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WASHINGTON CLOSE-UP

'Thin' Antimissile Defense Seen

By RICHARD FRYKLUND

The best solution to the U.S. agonizing antimissile problem is almost certainly a "thin defense"—one that is effective against small attacks but conspicuously inadequate against a massive Russian attack.

This approach is being studied carefully in the Pentagon. So far the analyses fail to find anything particularly wrong with it.

This is in marked contrast to the studies on a "full" defense against enemy missiles. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara has publicized calculations showing that the Russians can overcome a U.S. defense—by improving and enlarging its offensive force—no matter what this country spends on Nike-X, the proposed missile interceptor.

The McNamara case against an effort at a full defense is getting a sympathetic hearing from some key members of Congress who used to support the Nike-X.

But there has been no real public examination of another form of the Nike-X, built for a different purpose. This, the thin defense, looks like a winner today.

There are two basic approaches to defense against missiles. The one debated thoroughly in the past would try to defend American cities and military installations against an all-out Russian attack.

It would intercept and destroy the warheads of enemy ICBMs before they had a chance to explode on their targets. Tests of the Nike-X on Kwajalein island indicate that it would work well against a simple attack by simple warheads but that it would fail against an attack by rockets

carrying showers of warheads and decoy devices.

So McNamara has, in effect, rejected Nike-X as inadequate at any price.

What's more, the President wants an agreement with the Soviet Union for a mutual ban on antimissile weapons. The President's argument is that both sides will avoid the waste of \$40 billion to \$100 billion on new defenses and improved offenses.

The thin defense looks to a different problem. It would defend against attacks from other countries—Red China or any country that cared to build a cheap and simple offense.

It's as sure as anything in the defense business that for \$3.4 billion the United States can build a small Nike-X defense that will stop a small attack almost cold.

Some studies say that under many circumstances of war with a smaller country, the United States would suffer no casualties. In other war situations, the death toll would be in the hundreds of thousands—as contrasted with the 100 million who would die in an all-out Russian attack today.

The thin Nike-X would use the same missiles, radars and computers but use fewer of them. Every city and town would be defended.

A number of distinct advantages would flow from installation of the thin Nike-X.

Millions of lives would be saved in an attack by some irrational or reckless small country.

Blackmail threats by such a country could be ignored.

Accidental discharge of a few missiles—even by the Soviet Union—could be handled without great death and destruction and without the

urge to reply with a counter-launch of missiles.

And the United States and the Soviet Union could return, for all practical purposes, to the good old days when only two countries in the world had nuclear weapons.

Those days seemed grim at the time, but in retrospect, they were rather safe simply because the two governments realized the danger of the use of nuclear weapons and because neither had any intention of striking first.

If both the United States and the Soviet Union install thin defenses—and the Soviet Union already has started some kind of defense—then neither would be in an arms race with the other, both would be defended against third countries, and each would have a comfortable, mutually deterred relationship with the other.

The Russians would realize that our defense was not designed to handle their retaliatory attacks against us, and of course a thin Russian defense would be no obstacle to U.S. retaliation against the Soviet Union. Neither side would have to improve its offense against the other.

The \$3.4 billion Nike-X would defend even against the Red Chinese until 1980 or beyond, according to Pentagon estimates. The money would be spent over several years.

For another half-billion a year, the system could be maintained and improved and could remain effective until 1990.

After that, in theory, other countries could acquire the offensive skill necessary to get back in the contest.

But, meanwhile, a few billion dollars could buy a lot of peace of mind for Americans.