

Senate mandates beam weapons

Very different factions support the recent push to develop advanced anti-missile capabilities, reports Military Editor Steven Bardwell.

In a voice vote on May 17, the full U.S. Senate added an amendment to the FY83 Department of Defense budget appropriation committing the United States to build a space-based laser anti-ballistic missile system within the decade. By Dec. 1, the DOD is ordered to submit to Congress a specific plan for developing such systems. Co-sponsored by Sens. Malcolm Wallop (R.-Wyo.), Harrison Schmitt (R.-N.M.), Jake Garn (R.-Utah), John Warner (R.-Va.), Don Nickles (R.-Okla.), Barry Goldwater (R.-Ariz.), Alphonse D'Amato (R.-N.Y.), S. I. Hayakawa (R.-Calif.), Mack Mattingly (R.-Ga.), and John East (R.-N.C.), the resolution reads: "The Secretary of Defense shall spend such funds as are authorized and appropriated for an orbiting laser weapon system to produce such systems as quickly as technology will allow . . . within a decade."

While appropriating no new funds for the laser-weapon research effort, the resolution opens the way for a national policy debate on advanced strategic weaponry and overall economic-technological capabilities. The timing is interesting: the 1972-74 U.S.-U.S.S.R. agreement on anti-ballistic missiles is up for renewal this fall.

The resolution meanwhile makes the Senate's reply to the House version of the DOD appropriation bill, which cut the DOD's request for funds by more than half. Capitol Hill observers see both positions as preparations for the upcoming conference-committee negotiations on the DOD funding bill, with the Senate firmly on the pro-beam weapons side and the House opposed.

The factional line-up

The fight over accelerated development of beam weapons has divided Washington in several unexpected ways. The opponents to development of beam weaponry for ballistic missile defense is centered in the highest levels of the Air Force. One Senate staff member describes "the group of old-guard generals who run the Air Force who are opposed to any qualitatively new technology in the military." This group in the Pentagon is not opposed to the use of lasers for tactical, battlefield deployment (for anti-aircraft or anti-armor missions),

but has firmly committed itself to opposing the beam weapon for defense against ballistic missiles.

As all military analysts have realized, the perfection of a beam weapon capable of destroying nuclear-armed ballistic missiles would totally change the nature of modern nuclear warfare: for the first time in 25 years, a defense against nuclear holocaust would be feasible. The beam weapon—whether using a laser beam or a beam of particles (or more exotic plasma or microwave beams)—is theoretically capable of aiming a ray carrying a large amount of energy with pinpoint accuracy over many hundreds of miles, and destroying instantaneously (at the speed of light) an incoming missile. It is the first technology which even promises to be capable of a complete defense against nuclear holocaust.

This Pentagon group, backed by influential circles in other parts of the DOD, has consistently opposed not only beam-weapon development, but any defense against nuclear weapons in the name of preserving the nuclear strategy of "mutually assured destruction," the idea that the greatest deterrent to nuclear war is the assurance by both nuclear superpowers that their adversary has the ability to destroy them should they start a nuclear war. This doctrine, more accurately called assured vulnerability, has been accepted only by the United States; the Soviet Union has consistently stressed all aspects of nuclear defense (civil defense, anti-missile missiles, and an aggressive beam development program).

Senator Wallop, in his speech introducing the amendment, accurately stated the connection between the basic Western strategy of mutually assured destruction and the opposition to the beam weapon: "Then the doctrine of mutually assured destruction became fashionable. . . . Robert McNamara and the civilian and military dynasty he started want so much for this condition to be real that they imagined it was real. As a consequence, we had scrapped our air defense system, scrapped a promising ABM system, and slowed down our research and development for new technology on defensive weapons."

In the current fight in Washington, the anti-beam position is put forward by the House Armed Services Committee, whose leading staff person for research and development, Anthony Batista, proposed the cuts in the DOD request stopping research on the only short-term laser beam program (using chemical lasers), and restarting a longer-term basic research program in beam weapons. This opposition to the short-term chemical laser was described in public as being based on the impossibility of using long-wave-length laser light (like that produced by chemical lasers) for a beam weapon, because a long-wave-length laser would be too heavy and costly to make an effective weapon. The House committee stated its firm opposition to a "premature" development program for beam weapons, echoing the testimony put forward by the Pentagon and Air Force spokesmen.

The pro-beam weapon forces

Accurately identifying this House position on the spurious issue of short- versus long-wave-length lasers as a "red herring," the pro-beam forces in Washington have come from two widely divergent camps. On the one side, Senator Wallop (apparently aligned with British strategists) and a group of "young Turks" in the Air Force are supporting the beam weapon as the ultimate in air power. Seriously disturbed by the recent Soviet advances in beam weapon development, which include the destruction last year of an ICBM in flight by a Soviet chemical laser beam weapon, these beam weapon supporters have played on the existence of a "beam gap" and are pushing for the development of beam weapon in the United States. In spite of their agreement with the general anti-technology bias of the Air Force traditional elements, Wallop and his co-thinkers can see clearly that beam weapon technology has revolutionary implications which will not wait for the present Pentagon leadership for their development. The late April testimony by Secretary of Defense Weinberger that according to his "optimistic" estimate, the U.S. would have a beam weapon well into the 21st century, has these pro-beam spokesmen terrified.

On the other side, typified by Sen. Harrison Schmitt, and Gen. Daniel Graham, author of *The High Frontier Project*, is a group supporting the beam weapon for entirely different reasons. Their concern is the entire scope of civilian and military technologies and industrial capacities. Starting with a commitment to use the most advanced technologies of space exploration and high energy plasma technologies, the faction represented by Schmitt, the National Democratic Policy Committee led by *EIR* founder Lyndon LaRouche, and others, has identified the beam weapon research program as the keystone not merely of necessary upgrading of the U.S. military, but also, of an economic revival.

The problems of low productivity, insufficient capital investment, and decaying education would all be very efficiently addressed by a crash program for development of beam weapons. In much the same way the Apollo program did in the 1960s, a large-scale investment program in the most advanced propulsion, energy, computer, and magnetic technologies—like those demanded by the development of a space-based beam weapon for ballistic missile defense—would force the education of new scientists and engineers, provide a source of technological innovation, and generate large amounts of capital investment in the most advanced and capital intensive industries. This combination was the key to the impact of the Apollo program on the U.S. economy, and would be replicated by a beam weapon research and development program.

In a series of white papers recently released by the NDPC and the Fusion Energy Foundation, the beam weapon program is shown to be critical in developing all the technologies leading to the next, major stage in technological development, "The Plasma Age." According to the FEF, this stage of industrial technology will be as great an industrial revolution as was the introduction of electricity 100 years ago. By making available energy densities thousands of times higher than those available today, all aspects of industry will be changed: energy generation using nuclear fusion, electricity production using magnetohydrodynamics, materials processing using the fusion or plasma torches, transportation using magnetic levitation, mining and refining using plasma torches, Earth-orbit for production of exotic medical and electronic materials, and many others.

The pro-beam grouping has proposed a program consisting of three parts contained in the Senate amendment:

- 1) A commitment to build an orbiting anti-ballistic missile beam weapon before 1990. This program should be "technology limited, not funding limited," in the words of the recent General Accounting Office analysis which concluded that the program was, at present, funding limited.

- 2) A management reorganization to centralize and speed up the research and development of beam weapons. The Senate amendment calls for a "fast track" program which would allow the DOD to circumvent the usually time-consuming procurement procedures and cut the development time of the weapon by one half.

- 3) A reconsideration of the West's nuclear strategy. This, while only implicit in the Senate amendment, is widely discussed in Washington; the replacement of the doctrine of mutually assured destruction, by a doctrine of assured survival, in the words of General Graham, is long overdue.