

WHAT IS STAR WARS?

Greenpeace uses the term “Star Wars” to describe U.S government's proposed National Missile Defence (NMD) because of the current plan's similarity to the “Star Wars” plan promoted by defence contractors and President Ronald Reagan in the 1980's. “Star Wars” is a system of radars and satellites used to detect incoming missiles. These radars and satellites are intended to communicate information to missiles launched from the U.S. to enable them to intercept and destroy the incoming enemy missiles before they reach their target. As yet, the plan remains a only a theory. After decades of testing and \$120 billion of taxpayers money spent, the Pentagon has yet to produce a plan that works.

The enormous technical challenges of creating the Star Wars missile intercept system have been likened to "attempting to hit a bullet with a bullet". The missile system must also distinguish between real warheads and decoys. It must confront an incoming missile that is designed to fool the interceptor so it will pursue one of the sophisticated decoys accompanying the missile.

The project has now failed two of its first three “hit-to-kill” tests in which an interceptor missile is supposed to destroy a mock nuclear warhead in mid-flight. The one successful attempt is mired in controversy. Dr. Nira Schwartz, a senior researcher at TRW, the company responsible for the system's command, control and communication systems, has launched legal proceedings against the company. Schwartz alleges she was fired for refusing to falsify research findings on whether a Star Wars interceptor can distinguish between a decoy and a nuclear warhead. Another critic of the system is Dr Theodore Postol of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who conducted the only scientific analysis of test data. He has written a letter to the White House charging “criminal fraud” in the Star Wars testing program. He went on to show the test series now underway has been “dumbed down”, making it much easier for an intercept to take place. The U.S. government itself has made criticisms of the Star Wars testing programme. In the 1999 annual report of the U.S. Defence Department, the Testing and Evaluation division found that the Star Wars testing programme was deficient in many areas.

Even with less demanding standards the last July 8, 2000, Star Wars test was an abject failure. After the launch was delayed twice, (an incident which would obviously sabotage success in the case of a real attack) the “kill vehicle” failed to separate from the interceptor booster rocket and its sensors were never activated.

However both the U.S. Defence Department and defence contractors are eager to keep the testing program on schedule. At least 20 more tests are planned by between now and 2007—the next sometime between March and June of this year and at least two more before the end of the year.

The version of Star Wars developed under the Clinton administration calls for initial deployment of 20 missiles by 2005 and an additional 80 missiles in operation by 2007.



Clinton's plan also required the construction of a new radar system on the Alaskan island of Shemya, the upgrading of the five existing radars in U.S. early warning system, a ring of sensors in space and three facilities to guide the intercept missiles or "kill vehicles" to their targets. Radar facilities at Fylingdales in the United Kingdom and Thule in Greenland (whose defence and foreign policy is controlled by Denmark) are also essential for the deployment of Star Wars.

The Bush administration is currently reviewing the plans developed under Clinton administration with a view to expanding them. A revamped and more costly program might also involve intercept missiles based at sea, radars and lasers based on aircraft and in space. It is also feared that this urgent review of the Star Wars development program will reverse the President Clinton's September 1, 2000, decision to not proceed to the next stage of the program or construction of the new radar at Shemya.

If this were to occur it could be the spark that leads to the collapse of international arms control and disarmament, triggering a new nuclear arms race.