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BEHIND THE TRIDENT HEADLINES

It was an authentic primetime network TV news event when the new U.S. Trident submarine, the Ohio, hit the water for the first time at Groton, Connecticut. In reporting this event, TV reporters told their audiences that "this is the most powerful submarine the United States has ever built."

That's a true statement, but it's a good example of how television news coverage has ranged from inadequate to downright misleading when it comes to the matter of the strategic balance between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Here is how a truthful news account of the Trident submarine event should have read.

Seven years after the Russians launched their modern Trident-class submarine called the Delta, the United States finally put its first Trident submarine in the water for sea trials. The Russians already have 32 Trident-class submarines operational.

Even though it took modern industrialized, high-technology America seven years longer to build a Trident than it took Russia, and even though our far-flung monitoring system could watch the 32 operational Russian Deltas, our submarine still does not have the range of the Soviet boat.

The Soviet Delta has a range of up to 5,000 miles, whereas our Trident has a range of only 4,000 miles. That means that the Russians can hit our cities while their subs are in their home ports, but we cannot do likewise (and will not be able to do likewise until we get Trident II, which is years away).

The Soviets do not need to sneak out of their home ports, make their way through narrow passages where we might detect them, and then travel thousands of miles to get within range of U.S. cities or missile sites. No anti-submarine warfare techniques can cope with such a force of submarines on such a vast on-station area.

When the Ohio went into the water, it was widely reported that it was two years behind schedule and cost twice as much as the original estimate. It cost more because it is behind schedule; delay puts a tremendous inflation multiplier in weapons production.

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The fact is that the last two years' delay is only the most recent of many delays in the Trident building program, most of them knowing and deliberate. We need a Congressional investigation to uncover the facts about why our Trident program is so many years behind Russia's and who is to blame.

High U.S. officials have known and stated for years that the United States is far behind Russia in these modern nuclear missile-firing submarines. Back in August 1973, Admiral Hyman Rickover testified that, in their Delta missile-firing submarine, "in effect, the Russians already have their equivalent of our Trident."

In testifying on our FY 1974 military posture, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, then Chief of Naval Operations, told the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee: "The Soviet Delta submarine with extended-range strategic missiles [is] capable of reaching our population centers from their home ports and in many respects [is] comparable to our planned Trident submarine."

The Soviet Delta's SS-N-8 missiles were then rated by the Pentagon as having a range of 4,200 nautical miles, by the International Institute of Strategic Studies at 4,600 nautical miles, and by Zumwalt at 5,000 miles. When the Ohio went into the water at Groton, it was announced that it has a range of 4,000 miles.

In his FY 1975 Defense Department Report, Secretary James Schlesinger stated that the Russian "current rate of production" was "6-8 per year." Yet, in that same report he announced a deliberate slowdown of U.S. plans for production of our Trident: "Accordingly, after starting the first Trident submarine in FY 1974, we now propose to build the nine remaining Trident submarines ... at the rate of two a year (instead of three a year) beginning in FY 1975."

But the Tridents didn't even get built as fast as two a year, much less three a year. Who is to blame for the incredible fact that it took us until 1981 to build a modern submarine like the Soviets had in 1974? And for the fact that our 1981 sub still doesn't have the range of the Russian sub built in 1974?

The Joint Chiefs of Staff were conned into supporting SALT I in 1972 on the promise that they would get the Trident and the B-1. Who deceived the Joint Chiefs? If the Soviets can build 6-8 submarines a year, why can't we?

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