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WHITE HOUSE GOOF ON DENSE PACK

President Reagan's unhappy experience with MX Dense Pack contains a powerful political lesson. If his White House advisers don't learn it soon, they will not be able to cope with the real world of politics between now and 1984.

Reagan's advisers seem to function on the assumption that "conservatives" will back any defense proposal with the Reagan imprimatur, and that enough "moderates" can be wooed and won by the magic of a national TV speech plus a few phone calls to Capitol Hill.

So they pushed the President out on the end of a limb in his Thanksgiving week address promoting Dense Pack. When he discovered he was all alone, without either hawks or doves to bring nourishment back to the nest, he had to beat a hasty retreat and "clarify" his goal as MX-sans-Dense Pack.

Before propelling the President into a legislative battle in which both the media and the Democratic leadership were certain to oppose him, his aides should have checked to see if conservatives and ordinary Republicans were willing to play their customary soldier's role in the trenches. But no one checked, and hence the Reagan embarrassment.

It apparently came as a shock to the cloistered White House political operatives to discover that many pro-Reagan, pro-defense, hard-line conservatives believe Dense Pack is a faulty product. Not even Reagan's super salesmanship could convert them.

The Reaganauts oppose Dense Pack because it is simply another shaky leg designed to prop up an obviously failed strategy. If it works (which is not sure), its purpose is to ensure a punitive strike against the Soviet Union after the Soviets inflict a nation-killing strike on us.

The rationale of Dense Pack abjures any current intent to defend ourselves from nuclear attack. This is the essense of the MAD-cum-SALT doctrine which has created the dilemma we are in today.

The doctrine of MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction), as codified by SALT (the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty of 1972), is based on the premise that both Russia and the United

States must build only offensive nuclear weapons, capable of killing the maximum number of people, and must not build defensive weapons to shoot down the enemy's offensive weapons. This topsy-turvy doctrine says that defending one's country from nuclear attack is "destabilizing," while deploying the capability to inflict megadeaths on the enemy is a positive good.

The same people who told us that we must have offensive, megadeath weapons only, thereby resting their whole strategy on an alleged balance-of-terror, now tell us that the hot terror they created is so frightening that our only hope is in freezing ourselves in our tracks. Neither argument makes sense.

Not only strategy experts but ordinary Republicans have been wanting to escape from the MAD-cum-SALT noose for years. The most spontaneous applause that erupted at the Republican National Convention in Detroit in 1980 was the line in the Republican Platform that promised to "reject the Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) strategy of the Carter Administration whhich limits the President during crises to a Hobson's choice between mass mutual suicide and surrender."

The Republican Platform then called for "a credible strategy" with "the clear capability of our forces to survive." That's what we expect the Reagan Administration to endorse -- not a continuation of MAD-cum-SALT.

High Frontier is the solution to this dilemma. It is an innovative, all-defense, non-nuclear, space platform system which would deny the Soviets the possibility of ever destroying us with a nuclear strike.

High Frontier would lift us out of the MAD-cum-SALT hole. High Frontier would shift the "arms race" from one of killer weapons on earth (where we are only second-best) to one of space technology (where we are second to none).

The Pentagon isn't enthusiastic about High Frontier because it was not born there (as was MAD-cum-SALT). No one seems to know whether or not President Reagan has been allowed to see a presentation on High Frontier, but he should see it immediately.

Success for the Reagan defense plans in the new Congress depends on his winning the support of many Congressmen who are less than enthusiastic about defense. But his program isn't going anywhere at all unless he works together with the conservatives who care deeply about defense and want a new survival strategy for America based on a real defense.