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ATTACK ON OUR SR-71

Much of the media dismissed the recent attack by the North Koreans on a U.S. plane as merely some kind of Communist retaliation for our shooting down two Libyan planes in the Mediterranean the preceding week. Another explanation, given by Newsweek, was that "another pugilistic state apparently launched its own spitball probe of U.S. resolve."

But the North Korean missile attack was much, much more than a show of solidarity with another Soviet client state on the other side of the world or an attempt to test Reagan's nerve. It was an effort to destroy or capture the greatest large aircraft ever built.

The American plane which escaped getting shot down when the North Korean missile exploded harmlessly several miles away is now called the SR-71 or the Blackbird. It is the same plane that used to be called the B-70 when it was built in the 1960s.

The SR-71 is the fastest airplane ever built, flying at three times the speed of sound, far faster than our fastest fighter plane. When Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger was asked if fighter escorts might be used to accompany the SR-71 to prevent future attacks, he admitted that they do not fly fast enough to keep up with the supersonic SR-71.

This great plane was designed under the Eisenhower Administration to be the follow-on long-range strategic bomber to succeed the B-52s. In the 1960s, the United States spent $1.5 billion on it, 10 years' work, and the efforts of 3,000 engineers. All tests proved it to be a brilliant success; its flight at mach 3 in 1964 was spectacular.

The B-70 became a pawn in the unilateral disarmament game plan played by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara, with assistance from Air Force Secretary Harold Brown. McNamara simply canceled the B-70 despite the fact that Congress had provided full funding for its development.

As his reason for canceling production of the B-70, McNamara argued that we did not need it because, he said, the B-52s equipped with Skybolt missiles would fulfill the same

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mission more "cost-effectively." Then, after a few months, he canceled the Skybolt.

A few years later, when McNamara's insistence on scrapping weapons began to be openly criticized, he tried to defend his decision to cancel the B-70 on the excuse that "had we decided two or three years ago to produce the B-70, by the time it came into operation, that is to say in 1967, it would have been obsolete and of little military value."

Clearly, if the new B-70 would be obsolete in 1967, the much older and slower B-52s and B-58s would be even more obsolete. McNamara's canceling of the B-70 was simply part of his deliberate plan to scrap 75 percent of our bomber fleet.

While he was Secretary of Defense, he reduced it from 2,110 land-based and 600 carrier-based strategic bombers to only 680. Since then, of course, the 680 figure has shrunk steadily through crashes and wear.

The B-70 was originally planned as a heavy bomber; it would carry more bombs than the B-52. But since we have only one plane of this design, now called the SR-71, it has been effectively used for photographic and electronic reconnaissance on long-range, high-altitude missions. It is a spy plane with a 3,000-mile range, a ceiling above 80,000 feet, and the potential to survey 60,000 square miles an hour.

When its missile failed to impact on our plane, North Korea tried to say that we invented the story. As Secretary Weinberger said, it's hardly an accident when a surface-to-air missile shows up in the vicinity of a high-flying plane; especially when nobody else in that part of the world has any surface-to-air missiles except North Korea.

The Reagan Administration denounced "this act of lawlessness" and Weinberger twice called it "international piracy," which, of course, it was. It was also an attempt by a Soviet client state to wipe out our most sophisticated spy plane, or, alternatively, to capture it and find out what makes it fly 500 miles an hour faster than any other plane in the world.

The recent SR-71 event should remind us that we need more than ever to start production of a new long-range strategic bomber. McNamara canceled plans in 1965 to build a bomber fleet of B-70s, and Jimmy Carter canceled plans in 1977 to build a bomber fleet of B-1s. President Reagan should move rapidly to fulfill his promise to build immediate replacements for our old, slow, subsonic B-52s, as well as additional SR-71 spy planes.

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