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The truth about a new missile

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A high official in the Reagan administration has finally let the truth be known: The decision to deploy the Pershing II missile, which has strained the Atlantic Alliance and energized the pacifist movement in Western Europe, was a political and military blunder.

The confession came from Richard Perle, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security, during an off-the-record lunch at the Washington-based New Republic magazine. Reporter Fred Kaplan of the Boston Globe learned from two people who attended that Perle admitted the missile has little military value because of its vulnerability and that it has been far more costly to the alliance than it is worth. But he insisted the U.S. should keep its promise to deploy it.

Perle has denied the story, but unconvincingly. Kaplan was told by another administration official that Perle had expressed the same views at an interagency meeting last year. Nor is Kaplan the sort of reporter who would get his facts wrong. He is the author of an excellent new book, "The Wizards of Armageddon" (Simon & Schuster), a pathbreaking account of the evolution of American nuclear strategy.

Perle's remarks also raise fresh doubts about the President's commitment to slowing the arms race. As an aide to Sen. Henry Jackson (D.-Wash.), Perle helped to kill the SALT II agreement, and he is now the Pentagon's chief official on arms control. Asked at the New Republic lunch if he regarded any past arms control treaties as worthwhile, Perle cited

only two—an 1817 agreement between the U.S. and Britain restricting naval vessels on the Great Lakes and an 1899 international agreement banning the dropping of bombs from airborne balloons.

What Perle admitted about the Pershing II is nothing more than what the administration's critics have said all along. An intermediate-range missile to be based in Europe, it provides no deterrent or war-fighting capacity that isn't provided by existing weapons. But it suffers from defects that they lack.

The greatest of these is its vulnerability. Being close to the Soviet Union, the Pershing II would be able to hit targets inside its borders quickly and accurately. Unfortunately, being close to the Soviet Union, it could be hit by the Soviets quickly and accurately. Unlike land-based ICBMs, it can't be "hardened" against attack. Unlike submarine-based missiles, it isn't immune to detection.

What all this means is that, as Perle noted, the missile has only dubious military value. What he apparently didn't mention is that it is also marginally destabilizing. A vulnerable weapon is, almost by definition, a first-strike weapon. If it were not used first—if it were held back for retaliation against a Soviet attack—it would probably be destroyed. Even if it weren't, some of its likely targets, like ICBMs, would have disappeared.

Military utility has never been one of the missile's strong points. The Reagan administration has portrayed it as the only possible response to the Soviet deployment of new SS-20 missiles aimed at Europe. There are two flaws in this depiction—one historical and one military.

The historical flaw is that the decision to deploy the Pershing was made to demonstrate an American commitment to NATO. West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt, worried that the U.S. might sacrifice Western Europe to a Soviet invasion rather than start a nuclear war, got it in an attempt to bind America more closely to its allies. The missile was offered as proof that we are prepared to use nuclear weapons to stop a conventional attack—which we probably aren't and certainly shouldn't be.

The military flaw is that the SS-20s don't change the military balance in Europe. The Soviets have had the means to incinerate the NATO countries since the 1950s. These missiles boast greater accuracy and explosive power, but the improvements are largely superfluous.

Moreover, the U.S. already has an ample force to deter the Soviets from using their missiles—and to retaliate should deterrence fail. The Pershing II adds nothing except vulnerability.

But the administration still insists on deploying it. As his remarks inadvertently revealed, even Perle and his compatriots know that the Pershing 2 will gain us nothing, while requiring considerable political and financial expense. In this case, however, the Reagan administration lacks the courage of its convictions.