



# Missile Defence

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PEACE EDUCATION

## What is Missile Defence?

Missile defence is a military project that aims to use satellites and rockets to identify, intercept and destroy incoming missiles. The satellites would identify the missile and then the rockets would be launched to try to shoot down the missile before it hits the intended target.

President Bush's current missile defence project, often called 'Star Wars' after the movie, would involve equipment based on land and sea, in the air and in space, with radars and missile systems which could detect, track and destroy launched missiles.

The task of tracking, intercepting and destroying missiles is scientifically and technologically challenging. Tests attempt to intercept missiles that have been fired have had mixed success to date. So far 14 out of the 17 US interceptor tests have failed.

## Background

Missile defence is not a new thing. Early attempts to develop missile defence systems started back in the 1960s and 1970s. During the Cold War, there was tension between the Soviet Union and the US and both countries attempted to construct a missile defence system.

In the 1960s the Soviets developed the Galosh, a missile defence system around Moscow. Galosh was intended to use nuclear-armed interceptors to shoot down incoming missiles. In the 1970s the US also started work on a safeguard missile defence programme. It was based in North Dakota and intended to defend the US nuclear weaponry.

## Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty

Instead of continuing development of such systems, the two countries signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) in 1972. The ABM Treaty limited the two countries to having one ABM system each, those that already existed in Moscow and North Dakota, and they agreed to develop no more.

Both sides felt that effective limits on missile systems were necessary to curb the growing race in strategic arms. However the US ended the treaty by withdrawing from it, on 13th June, 2002. It was then free to proceed with the development of a large-scale ballistic missile defence system. After September 11th, 2001, it felt it was necessary to proceed with the missile defence programme as it felt threatened from attacks by terrorists and 'rogue' states.

## Things to think about:

- *What are your views on the missile defence project?*
- *How do you feel about the situation of nuclear weapons in today's world?*
- *Is the threat from rogue states exaggerated? Some claim that those rogue states that are developing missiles would be unlikely to attack the US, as that would be suicide. Do you agree?*
- *Can you think of anything you can do to help the cause of disarmament?*

## How does Star Wars affect us?

In order to make missile defence work the US requires radar and tracking facilities in the UK, Greenland (whose foreign policy is administered by Denmark) and Australia in addition to its own.

### Fylingdales

RAF Fylingdales in Yorkshire has operated since 1963 as one of several sites which provide early warning of ballistic missile launches against the UK, US and other countries which are members of NATO. It is a particularly important base because it is in an ideal location to track missile launches from Russia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

The US has requested an Upgraded Early Warning Radar (UEWR) which would make important changes to the existing satellites at the site. This ground based, multi-function radar can be used to track, detect and classify incoming ballistic missiles.

### Menwith Hill

RAF Menwith Hill communication base in Yorkshire, used for military, commercial and civilian electronic surveillance, is also expected to play a role in missile defence. A government press release exposed by the Campaign for Accountability American Bases revealed that Menwith Hill was to be updated with space-based and infrared systems so that the site could provide early warning of ballistic missile launches. (1)

Menwith Hill has more highly developed satellites than Fylingdales and could pass on intelligence about missile launches to Fylingdales.

### Where are we now?

Britain is now officially involved in missile defence. On 17 December 2002 the United States Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, made a request to upgrade RAF Fylingdales for missile defence purposes. In February 2003 Geoff Hoon, the UK defence secretary, responded to this request by saying it was in the UK's interests to grant this application.

The upgrade of satellites is likely to be the first step. Ministry of Defence officials have confirmed that the US might ask for new interceptor sites to be built in Britain to shoot down ballistic missiles fired by 'rogue states'. (2)

As yet there appears to have been no formal request from the US to use Menwith Hill but it seems possible that that base, whose operations are shrouded in secrecy, will also be used.

The upgrade of Fylingdales and Menwith Hill will make the UK a sitting target for any state that seeks to overcome the missile defence system. Senior British Defence Officials have indeed admitted, "Britain would become a target of rogue states if the government allowed the US to use its bases at Fylingdales and Menwith Hill." (3)

### Footnotes

(1) Memorandum submitted by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, 'US National Missile Defence', 24 July 2000

(2) Toby Helm, 'Revolt over 'Star Wars' base in the UK', 18 December 2002

(3) 'Not in our interest - Missile Defence is the wrong road for Britain' 19 December 2002

### Things to think about:

- *Do you think that the UK should have involved itself in the Missile Defence project? Do you think our involvement could put us at risk from attack?*
- *Do you know where Fylingdales and Menwith Hill are? How would these developments affect things like the surrounding population and environment?*
- *Can you think of any ways nuclear weapons would directly affect you?*

## Some arguments used for and against Missile Defence

### For

- It is a more uncertain world now. During the Cold War, the idea of Mutually Assured Destruction (that both the US and Soviet Union had large nuclear forces and could strike and cause severe damage or even obliterate the other country) was sufficient to deter the countries from launching an attack. Now that the Cold War is over, Bush has said we must acknowledge that the world is no longer bi-polar, with two equally weighted super powers. Instead more unpredictable, less responsible nations possess nuclear weapons and are willing to use them to threaten and intimidate their immediate neighbours and distant enemies.
- After September 11th the US is worried about more terrorist attacks and believes missile defence is essential to its continued security.
- The US is fearful of missile attacks from so-called 'rogue states' such as North Korea, Iraq, Iran and Libya and wants to be able to protect itself if such attacks were to take place.
- The US wants to be able to protect itself against accidental missile launches from countries with nuclear weapons such as Russia.

### Against

- Missile defence will trigger the spread of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction as other countries may upgrade/develop their nuclear arsenals to try to overcome the US missile defence shield. This development would run counter to the attempts of treaties to limit weapons, such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty (NPT), which works towards preventing an increase in nuclear weapons. We will see new arms races and a threat to global security.
- Britain's involvement with the missile defence project makes Britain a 'sitting target' for an attack. As former Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff, Sir Timothy Garden, pointed out Fylingdales and Menwith Hill "would become the forward eyes of a defence system". Therefore anyone wanting to launch missiles against the US would benefit from taking out the UK sites first.
- Missile defence leads to world political instability and anger. China, Russia, India and Pakistan, all of which have nuclear weapons, have already expressed their concerns.
- Missile Defence is immensely expensive. It is estimated that Britain's involvement could cost us up to £10 billion a year. The US spends around \$8-9 billion per annum on missile defence research and development. This money could be better spent on people's real security needs.
- The technological difficulties around trying to intercept missiles, which some consider is as difficult as trying to hit a bullet with a bullet, means that we could spend lots of money on a project which has little likelihood of success.
- The development of missile defence meant the end of the Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty. Creating not destroying international agreements and arms control is the way to world peace.

### Things to think about:

- *Is the case for or against missile defence more convincing?*
- *Will missile defence undermine disarmament work or make the world a safer place to be?*
- *Why do you think states want nuclear weapons?*
- *What actions do you see being taken towards disarmament?*
- *Would missile defence have protected against the attacks of September 11th?*
- *How much money is used on peace making in the world?*