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RELEASE: JANUARY 25, 1983

BLUE RIBBON COMMISSIONS ON DEFENSE

Will President Reagan's MX Blue Ribbon Commission fare any better in deciding defense policy than President Nixon's Blue Ribbon Commission of a dozen years ago? The old Blue Ribbon report did an excellent job of defining our problems, but its recommendations were ignored.

Seven nongovernmental members of President Nixon's Blue Ribbon Defense Panel became so alarmed about the growing Soviet nuclear threat that they wrote a "Supplemental Statement" and submitted it to President Nixon on September 30, 1970. The Pentagon suppressed it for six months and then finally released it on March 12, 1971.

This Supplemental Statement was signed by very prominent professional and business names. It was reputedly drafted by a Richmond lawyer, Lewis F. Powell, Jr., who is now a Justice of the Supreme Court. Other signers included William P. Clements, Jr., then president of Southeastern Drilling Co. of Dallas, and more recently Governor of Texas; George Champion, president of the Economic Development Council and former president of Chase Manhattan Bank; William Blackie, board chairman of Caterpiller Tractor Company in Peoria, and Wilfred J. McNeil, director of Fairchild Hiller Corporation.

The Blue Ribbon Statement warned flatly that "the Soviet Union has attained for the first time a superior strategic capability -- where it counts the most -- in ICBM's. ... While we imposed a limitation on additional strategic weapons, the Soviets pressed forward to overtake and pass us."

"More serious than the numerical superiority," the Statement continued, "is the substantial megatonnage advantage enjoyed by the Soviet Union. The enormous payloads of the SS-9's have a destructive capacity incomparably greater than any U.S. missile. ... The Soviet SS-9 ICBM force alone is capable of delivering a megatonnage of nuclear warheads several times greater than that of the entire U.S. force of ICBM's and SLBM's."

The Blue Ribbon Statement emphasized a fact that few Americans yet understand: we have no way to shoot down incoming missiles. "It is well to remember that we have no

defense whatever against Soviet ICBM's and SLBM's which now have the capability of killing perhaps half of our population -- more than 100 million people -- by a surprise first strike."

The Blue Ribbon Statement of more than a decade ago took a strong position against freeze folly. It stated that it would be "egregious folly" for the United States to agree to freeze strategic capabilities "at some level of specified parity" because this would enable the Soviet Union to "strengthen its overall military and political position."

Many people asked then, as they ask now, why we need more nuclear weapons when we already have enough to kill every Russian. The Blue Ribbon Statement gave the answer -- which is just as applicable to the current MX debate as it was a decade earlier. We have no assurance whatsoever that our weapons can kill any substantial number of Russians because of extensive Soviet anti-missile and anti-bomber defenses. That dissymmetry gives the lie to the theory of "mutual" assured destruction.

In his Thanksgiving Day speech last November, President Reagan showed the country an amazing set of charts which graphically prove Soviet superiority in every category of strategic weaponry. Our present second-rate status was thoroughly predictable and was caused by wrong policies, as the 1970 Blue Ribbon Statement proves.

The Blue Ribbon Statement was written by men who were appointed by President Nixon. However, they did not call on Nixon to do anything. Apparently, knowing Nixon and his weaknesses, they despaired that he would take the necessary action.

Instead, the seven stalwart signers of the Blue Ribbon Statement appealed over Nixon's head to the American people. Our "only hope," the Statement concluded, "is to assure a wider public knowledge of the facts and an understanding of the probable consequences of second-rate military status."

Its final warning was clear: "The road to peace has never been through appeasement, unilateral disarmament or negotiation from weakness. The entire recorded history of mankind is precisely to the contrary. Among the great nations, only the strong survive."

Since the Nixon Blue Ribbon Statement, the Soviets have grown stronger still, and we have grown weaker. The challenge facing the Reagan Blue Ribbon Commission is to develop policies that can extricate us from our second-rate predicament.