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The MX Report

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IN A WAY, the assorted eminences whose report to President Reagan on the MX missile was released yesterday may be the ultimate commission. They represent much experience and expertise in defense planning, hail from the uppermost reaches of every recent administration, are Democrats and Republicans mainly of the political and strategic establishment-center and have, as you would expect them to, produced a compromise consensus on what to do. The report is reasonable in tone and, we think, also reasonable in argument.

"Reason" is, of course, a highly relative and slightly crazy term in the context. What we mean is that given the monstrous and terrifying facts and assumptions of the nuclear competition between this country and the Soviet Union, given where we both are and how we got there, what the commission proposes has a certain logic and plausibility to it. Its principal recommendations concerning ICBMs are that the United States 1) get expeditiously to work designing and developing a comparatively light (15-ton), single-warhead ICBM that could be deployed in mobile launchers as well as stationary sites, 2) promptly deploy 100 of the much bigger (nearly 100-ton) MX missiles in existing Minuteman silos as replacements for their current occupants and 3) embark on a "vigorous investigation" of the merits of various basing modes for ICBMs, about which much remains to be learned.

Practically everyone seems persuaded of the merits of a prospective new, lighter, mobile ICBM. The commission claims that its introduction to the U.S. strategic nuclear force would greatly add to the safety and stability of that force and also present arms control advantages and inducements. The MX deployment is something else--very much disputed. In part, no doubt, this is due to the Perils of Pauline history of two administrations in trying to figure out a way of deploying the MX. In part, it is due to the fact (recognized explicitly by this report) that the MX changes the character of our ICBM force by adding a combination of accuracy and size adequate to destroy considerably more Soviet missiles in their silos and other "hard targets." In part it is due to cost. And in part it is due to the feeling that the MX, as originally argued for, was a rash investment: a huge and costly missile that would take us to a new place in the arms competition, but which could not be protected in the complicated basing schemes being proposed for it.

May we add a slightly disruptive and disrespectful thought here? It is that in addition to these various reasons for liking the new, light-missile alternative and disliking the heavy, old MX there is another: the preferred missile is still in the drawing-board stage, the other is here. These weapons and the scenarios we are asked to take seriously concerning them are all so fundamentally preposterous and brutal, so unacceptable except at a rarefied level of strategic theory, that it sometimes seems as though this country can only unite on those that are somewhere down the pike, that represent the rational solution we are always looking for to this essentially irrational problem. What we have looks rotten; what we could have looks good and has the advantage of being in the great Not Yet.

The commission asserts that the value of each of these two components of the ICBM force would depend on going forward with the other, that in conjunction with each other they sufficiently complicate the lot of any would-be attacker to strengthen deterrence and, therefore, security and to provide an incentive for drawing-down arms control measures. If its report has a single recurrent theme it is that the United States, in a practical political contest with the Soviet Union,

cannot expect to get the Soviets to moderate their arms buildup if it cancels the single new American ICBM program, as it says, "that could lead to deployment in this decade" and fails to match the Soviets in developing at least some new weapons with a capacity to destroy hard targets in a conflict. Again and again, in this connection, the commission talks of the necessity to demonstrate political "will" to get the Soviets to do business.

And that really brings you to the nub of it. The chaotic, on-again-off-again record of this country in its pursuit of strategic arms programs and strategic arms limitations over the past decade or so strongly suggests that two elements are missing--and needed. One is some political consensus, the other is the political will to act on it. The commission believes it has produced a consensus. But Democratic candidates and some holdouts for a full-scale MX elude the consensus. And no commission can create "will." There is a strong chance that the commission report, because of the MX proposal, will get buffeted to death. Is there any consensus possible? Is there anything real and here and now the critics will accept?

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