

11995 A 109 New Pentagon Ghosts

President Nixon's case for deploying a modified Sentinel antiballistic missile defense becomes less credible with each elaboration by Administration spokesmen.

"It is a dismal commentary on the Senate Armed Services Committee that only Stuart Symington seems to have either the knowledge or the motivation to put the crucial questions to Defense Secretary Laird and his associates. We trust that, when its turn comes in this critical debate, the Foreign Relations Committee will serve the Senate and the country more adequately.

What is evident in the latest round of testimony is that the Pentagon, having been forced to lay a good many of the ghosts with which it tried in the past to frighten the country into escalation of the arms race, has come up with a whole new set of sepulchral horrors. Mr. Nixon, to his credit, nailed both the "thin" and "thick" ABM projects as frauds for any effective defense of American cities against massive nuclear attack. Now a rationale of comparable dubiety is being put together to persuade the nation that it makes sense to build an ABM screen around the Minuteman offensive missiles.

One major new horror is the Soviet SS9 missile said to carry a nuclear warhead load of twenty to 25 megatons. Last year, American intelligence reported Russia unlikely to proceed with SS9 deployment; now, says Secretary Laird, Washington has "firm and solid information" to the contrary.

"If Soviet SS9 capabilities are what Mr. Laird and Deputy Defense Secretary Packard claim they are, however, they make Mr. Nixon's modified ABM

defense even more irrelevant than some experts have supposed. Mr. Packard says that with large numbers of SS9's in the mid-1970's, Russia could destroy "essentially all" American Minuteman missiles in their underground silos. An SS9 could knock out a Minuteman if it struck even within a mile of its hardened site. With multiple warheads under development by Moscow, what real chance would there be of interception by an acknowledgedly obsolete Sentinel defense?

"The greatest shock in Mr. Laird's testimony, however, was his statement that he would "seriously question" whether the American Polaris submarine fleet could provide an adequate nuclear deterrent after 1972. Senator Symington obviously had assumed—as had most other Americans—that these nuclear-powered submarines, capable of firing nuclear missiles without surfacing, would remain the least vulnerable of all nuclear weapons systems for many years.

Mr. Laird said he would explain his doubts about the Polaris system after 1972 in closed session, but this is not good enough. If a weapons system on which the United States and its allies have placed heavy reliance for their survival will be obsolete after 1972, the American people have the right to know it.

The net effect of Mr. Laird's testimony is to project the nightmare of an accelerated nuclear arms race, rather than an all-out effort with the Soviet Union to bring these terrible weapons under control. Its effect is to make even more dubious the "safeguard" label that President Nixon has tried to pin on his ill-conceived ABM project and to raise new questions about the Administration's reluctance to move for arms control talks with the Russians.