

Washington: The Anti-Republican Missile

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Sept. 21 — The Presidential election campaign has not only started, but is beginning to influence executive decisions of the most delicate and fundamental nature. The trend is not new—policy divorced from politics is heresy in Washington—but it is starting early this time and touching the most important issues of the age.

The Administration's decision to build a limited missile defense—not against the Soviet Union, which has intercontinental missiles, but against China, which doesn't—is only the latest illustration of the point. In military terms, the arguments for doing so, as Secretary of Defense McNamara has said, are "marginal." But in political terms they are practical if not logical.

Defense or Deterrent?

Mr. McNamara knows all the military considerations as well as anybody in the world. He has argued with more facts and passion than anybody else that the best defense against missiles is a sophisticated devastating missile offense; but the best, and probably the only, re-

liable guarantee against a missile attack on the United States lies in persuading the enemy that a missile attack on this country would result in an immediate nuclear counter-strike that would destroy the attacker.

Militarily, the case is fairly plain. The entire policy of the United States rests on it. The present and foreseeable possibility of protecting the United States from a deranged enemy—who can attack us with missiles from ships near our coasts regardless of missile defense—is out of the question.

But politically, the case is not plain. It is not only the Democratic Administration but the Republican opposition that is playing politics with this question. Johnson and McNamara are being asked whether they are "indifferent" to the defense of the American people. How do they know the Chinese will not be "irrational"? Why should they not assume the worst from the Communists?

These are hard questions to answer in the emotion of a Presidential campaign, so the Administration has compromised. It has agreed to a \$5-billion missile defense program, assuming the worst from the

Chinese, but it has warned against a larger \$50-billion missile defense program, assuming the best from the Soviets.

This is an awkward political argument to make. But it is also quite a gamble. What the Administration is really doing is building, not an anti-missile system for the Chinese but for the Republicans; and in the process it is not blocking an anti-missile system for the Russians, but by assuming the worst it is encouraging the very people who would pour all our resources into the external war no matter what happens to the war in our own cities.

Politics and Policy

It is the old story of this Administration. From the very beginning it has dealt primarily not with the problems before it but with the politics of the problems. It is a fallacy to think of Johnson as a wilful man who imposes his opinions on others and ignores advice. The opposite is the case. His problem is not that he decides but that he does not decide. He compromises with everybody, which is what a majority leader does, but what a President must not do.

His recent decisions under-

score this political approach to policy. The doves want a Maginot Line between North and South Vietnam. Most of his military advisers say it is costly deception and will not block supplies from the North; but after opposing it, he accepted. The hawks want to bomb Hanoi and other targets he has previously put off limits as too dangerous, but as the frustrations of the stalemate continue, he bombs the targets.

Politically, it is understandable. He is determined to hold "the middle ground" of American political life. The Republicans are condemning him for committing too many troops and for not bombing more—they too are trying to have it both ways—so he does what he always did as majority leader on Capitol Hill. He appeases one group of his critics and placates the other, and hopes this compromise will appeal to the uncommitted majority as "reasonable."

The result, unfortunately, seems to be that it is neither good policy nor good politics. For it perpetuates the notion that he is playing politics with everything, and this has always been his most serious personal and political problem.