

[Editorial]

Stopping the Superweapons

A Fight We Can Win

When the Strategic Arms Limitation agreement was signed by President Nixon in May 1972, this victory for detente was heralded as the most significant armaments control advance since World War II. Analysis in *Business Week*, however, revealed the irony of arms control in the SALT mode. The agreement set limits on the ABM itself and the numbers of offensive weapons, but it presumed the replacement of current weaponry with the "qualitative improvements" of new systems. This, *BW* reported, would open up a potential \$49 billion weapons market. Their figure proved conservative, but, without doubt, the era of the Superweapons had arrived.

In the coming years, decisions that would commit hundreds of billions of dollars for new weapons systems are to be made, with varying phases of finality. There are no precise criteria to define which of these should be ranked as Superweapons. But among them are three paradigms that by themselves account for a total of almost \$100 billion. These are Superweapons of the first order: the B-1 bomber, the Trident Submarine, and the successor to current ICBMs (which could be any of a variety of options). In the clearest cases Superweapons have these elements in common: they are strategic weapons designed for Big Power nuclear war, whose cost is mind-boggling and whose military value is nil.

America is in deep crisis and is facing more than one watershed decision about its future. But the defeat of the Superweapons is manifestly a minimum condition for any kind of sanity ahead. This imperative merits top political priority: the Superweapons must be stopped.

It is difficult to grasp the amounts involved. Without trying to lay out the social reconstruction such funding could accomplish, its significance is all the more astounding when conceived as an aggregate of smaller choices. Allowing for customary cost overruns and hidden charges, each Trident submarine will cost \$2 billion. San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit system, hardly a best buy, was built for that sum—which means a major urban transit system foregone for every single sub. The average annual spending scheduled for the B-1 bomber could subsidize the operation of every rapid transit system in America to the full amount now collected from all passenger fares.

There are many skewed priorities in our national resources, but in none is the corporate requirement for waste set off so clearly against the urgency of real social needs. In no other priority is the political issue so starkly drawn, nor does it cut so deep. In the battle over the Superweapons we

shall see a head-on collision between utility and profit, each desperately in need of victory. And in this battle the economic and political conditions at last are ripe to decisively defeat the war industry's enormous power.

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The significance of the Superweapons issue is revealed in a number of related propositions.

The Superweapons are patently without military value. It is particularly obvious that in an era of invulnerable and unstoppable ballistics missiles, a new bomber is pointless and obsolete. But the notion of beefing up strategic capability in any of the ways now planned is equally pointless. The current U.S. armada of missile subs is already a perfect deterrent force. It is invulnerable, and it can destroy the world. Given that, any other weapon serving the same purpose is automatically superfluous.

The Superweapons are the inevitable consequence of military perfection. Nuclear warheads and ballistic missile delivery systems represent a kind of "crisis of overproductivity" in strategic arms. A single weapon system of this type is more destructive than the entire war effort of WWII. With this achievement and only a finite planet to destroy, armsmaking on the strategic level made itself obsolete. The seemingly endless historic progression of limitless numbers, generations, and types of arms reached an absolute plateau. No further improvement was possible.

The ABM showed us the Superweapon way. The Cold War strategic universe of Mega-death and Counterforce had always seemed mad and unreal, but it was linked to the actual ambitions of national policy. Even with all the waste, giveaways, misallocations and blunders of military weapons planning and procurement, strategic imperatives provided a basic thrust for the war machine's juggernaut.

The planned deployment of the ABM, however, seemed to lack even this kind of contact with reality. The important weapons had been built, and overkill had been stockpiled beyond comprehension. But the "military-industrial complex" created to accomplish this had taken on a life of its own. Even though there was no longer a military need for a new manned bomber or an ABM system, there was still a corporate need to build them.

The ABM then was the ideal product: having been wrought of the purest military fantasy, it could be stretched

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and shaped to meet corporate needs, a thin or thick defense, \$4 billion or \$40 billion, whatever was called for at the time. The ABM and succeeding Superweapons could serve as a kind of "ever normal granary" helping to maintain corporate revenue from year to year at whatever level was required.

The political question of military spending is going to be weighed against alternatives now as never before. In the coming decisions over the Federal budget, a matrix of political options will be expressed. We cannot have both guns and butter after all, and something has to give. LBJ's guns-and-butter illusion made the Vietnam war politically more tenable than it would otherwise have been. But it took a devastating economic toll.

There are differences over the range of deficits that are now considered likely or sustainable in any given year, but the situation is unlike that which prevailed in Johnson's time. Then, each domestic and military program was considered independently and simply funded out of debt with no consciousness of long-term economic cost. Now, even with deficit levels soaring, the notion of limits and trade-offs cannot be ignored.

There is a crucial difference between posing the question in a budgetary vacuum: "Is this weapon worth this much money?" or, on the other hand, asking, "Is this weapon worth the sacrifice of a popular domestic program?" Weapon spending has never been put on the defensive in this way, so that, even though vast amounts were involved, it was difficult to get a purchase on them. Is the B-1 bomber really worth \$25 billion? Most would have been content to leave that question to the military experts. But is the B-1 worth giving up a major pollution-control program, or an expansion in mass transit, or a decent adjustment in unemployment payments? After years of publicity about cost overruns and military waste, the public will be much less ready to accept a weapons system as worth the sacrifices now so pointedly defined.

The political tide has been turning against armaments for some time. Even before the debacle of military force in Vietnam was consummated, and before the consciousness of a domestic crisis had set in, armaments already were losing their appeal. Every major survey of popular priorities for government budgeting in the last few years has placed defense spending at or near the bottom of the list, far behind expenditures for social needs of every kind. Improvements in health, jobs, housing, education, pollution control, helping the poor and the elderly, have all received *two to three times* the levels of support accorded to higher spending for defense.

The pontification of generals about "security needs" now carries far less weight. In 1966 the military was ranked third from the top among sixteen public and private institutions in which people expressed "a great deal of confidence." By 1971 the military had suffered the most precipitous drop of all; confidence was off by well over half, down from 62 to 27 percent. During the 1972 presidential campaign, voters in California, one of the most defense-dependent states, ranked "extending and improving mili-

tary defense programs" twelfth out of a list of fourteen issues as being among the Most Important; and it topped the list of Least Important. Social programs of one kind or another have always been valued by the public. The difference now is not simply that they love social spending more, but that they love military spending less.

The Red Scare isn't working anymore. The money rolled in with ease well past the Fifties. In a period of nuclear trauma, with dog tags and "Take Cover!" drills in the schools, the mere roar of an airplane could often induce a sense of panic. But people are no longer fearful enough to respond well to Pentagon extortion. The Russian threat long ago lost its psychic clout. By the end of the Sixties, the only menace that could be successfully conjured up was that of maniacally fanatic Chinese Reds, so suicidally aggressive that they were willing to sacrifice hundreds of millions dead just to get a nuclear shot at us. And by 1972, even this was gone. According to *Time* magazine that year, "Communism as a threat at home or abroad ranked twenty-second" among popular concerns.

This should not be too surprising. In the 1972 election, Richard Nixon himself had helped to undermine popular fears. With all his demagogery, flag and motherhood, Nixon did what politically he had to do to win his re-election—detente with Russia and rapprochement with China. In effect, Nixon was able to announce to the American people that he had ended the Cold War. He bought his votes at an enormous price. He recklessly spent down the entire Cold War patrimony.

An external enemy is indispensable for calls to arms, especially expensive ones. China was the last good enemy we had. And if the Cold War is over, it is no surprise that people are not willing to pay as much to win it anymore.

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Ford, like Nixon before him, while pressing for lavish military spending, has tried to keep a check on important social programs by threatening to blame economic difficulties on a spendthrift Congress. The question is whether this challenge will be thrown back, whether it is spendthrift military policies that are placed on the defensive. For butter we must sacrifice guns, not "fiscal responsibility." There can be no social program unless that point is made. And, in particular, opposition to the Superweapons should be a first condition for any politician who hopes to be considered socially progressive in this period. Those who have most successfully tried to play both sides—Jackson the Progressive and Wallace the Populist both immediately come to mind—will fail this litmus test. That could—and should—become a major reason why their demagogery will come to grief.

The Superweapons are simply not defensible in open controversy. Only low visibility can save them. That is why it is such an important task to force the issue with the utmost clarity. Every politician should be made to face the responsibility for an obvious choice between the public good and privilege, mismanagement, and waste.

If sufficient momentum is generated behind the issue of the Superweapons, the results could be extraordinarily significant in redefining American politics. It is a fight we should take up and one that we can win.

The Pentagon's \$150 Billion Shopping List

“How do we stop this dangerous, ruinous rivalry? For a start, we can simply recognize that overkill is overkill, and superflous weapons are superflous.”

—Sen. John Sparkman, Chairman,
Foreign Relations Committee

Our economy may be on the rocks, the quality of life in America may be deteriorating for everyone, our foreign policies may be bankrupt, but the arsenal of democracy is to remain alive and well. The Defense Department wants the United States to continue to put its faith in weapons and military power. The U.S. produces the most destructive weapons in the world, the most advanced tanks, planes, submarines, bombers, missiles, and yet we are called upon to try harder to remain “number one.” World demand for the products of our advanced industrial civilization is insatiable and growing: U.S. weapons manufacturers sold a record \$8.2 billion worth of arms overseas in 1974, an increase of more than 100% over 1973. America’s dubious world leadership in weaponry may be the ultimate expression of our philosophy of conspicuous consumption.

The proposed fiscal 1976 Bicentennial federal budget says a great deal about our misplaced priorities. In the new budget President Ford asks the Congress to appropriate almost \$108 billion for military purposes, the highest level of military spending in history. This is an increase of \$16 billion over last year. At the same time, funding for non-defense programs is projected to decline by more than \$25 billion. The Pentagon, according to its five-year plan for 1976 through 1980, plans to spend at least \$636 billion over this period.

The new military budget now being debated before Congress contains a bewildering variety of new weapons schemes. The Air Force and Rockwell International want \$749 million to continue development of their \$21 billion B-1 bomber program so that the U.S. will possess well into the 21st century a bomber that will be able to fly lower, faster, and carry more bombs than any bomber ever built. General Dynamics is working on a submarine for the Navy,

the Trident, that will be bigger (two football fields long), quieter, and fire more nuclear weapons than any submarine in history. It will also be the most expensive weapons system in history, at \$1.6 billion or more per copy. The Army has Chrysler and General Motors competing to produce the Tank of the Future, the XM-1 Main Battle Tank. The XM-1, estimated to cost almost \$2 million each, will shoot further, more accurately, have more armor protection, and a smoother ride than any other tank. Assuming, of course, that everything goes according to plan, which frequently does not happen.

The 1976 military budget asks for funding of new missiles of every conceivable description: anti-ship, anti-aircraft, anti-tank, anti-missile, surface-to-surface, surface-to-air, air-to-surface, air-to-air, continent-to-continent, laser-guided, radar-guided, electro-optical-guided, television-guided. New military aircraft come in all shapes and sizes and nicknames: Skyhawks, Tomcats, Eagles, Cobras, Prowlers, Hawkeyes, Intruders, Corsairs, Chinooks, Orions, Vikings, Sea Stallions, Sea Cobras, Iroquois, not to mention AWACS and the unpronounceable AABNCPs.

Every three months the Pentagon is required by Congress to publish the current estimated costs of major weapons systems. The latest cost-overrun status report on 40 big ticket items indicates that these weapons alone will cost \$150 billion, \$41 billion more than originally expected.

The American public has little way of judging whether there is any real need for particular weapons and must rely on the Congress to exercise control over the military budget and the Defense Department. The Congress, however, is barely up to the task of beginning to explore the intricacies of the many complex weapons systems and defense issues buried in the labyrinths of the plus-\$100 billion defense budget. Unlike the Defense Department, Congress has little

by David Johnson