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Window of Opportunity

Millions of Americans have joined the rapidly growing "nuclear freeze" movement to demand that their government get moving with meaningful arms control efforts and halt the slide toward catastrophe. At the same time, the Senate Armed Services Committee has voted unanimously to defer production and deployment of the MX missile, because of lingering confusion over its role and survivability.

These two events are in fact closely related. The dangers of nuclear war and the complexity of our next strategic move have both increased dramatically because of the introduction of "counter-force" weapons—highly accurate ICBMs with multiple warheads, theoretically capable of a "first strike" against the nuclear forces of an adversary.

The ill-fated "racetrack" plan to hide the MX missile on moving railroad cars was the first concrete indication that average citizens were correct in perceiving that the arms race had indeed reached a new plateau of insanity. Having rejected that bizarre scheme, however, the administration is evidently at a loss on how to proceed.

I have proposed a solution that attempts to address both the counter-force dilemma and the goals of the nuclear freeze movement: a modified freeze followed by selective and synchronized reductions designed to close the "window of vulnerability" through arms control.

Specifically, we should first propose a modified moratorium on anything that can increase the threat to the land-based ICBMs of either country. Primarily, this would mean no more land-based MIRVs, and no special efforts to increase the accuracy of those already in existence.

Today, the Soviet Union already has so many warheads on its MIRVed ICBM force, and these systems are so accurate, that they are theoretically in a position to destroy a large proportion of the U.S. ICBM force and bomber bases, using only a fraction of the Soviet ICBM inventory to do so. (Our submarine force, invulnerable for the time being, may not always be so.)

As of now, the United States is not in an equivalent position, but the Soviets know that we soon will be. The MX, when and if deployed, would be a "silo-buster." But even if it were never deployed, the Trident D5 missile, to be placed aboard the new Ohio-class submarines, would pose an identical problem. The Soviets, who, unlike us, have 80 percent of their warheads on ICBMs, will then be faced with a threat to almost all of their strategic forces.

Unless we act, the situation we are heading toward is one in which each side will have so much to lose if it hesitates that both will be forced to keep their nuclear forces on a hair-trigger alert. And of course, one false move in a crisis could be our last.

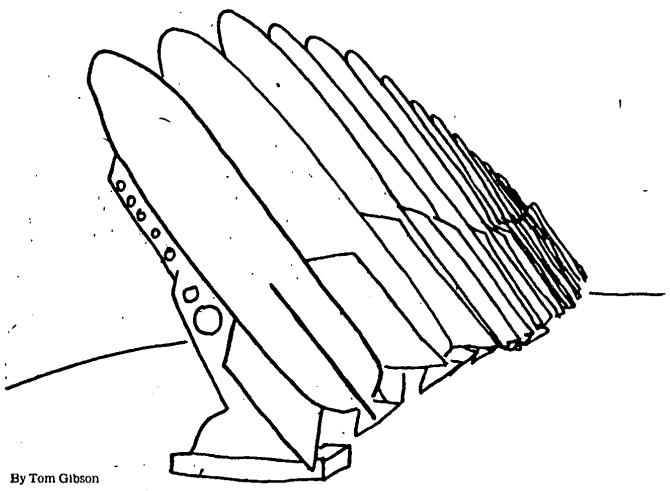
During the proposed moratorium, we would need to have a hedge against the failure of the subsequent negotiations. Development and testing of the MX and D5 missiles should continue, although with the intent that their deployment should be rendered unnecessary by means of U.S. and Soviet reductions. In other words, the MX would remain "on the shelf," where the Senate committee has just put it.

Reductions should then aim straight at the vulnerability problem. We should seek the step-by-step dismantling of the MIRVed ICBMs of both sides. Assuming, however, that ICBMs in some form will probably remain a necessary evil, we should arrange to convert to a new, less destabilizing type: specifically, an ICBM carrying just one warhead. At the same time, overall totals of strategic launchers (ICBMs, SLBMs and heavy bombers) must be held down. A reasonable number would be the lowest level agreed to in SALT II: 2,250 systems. Reductions would have to be carefully synchronized, and take place in an agreement of extended duration so as to remove the arms control process as much as possible from the turbulence caused by our presidental politics.

There are many different ways to accomplish such reductions and to adjust strategic systems on both sides. Calculations that have been done in this regard prove to me that: 1) the United States and the Soviets can make this transition without increasing the risk of surprise attack; 2) once it is completed, the deadly arithmetic of a "first strike" no longer would work out for either side; and 3) although the number of nuclear warheads remaining on each side would be substantial, they would be less than half the number that were anticipated under SALT II. This approach deliberately leaves great flexibility for each side to redesign its overall nuclear force if it wishes to do so. The familiar "Triad" of land-, sea- and air-based systems could be maintained, or there could be a shift to new forms of launchers with characteristics that protect us against the reappearance of the vulnerability problem. And of course both sides would be in a better position to continue the arms control process.

For many years, arms control was the domain of specialists. Its transformation into a popular issue is creating a new challenge for political leadership: but the old responsibility for careful deliberation remains. We should focus the growing public mandate for arms control on an achievable result that would do the most to diminish the chances of nuclear war and create the stability and momentum necessary for greater progress later on. We have entered a "window of opportunity" that will close if we do not act.

The writer is a Democratic representative from Tennessee.



By Tom Gibson