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The Paradox of Missile Defense

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One man picked up a club, and the other answered with a stone. A knife was parried with a sword. The shield followed, then the spear, the mace, the longbow, the fortified wall, the catapult, the castle, the cannon. Across eons, every warrior's improvement in defense was followed by a breakthrough in offense, leading to yet new countermeasures, ever more lethal. This ancient offense-defense cycle was made modern by the machine gun and the tank, then by warplanes and anti aircraft guns, and, ultimately, by ballistic missiles and anti ballistic missiles.

In 1967, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara analyzed the structure of this dynamic to argue for a halt to it. "Were we to deploy a heavy ABM system . . . the Soviets would clearly be strongly motivated so to increase their offensive capability as to cancel out our defense advantage." Not only would the mutual escalation, launched in the name of defense, be futile and wasteful, but it would make war more likely rather than less. At the end of his Pentagon tenure, McNamara had arrived at the central paradox of the nuclear age: how defense and offense had taken on opposite meanings, with the former having become the inevitable precursor of the latter. In opposing the deployment of the ABM, the American defense chief was breaking with the oldest pattern of human belligerence.

This counter intuitive repudiation of defense was soon embraced across the right-left political divide, with Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger becoming its champions. The idea, enshrined in the 1972 treaty according to which Moscow and Washington jointly foreswore the anti ballistic missile, was arguably the most important intellectual achievement of the Cold War. Defense could no longer be simplistically defined as moral, with offense as immoral, because the two were halves of the same nut. At last, it was understood that the only way out of the endless cycle of arms escalation was the renunciation of the whole of it. The ABM treaty was thus the ground of subsequent arms limitation, and then arms reduction, leading to nothing less than the non violent resolution of the nuclear stand off.

When George W. Bush came into office as president, he quickly denounced the ABM Treaty as a "relic" of the Cold War. (In doing this, he was largely dependent on the analysis of Paul D. Wolfowitz, whose public career began on the staff of the Committee to Maintain a

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Prudent Defense Policy, which was formed to oppose the ABM Treaty.) Because the United States was forbidden by the 1972 treaty to go forward with a Missile Defense System, Bush unilaterally "abrogated" the agreement in 2002. Not only did this action destroy the arms reduction process (immediately killing START II), it made inevitable the next round of arms escalation. Missile defense began as Ronald Reagan's Star Wars fantasy, but in Reagan's vision it was to be paired with steady progress toward nuclear abolition, an element that Bush simply dropped.

The actual deployment of US missile defense is well underway - a first shoe dropping. But the Bush system involves the added provocation that Poland and the Czech Republic are sites of some key components, confirming Moscow's fears that the United States, putatively targeting a "rogue" state like Iran, is actually aiming at Russia. The Kremlin reacted exactly as McNamara had predicted it would 40 years ago, and last week the second shoe dropped. "Russia tests missile to pierce US shield," a headline in the International Herald Tribune read, announcing an offensive breakthrough. On May 29, Moscow's new missile flew, and it was a success. Multiple warheads will so enhance a new generation of long-range Russian missiles "as to cancel out," in McNamara's phrase, any imagined defensive advantage of America's shield.

Two days after the Russian test, Vladimir Putin said simply, "It wasn't us who initiated a new round of the arms race."

Of all the problems that are exacerbating US-Russian tensions today, none compares for destructiveness with Bush's misguided missile defense project. The irony, of course, is that this reigniting of the old tensions in the name of security leads to less security, not more. The tragedy is that it ignores the lesson that had already been so well learned four decades ago.

A consensus has lately developed that the Bush administration's worst legacy will be tied to the disastrous war in Iraq, but that may be wrong. The resuscitation of the fantasy of missile defense, and with it the raising from the dead of the arms race, may result in catastrophes in comparison to which Iraq is benign.

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James Carroll's column appears regularly in the Globe.

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