

Watch What They Spend, Not What They Say

The Obama administration says missile defense isn't as important as it used to be. Its budget says otherwise.

By Fred Kaplan

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When Defense Secretary Robert Gates laid out his \$708.2 billion budget proposal this week, he also submitted a 48-page document called the "Ballistic Missile Defense Review." Reading this review, you might think that Gates was slashing the missile-defense program. You'd be wrong.

Gates writes of "a new course for spending" that is responsive to "budgetary constraints." He says he won't deploy any system until it passes realistic tests. (In more than a decade of development, no BMD system has been subject to any realistic tests, and none has passed more than half of the rigged ones.) And he's moving away from exotic technologies based on "unrealistic concepts of operation" and designed for threats that won't exist for a long, long time, if ever. Gates says that the program will deal with threats as they evolve. But, he adds, this does not require us to push ahead with missile defenses "at the same accelerated rate" as we have "in recent years."

There's a mismatch, however, between Gates' words and his actions. His proposed missile defense budget for fiscal year 2011 amounts to a staggering

\$10.4 billion. This is \$2 billion less than George W. Bush requested (and received) for missile defense—his most cherished military program—in his last year as president. But it's \$700 million more than Gates himself received in FY 2010.

The program is getting more expensive and, in some respects, more exotic—not less.

First, let's get straight on how much money this program is consuming, a more complicated matter than any other part of the defense budget. In his Feb. 2 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Gates said he was requesting \$9.9 billion for missile defense. But the day before, at the Pentagon's press briefings on the budget, David Altwegg, the program manager for the Missile Defense Agency, put the

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figure at \$8.4 billion.

What accounts for the difference? Three things.

First, the Missile Defense Agency controls most, but not all, of the money for missile defense. The Army controls the program for upgraded Patriot surface-to-air missiles; that amounts to about \$1 billion. Various support items for these missiles, also in the Army budget, add up to another \$400 million. A space-laser research program, once in the MDA budget but now in the Pentagon's research and engineering office, takes up \$100 million. (See the Defense Department's budget books on these items.)

Those three items add up to \$1.5 billion—the difference between the two statements by Altwegg and Gates.

Quite apart from this, the Air Force is requesting another \$500 million for the space-based infrared system, or SBIRS. This is an element of the missile-defense system, even though, for reasons I've never understood, no administration has ever included it in the missile-defense budget.

So, Gates' \$9.9 billion, plus \$500 million for SBIRS, equals \$10.4 billion. This is not exactly a sign of heeding "budgetary constraints."

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