

Missile Defense Fraud Goes Ballistic

Needless, Unworkable, Gold-Plated, Dangerous, & Corrupt

By John LaForge

The nuclear weapons thriller “A House of Dynamite,” directed by Kathryn Bigelow, depicts the catastrophic failure of U.S. anti-ballistic missiles to shoot down a long-range nuclear-armed missile, fired by unidentified assailants in the eastern Pacific, that is honing in on Chicago. In the film, two “ground-based interceptors” (GBIs) are fired at the terror-inducing missile, but one misfires and the other just misses. After the Secretary of Defense is depicted claiming that the success rate of the GBIs is “61 percent,” he cries out: “Fifty billion dollars only buys us a coin toss!?” As bad as that is, the statement is doubly misleading here: the cost of antimissile defense systems all told is at least eight times \$50 billion, and the success rate in missile shoot-down tests is far worse than 61 percent, so much worse that the Bush administration ordered the program’s test results be kept secret after 2002.

The Arms Control Association reported in January 2025 that Congress has appropriated over \$250 billion for the Missile Defense Agency’s programs between 1985 and 2023. Gabe Murphy, reviewing “A House of Dynamite” November 2 in *The Hill*, reported that, “Between 1957 and 2021, the U.S. spent over \$400 billion in a vain effort to defend the nation against ballistic missile threats.” Murphy also noted that “arms control experts have lauded the movie as a timely portrayal of ... the fallacy that missile defense can effectively protect us from them.”

Today’s ballistic missile defense program, or BMD, is promoted as a version of the 1983 impossible “Star Wars” mission of Ronald Reagan. BMD, today dubbed Golden Dome in the gilded Trump iteration, is a complex of early warning satellites, rockets, interceptors, and radars. Yet there is no workable system in sight.

William Hartung and Ashley Gate wrote November 16 for TomDispatch.com: “Believe it or not, the Pentagon has yet to even conduct a realistic test of the system, which would involve attempting to intercept hundreds of warheads traveling at 1,500 miles per hour, surrounded by realistic decoys that would make it hard to even know which objects to target.”

Yet the list of the program’s critics grows every day, and its decades-long string of test failures should have long since proven the Republican Party’s adage that there are some problems you can’t solve by throwing money at them. Still, the contractors are such lavish campaign contributors, the scam is winked at by both major parties and routinely wins unfathomable funding increases.

The gigantic swindle is being funded exorbitantly under the newly minted nickname “golden” in spite of long-standing, high-level allegations of official fraud, cover-up, insurmountable technical problems, harsh international criticism, and a complete lack of military rationale.

Failure, fraud, abuse

In June 2004, fifty-three House Democrats asked the FBI to investigate the antimissile program for “serious allegations of fraud and cover-up.” The allegations were based on evidence collected by Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Professor Theodore A. “Ted” Postol, formerly a top Navy science advisor in the Reagan Administration. Dr. Postol’s allegations were made after the Pentagon classified as “secret” his May 11, 2000 letter to John D. Podesta, the White House chief of staff, in which he described a major flaw in the program.

Postol’s letter charged that flight test data from a June 1997 test showed that an interceptor missile could not distinguish incoming weapons from swarms of decoys. The Pentagon then conspired, Postol alleges, to hide this devastating test result. In a second letter to Mr. Podesta, Dr. Postol charged that the Pentagon’s BMD organization “is most likely attempting to illegally use the security and classification system to hide waste, fraud, and abuse.”

Postol’s excoriating letter was based on the work of Dr. Nira Schwartz, a former engineer at the

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giant weapons merchant TRW, who first exposed the fraud in a lawsuit against the company. Dr. Schwartz claimed that TRW faked results of BMD tests as well as reviews of computer programs, and “fired her when she protested.” TRW had denied her accusations.

Postol told *The New York Times* that BMD officials were “systematically lying about the performance of a weapons system that is supposed to defend the people of the U.S. from nuclear attack... They’ve been caught in one outright lie after another.” Then as if to prove his point, the Pentagon sent Defense Security Service agents to his office with classified documents they said he should read. “I definitely saw this as potential for entrapment and intimidation,” Postol said.

Postol and others called the visit a ploy the government has used to silence informed dissidents.



Trident missile test firing. Photo by Eddie Irizarry /X /US Navy.

If Postol had agreed to read the letter, he said, he would be obliged not to talk about its contents, even if they were identical to his previously published work. Jennifer Weeks at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government told *The Boston Globe*, “I think it’s plausible this was an effort to silence him.”

Skullduggery has hounded the program from its beginnings. Congressional investigators found (years after the fact) that two “positive” tests of antimissile systems in 1984 and 1991 had been rigged. The tests — of a forerunner antimissile program — failed all 16 times. In May 2010, Dr. Postol and George N. Lewis published a paper showing that while the Pentagon claimed an 84 percent interception success rate, the antimissile warheads worked only 10 to 20 percent of the time. “I gave them evidence of fraud at the Pentagon,” Postol said. “In fact, they should turn it over to the FBI in my opinion.”

Technical problems

Many of the world’s top scientists have declared the antimissile plans unfeasible. In April, a report by the MIT Security Studies Program and the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) said the system would not work and that, “It makes no sense to begin deployment.”

In July 2000, fifty Nobel laureates in science (half of the living science winners) — the biggest group of Nobel Prize winners ever to make such a joint appeal — signed a scathing letter to former President Clinton, saying that BMD offered “little protection and would do grave harm” to national security after finding that foes could outwit or overwhelm any such attempt at defense.

The next day, the American Physical Society, the world’s largest group of physicists with 42,000 members, along with the Federation of American Scientists, and the Union of Concerned Scientists, jointly urged Mr. Clinton to cancel the program regardless of what test results show.

The non-partisan Government Accounting Office warned of unsolved problems caused by decoy warheads nullifying the defenses, as well as the fact that testing can never duplicate actual wartime conditions. Even Larry Welch, a retired four-star USAF General, authored two Pentagon-sponsored reports to Congress acknowledging the failure of U.S. test interceptors to distinguish decoys — although he used the failed mission to argue for more funding.

The system’s notorious failure rate is so bad that in June 2002, the Bush Administration took the anti-democratic and authoritarian step of declaring BMD’s test results secret. *The Los Angeles Times*

reported that critics have often used Pentagon data from the tests “to challenge whether the experiments were as successful as claimed,” and argue that the new secrecy could see the Pentagon “spend tens of billions of dollars on a national antimissile system that doesn’t work”

Was the Pentagon given Congress’s war powers?

Could a computerized launch-on-warning antimissile system usurp control of military action unto itself? This question is raised not just by critics, but by technology-dependent BMD models. David Wood in *The Seattle Times* wrote that the cherished constitutional principle that elected civilian leaders are in charge of the military — especially in war-time — “would be overturned by the proposed missile-defense system, which would have to react so quickly to the threat of incoming warheads that its military operators would make the decision to fire.”

The usurpation of war power by generals in U.S. Space Command — or by computers — is taken for granted by proponents of BMD. Vice Adm. Herbert Browne, deputy commander at Space Command, told *The Seattle Times*, “There’s not enough time to call back and say, ‘Can I shoot?’ Therefore, that decision would fall to the Space Command chief, [formerly] USAF General Stephen N. Whiting. Later the President would learn from a phone call that the country had gone to war.” Of course, this is flatly unconstitutional.

“There’s going to have to be special trust and confidence placed in the hands of the CINC,” Adm. Browne said, using the acronym not for the White House but for commander-in-chief of Space Command.

International opposition

“Virtually all the principal American allies in Europe and Asia oppose the missile defense system. They argue that its efficacy is unproven...” *The New York Times* reported. “European allies...argue against the ... system because it would kill the ABM [anti-ballistic missile] treaty, which they view as a cornerstone of arms control.”

The London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies condemned missile defense in its 2000-2001 Strategic Survey, May 1, 2001. “The U.S. has had little success in convincing its European critics that its plans for NMD [national missile defense] deployment are needed, sensible or useful ... [and] many do not believe the system will ever work as intended,” the report said. In February 2001, a group of European leaders at the Munich Security Conference urged the United States to abandon the antimissile system.

In November 1999, a UN committee voted 54 to 7 to oppose any new missile system that “attempts to undermine or circumvent the ABM treaty.” All the members of the European Union either voted for the resolution or abstained. Calls for the cancellation of the system have come from Britain, France, Canada, Germany, and Denmark — and, of course, from those “most favored nations” China and Russia.

What threat?

A 1995 CIA intelligence estimate on ballistic missiles concluded that the U.S. was safe from missile attacks from small “rogue states.” Furious Republican lawmakers assembled a commission to challenge the CIA findings, made the newly appointed Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld the commission chair, and got the analysis they wanted. The “Rumsfeld Report” was used by the Bush Administration to protect BMD from its long list of critics.

The threats used by Congress and the Pentagon’s and missile contractors’ public relations officers to justify the BMD budget have lost all trace of plausibility. The vilification of North Korea has lost its bite everywhere but the U.S. This may be because everyone from the President on down in nearly every official statement regarding BMD, targets North Korea. The tiny mouse that is Pyongyang, with a \$6 billion military budget and a population less than the

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