U.S. weapon systems debated

By David Potter

An MIT Professor and an IBM executive faced off Wednesday night in a debate over whether the United States should build the controversial B-1 bomber or the air-launched cruise missile (ALCM) system.

The Cambridge Forum discussion did not concern the bellicose remarks that the two participants had expressed in support of their respective positions.

John F. McCarthy, Professor of Aeronautics and Astronautics at MIT and Director of the Center for Space Research, advocated building the B-1 bomber, Richard L. Garwin, an IBM executive and the Thomas J. Watson Research Center and former member of the President’s Science Advisory Committee, supported the ALCM option. Harvard Law School Professor Roger Fisher served as “questioner” and attempted to clarify issues on which the two participants differed.

McCarthy outlined the purpose of the B-1 as a strategic, rather than tactical, weapon, aimed at deterrence. He said that if deterrence fails, the purpose of strategic defense policy is to lower the level of escalation of the conflict, and that it is unsuccessful, to attempt to assure an outcome favorable to the United States.

Garwin agreed with McCarthy that a “truly strategic defense policy,” consisting of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and “airfield-based defense capabilities” is the most economical. He argued with his opponent about the cost and effectiveness of the B-1 versus the ALCM and airfield-based defense system.

Garwin claimed that the ALCM could do the job of the B-1 at a lower cost. The ALCM could be launched, he asserted, from a cargo aircraft such as the KC-135 or Boeing 707 at the periphery of enemy territory. He contended that the ALCM, once launched, could take advantage of terrain at an altitude of 200 feet, the same way that the B-1 bomber, which has the disadvantage of having a much larger radar cross-section.

Garwin pointed out that 20 ALCMs launched from each of 250 cargo planes would yield a total strike force of 5,088 warheads, all flying independently, whereas 1,000 B-1 bombers would present a smaller number of targets which could be handled more easily by enemy defense systems.

McCarthy countered by declaring that a cargo plane would have a lower launch survivability compared to the B-1, which is designed with thermal and over-pressure insulation against near-by nuclear explosions. He also maintained that the 707 cargo plane has a wide radar cross-section and flies at high altitudes, making it, in an ALCM platform, a logical high value target for the enemy. He emphasized that a 707 cargo plane would be incapable of defending itself against airborne or short range enemy defenses, which it would have to penetrate at high altitude to bring the ALCM missiles within range of their targets.

Fisher concluded that the B-1 is more risky than the ALCM in the delicate interplay between politics and the military and that, in the event of a crisis, the slower ALCM carriers could be put in the air gradually, and would not cause the destabilizing effects of a fleet of supersonic bombers.

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