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REAGAN IS STILL IN CHARGE

Well, the pundits underestimated the Gipper again. They said he is a lame duck President who won't have enough influence to pass any of his programs. But he persuaded Congress to authorize the MX missile against all odds, and even in spite of Barry Goldwater a couple of months ago predicting that it was dead.

Whether the MX is the right weapon at the right time and at the right place may be debated. What is not debatable is that the United States needs a new image of strength to counteract the immense Soviet missile arsenal.

But won't the MX "escalate the arms race" and cause the Soviets to build more missiles to counteract ours? No; experience teaches us that the Soviets build weapons just as fast when we build none at all.

There has been no slow-down in their relentless build-up of strategic missiles. In the last 15 years, the Soviets have deployed four new missiles and are developing two additional ICBMs. During that same period of time, the United States has not deployed a single new land-based strategic missile.

But wouldn't building the MX lift us into a new generation of larger, more modern, more powerful missiles? No; the Soviet ICBM force is three to five times as powerful as the U.S. ICBM force.

During the past ten years, the Soviet Union has deployed more than 800 MX-type missiles, all of which are much larger and more powerful than U.S. missiles. These include 308 SS-18s, 360 SS-19s, and 150 SS-17s.

The Soviet SS-18 is eight times as large and powerful as the newest U.S. ICBM, the Minuteman III. The SS-18 is the most powerful missile on earth; we have nothing even close to it and, indeed, are forbidden to build anything like it by the SALT II Treaty (which some people want us to obey even though we never ratified it).

The current U.S. ICBM force consists of 500 Minuteman IIIs, 450 Minuteman IIs, and about 30 Titan IIs, all of which were developed before 1971. More than half of the Soviet

ICBM force is made up of nuclear missiles deployed since 1975.

The bipartisan Scowcroft Commission reported in March 1984 that the Soviets "now probably possess the necessary combination of ICBM numbers, reliability, accuracy, and warhead yield to destroy almost all U.S. ICBM silos, using only a fraction of their ICBM force. The U.S. ICBM force now deployed cannot inflict similar damage, even using the entire force."

In those two sentences, the Scowcroft Commission proved that the so-called Mutual Assured Destruction doctrine, under which we are now living, is a fraud. That doctrine is based on the notion that, if the Soviets strike us first, we will hit back with our retaliatory force and wipe them out.

But, if the Soviets need to use "only a fraction of their ICBM force" to destroy all our ICBMs, that means they would have plenty left to destroy our cities after we retaliated. If you were the U.S. President, would you push the button to retaliate if you knew that the Soviets still had the majority of their nuclear force unused and ready to destroy our cities?

The Scowcroft Commission recommended that the United States deploy 100 MX missiles right away in 100 existing silos, and then develop a small, mobile, single-warhead ICBM in the early 1990s.

The MX, dubbed the Peacekeeper by its advocates, is of key importance to the Reagan Administration's effort to redress the nuclear imbalance between the United States and the Soviet Union. The MX is the most accurate, most reliable, most effective land-based system ever developed. The MX can significantly enhance the credibility of the U.S. deterrent because the Soviets have always valued land-based missiles as the best yardstick of relative military power.

If Congress had not voted to go ahead with the MX, that would have conceded to the Soviets superiority in land-based missiles for the next decade. That would have been tantamount to our signing another treaty agreeing that the Soviets can be Number One.

In international relations, the perception of power can be just as important as power itself. Year in and year out, it is clear that the best way to get the Soviets to the bargaining table is to start building more weapons.