ABM Should Be Republicans' Unifying Issue

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Now that the hyperbole of the political campaign is behind us, the Republican Congress should buckle down to the business of doing its constitutional duty to provide for the common defense. In the post-Cold War era, Republicans have been seeking a major issue to serve as a unifier and motivator, and there is no better goal than the protection of the lives and property of American citizens from attack by rogue dictators.

This issue can rally the troops of all factions of the conservative movement: fiscal and social activists, free traders and protectionists, interventionists and America Firsters, libertarians and the religious right. It's also an issue that cleverly banishes to left field the liberals who haven't shaken off their Cold War pacifism.

Fortunately, former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has provided Congress with enough talking points to win the argument both in the strategic arena and in the 20-second soundbite television debates. The nine-member bipartisan Ballistic Missile Threat Commission he chaired released a report that is credible, unanimous, and ominous.

The commission warns us that "hostile nations" such as North Korea, Iran and Iraq, are making "concerted efforts . . . to acquire ballistic missiles with biological or nuclear payloads" that will be able "to inflict major destruction on the U.S. within about five years of a decision to acquire such a capability." And further, we are warned that "the U.S. might not be aware that such a decision has been made."

Can't we rely on the U.S. intelligence community to keep us posted on imminent military threats? The Rumsfeld Commission warns us that the threat from rogue countries is "evolving more rapidly" than U.S. intelligence has told us, and that our ability to detect the threat is "eroding" because "nations are increasingly able to conceal important elements" of their missile programs.

We also continue to be threatened by the existing ballistic missile arsenals of Russia and China, and the

fact that both are exporters of ballistic missile technologies to countries hostile to the United States. Russia has accelerated Iran's missile program, and China has carried out extensive transfers to Iran and Pakistan.

"Foreign assistance is not a wild card. It is a fact," according to the Rumsfeld Commission. A nation that wants to develop ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction can easily get assistance from outside sources.

The Rumsfeld Commission notes that North Korea has a "well developed" ballistic missile infrastructure, and it is unlikely that the U.S. would know of a decision to deploy its missiles. House National Security Committee Chairman Floyd Spence (R-SC) concluded that "the missile threat is not 15 years away, it is here and now."

The CIA reported this year that 13 of China's 18 long-range nuclear missiles are now targeted at U.S. cities. Four of these missiles were produced in the first four months of 1998.

China's new missile capability gives that regime a tremendous opportunity for blackmail to achieve its goals, such as taking over Taiwan. The Rumsfeld report noted that Gen. Xiong Guangkai is already on record as threatening the United States by boasting that we would not be willing to "trade Los Angeles for Taipei."

The Clinton Administration's response to the growing missile threat is to try to resuscitate the moribund 1972 ABM Treaty, recite the insulting mantra "Star Wars, Star Wars," and oppose all appropriations to build any system to shoot down incoming missiles. Clinton's position is so untenable as to be downright ridiculous.

Under international law, our 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty with the Soviet Union expired when that country went out of existence in 1991. This is admitted by legal scholars and even by the author of the 1972 treaty, Henry Kissinger.

The Clinton Administration is trying to resurrect it by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with four of the 15 states born out of the former Soviet Union: Belarus, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Russia. This would allow those four to outvote the U.S. on interpretation and implementation.

The remaining 11 countries would be free to develop, test and deploy ABM systems, along with all the other countries identified by the Rumsfeld Commission, while the United States would be forbidden to do so. The MOU is actually a new treaty, also known as the ABM Expansion Treaty, which would require a two-thirds vote in the Senate.

This MOU/ABM Expansion Treaty would perpetuate the asinine policy known as MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction), which means promising to keep Americans undefended against incoming missiles. Since the liberals have no sensible argument against this, they just go into their "Star Wars, Star Wars" tantrum.

We live in a dangerous world, which has a lot of powerful men who are evil or irrational (or both), unpredictable, and hate Americans. Even with unlimited access to highly classified information, Rumsfeld said, "There is a lot we don't know, can't know and won't know . . . there will be surprises."

Congress has no greater duty than to act now to protect American lives against this threat. Building an anti-missile defense will be the litmus test for how we judge the 106th Congress.