missile right at it. That's obsolete now, he said. When we had airplanes up in the stratosphere bombing in Yugoslavia and hit the Chinese embassy, they could come within six hundred feet of their target from way up there. Now they've closed that down to sixty feet. They can be that accurate with missiles. Aircraft carriers are obsolete; they are sitting ducks for anybody that can guide a missile.

Members of Congress will resist phasing out aircraft carriers and other past defenses because what is built in their states is dear to their hearts. I think your biggest battle is going to be with Congress.

Frank Gaffney: I'm not entirely surprised that a retired Air Force major general doesn't think we need any aircraft carriers, but leaving that aside, the truth is that anything that can hit a moving aircraft carrier can certainly take out an Air Force base or fixed runways of other kinds. There's no question that the transformation we're talking about making in our military is to some extent taking place in other militaries around the world as well. Unfortunately, it's being fueled in part by access to our technology. It's also

being fueled by access to the Russians' technology, and through them and others, the Chinese, and so on. It's a very important and very difficult challenge to keep abreast of developments and respond to them as appropriately as we can within our resources. It isn't easy to do—and it is almost impossible to do in a democracy if the public doesn't have any appreciation of why it's important to be doing it.

One of the things that our Center for Security Policy is working very hard to do in Washington is to reinvigorate legislators' sense that their constituents care about national security. Many lawmakers have told me, "I'm with you—I think you're absolutely right—it's just that nobody in my constituency is interested in these issues, and when I have to choose what I'm going to invest my time and energy in and what I'm going to stake my run for reelection on, it has to be the things that are important to them."

We are going to face challenges to our national interests in the future, just as we have in the past. Thanks to the march of technology and its proliferation throughout the world, those challenges have the potential to be very destructive. People like you can help recreate a sense of priority and urgency and public support for the investments we're going to have to make across the board. Maybe it won't be as many aircraft carriers, maybe it will be long-range bombers instead of short-range tactical aircraft that fly from bases close to those missiles or enemies, maybe it will be submarines using their

own long-range precision-guided missiles. We know that it is going to be an increasingly competitive environment. We've got to stay competitive, and that will take public support as well as the support of our legislators.

Stan Donnelly: I'm a member of Center of the American Experiment, a conservative thinker, a student of history and military history, a friend of the military. And yet I'm unpersuaded. Not by your remarks, but generally. I say this because the coming debate is not going to be just liberals versus conservatives. A more persuasive argument is going to have to be made for even conservative thinkers to come around.

Earthquakes in Los Angeles or San Francisco could kill more people than we're talking about, but people live there. The same odds apply in national defense. If a missile hit here, I certainly wouldn't like to be on the receiving end, but America would survive. It wouldn't wipe out America any more than Pearl Harbor did. We're playing the odds not just with the cost, but also SAD (self-assured destruction) versus MAD (mutually assured destruction). The more interesting question is if a missile hits Tokyo, are we really going to take out North Korea on behalf of the Japanese? I'd be more worried about that as a Japanese than I would be as an American.

Frank Gaffney: When people knowingly live on fault lines, they're on their own. But the government has an obligation to "provide for the common defense."

Most Americans don't know that our government is gambling with their lives. They're not aware that we're playing the odds, that we're operating under a theory like you've just described, that somebody might actually not be deterred from attacking us because we're going to blow up their country.

Kim Jong-il, who has lately been repackaged by the South Korean government as a sort of cuddly, fun-loving guy, is presiding over the murder by starvation of as many as 2 million of his people. It's not self-evident that our willingness to wipe out the rest of them is going to persuade him not to do something that he decides to do. Maybe it will be Tokyo, maybe it will be someplace farther away; he's trying very hard to get longer-range missiles.

And even if you think that the United States won't actually be attacked, we have an interest in thinking through the implications of allowing countries to blackmail us. That's what Kim Jong-il is doing right now. We are currently the largest provider of foreign aid to the communist totalitarian regime in North Korea. I don't think that's an accident. It's not because we like him; it's not because we like his system of government; it's not because we're particularly sympathetic to the plight of his people, though that affects us at a humanitarian level. He's getting hundreds of millions of dollars worth of oil and food, and billions of dollars worth of nuclear technology that he will probably use to build nuclear bombs because he's able, now, to play the long-range nuclear

card. That's what lots of people like him are figuring out, and what is contributing to the proliferation of these very threats. We ought to try to create, for the first time, a real disincentive to that proliferation.

John Eidum: Isn't Washington worried about Li Ka-shing and Hutchison Whampoa practically owning the Panama Canal and building a new deep-water port in the Caribbean?

Frank Gaffney: China has made use of a number of companies, including Hutchison Whampoa, as surrogates for the Chinese military and intelligence apparatus. This story came to light in December 1999, just as we were turning over the Panama Canal to the Panamanians. It turned out that they were turning over facilities at either end of the canal to this company, whose owner, Li Ka-shing, is closely tied to the Chinese leadership and its military-industrial system. More recently, there were reports about Cosco, another Chinese company, owned by the state, that's been shipping arms to Cuba. This is the kind of thing Washington should be concerned about.

If your reason for not favoring a missile defense is that you're concerned that somebody might bring a tramp steamer into one of our harbors and light up a nuclear weapon, well, Hutchison Whampoa and Cosco are candidates for the ships that could do that.

Peter Calott: Do our alleged allies have any right to be lecturing us about the ABM treaty?

Frank Gaffney: It was a bilateral treaty framed in the cold war era when there were really just two powers, ourselves and the Soviets, who were engaged in a so-called pact of mutually assured destruction. A lot of other governments became invested in this as it developed and became enshrined in the architecture of arms control. The French figured that their little *force de frappe*, as they call it, would be made completely irrelevant if the Russians had even a modest missile defense, so the French liked the idea that the Russians weren't supposed to have one. Ditto, more or less, the Brits.

The Chinese have recently come into the act. On at least two occasions that I know of, senior Chinese military figures have threatened us with a nuclear attack if we interfere with their efforts to bring Taiwan to heel. Do they mean it? I don't know. Is it a threat? Yes. Does it have coercive effects in the absence of a missile defense? I think so. But the Chinese think the world of the ABM treaty because if we had a missile defense, they couldn't do that.

So the short answer is, our allies and these other parties don't have any standing. A legal analysis done by one of my colleagues two years ago makes it pretty clear that Russia, for that matter, doesn't have legal standing. The treaty was done with a different country—not just different in name, but different in geography, capabilities, and deployed systems. This is a treaty that has long since outlived its usefulness, and those who wish to keep it intact either like the idea of America's present vulnerability or are operating

under certain illusions about Russia's vulnerability, or both.

It may be that this debate will go on for several more years. Certainly, if the likes of Tom Daschle and Carl Levin and Joe Biden have their way, it will go on for the remainder of President Bush's first term, and maybe for the duration of his second term, if he has one.

Unless something awful happens in the meantime. And then, the ABM treaty and all the other considerations—of conservatives and libertarians and liberals alike—will not matter: we will be hell-bent-for-leather to deploy whatever missile defense we can. ■