

# Fletcher Report calls for near-term ABM development program

by Paul Gallagher

On the Columbus Day weekend, after ten days of stalling, the first revelations of the anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defense study completed on Oct. 1 by a top scientific panel began to hit the press, in the form of interviews with unnamed Pentagon officials. Defense Department sources said that the Fletcher Commission report called for a major acceleration of U.S. beam-weapons programs, and that a decision by Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger was imminent.

The Pentagon "leaks," which began in the Oct. 9 *Washington Post* and then hit the *New York Post* and Associated Press wires the next day, were the first open signs of the internal battle through which military and national security officials are trying to bring President Reagan's ABM program back into prominence politically.

The program, a major shift in U.S. military doctrine announced by the President on national television on March 23, has been downplayed during the past month especially, sacrificed to a new administration arms control campaign. Defense Department officials had lost a battle with the State Department against Henry Kissinger's "build-down" arms control farce, and they also lost the battle to expose Soviet violations of SALT I and SALT II.

Reporting on the conclusions reached by the Fletcher Commission, Walter Pincus wrote in the Oct. 9 *Washington Post* that "an advisory panel has urged . . . Weinberger to step up research on new space weapons next fiscal year, including work on lasers for use against enemy missiles. . . . Weinberger is expected to make his decision this week or next on the recommendations of the commission."

Pincus quoted Pentagon officials insisting that continued Soviet improvements in space capabilities—particularly launching heavy objects into space quickly and tracking U.S. ships for missile targeting by aircraft—required a much bigger U.S. beam weapons program. (The House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense has just declassified testimony by Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency head Richard Cooper, who says that the Soviets could quickly put a laser in space on board a "300 or 400,000-pound object.") The Defense officials told the *Washington Post* what has been privately known since early September—that the Fletcher Commission report calls for continuing the existing anti-missile laser program known as TRIAD, but adding higher priority emphasis on "other, more promising laser approach-

es, such as short-wave and nuclear explosion-created x-rays."

The *New York Post's* Niles Lathem quoted Pentagon sources on Oct. 10 that the Fletcher Commission report contains "a list of projects that could begin as early as next year," and that "currently, the thinking is to launch hundreds of mirrors in space that would direct laser beams fired from the ground against Soviet missile targets."

Such hybrid systems are in fact only one of a number of near-term deployment options now under intense discussion among National Security Council, Defense Department, the military services, and Presidential science advisory officials. Lathem quoted anti-beam-weapon Congressman Joseph Adabbo (D-N.Y.) about the Pentagon plans about to emerge from the Fletcher study: "You're talking about big bucks."

Weinberger is "under heavy pressure for a big expansion" in the beam weapons program and "about to make a decision," according to an Associated Press wire of Oct. 10. It is likely that the Secretary of Defense wants clearance to make a high-profile announcement of such an expansion and a real anti-missile deployment mission, for the beam weapons development efforts which are now making rapid progress in the national laboratories.

*Aviation Week* magazine reported on Oct. 10 that a meeting has been set between the Defense Department and the House Armed Services Committee "to iron out differences and ascertain that the DOD is . . . developing short-wavelength laser hardware, not merely continuing technology studies." The source of this information was House Armed Services Committee staff leader Anthony Battista, a member of Dr. Edward Teller's delegation to the recent Erice, Italy conference on "The Technological Basis for Peace."

*EIR* readers know from our report of that Erice conference that Teller and other top Reagan science advisers consider deployed beam-weapon anti-missile defenses possible during the 1980s. They consider it easiest immediately to develop defense of areas of U.S. and European territory against the threat of intermediate-range and submarine launched ballistic missiles, which are slower and more vulnerable than ICBMs. Defense against air- and sea-launched cruise-type missiles is easier still, for the same reasons. These advisers feel that these simpler tasks for anti-missile defenses should be tackled immediately in a large, broad-based effort which will aim toward eventual defense capabilities against ICBMs.