

As we begin this new session of Congress, let us resolve together to surprise everyone and do what needs to be done.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Mississippi.

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NATIONAL MISSILE DEFENSE  
SYSTEM TESTING

Mr. COCHRAN. Mr. President, last week the Department of Defense conducted its most recent flight test of our National Missile Defense system. A great deal has been said and written about this test in the last few days—much of it erroneous—and I think it is important that we draw the correct conclusions about what this test does and does not mean.

The test conducted last week was one of a series of 18 scheduled flight tests of the National Missile Defense system, and only the second to actually attempt to intercept a strategic ballistic missile by colliding with it in space. The first test this past October was primarily a test of the vehicle that actually hits the target missile. Last week's test was significantly more complicated and involved additional, newly developed elements of the National Missile Defense system, such as the ground-based radar and the Battle Management Command, Control and Communications system. In fact, a senior Defense Department official told reporters before the test that the battle management system is: "the most difficult and sophisticated part of this entire program."

The latest test began with the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. After its rocket engine burned out, the target missile deployed both a mock warhead and a balloon decoy intended to try to fool the interceptor missile. The missile was tracked by satellites and by the National Missile Defense system's ground-based radar at Kwajalein Atoll in the South Pacific, and the interceptor missile was launched to meet the target. It sighted the target missile and then closed on it.

While the interceptor did not hit the target warhead, it appeared that all of the systems tested functioned properly until the final six seconds of these, when the infrared sensors on the interceptor vehicle did not operate correctly—as they had in the October test.

While the failure to hit the target is disappointing, it is hardly justification for all the negative comments I have heard about last week's test. It's important to remember that a test program involves the testing of weapon systems to see if they perform as they were designed. The purpose of this test program is to uncover problems and correct them. If it were possible to take a design straight from the drawing board to the field, we wouldn't need testing programs. We test because we expect to find problems and try to solve them.

What's remarkable about the National Missile Defense testing is not that the intercept vehicle missed on the second test but that it succeeded on the first one. Many newly introduced elements had to work right on this most recent test even to achieve a near miss, and the really significant news on this test is that all of the new elements which added complexity to the challenge seemed to have performed very well; the only thing that apparently didn't work properly was the one element which was already proven to work in the October flight.

Some of the critics of missile defense have said this test was a major setback for the program. It was not. In fact, it demonstrated significant progress in the development of a workable and reliable National Missile Defense capability.

The October flight was primarily a test of the intercept vehicle and its ability to identify a target in space, discriminate between the warhead and a decoy, and collide with the warhead. It did exactly what it was designed to do, but critics of the program claimed that had the decoy not attracted the intercept vehicle's attention, it never would have detected the warhead. They argued that the system can not work when there are decoys, and only did work because there was a decoy.

As ridiculous as that sounds, it has been echoed by those who have long opposed missile defense in any form. An editorial in the New York Times claimed that the October success was "lucky" and occurred "almost by accident." Now wait a minute and think about this. When two objects—each about the size of a chair, launched 4300 miles apart and traveling at a combined speed of 15,000 miles an hour—collide in the vastness of space 140 miles above the Earth's surface, that's not an accident. That's a demonstration of some very capable technology and engineering.

Clearly, for some, no amount of evidence will be convincing. But repeating something that's wrong doesn't make it right.

Predictably, some are urging the National Missile Defense program be slowed down or even shelved in the wake of last week's test. For some critics, delay or cancellation is always the right course of action when it comes to missile defense. Others suggest abandoning this program for another approach using different basing modes, but that will only delay the National Missile Defense deployment we need now. Still others believe the administration's assessment of technological readiness should be delayed in order to remove the decision from presidential politics. This, too, would be a mistake.

We have a National Missile Defense program because we have a growing vulnerability to the threat of ballistic missile attack. That threat will not wait for us to conduct a test program with perfect results, something that has never happened with any weapon

system. Delay in deploying a defense against these missiles only serves the interests of our adversaries.

This threat is growing. We must all remember that this program is not just an academic exercise. The Senate passed the National Missile Defense Act last spring; in September the Intelligence Community released a new National Intelligence Estimate of the ballistic missile threat which, according to its unclassified summary, judges that some rogue states may have ICBMs much sooner than previously thought, and that those missiles will be more sophisticated than previously estimated. In just the past few weeks, British authorities intercepted components bound for Libya for missiles with three times the range of Tripoli's current arsenal. According to news reports from last week, the Director of Central Intelligence cannot rule out that Iran may already be able to build a nuclear weapon. And this past weekend, North Korea said it was reconsidering its declaration to refrain from any more long-range missile tests, though of course a moratorium on flight testing, however long, does not mean that North Korea isn't making progress on its missile development programs.

While the threat continues to intensify, we've already had too much delay in deploying a missile defense system. In fact, we are behind today precisely because those who counsel delay have long had their way, not because of any inherent problems with the technology. What's required now is that we stay the course we set for ourselves when we passed the National Missile Defense Act of 1999. That act makes it the policy of the United States to deploy a National Missile Defense system as soon as technologically possible. With the successful test in October and last week's test incorporating additional elements of the National Missile Defense system, the talented men and women of our armed forces and industry have demonstrated that this system is technologically possible. The test program is in its early stages and much can and will be done to refine the system between now and the start of missile production. But there is no question that this technology is not just within our reach but is actually in our grasp now.

I congratulate the Defense Department for the extraordinary technical accomplishments it has achieved so far, and urge it to continue to work to improve this important program.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New Jersey.

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PAYING DOWN THE DEBT

Mr. LAUTENBERG. Mr. President, before I start my principal subject, I will take a couple minutes to commend the Democratic leader for his earlier comments.

We are all ready to go to work, and tomorrow we start with the Budget