

A Big Decision On Anti-Missiles

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A MOMENTOUS DECISION is about to be taken, with consequences reaching far into an unforeseeable future. All the signs indicate the Administration is about to give the go-ahead to construction of an anti-ballistic missile system.

How extensive the system will be is still in the discussion stage. It is likely to be a beginning phase, intended as a barrier against Red Chinese nuclear warheads in the early '70s. The price tag on such a limited ABM system has been put at \$10 billion. But, like all initial Pentagon price tags, that is only a rough guess and it could be twice that amount. An all-out system built to stop warheads from the Soviet Union would cost not less than \$30 billion and probably much more. What this would do to the defense budget—even that record \$70 billion budget—and to the need for more and more taxes hardly needs expounding.

Here, along with the controversy over bombing targets in North Vietnam, is another and even more striking instance of the gap between civilian authority represented by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and the solid phalanx of the military speaking through the Joint Chiefs of Staff. McNamara is making what is billed as a most important speech on the whole nuclear issue in San Francisco on Monday. He could use this opportunity to indicate the ABM decision.

For months, both publicly and privately, Moscow has been prodded to begin talks aimed at an agreement to forgo construction of an ABM system. Public hints have come from Administration spokesmen and from Senators believed to have been inspired by the White House that Washington cannot wait much longer and particularly since the Soviets were known to be installing parts of a system. In Moscow Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson, who returned for a second tour of duty at the urging of the President with the hope of checkmating a new round in the nuclear arms race, has been pushing for talks. So far as is known, the response is not so much *nyet* as wait awhile and let's talk about your escalation of the war in Vietnam.

EARLY IN JANUARY the Joint Chiefs made their argument for starting at once on a full anti-ballistic missile defense system. In the House Armed Services Committee the JCS chairman, Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, had an audience already sympathetically attuned.

In his posture statement at the start of the year McNamara made a power-construction of an ABM system. He argued that America's nuclear capability was so great that it could never be crippled by a Soviet first strike. As double-insurance he proposed to increase the capability, even though it was put at anywhere from two to four times that of the Soviet Union. The case of the brilliant logician was, in short, that the billions for an ABM would be thrown down the drain. In private he was even more emphatic than before congressional committees.

But pressures began to mount. The Southerners who dominate the military committees in the Senate and House came down on the side of the JCS. If the Soviets were going ahead, said Sen. Richard Russell, then the United States should not wait. It was part of McNamara's argument that even without a standoff agreement with Moscow there would be no reason to proceed, since an American second strike could get through any defense. From the military-industrial complex, too, came pressures. An extraordinary advertisement by an investment firm listed 28 companies that "could profit handsomely" if a full-scale ABM were installed.

More recently McNamara has modified his stand. He has said that a limited ABM designed against China's potential might be useful. China's success in exploding a hydrogen bomb considerably in advance of most estimates may have had something to do with this.

ON THE BASIC ISSUE, however, of the usefulness of an ABM system the difference of view between McNamara and the Joint Chiefs is clear. It is as clear as the difference over the bombing of targets such as the port of Haiphong. McNamara contended before the Senate Preparedness subcommittee that the risk of enlarging the war was too great.

The committee in a summary report called for "closing the port of Haiphong." No matter what the denials and the explanations, the disagreement cannot be papered over.

For the long future the issue of the ABM may be far more important. And the question is whether if the military has a foot in the door with a limited ABM the pressure will not eventually compel the full system with its fantastic cost.