

FORT GREELY AND THE STAR WARS PROGRAM

1 October, 2001

Introduction

Ground clearing, a preliminary step to the construction of missile interceptor silos for the Star Wars (National Missile Defense) program, began at Fort Greely in late August 2001. Many observers including the Russian government, see such construction – due to begin next year – as the “straw that will break the camel’s back” in terms of the future of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. The ABM treaty constrains Russia and the United States from testing or deploying missile defense beyond a limited number of sites, and the Bush Administration have warned that they will withdraw from the Treaty by the end of 2001 in order to begin construction at Fort Greely sometime after March 2002.

Where is Fort Greely?

Just over a hundred miles south of Fairbanks in interior Alaska.

What will be built at Fort Greely?

The US Department of Defense (DoD) has said that the Fort Greely site will have two roles:

1. A testing role: Fort Greely is intended to be a “test bed” for the US land-based segment of the Star Wars program. Five missile silos for Ground Based Interceptor missiles (GBI) and a missile-launch command centre will be built there.
2. A deployment role: It could also be turned into an operational missile base as early as 2004 with a ‘minimum’ ‘emergency’ capability to intercept rogue missiles from north Asia, if they think that is necessary. To change it from a test site to an operational ABM base would require a simple installation of new software.

In August this year, contractors began building roads, clearing trees, and installing water wells and other basic utilities. In Spring, 2002 silo construction is expected to begin. Such construction, unless approved by Russia, would certainly breach the ABM Treaty.

Why do they want to build the facilities there?

The US DoD claims that for geographical reasons a missile interceptor base is required at the top of the continental United States in order to improve the chances of intercepting any future missile attacks from Northern Asia. They also claim that Alaskan test flights will give them more realistic test conditions than they can achieve with the current tests from California to the Marshall Islands. Independent missile experts and US legislators have questioned all these rationales for the Fort Greely plans. (see footnotes)

What role will Fort Greely play in the new ‘test bed’?

Currently, no actual test flights are intended to be launched from Fort Greely. The Greely command and control centre will be linked up to the missile early warning system and will control the firing of interceptor missiles from new silos on Kodiak Island, 500 miles away in the northern Pacific.

The five silos at Fort Greely will only be used to store missiles and to ‘test’ their performance in the cold Alaskan environment. Congressional hearings have been told that one just silo in Alaska would be enough to provide the same test scenarios.

What concerns are there about Fort Greely?

Democratic Senators and Congressmen have raised a number of concerns about Fort Greely. According to Representative John Spratt of South Carolina – *“the work at Fort Greely may seem a modest step, but it can be viewed as the first move towards withdrawal from the ABM Treaty...”*

Aside from being the first concrete step towards actual deployment of a Star Wars system there are also legal and constitutional questions about beginning construction at Fort Greely.

1. Democrats on the Armed Services and Appropriations Committees claim they are not aware of any funding expressly authorized for the purpose of constructing five silos at Fort Greely. It would *“...clearly breach a longstanding tradition of only building those military construction projects that Congress has specifically approved...”*
2. Questions are also being raised about whether the requirements of the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) have been fully met in relation to publication of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and the following consultation process. On August 24 Greenpeace joined a Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) lawsuit with five other groups in Alaska to halt work at Fort Greely on these grounds.
3. The \$9 million ground clearing contract at Greely was issued with great speed. It is unclear whether the contract was ‘competitively bid’ (which is required under US law).
4. The legality of the Administration’s activities in moving towards knowingly breaching the ABM Treaty with the Greely work is questionable.

Despite these concerns the funds to carry out groundclearing this year were released and this work has been completed. It also looks likely that work to begin construction next year will also be granted in full.

What has Russia said about this?

An unnamed senior Russian Defense official told the Washington Post that Russia *“will view the first cubic meter of concrete laid under the launching pad for interceptor missiles in Alaska as the United States formal withdrawal from the ABM Treaty.”* [“Russia warns United States against deploying missile defense”, Vladimir Isachenkov, AP Worldstream, July 12, 2001].

What about the ABM treaty?

The US is actively negotiating with Russia about the future of the ABM treaty. The US is currently asking Russia to jointly abandon the treaty in the near future, and Russia is hinting that they might be prepared to amend the treaty. Neither position is currently acceptable to the other side. That leaves the US with two possibilities if they want to move forward with plans at Fort Greely without Russian consent: (1) they either attempt to unilaterally withdraw from the treaty by giving six months notice under the treaty’s withdrawal clause, or; (2) begin construction or assembly work (other than the current preparing of the site) and break the treaty.

Either way, construction at Fort Greely would mark the death of the ABM treaty, which most experts agree has been the foundation of nuclear arms reduction treaties for the last thirty years.

Footnotes:

1. See www.ucsusa.org/security/mbdf_alaskaopt.htm for the Union of Concerned Scientists’ technical analysis from MIT physicists who have argued that at Fort Greely "the Pentagon is trying to sneak deployment past Congress under the thin veil of testing...But their proposal makes no sense from even a testing standpoint."
2. See www.clw.org/nmd/fortgreely.html from the Council for a Liveable World which explores the ABM concerns and discusses the ‘necessity’ of Alaskan silos for either testing or deployment. It cites an ‘anxious’ Nebraska Senator Ben Nelson: "I certainly don't have any understanding what 'deployment'

is, when it starts. I think I'll know when it's over, but I won't know when it's started. And that worries me."