

NEWSWEEK 6 DECEMBER 1982 (30 NOV) Pg. 38

## The Battle Over the MX

Even by Reagan-administration standards, it was a massive public-relations blitz. Congressional leaders trooped to the White House for private conferences. Pentagon officials held a dizzying array of technical briefings. And the president himself, armed with state-of-the-art electronic graphics, went on national television to present a frightening view of the U.S.-Soviet missile gap. The solution, Reagan declared, was "Dense Pack," a \$26.4 billion plan to place 100 MX missiles in a narrow strip of land outside a U.S. Air Force base near Cheyenne, Wyo. But as impressive as last week's sale effort was, "Dunce Pack," as some critics call it, met with continuing skepticism.

Dense Pack is controversial for the simple reason that no one is sure it would work. In theory, the closely spaced missiles—buried in superhardened silos about 1,800 feet apart—would be protected by a concept known as "fratricide." The first Soviet warheads to hit the site would create such a

maelstrom of dust, gravel, heat and radiation that they would destroy or throw off course subsequent Soviet warheads. Proponents claim that enough MX missiles would survive to launch a retaliatory strike, even though they would be pinned temporarily in their silos by the same dust and radiation clouds that deflected the Soviet missiles. The only way the Soviets would escape fratricide, Air Force experts say, would be to simultaneously hit each of the 100 MX silos with single 25-megaton warheads.

**Obstacles:** MIT physicist Kosta Tsipis told NEWSWEEK he has conducted his own studies using Pentagon data and determined that 90 percent of the Dense Pack missiles could be destroyed by fewer than 60 25-megaton warheads. The Soviet warheads could escape fratricide, he claims, if they were equipped with readily available timing devices that would detonate simultaneously. The Soviets could also develop missiles that would burrow into the earth and explode after impact. Dr. Charles Townes, the

Nobel Prize-winning physicist who headed Reagan's Dense Pack studies, has privately cautioned the Pentagon against underestimating the obstacles to superhardening the MX silos by the target date of 1986.

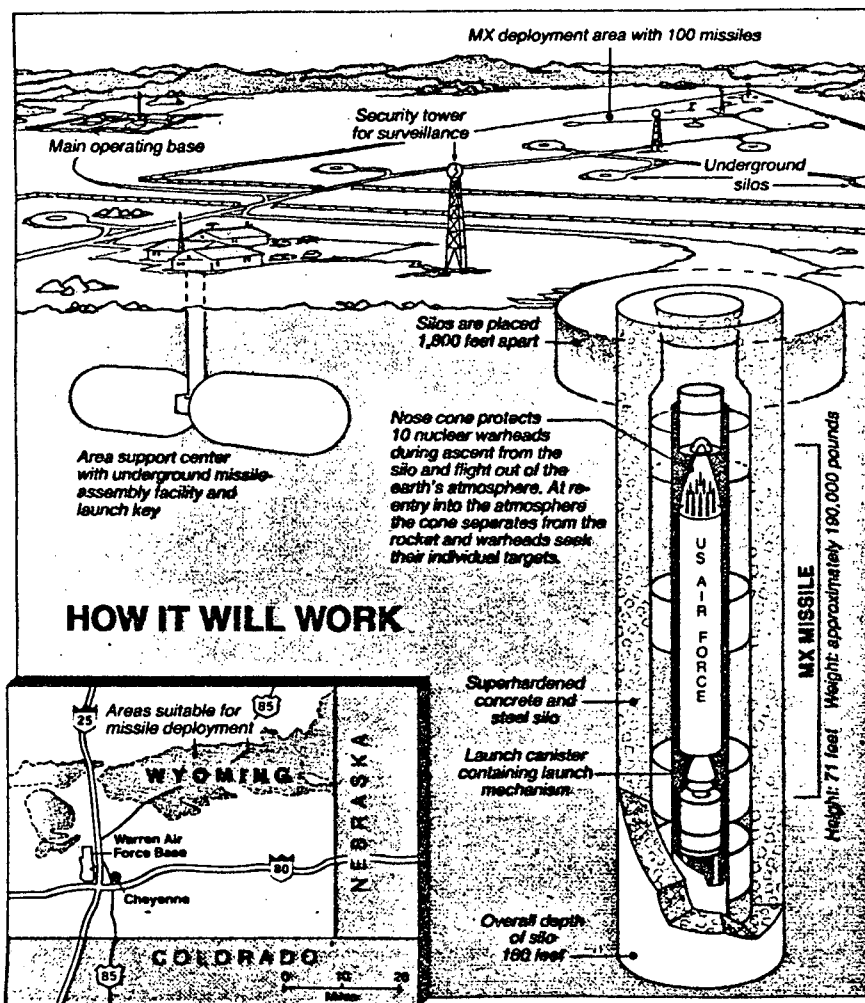
Pentagon planners nevertheless see advantages to developing Dense Pack soon. To try to thwart the system, they say, the Soviets would have to reverse their missile-development program, abandoning lightweight multiple-warhead missiles in favor of single, massive warheads. Even if the Soviets succeed in immobilizing the U.S. MX force for a period of hours, proponents say, the United States could retaliate with its submarine-based missiles. (Critics argue that the United States already has that option without the new \$26 billion MX program.)

Another problem with Dense Pack is that it appears to violate the unratified SALT II treaty, which both Moscow and Washington have pledged to respect. MX supporters hope—somewhat implausibly—to skirt the treaty's ban on new fixed silo launchers by equipping each MX with its own portable launcher. Pentagon planners also have suggested that Dense Pack could be defended by an antiballistic missile system to ensure its survivability—a step that would clearly violate the 1972 ABM treaty. The official Soviet newspaper, Pravda, warned last week that the Soviet Union would be forced to "find an effective reply" if the United States does deploy the MX. In response, U.S. officials vigorously denied that MX would violate any existing arms agreements.

In Cheyenne, the president's plan drew mixed reactions—not unlike "a teen-age daughter coming home at 3 a.m. with a Gideon Bible under her arm," joked Wyoming Gov. Ed Herschler. Some antinuclear church groups will fight the plan, as will some ranchers and farmers whose land falls within the sites the Pentagon planners are eying. But businessmen welcomed the prospect of an average of 3,500 MX construction workers pumping an estimated \$70 million a year into the local economy. And many citizens fatalistically noted that since the area now houses dozens of Minuteman missiles, they would be no more of a Soviet target than they have been for years.

**Delay?** The real fight lies ahead in Congress—and it will no doubt surface in some form during the lame-duck session. Rep. Joseph Addabbo of New York, chairman of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, has vowed to try to strike a \$1.5 billion authorization for the first five MX missiles from the 1983 defense budget. Ernest Hollings of South Carolina plans a similar effort in the Senate. Sen. Paul Laxalt, a close Reagan adviser, predicts that battle could prove as tough as any Reagan has fought—"His persuasive powers will be tested to the limit." To avoid an early and embarrassing defeat on MX, the White House could seek to delay the debate until the new Congress convenes in January.

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