

Why the fight over the Trident missile?

by Leif Johnson

When Navy Secretary John F. Lehman, Jr. wrote to General Dynamics Corporation (GD) Chairman David S. Lewis in mid-March to announce that "it may be necessary to consider alternatives to the Trident-class submarine," the debate over the mammoth subs accelerated full steam.

The outlines of this debate first emerged in the mid-seventies with the Zumwalt-Rickover row over diesel versus nuclear-powered subs, and more recently there has been debate over the MX missile versus the Trident-II missile. The question of whether to have the Trident itself surfaced in a *New York Times* story last November. Author Richard Burt, now director of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs at the State Department was provided information from a Pentagon source on the cost and time overrun problems of the Trident. The unnamed Pentagon leaker was said to have been an advocate of the MX missile. Eighty-year-old Admiral Hyman Rickover has entered the fray, blaming GD for its failures, although still pro-Trident.

Then, on April 4, the *New York Times* charged that GD had a total of 127 sizes and shapes of steel which were inferior to the grade specified in the contract. The result, according to the *Times*, was that this steel could have found itself in 61,500 locations in the Trident.

General Dynamics spokesmen responded to the *Times* attack that only 50 pounds of nonconforming steel, of a total 23 million pounds of steel in the vessel, was found to have been installed in nonsensitive areas of the Ohio submarine, the first Trident to undergo trials. Further, the audit of steel stock at the Groton shipyards was made by General Dynamics, not by the Navy as claimed by the *Times*.

Sources close to GD also claimed that Admiral Rickover had been gunning for the company since the cost overrun settlement in 1978. Rickover had demanded the company bear the entire \$700 million overrun.

Subsequent stories that the Trident would be given to other shipyards were in fact arguments for its demise. It would take any other contractor two years and \$1 billion to tool up for Trident production.

While the small-wars-are-beautiful proponents are championing Rapid Deployment Forces, diesel subma-

rines, missile-carrying destroyers, and the defeat of the Soviets through psychological warfare, the strategic weaknesses of U.S. defense are no better addressed by Rickover's faction. The one fact that probably has the admiral upset is that while the United States can produce one and a half Tridents a year, the Soviets can churn out 13 of the comparable Oscar-class subs a year. The Soviets have a combined nuclear and diesel submarine force of 243 to the U.S.'s 75, and an economic infrastructure and defense capital equipment capacity considerably superior to that of the United States.

In the past five years, two technological developments have taken some of the sting out of the Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) theory and have shifted the strategic debate even further.

Early satellite warning of launches and mid-course missile guidance makes early detection much easier and missile accuracy to a predetermined target much greater. Although it is still debated whether satellite detection can completely screen the oceans, satellites do undeniably simplify detection.

The second technology is particle and laser beams which provide an antiballistic missile defense cover. If urban, industry, and military targets can be protected from incoming warheads, the strategic MAD doctrine is made obsolete—at least from the Soviet viewpoint.

The combination of satellite surveillance and guidance and beam weaponry gives rise to satellite weapons such as the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory's directed X-ray weapon. This device creates a directed X-ray from the power of a contained nuclear explosion which can be detonated far more rapidly than conventionally powered beam devices. Senator Malcolm Wallop (R-Wyo.) is currently demanding that the LLL Dauphin X-ray lasers be given unlimited funding to convert what is now disparate work on various technological problems into a coherent weapons program, probably under the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

According to congressional sources, the Senate Armed Services Committee has held closed hearings on the X-ray weapon system, but they report that, while "there is no one blocking the development of the system, the committee has decided to await further information from the Department of Defense."

In the strategic context of the X-ray weapons, which make defense and nuclear war-winning feasible, the Trident-II missile, and its submarine carrier have an important role. The X-ray laser is a worthwhile defensive weapon, but no substitute for basic artillery. Trident-II's are far more accurate, more powerful with a more flexible range than the present Trident-I's and ought to be built.

Malcolm Wallop, who is a leading member of the Armed Services Committee, agrees with this assessment. So too, from their side, do the Russians.