

Bush Outlines Arms Control And Missile Defense Plans

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Joining a growing chorus of Republicans, Texas Governor George W. Bush warned President Bill Clinton on May 23 against concluding a deal with Russia that would limit any future U.S. national missile defense (NMD). Speaking at the National Press Club in Washington, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee also charged the Clinton administration with being mired in Cold War logic and vowed to pursue significant reductions in U.S. nuclear weapons levels but failed to provide specifics.

Speaking less than two weeks before Clinton's scheduled June 3-5 Moscow summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Bush denounced Clinton's efforts to win Moscow's agreement to amend the 1972 ABM Treaty, which bars missile defenses capable of protecting a country's entire territory, to permit an initial U.S. national defense composed of a single site of 100 missile interceptors located in Alaska. "No agreement would be better than a flawed agreement," the governor declared. He further called on the president not to "hamstring the ability of the next president to fully develop an antiballistic missile system."

Flanked by senior foreign policy officials from earlier Republican administrations, the governor said a missile defense should protect all 50 states, U.S. allies, and U.S. forces deployed overseas from missile attacks by so-called rogue states and from accidental nuclear launches. He left open the door for sharing information and technology with Russia, depending on "how Russia behaves."

Though not describing the exact architecture of the missile defense he would pursue, Bush remarked that "laser technology is evolving" and that "there is a lot of inventiveness in our society that hasn't been unleashed on this particular subject." But in looking at the ABM Treaty, which proscribes the development, testing, and deployment of ABM systems or components that are sea-, air-, space-, or mobile land-based, Bush said he sees a treaty that "makes it hard for us to fully explore the options available."

Bush's comments follow an April 24 letter by 32 Republican senators to Secretary of Defense William Cohen that asserted the "ultimate value of sea-, air- and space-based assets in ballistic missile defense is unmistakable." Only the "political will" is needed, according to the senators, to defend the "American people as quickly and comprehensively as our technology allows." Bush has pledged to withdraw from the ABM Treaty if an agreement cannot be reached with Moscow to modify the accord.

In addition to advocating a more robust missile defense, Bush said he would ask the secretary of defense to conduct "an assessment of our nuclear force posture and determine how best to meet our security needs." It should be possible, Bush asserted, to pursue nuclear weapons reductions and remove "as many weapons as possible from high alert."

Citing President George Bush's September 1991 precedent of eliminating all ground-launched U.S. tactical nuclear weapons and withdrawing all sea-based tactical nuclear weapons from ships, submarines, and naval aircraft, Bush said he would cut weapons levels unilaterally if necessary. Congress, beginning in fiscal year 1998, has prohibited unilateral cuts below START I levels of 6,000

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deployed strategic warheads.

While declaring the need to go below agreed START II levels of 3,000-3,500 warheads, Bush did not detail whether he would go lower than the 2,000-2,500 level the Clinton administration is seeking in START III negotiations or the proposed Russian level of 1,500. Bush merely stated that "sufficient reductions" would be determined through consultations with the secretary of defense and the defense establishment. Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee the same day, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said it would currently be uncomfortable with levels lower than 2,000-2,500 warheads. (See page 24.)

Responding that afternoon to Bush's speech, White House Press Secretary Joe Lockhart defended the administration's negotiated arms reduction approach and argued that Bush's proposal for an "expansive national missile defense along the lines that we saw discussed in the 1980s" reflected a Cold War mentality. Two days later, National Security Adviser Samuel Berger dismissed Bush's warning against pursuing an agreement, saying, "I think presidents are elected by the American people to serve four-year terms."

Claiming the Bush proposals had "internal inconsistencies," Cohen, speaking on national television May 28, offered to provide the governor with a Pentagon briefing to facilitate an informed debate on security issues during the forthcoming presidential campaign. Cohen argued that deploying more robust missile defenses would force other countries, including Russia, to build up their offensive forces.

The Bush campaign responded by rhetorically asking if Cohen thought Bush's advisers, which include former JCS Chairman General Colin Powell, did not understand U.S. security issues. Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon noted May 30 that the "secretary considers the issue finished in that they have rejected the invitation."

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