

Senate Democrats Blast Bush's Missile Defense Plan

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Senate Democrats sharply criticized the Bush administration's missile defense plan yesterday, saying they did not want to vote on an \$8 billion request for the program without knowing whether it would violate an arms control treaty.

Pentagon officials responded that they could not say whether the accelerated testing and initial construction planned for fiscal 2002 would break the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, because that was a matter of interpretation.

The conflict emerged as Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul D. Wolfowitz gave Congress its first detailed description of the program, which goes well beyond the ground-based interceptor system pursued by the Clinton administration. President Bush's plan includes sea-launched missiles and lasers mounted on airplanes, both of which are prohibited by the ABM Treaty.

"We will not conduct tests solely for the purpose of exceeding the constraints of the treaty," Wolfowitz told the Senate Armed Services Committee. "But neither will we design our program to avoid doing so. . . . Such an event is likely to occur in months, rather than in years."

The admission sparked an angry response from Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.), the committee's chairman. He noted that the official seated beside Wolfowitz, Air Force Lt. Gen. Ronald T. Kadish, director of the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization, told the panel three weeks ago that none of the testing planned for fiscal 2002, which begins Oct. 1, would violate the treaty.

"That's what you told us, general," Levin said. "Three weeks ago. Something's changed in the last three weeks."

"We are in a gray area," Wolfowitz replied. He said it is not clear whether breaking ground next month for a test facility in Alaska would violate the treaty "if you harbor the intention" of turning the test site into an interceptor base, as the administration does.

In Moscow, meanwhile, Russian officials warned that scuttling the treaty could set off an arms race and prompt Russia to refit its missiles with multiple warheads, which have been removed in recent years. Igor Sergeyev, a security adviser to President Vladimir Putin, accused Washington of using "the smoke screen" of consultations to obscure that it "has obviously made the decision to leave the 1972 ABM Treaty."

Publicly, Russian officials did not explain at what point they would consider the treaty to be violated. But the Interfax news agency quoted an unnamed, high-ranking defense official as saying, "We will view the first cubic meter of concrete laid under the launching pad to intercept missiles in Alaska as the U.S.'s formal withdrawal" from the pact.

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, speaking at a policy forum on Capitol Hill, said the only action contemplated in Alaska in the near future was the clearing of trees for a test site at Fort Greely, near Fairbanks. "Tearing down trees -- no lawyer that I know thinks that is a treaty violation," Rumsfeld said.

He, like Wolfowitz, said the administration has not been secretive that its plans eventually will "bump up against" the ABM Treaty, which bans any nationwide shield against long-range missiles.

Both officials said, however, that they did not intend to abrogate the treaty. Rather, they promised to seek negotiations with Russia over a new security framework that would permit development of a missile shield.

"If we found there was no way to reach a truly mutual agreement, you would have to then say, 'Well, we do need to have missile defense, we do need to go forward, and therefore we need to give the six-month notification' " required before withdrawing from the treaty, Rumsfeld said. "Is that going to happen? No, I think

Sen. John Warner (Va.) and other Republican members of the Armed Services Committee strongly supported the administration's missile defense plan. Not all Democrats opposed it, either.

Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Ct.) complimented Wolfowitz and Kadish for "speaking directly about this new approach."

"I, for one, will not shy away from supporting authorization or an appropriation that might necessitate a withdrawal from the ABM Treaty if I am convinced that it is necessary to do so for . . . national security, and that the administration has made every possible effort to negotiate . . . with the Russians," Lieberman said.

Sen. Jim Bunning (R-Ky.) spoke for many of his fellow Republicans when he told Wolfowitz and Kadish, "Spending money to defend the United States of America from intercontinental ballistic missiles ought to be the top priority that we have."

Correspondent Susan Glasser contributed to this report from Moscow.

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