

'MIRV Mania': A Familiar Drama

The curtain is going up on an old familiar drama. The scene opens with wild cries of alarm—"The Russians are coming, the Russians are coming," and we are all defenseless, at their mercy, because of a few mushy-headed disarmament idiots.

The center piece this time is the revelation that the Soviet Union has successfully tested on two of their missiles an independently targeted multiple re-entry vehicle (MIRV). The curtain raiser is faithful to the well-tried formula. News of the MIRV breakthrough is leaked to heralds of doom and they promptly set the drums to beating.

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This is based, it seems to me, on a fundamental illusion of America's inevitable superiority. It has been true since the beginning of the nuclear age when the United States was the sole possessor of the atomic bomb. Years would pass before the Soviets could come up with a bomb, it was said.

When they tested their first atomic device several years in advance of most estimates it brought a shock of surprise. The parallel with MIRV is close. For more than three years the United States has been installing multiple warheads on land-based missiles and on those carried by Polaris and Poseidon submarines. While Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird warned that the Soviets would MIRV, the prevailing belief was that their achievement of this advanced technology was some way off. There was even the suggestion that the Russians might refrain from MIRVing with the hope that this would make it easier to reach agreement in SALT II on limiting the number of offensive missiles.

Any technology the United States can achieve so can the Soviets. That is the lesson which seems never to be learned as this re-run of the old drama is on once again.

America's MIRVed missiles were the reason we could accept the fact of a superior number overall of Soviet missiles without MIRVs. In the next four to five years as the first Soviet tests move on to deployment that advantage will disappear.

For the doom sayers not only does this put the nation in deadly peril but

it rules out any further efforts to arrive at a mutual agreement to cut back strategic armaments. There is, however, a less cataclysmic view. With several years still to go for deployment, the Soviets may regard their MIRV as a bargaining chip in the SALT talks to resume in the fall in Geneva.

On our side we hear a lot about bargaining chips. The \$12 billion plus long range Trident submarines is justified as a bargaining counter against a reported similar new sub the Soviets are said to have in the works.

With the whole disarmament apparatus so downgraded by the President, the burden of trying to reconcile the new MIRV development will fall on Henry Kissinger. Kissinger played a leading part in the talks between the President and Leonid I. Brezhnev in the White House in June. The surprising news out of those talks was that the two leaders had agreed that a limitation on offensive missiles could be reached in 1974.

Kissinger along with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin played the central role in the breakthrough on SALT I, first in May, 1971, and then in the climax which came just before the Moscow summit a year later. In the Byzantine atmosphere of the White House he was subjected to attacks from two different directions. First it was leaked that he had been so dovish as to yield to Soviet blandishments and accept a secondary position for the United States. Later his enemies in the White House put it out that he was the supreme hawk who had taken in all his liberal admirers.

One of the imponderables is how much Kissinger has been sideswiped by the Watergate mess. His role at this point is supremely important if the strategic arms race is not to go into a new and perhaps irrevocable spiral. As head of the Disarmament and Arms Control Agency the President named Fred C. Ikle, a gentle, scholarly man whose latest public utterance on the arms race seemed to cast doubt on whether any limitations should be agreed to.

In his official revelation of the Soviet success, MIRV Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger made one statement likely to be downplayed in the current drama. In spite of the new development and what it means for the future neither the Soviet Union nor the United States has a first strike capacity which could prevent a retaliatory blow. Cruising the seven seas the Poseidon and Polaris submarines would still be able to destroy the attacker.

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William Raspberry is on vacation. His column will resume upon his return.