

Professor's charges against MIT expose fraud in US missile defense program

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Theodore Postol, a professor of science, technology and national security policy at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and a former science and policy advisor to the Departments of Energy and Defense, has publicly accused the MIT administration of trying to perpetrate scientific fraud in order to hide fundamental flaws in the National Missile Defense (NMD) program.

The issues raised by Postol reveal details of the inner workings of the US military-industrial complex. Despite the seriousness of his charges, the MIT administration has dragged its feet and is yet to undertake any serious steps to investigate or refute them.

The NMD is the successor to the Reagan administration's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), dubbed "Star Wars." SDI was to render nuclear weapons, especially Soviet strategic missiles, "impotent and obsolete" and thus help the US ruling class achieve its dream of absolute military superiority over the world. Yet, even after \$69 billion wasted on this technical fantasy, the program was a dismal failure and was finally abandoned.

However, the missile defense clique in the US government was biding its time and finally got the opportunity when the Pentagon and Raytheon Corporation (the maker of the Patriot missile system) conspired to claim near-perfect performance of the Patriot in shooting down Iraqi Scud missiles during the 1991 Gulf War. This supposedly demonstrated the feasibility of fielding a national missile defense system to protect the continental United States from missiles fired by "rogue states" or by others "accidentally."

Postol came to prominence at this time when he publicly challenged Pentagon and Raytheon claims about the Patriot. When Postol examined the videotapes of the supposed intercepts released by the Pentagon, he came to the conclusion that the Patriot had not hit any of the Scud missiles it had targeted. Raytheon, which grants millions of dollars to MIT, brought pressure to bear on the university administration to silence Postol.

The NMD has been dogged by persistent and credible charges of technological fraud, almost from the time it was approved by the Clinton administration in 1996. Nevertheless, this program has not only survived but has now been given a boost by the right-wing cabal within the Bush administration who aim to utilize this program to advance their goal of world domination.

The current version of NMD utilizes missile interceptors, termed exo-atmospheric kill vehicles (EKVs), to destroy incoming warheads. For the EKV to perform its function successfully it is essential for it to discriminate between a real warhead and a decoy designed to confuse the EKV and draw it towards a false target.

The TRW corporation was contracted to design the target discrimination technology for NMD. In 1995, TRW hired Dr. Nira Schwartz to test the target discrimination computer algorithm, a crucial component of this discrimination technology. To her alarm, Schwartz found that the target discrimination algorithm was incapable of identifying a real warhead from a decoy. She insisted TRW management admit this fact immediately to

Pentagon. TRW reacted by firing Schwartz in 1996.

Despite Schwartz's finding, TRW, along with Boeing, the prime contractor for NMD, scheduled a test of this target discrimination technology at a cost of \$100 million. By manipulating the test data, the Pentagon and TRW not only claimed this 1997 test a success but further claimed that the discrimination technology was "effective."

The faking of test results received wide publicity when Schwartz filed a lawsuit against TRW—under the Federal False Claims Act, which allows US citizens to expose individuals and companies which defraud the US government (and get a portion of the award if they win). She charged the company has knowingly defrauded the American people.

A committee called Phase One Engineering Team (POET) was appointed by a special agent hired by the US Department of Justice to examine the 1997 TRW test results. Two researchers from the MIT Lincoln Laboratory played major roles, with one of them appointed as the chairman of this committee.

Their report exonerated TRW from the accusation previously leveled by Schwartz that TRW, with the Pentagon's collusion, faked the test results. Uncritically basing its conclusions upon the manipulated test data provided by TRW, instead of demanding and utilizing raw data from the tests, the report claimed that discrimination algorithms "are well designed and work properly."

Professor Postol conducted his own analysis of the 1997 TRW test and found the conclusions drawn by the POET team utterly unwarranted. Suspecting scientific fraud, he wrote to MIT President Charles Vest to initiate an inquiry into the conclusions of the POET report.

When Postol's letter elicited no action, even after nine months, he then lodged a formal complaint against Vest in January 2002. He appealed to the chairman of MIT Corporation, Alexander V. D'Arbeloff, charging that Vest had failed to take any action to investigate "a serious case of scientific fraud that has taken place under his oversight of the MIT Administration."

Initially, the MIT administration claimed the report issued by POET belonged to the government and the university had no obligation to investigate its accuracy. However, because of media publicity given to Postol's charges, MIT was forced to open an inquiry. The university appointed Dr. Edward F. Crawley, head of the department of Aeronautics and Astronautics, to look into these charges. After several months of deliberation, Dr. Crawley recommended a formal investigation in December 2002. The MIT administration is yet to publicly comment on what it will do to implement this recommendation.

Despite repeated exposure of fraud within the NMD program, not to speak of its technical dubiousness, this program nevertheless persists with the support of successive administrations. This behavior cannot be explained simply by the unquenchable profit motive of the aerospace and weapons industries; rather, it behooves one to examine the deeper motives.

The cornerstone of post-World War II US foreign policy has been the

achievement of military superiority over all potential rivals. This quest, supported by both Democrats and Republicans, has resulted in the buildup and use of the most destructive military machine in history.

The triumphalism of the US ruling elite upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union has now given way to deep anxiety over capitalism's future. The almighty dollar, which at one time served as a tool of hegemony, is not as viable a tool at present.

Simultaneously, globalization of capitalism has undercut the effectiveness of previous economic policy options available to the US ruling classes under the postwar nation-state system. Thus, they find themselves in a historical quandary.

This forces the US ruling class to rely almost exclusively on the military to maintain its hegemony. Given the overwhelming superiority of offensive weapons available to the Pentagon, the major military threat to be neutralized is that posed by missiles.

This military vulnerability has to be closed at any cost and no obstacle such as the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty will stand in their way. Even though some Democrats have expressed concern at the implications of abrogating the ABM treaty, by spurring an arms race, their opposition has to be treated as a formality given their complete prostration before the Bush administration.

The importance attached to NMD by the ruling circles is evidenced by two recent important developments. The first is the US District Court's dismissal, on February 24, of the previously mentioned seven-year-old lawsuit by Nira Schwartz. This court ruling was based upon the Bush administration's claim that national security would be imperiled if the case is argued in public—this despite the fact that Schwartz's attorneys had made no request for any classified documents to present their arguments and had repeatedly made this position public. However, TRW did request such classified documents from the US government in order to "defend themselves," thus providing the government with the needed weapon to get the case dismissed. Critics, like Schwartz's attorney Joseph Barrera, strongly suspect collusion between TRW and the Bush administration.

The second development is the Defense Department's recent request to the US Congress to exempt the NMD program from the longstanding law requiring operational testing of new weapons systems before their deployment. The Bush administration wants to rush into a deployment of NMD in Alaska and California by October 2004. By this unprecedented action, the administration intends to make the National Missile Defense system a fait accompli.

Some of the Bush administration's thinking can be gleaned from the following remarks of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to the US Congress:

"I happen to think that thinking we cannot deploy something ... until you have everything perfect, every 'i' dotted and every 't' crossed, it's probably not a good idea. In the case of missile defense, I think we need to get something out there, in the ground, at sea, and in a way that we can test it, we can look at it, we can develop it, we can evolve it, and ... learn from the experimentation with it."

In other words, the administration plans to experiment with the NMD technology and "perfect it" after deployment. They want to keep their adversaries guessing and create enough uncertainties to put them off balance, thus spurring the arms race. They calculate that the US ruling classes can "afford" an arms race, while their opponents would be bankrupted by it.

There is certainly an element of irrationality to the pathological quest for NMD, even to the point of viewing a missile defense system that does not work as better than none at all. This in turn is connected to their single-minded pursuit of absolute political and economic dominance over their adversaries. The Bush administration is totally oblivious to arguments advanced by critics of NMD, such as Postol and Schwartz (an Israeli-born scientist who supports the concept of NMD), when they point out that the

current version is technically unworkable.

The financial and the symbolic significance of missile defense is well understood by the parasitic scoundrels in both the industry and academia. It is in their interest to cooperate to maintain a solid front when under assault. Given the monopoly nature of the military industry and the associated research, they realize that committing fraud will not derail these lucrative programs. If scientific objectivity proves to be in the way then it will be cast aside as so much inconvenience.

Among the universities performing military research in the United States, MIT has the most extensive ties to the military industrial complex. Many MIT officials and faculty play important roles in the US government as advisors and high officials. For example, President Charles Vest serves as a member of the President's Committee of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST), which plays a major role in advising the Bush administration in the application of technology to the military and to its so-called war on terror.

MIT obtains the bulk of its research funds from the US military and most of its research program is either military or military-related. Because of this research, MIT not only maintains close liaison with military industries, such as Raytheon and TRW, but also receives payments, in the form of grants and research funds, directly from these industries.

MIT not only lends its considerable technical expertise to enhance the war-making ability of the Pentagon but is also using its reputation to hide scientific fraud.

The colossal waste of public funds by programs such as NMD cannot simply be countered by mere exposure of fraud, of either the financial or scientific kind. Indeed, it is notable that Postol's exposure of fraud in NMD does not stem from any politically principled opposition to missile defense. He opposes only this incarnation of NMD, but supports an alternative system, which aims the interceptor at the missile launchers (boost phase interception), instead of at the warheads, as done by the present system.

Opposition to missile defense in particular and military spending in general requires a clear understanding that the deep-rooted nexus between the US government, military industries and academia is part and parcel of the attempt by the US ruling class to overcome its foreboding future by threats and unprecedented violence.



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