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MX crossfire

System 'vital'. . .

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The article on the MX missile system ("At whom is the MX pointed?") by Dr. Stephen B. Zatuchni on April 22 was so replete with errors of fact and comprehension that I feel obligated to help straighten out the record.

It would be interesting to know how Dr. Zatuchni has concluded that "It is cheaper, easier and faster to deploy more missiles and warheads" than to build MX shelters. In reality, we could pour concrete and pile up dirt to build more shelters cheaper than, and just as fast as, the Soviets could build missiles and warheads — their highest technology products.

It is astonishing, indeed, to learn from Dr. Zatuchni that the CIA believes the Soviets could rapidly deploy 20,000 warheads. The CIA experts I deal with think such a move would dramatically curtail their overall military program, destroy their vital civil nuclear power programs by diverting nuclear materials, force cancellation of their foreign nuclear power related commitments, and in general have serious adverse effects on their entire economy. By contrast, MX will cost about one half of 1 percent of the total federal budget over the years it takes to deploy (completion in 1989). This is a small price to pay to strengthen a vital element of our strategic forces which provide security for the free world.

Dr. Zatuchni says MX may cost as much as $50 billion. He must have his own inflation projections. If he tells me how much a Chevrolet will cost in 1988, I will tell him how much MX will cost in that year. Our real estimate is about $33 billion in 1980 dollars, which is about 80 percent of the amount we have spent on our Minuteman missile force, 65 percent of what we have spent on our B-52 bomber fleet, or about 80 percent of what we have spent on our Polaris/Poseidon nuclear missile-carrying submarine force.

Dr. Zatuchni apparently believes it would be cheaper to rebase Minuteman in MX shelters than to build new missiles. In fact, a smaller missile like Minuteman would require a large number of shelters to insure survival of the number of warheads needed to meet our deterrence objectives. A large missile, providing for the economy of large scale, is a way to save money in the system. Because we now have to overhaul some of the earlier models. A new missile is justified to keep maintenance and support costs low in the future.

Dr. Zatuchni suggests that if a missile can flee to a shelter in a few minutes, an airplane certainly can too, thereby implying endorsement of an airbasing concept. With a bit of reflection he might have realized that the shelters into which the missile can move are several hundred times as resistant to nuclear blast as the airplanes, so an airplane has to go a lot further to be safe. This consideration plus the large number of new air bases implied lead to the conclusion that airplane basing of MX would be 50 to 100 percent more expensive than land basing. This result was publicized last year when we completed our design study.

The idea of small diesel powered submarines has been worked on since about 1967 and still looks poor. My office has recently published a summary of the current information. How Dr. Zatuchni thinks a diesel powered sub, visibly snorkeling five hours a day, will be secure is a mystery to me. Our fleet of missile launching submarines is a vital part of our deterrent, but it would be dangerous to concentrate too large a fraction of our eggs in that basket. Even if we did want more missiles at sea, the effective and economical way to get them there is to build more of the long range, capable Trident submarines, not incapable mini-subs patrolling in coastal waters (which would then become a rich hunting ground for Soviet anti-submarine forces).

Dr. Zatuchni is terribly concerned that the location of the MX missiles can be detected by what he states to be present U.S. reconnaissance capabilities. He must sleep uneasily, indeed, if he believes that those responsible for his defense are so fatuous that it wouldn't occur to them to test MX against our own detection capabilities, for which they are also responsible. Simple concrete weights and various electronic black-boxes will be used to keep the transporters and shelters always loaded to the same weight, sending out appropriate emissions, and solve the problem which bothers him.

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