

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Anti-SDI 'expert' takes pounding from press

John Pike, who bills himself as the associate director for space policy of the Federation of American Scientists, has frequently been interviewed by the major news media to attack the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).

Pike, in all his self-righteous smugness, spoke at the National Press Club March 17, confident that, with the SDI in a state of retreat under pressure of budget cuts, he could drive another nail into the coffin of the program.

In a surprise turn of events, however, a line of questioning initiated by this reporter was followed up by numerous others, which sent Pike and his cohort, Tom Longstreth, scurrying for the exits.

It was a rare occasion. A major anti-SDI charlatan was exposed by the press in a way that inflicted serious damage on his credibility.

Pike called the press conference to release two new reports assessing the SDI program's compliance with the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty of 1972.

It came one day after the SDI Organization release its own assessment of the impact of scheduled tests on compliance with the treaty, a new procedure adopted by the SDI). The assessments reflect the office's increasingly defensive posture in the wake of budget cuts and the administration's virtual abandonment of all but lip service to the program.

Pike applauded the SDI office's assessment report, saying it was "a step in the right direction," but then questioned its conclusions, and pointed out that "down the road," the SDI

program will conduct a number of tests in direct violation of the ABM treaty, including the "airborne optical adjunct," the Zenith Star space-based chemical laser, and the booster surveillance and tracking system.

In fact, he said, that the "airborne optical adjunct," which amounts to nothing more than placing a telescope sensor onto a Boeing 767 aircraft, may already be in violation of the treaty, simply because the telescope has been mounted, even though the test will not be conducted for over a year.

The first question came from a journalist wanting to know what Pike thought should be done about the Soviet's giant Krasnoyarsk radar, which is a clear violation of the ABM treaty. It was a timid question, but a harbinger.

Pike was prepared for it. He recited his answer in such a droning tone, it sounded like a memorized reply. He agreed that Krasnoyarsk was a violation of the ABM treaty, and that the United States should do more to confront the Soviets about the fact. He added that Soviet leader Gorbachov has said that construction on the radar has stopped, and endorsed Gorbachov's suggestion that an agreement be reached for the Soviets to eliminate Krasnoyarsk in exchange for the U.S. removal of early warning radars in Greenland.

This reporter pushed Pike farther, noting that the real concern of U.S. intelligence circles is not a particular Soviet treaty violation here or there, but the fact that the Soviets are preparing a total breakout from the ABM treaty and deployment of a nationwide ABM system.

Pike was ready again. If this was true, he asked, then why isn't the administration reacting accordingly? Why isn't it calling for more "penetration aids" to counter a Soviet ABM system? The fact the administration is

not doing this, he said, is proof to him that there is no Soviet plan to build a nationwide ABM system, "despite what some cowboys at Air Force Intelligence might be saying."

I asked, "Isn't there a flaw in logic here? If the administration fails to act on its own violations of the ABM treaty, then you send up a great hue and cry. But if it fails to act on Soviet violations of the treaty, then you say that's proof the Soviets aren't violating it."

Longstreth interjected to bail out Pike, "But it is our view that the Soviets aren't building a nationwide ABM system."

I retorted, "How can you draw that conclusion? You are not in the intelligence business."

Pike said, "Because of what's in the public record, and because of leaks provided to us by folks like you."

Four other reporters jumped into the fray with a succession of follow-on questions.

Q: Is it really your policy not to question the government if it fails to make an appropriate response to the Soviet threat?

A: I answered that already!

Q: You say that the U.S.'s response to a Soviet ABM breakout would be to build more penetration aids. What if its response is to build the SDI, instead?

A: If that's true, then the game is over, because the SDI won't be ready for 10 years.

Q: A first-phase deployment could be ready much sooner.

A: But not within a year, which is when those Air Force boys are saying the Soviets will be ready.

Q: What if the concern is that the Soviets are incrementally ahead, and that slowing our SDI will give them a marginal advantage?

A: Listen, can we cut this short? I have a plane to catch.